Working with teams of “insiders”: Innovations in qualitative data collection in the Global South

Enid Schatz, University of Missouri
Nicole Angotti, University of Colorado Boulder and University of the Witwatersrand
Sangeetha Madhavan, University of Maryland
Christie Sennott, University of Colorado Boulder

Abstract: The convergence of two qualitative methodological strategies – working in “teams” and with “insiders” – can facilitate access, efficiency, and insights into research questions of interest to demographers. Team-based research, more common in developed country settings, traditionally entails two or more professors leading a group of graduate students. “Insider” research in the Global South usually refers to local research assistants serving as interpreters/key informants for Northern trained investigators. Here we draw on three projects embedded in the Agincourt research site in rural South Africa that integrate both approaches to demonstrate the benefits and limitations of this strategy. These projects, focused on HIV/AIDS, aging, and children’s wellbeing, utilize a “team-insider” approach by hiring local research assistants who assume roles beyond language interpreters and cultural brokers. The projects vary in their use of “teams” and “insiders” but together these projects deepen our understanding of pressing population concerns in the Global South.

Key Words: ethnography, team, insiders, population, health, South Africa

Introduction

This paper highlights how the convergence of two methodological strategies of qualitative research – using (1) research "teams" and (2) "insiders" – can facilitate access and improve efficiency and insights into research questions of interest to demographers. We believe that this strategy will have appeal to qualitative researchers but also those who are more quantitatively inclined but interested in expanding their suite of research tools, especially those interested in the health and wellbeing of vulnerable populations. We draw on the experiences of three projects conducted in the MRC/Wits Rural Public Health and Health Transitions Research Unit (Agincourt) site in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa: the Public Conversations about HIV/AIDS (*Conversations*) Project; the *Gogo* [Grandmother] Project; and the Children's Wellbeing and Social Connections (*CWSC*) Project. These projects seek to deepen our understanding of three issues of pressing concern in sub-Saharan Africa and more generally in the Global South: HIV/AIDS, aging, and children's wellbeing. Researchers interested in these issues might typically explore them either through census/survey data at one end of the methodological spectrum or through conventional ethnography at the other end. The projects outlined here provide innovative ways of researching these issues by bringing together team-based research and an insider approach. Although each project used teams and insiders in somewhat different ways, together, the three projects bring to light the benefits and limitations of the "team-insider" integrated approach.

We begin with a discussion of well-known examples of team approaches in the United States and the Global South and the ways in which insider status has been appropriated in more traditional ethnographic research. Next, we describe the site in which all three projects were carried out, followed by a brief description of each project. We then explain how each project integrated teams and insiders with attention to three critical dimensions of the research process where this approach adds value: access, efficiency, and insights. We close the paper with a discussion of the limitations of our approach and suggestions for future research.

Conceptual Framework

There are several well-known examples of team ethnography from the U.S.: Bellah and colleagues' classic studies of religion and moral life (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Bellah, Madsen, Tipton, Sullivan, & Swidler, 1992); the "Three Cities Study" which examined families and welfare (Angel, Burton, Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Moffitt, 2009); and the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation multi-city study on welfare reform (Quint et al., 1999). All of these endeavors followed the model of having two or more professors/researchers leading the research with graduate students conducting the fieldwork under their guidance. Team based ethnographies are not as common in the Global South where the "lone anthropologist" has been the normative model. Two notable exceptions are the work of Seeley and her team on the coping strategies of households in Uganda in the early years of the HIV-epidemic, and more recently on aging with HIV (Kuteesa, Seeley, Cumming, & Negin, 2012; Seeley, Kajura, & Mulder, 1995) and a five-country study examining the changing understandings and practices of marriage and relationships in the context of HIV/AIDS (Hirsch et al., 2009). Seeley and colleagues (1995) call for local interviewers to be considered as more central to the intellectual project, and be thought of as co-investigators. The team dimension in the latter study, however, refers primarily to the five principal investigators, all trained and based in Northern institutions (though all the investigators recognize the critical role of their local research assistants (LRAs) in the research). Thus, the latter project looks much like the U.S.-based team studies outlined above. Interestingly, Hirsch and colleagues were surprised when, during fieldwork, LRAs from the Uganda site requested to make contact with LRAs from the other sites. The authors admit that their surprise was partly a function of their own immersion in traditional research models in the Global South: "That we did not anticipate their desire for direct communication reflects our own internalization of the arguably colonialist, hierarchical model of the traditional relationship between anthropologist and field assistant" (Hirsch et al., 2009, p. 49).

The use of a team approach versus the more traditional lone anthropologist model is at least partly a function of how one understands "insider knowledge." In the lone anthropologist model, one researcher, usually from the Global North, leads all aspects of the project and works with a local research assistant who, in his/her insider capacity, takes the role of interpreter/informant in order to gain access to "insider knowledge." Conversely, the team approach relies on what Hirsch et al. (2009) call the "critical comparative approach," in which team members actively engage in collaboration and comparisons of findings from each site. Such an approach implicitly or explicitly incorporates and values comparison of various forms of insider-based interpretations. According to Hirsch et al. (2009), the resistance to team ventures that privilege comparison is partly a result of postmodern theories in anthropology (Clifford & Marcus, 2010; Marcus & Fischer, 1999), which emphasize subjectivity, that is, one's interpretation of a cultural process cannot be separated from his/her own identity. Therefore, insider insights gained through intensive immersion cannot be generalized beyond that particular research.

The notion of an insider is certainly not uncontested: in recent decades feminist and postmodernist theorists have challenged the binary distinction between insiders and outsiders or strangers (i.e., non-native researchers) on the grounds that it is over-simplified and presumes that social positions are static (Sherif, 2001; Shope, 2006). We appropriate the term “insider” to mean individuals with prior knowledge of respondents, their families, and/or communities (also see Weinreb, 2006), and who are themselves members of the communities of empirical interest. We broaden the use of the terms “insider” and “team” in our team-insider approach to encompass the work that we have done with groups of local research assistants, who although not academically prepared, are trained for this work and have taken on roles beyond translating for the investigators or bridging cultural divides.

Site description

All three projects were carried out in the Agincourt sub-district, located 500 km northeast of Johannesburg in South Africa’s Mpumalanga Province and close to the border with Mozambique. Indeed, about one third of the local population is of Mozambican origin (Kahn et al., 2012). The Agincourt sub-region is typical of much of southern Africa in three important respects: (1) the land is insufficient to support the population through subsistence agriculture or other local activities; (2) there are very few local employment opportunities; and (3) the population has high levels of migration and mobility. Under apartheid, this rural area was part of the “homeland” system that aimed to concentrate the black population in areas with little infrastructure and poor land. The Agincourt site’s population of about 90,000 lives in 28 villages, which were established through forced resettlement between 1920 and 1970. All villages have water provided through neighborhood taps, at least one primary school, and most have electricity and a secondary school (Kahn et al., 2012). The main ethnic group is ama-Shangaan who speak Xishangaan, a dialect of Xitsonga, a language spoken in both Mozambique and South Africa. Most families live in multigenerational, extended family arrangements in which adult siblings live close to one another (Junod, 1962; Niehaus, 1994). These "stands" occupied by kin are often physically very close to one another; people and food flow constantly between them, and labor, including childcare and supervision, is commonly shared or exchanged.

The three projects discussed here are nested within the Agincourt Health and Demographic Surveillance System (AHDSS). Since 1992, the AHDSS has been monitoring births, deaths, and migration through annual censuses (see Kahn et al 2012). Occasional modules, varying each year, focus on specific research and policy issues – such as food security, household assets, health care utilization, labor participation, and temporary migration – and provide additional data on the population. Each of the three projects benefitted from the AHDSS research infrastructure and two of the three projects used the census as a sampling frame. Additionally, all three projects relied extensively on counsel provided by AHDSS staff in carrying out the project, including in the choice of LRAs.

Project descriptions

Conversations Project: The *Public Conversations about HIV/AIDS Project* selected and trained nine[1] local research assistants living and working in the Agincourt study site to serve as participant observers and document conversations about HIV/AIDS taking place in public settings in their communities that they overheard or participated in (Angotti &

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[1] Attrition during the course of fieldwork brought the number of LRAs down from nine to seven.

Sennott, 2013).[2] The project's aim was to learn more about changing social norms and cultural scripts surrounding the epidemic. *Conversations* took place from January-August 2012, and followed a recently completed community-level HIV prevalence and sexual behavior study conducted in Agincourt in 2010-2011, where HIV infection was estimated at 20% overall, and as high as 50% in some age groups (Gómez-Olivé et al., 2013). Although the HIV and sexual behavior survey data are useful for estimating community prevalence and the factors associated with HIV status, they provide little information about the ways in which those experiencing the epidemic firsthand talk about it. For example, although the survey data can provide information about the extent of condom use or the typical number of sexual partners in the site, they cannot provide insight as to men and women's beliefs about condoms, how and why they (fail to) negotiate condom use with their partners, or why they believe having many simultaneous partners is advantageous or problematic. The *Conversations Project* was thus designed to collect these types of ethnographic data about the everyday discourses about the epidemic among local men and women and their neighbors, friends, and fellow community members. The LRAs – also called "insider ethnographers" (see Angotti & Sennott, 2013 for more details about the project) – were comprised of men and women of varying ages with diverse social networks who engaged in different types of activities, such as church involvement, community sports, and going to *tithavheni* [taverns]. The LRAs were selected from the pool of Agincourt staff and were thus familiar with the ethical responsibilities of conducting research. The goal at the group level was to ensure variation across demographic and social dimensions so that the project would be able to access a wide swath of the conversations about AIDS occurring in villages throughout the study site. The LRAs worked as a team to define and establish the boundaries of what a mention of AIDS looked like, but engaged in participant observation independently in their own communities, with on-going engagement with the project's Principal Investigators (PIs).[3]

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[2] The project drew its inspiration from research spearheaded by Susan Watkins in Malawi; see http://investinknowledge.org/projects/research/malawian_journals_project (Watkins & Swidler, 2009).

Gogo [Grandmother] Project: The *Gogo Project* (2004-2006) hired three LRAs to conduct repeated in-depth interviews with 30 women aged 60-plus. Agincourt's administrative staff assisted with the recruiting (through advertisements and word of mouth) and the selection of older female interviewers for this project. The respondents were drawn from the Agincourt census list: a third of the sample lived in households with a recent (within 3 years) adult death from AIDS; a third in households with an adult death from other causes; and a third in households with no recent adult deaths. The aim was to understand the social impacts of HIV on older women's households and their lives, and to understand the gendered and generational dynamics related to HIV (Schatz, 2007). A secondary focus was on the ways in which older women's access to a non-contributory pension affected their roles and responsibilities (Schatz & Ogunmefun, 2007). The project began with 30 South African female respondents aged 60-plus. It expanded to include another 30 women aged 60-plus (stratified similarly) who were not South African born but had moved to the site from Mozambique in the 1980s-1990s and were only recently legally eligible to receive the pension (Schatz, 2009). Finally, a sample of 30 "near old" women (aged 50-59), who were not yet pension-eligible and thus could be compared to those with pension access, was added to the project (Ogunmefun, Gilbert, & Schatz, 2011; Ogunmefun,

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[3] Throughout the paper, we refer to two groups: Principal Investigators (PIs) and Local Research Assistants (LRAs). PIs are those individuals who conceived of the study, raised the money for it, and brought it to the site. LRAs were those employed locally to collaborate with the PIs.

2008). With each respondent in each sample, the LRAs conducted three interviews: one focused on life-history, pension receipt and use; a second related to relationships with household members, care giving, and ideas about HIV in the community; and a third on personal experiences with HIV, such as providing care to orphans and sick adult children.

Children's Wellbeing and Social Connections (CWSC): The *CWSC* was an ethnographic study, carried out in 2002 and followed up in 2004, designed to investigate, in detail, the wide range of social connections that link members of different residential households and their impact on children's wellbeing (Madhavan, Townsend, & Garey, 2008; Madhavan & Townsend, 2007; Madhavan, 2010). The impetus for the research was dissatisfaction with the extant research on the topic, which was limited by an exclusive focus on co-residential living arrangements. Most surveys and censuses collect data using households for practical reasons but also based on the assumption that co-residence is the only or main locus of influence for children. The CWSC was an attempt to broaden this perspective through the use of an innovative (qualitative) research design. The sample households were selected from two Agincourt villages, one above and one below the median level of access and services as determined by AHDSS village-based wealth rankings (Townsend, Madhavan, & Garey, 2006). In each village, two households from each of the three wealth stratum that had at least one school-aged child (10 or 11) were selected. Selection of the LRAs to work on the project was based on recommendations from AHDSS staff as well as interviews with the PIs. Of the eight LRAs chosen, six had worked with the AHDSS and two were community members who responded to the advertisement. Working with the LRAs over a period of four months, the PIs mapped out connections between the initial contact household and members of other households that had the most important connections. The team arrived at these judgments through close and repeated observations of visitation patterns, movements of people and resources, in-depth interviews with members of various households, and fieldworker judgment. The goal was to identify groups that, while not closed, had a noticeable drop-off of interaction and resource exchange beyond their boundaries. In the course of fieldwork, the project collected a variety of data on social connection including kinship diagrams, residential histories, interview data and detailed daily observation records. Each instrument was designed to provide a different dimension of social connectivity in different scales of time ranging from the life course to daily activities. The resulting 12 contact groups contained 349 children under the age of 22.

Definitions and Terminology Across Projects: The definition and role of "team" differs for the three projects. For the *CWSC* study, eight LRAs were engaged as a group to actively participate in all key aspects of the project including instrument design, sample selection, and interpretation of the data. In the *Gogo Project*, the three LRAs commented on interview guides, provided feedback about issues raised during the project, illuminated customs and traditions and how they may be shaping understandings related to project topics, and problem-solved fieldwork issues as a group. In contrast to the *CWSC* study, however, the LRAs were not as involved in shaping the study sample and instruments. The *Conversations Project's* seven LRAs worked as a team to define terms and establish boundaries of what issues – and by extension, conversations – would be focused on in the field notes, but each engaged in participant observation independently in and around his/her own community. In sum, the three projects varied in team members' level of involvement in study design and coordination in data collection.

The definition and role of "insider" also differs for the three projects. Each of the projects hired local residents who were native speakers of Xishangaan, but the LRAs varied in their familiarity with the research subjects. Some were unknown, but many were acquaintances, such as through church functions or extended family relations. However, their position as insiders necessarily differed due to each projects' empirical aims and different forms of data collection. For example, although they may have been known to be associated with the Agincourt research site, the *Conversations* LRAs were not officially known to their communities to be members of this research team. Rather, as embedded insiders, they collected data on everyday conversations occurring organically among individuals in their social networks and who they encountered in settings such as on buses, at the market, or in church. In the other two projects, the LRAs were identified as "working for a project" from the beginning. Thus, community members may have seen them as both outsiders and insiders.

In the following sections, we examine how, in each of the three projects, the convergence of team and insider strategies facilitate access, efficiency, and insights – key considerations and concerns for all researchers.

Access

One of the advantages of the team-insider approach is enhanced *access* to populations and social settings beyond those easily available to outsider researchers. Working with LRAs of the same ethnicity and, at times, from similar social locations as those whom they are researching, is a particular advantage in post-colonial settings where such distinctions may evoke historical tensions. However, this advantage of the team-insider approach would apply to any number of research settings characterized by substantial social distance between researchers and subjects. By making use of a team of insiders, each project described here was able to enter spaces (often repeatedly and/or simultaneously) and collect data that otherwise might have been difficult to access. Below are examples from each project of how working with a team of insider LRAs benefited access to certain domains, individuals, and/or information.

For the *Conversations Project*, insider research assistants were essential for accessing everyday discourse about HIV/AIDS because the LRAs were positioned as locals embedded in communities. Combined with the team approach – that is, employing several LRAs of varying ages, sexes, and other social attributes – the team collectively had privileged access to a diverse array of social networks, settings, and the organic conversations taking place within them, which otherwise would not have been possible for the PIs if they were working alone. The *Conversations'* LRAs thus represented a variety of standpoints (see Fawcett & Hearn, 2004). Their plurality of identities – as neighbor, elder, sports' coach, and pastor, to name but a few – contributed to the richness and uniqueness of the data they each provided to the project. This is perhaps illustrated best by considering the demographic differences between two of the team's female LRAs. Idah[4] is young (late 20s) and unmarried. When not working, she likes to spend her time hanging out with friends at local taverns, where they play pool, listen to music, and drink beers. Below is an example from her field notes, which describes Idah and her friends (8 men and 2 women, ranging in age from late 20s to late 30s) hanging out at a jazz festival, teasing one of the men [Brother K] about being seen the previous week with a woman known for sleeping around [Sister F]:

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[4] All names of people and places have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the *Conversations* LRAs as well as the individuals participating in the conversations.

> Brother K, what happen last week at Tavern S [local bar] and Brother K said what do you mean when you say what happen, and Brother R said I saw you leaving with Sister F, and everyone laughed, and Brother K denied, saying I didn't go with her; yes, she wanted to go with me, but I said no I'm not going with you. And Brother O said you are lying. We saw you and we were asking our self if you are not afraid to die because she is a *minora* [razor]; she cut too much, and you can get drop [sexually transmitted disease] or AIDS. Immediately Brother K said how do you take me for? I know that Sister K, every man that is in a *shebeen* [tavern], she want to go with him as long as you buy her beers. And I said so you mean she is very cheap, just buy her a beer and you are taking her with you? Brother E said so how many did you buy, Brother K? We all laughed again and Brother O said you can deny, Brother K, we see you in two weeks to come, you will start coughing and that will be the beginning of AIDS, and will come to greet you when you are hospitalized.

Audrey, on the other hand, is about 20 years Idah's senior and married with children. She spends much of her free time in church-related activities and in caring for sick relatives, friends, and neighbors (also see Schatz & Ogunmefun 2007). In the field note below, Audrey is attending a church meeting and chatting with other women about how the pastor's wife was found HIV positive on account of her husband's infidelity. The women discuss the pastor's moral transgressions and how his behavior undermines their Christian faith:

> "Hey, when coming to HIV/AIDS," said the third woman, "I heard that Pastor Z was always lying to his wife by saying he is going to preach at [city]. Always he was going there, meanwhile he is going to see his girlfriend. When we looked at him, we thought he was fasting a lot by seeing him losing weight, meanwhile he is [HIV]

> positive. We heard this soon after when his wife went to the clinic for antenatal care. Indeed, nowadays you have to test while you are pregnant. It is a matter of must. After doing like that, she was tested HIV positive. People said she cried a lot, shouting so that she was not able to hold herself. The nurses tried to comfort her, but they failed... The woman told them that she started to be suspicious after finding a massage [message] in her husband's phone. Again he also changed his behavior." So I [Audrey] said to her as we listened attentively, "This need a prayer. If pastors are not able to hold themselves, what about other people who are not Christians? I think they need to practice what they preach." The second one said, "The problem is that nowadays we don't have Christians who committed themselves to God. A church is a business nowadays. Pastors are not preaching about salvation but money. [The first one was nodding her head.] They stand before God with their sins.

As demonstrated by these two field note excerpts, the diversity of LRAs on the *Conversations* team allowed the project access to a wide variety of conversations occurring in different social groups in the study site. The two conversations highlighted above invariably capture different discourses about AIDS circulating in everyday life, from how young men should temper their behavior around wayward women, to how religious authorities are undermining sacrosanct values such as fidelity.

Unlike *Conversations*, the *Gogo Project* hired a team of LRAs who were similar to one another and to their subjects—older women. The three LRAs were over the age of 40 and were mothers and grandmothers themselves. In returning to households multiple times, the LRAs were able to build relationships with respondents and allow space for sensitive conversations that might not otherwise occur in an interview setting. Two important issues of access facilitated by the team were their ability to be invited into homes as compassionate listeners of older persons' complaints and stories, and their showing of appropriate respect for elders and local gender dynamics.

In order to learn intimate details about older women's roles and responsibilities, as well as their concerns about family dynamics and their own health and wellbeing, it was essential that the interviewers be seen as both insiders who could understand their plight, and outsiders to the extent that they might take that knowledge elsewhere in order to help relieve their problems. For the most part, the team found that respondents welcomed their multiple visits. One field note, written by an LRA in her late 40s, highlighted how connections and a sense of familiarity made the respondent feel open to sharing her experiences with the interviewer: "When we were busy talking, [the respondent] said that I'm like her daughter who died. 'I said that I don't know, maybe we are related.' When we went on talking, she said that she suffered a lot during the illness of her daughter. She even said that I must come to her anytime."

In several cases, *Gogo Project* LRAs had to navigate a husband as a gatekeeper to respondents. As one wrote in her field notes, "[The respondent's] husband came and said, 'Don't talk to my wife. Tell me what you want.' I explained why I wanted to talk to his wife. Then he allowed me. When I finished the interview, I thanked the husband and he said that from now I may come any time to talk to his wife. He said maybe some of the things will change [i.e., he thinks they might see improvements in their village as a result of participation]." As a community member, the interviewer knew how to address and navigate this situation. Not only did she know to explain the project to the husband as a means of continuing the interview, but she also knew to thank the husband for his wife's time as she left. As a team, the PI and the LRAs discussed such interactions, which helped clarify and provide insight into local gender power dynamics—a topic central to the project—and allowed other interviewers to think about how they might have handled a similar situation. Indeed the spouse's reaction to the interviewer's presence might have been less extreme had the interviewer been an outsider, a potential limitation of the team-insider approach discussed further in the final section of the paper.

In the *CWSC*, the use of the team-insider approach was essential for gaining access to participants and events in two critical ways: (1) repeated and (2) intimate. By its very design, the *CWSC* PIs assigned each LRA two "contact groups" – groups of interconnected households – with whom to develop a close and sustained relationship over the course of four months. This entailed repeated visits to all households, sometimes twice over the course of a day, and follow-up discussions with the same people to resolve inconsistencies or for further probing. The repeated visits model also made possible the second crucial dimension of access – intimacy. Time is essential to understanding lives beyond the superficial and, therefore, the two are mutually re-enforcing. More time led to greater intimacy that, in turn, opened up space for more visits. Such an intense and sustained effort could not have succeeded without having the "cultural" knowledge that accompanies insider status but was also facilitated by having the opportunity to share/discuss/debate that knowledge with other LRA team members. This process often led to a rethinking of initial impressions, modifying approaches to tackling particular issues, and, in some cases, allowing each LRA to engage in self-reflection about values and opinions they once held as sacrosanct. In short, the presence of a team of culturally similar insiders provided space for critical analysis of cultural processes and "performances."

Perhaps the best example of intimacy is the intensive observation of young children that was carried out over 40 hours in one week at different times of the day. This required LRAs to record the minutiae of all activities in which children engaged and their interactions with adults every 15 minutes. Therefore, it necessitated LRAs spending long periods of time in selected households and following children if needed to other households or venues. As it was the most intrusive part of the project, it was phased in towards the end. Because the LRAs had access to these children in such an intense manner it was possible to collect observational data on time use and quality of interaction.

Efficiency

Efficiency in data collection is critical for all researchers but particularly so for those working in international contexts who – likely relying on grants for their projects and/or short sabbaticals to conduct them – have limited time and money to be in the field. The three projects presented here illustrate how working with a team of insider LRAs facilitated efficient data collection, enabling the PIs of each project to collect extensive, high-quality qualitative data in a relatively short period of time. Moreover, access to a larger and more diverse group of respondents partially addresses perhaps the most common concern about qualitative data – the lack of representativeness/selection. This concern often arises because of small sample sizes in qualitative research as well as the greater potential for interviewer-specific subjectivities to influence data collection and interpretation.

By utilizing a team of LRAs with diverse characteristics (as described above), the *Conversations Project* was able to gather extensive amounts of data in a relatively short amount of time. Over a seven month period, the project's seven LRAs wrote 39 sets of field notes comprising 947 handwritten pages and 194 distinct conversations that organically occurred among individuals encountered during the course of the LRAs' daily lives. These conversations included an array of people and situations, from a small group of neighbors gossiping on a verandah about the infidelity of a boyfriend caught in the act, to 300 people interacting at a church service or community meetings and discussing a member's untimely death to AIDS. Because the project's LRAs were simultaneously engaging in participant observation, using a team of research assistants enabled this project to gather diverse information from different people (e.g., men and women, young and old) and different settings (e.g., taverns, car washes, church), at the same time.

The *Gogo Project* worked across several villages that were spread out geographically. During the initial phase of the research the team of three LRAs conducted and transcribed 90 interviews (three interviews with each of 30 respondents) over a 10-week period (the second and third phases had similar short intensive data collection periods). Having a team of LRAs meant a steady flow of transcribed interviews for the PI to read. With a single LRA, transcripts might have been more intermittent and the PI's time less well spent. Once transcribed, the PI engaged the LRAs and the broader team in discussions of content and queries about language and topics raised in the interviews. These discussions led to new topics being added to the subsequent interview guides. While increasing the depth of the research possible in a short period of time, working with a team of LRAs resulted in an intensive data collection period.

In similar ways to the other two projects, the use of eight LRAs with insider status greatly improved the efficiency of the *CWSC* Project. The project was able to include more families in two different villages and complete the work in a relatively shorter time span than would have been possible with just the PIs and one LRA. The expansion of the sample, in turn, enabled the PIs to analyze variation based on socioeconomic status (SES) and village characteristics (e.g., proximity to main road), and still retain the in-depth perspective on each family group. This expanded the variation of the project as in the *Conversations Project*. In short, the team-insider approach permitted the balance of breadth and depth, something that is often not possible in more conventional ethnographic research. Having a team also enabled the PIs to divide activities among LRAs in order to optimize resources such as transportation. For example, while one LRA could conduct participant observation at a wedding, another could pay a social visit nearby to one of his/her households or conduct a follow-up discussion on a particular topic.

Insights

Through group interactions and asking LRAs to connect their work to their own ideas/experiences, team-insider approaches can *expand and deepen insights.* LRAs can provide feedback, clarify cultural misunderstandings, and vet information learned throughout the course of data collection. In addition, on a diverse team that includes LRAs of different ages, sexes, or experiences, it is possible to triangulate different perspectives within the team to better understand the data. This, in turn, strengthens internal validity.

The use of a team of LRAs in the *Conversations Project* was crucial in expanding the PIs' understanding of the research topic of interest (HIV/AIDS) in two key ways: (1) group engagement during training and (2) monthly meetings with the PIs and each LRA when field notes were submitted. During the project's formal training, for example, the LRAs brainstormed together to come up with a list of indirect references to HIV/AIDS. In all, the group of LRAs identified 10 different ways people talk about HIV/AIDS in their communities without saying “HIV” or “AIDS.” Examples include using sign language implying HIV by placing three fingers over one’s head, as well as euphemisms in the local vernacular such as *Xinghunghumana* (something frightening but invisible, similar to the “boogie man”). This exercise alerted the PIs to the different ways in which locals colloquially referred to the disease, and assuaged the LRAs’ concerns that they had to rely solely on an explicit mention of HIV/AIDS for a conversation to be considered as data. Indeed, if the LRAs had only included explicit mentions of HIV or AIDS, they likely would have had very few field notes to submit each month. Engaging with the LRAs illuminated that the disease is invoked in conversation by how it is understood locally (such as by symptoms like coughing, which may be conflated with other diseases), by the emotions it generates (e.g., fear or discomfort), and by being part of a category of diseases for which there are various unknowns and uncertainties about its etiology.

The *Conversations* investigators met with the LRAs at the end of each month when they turned in their field notes, though this was done individually, not as a full team. During these 30-60 minute sessions, the PIs and each LRA discussed the field notes; the PIs solicited additional details that might have been missing or which the LRAs might have omitted; and the PIs vetted their understandings of the conversations that the LRAs captured. This dialogue also expanded the PIs’ insights by engaging with each LRA on the topic of interest and observing his/her emotional reactions (e.g., laugh, sadness, disgust, etc.), moral reasoning, explanation of the larger context, and interpretations of the conversations documented in his/her field notes. For example, in one set of field notes, a LRA described a conversation she had with a younger woman who is HIV positive, and whose mother objects to her daughter’s use of Western antiretroviral treatment in favor of the traditional medicine advocated by her church. In discussing the issue of emic understandings of treatment for HIV in her community, the LRA further shared that people from her community frequently board mini-buses on Friday afternoons to travel to Johannesburg, where many pastors promise a cure for AIDS in exchange for a fee. Thus, the LRAs also served as key informants and cultural interpreters, who added local insights and embedded knowledge of their own data to the PIs' understanding of it.

Similarly, as a team, the *Gogo Project* LRAs, the Project Manager (a PhD student) and the PI met regularly to debrief about emergent findings in the interviews and assess what new topics, if any, should be added to the interview guides. Usually such contemplation and decisions might be relegated solely to the PI. However, as insiders, the LRAs' ideas about what was important or surprising provided additional insight into the ways of reading narratives or situations highlighted in field notes, such as how the respondent received the interviewer, as well as information about households' appearance and wealth.

One example of insight from the *Gogo Project* was in the interviewers' assessment of socioeconomic status. In addition to writing field notes describing household appearance, the interviewers were asked to rank the socioeconomic status of respondents' households into categories of "poor," "average," or "rich," definitions they determined as a team. These combined data allowed the LRAs to assess which individuals were in the worst and best circumstances. For example, among the poorest was a respondent in whose home, "No one is working…, she doesn't have a house, an ID, and she didn't get a pension." Another stressed that the poorest person's house was "made out of mud, no furniture inside her house. She doesn't receive a pension." On the other end of the spectrum was a respondent described as, "….the richest. Her house is nicely built with furniture inside. She is using electricity in her house." And another described as, "She has a nice house, nice furniture and cows. And her children have a big house made of fancy bricks, roofed with tiles. Everything is good for her." Having a child with a nice house or who was working was part of the interpretation of who was wealthy because it alluded to resources the *gogo* might be able to access. While the exercise may not have matched perfectly with socioeconomic status as measured by the census (Ogunmefun, 2008), it led to important insights about perceived wealth in the study site: wealth, in the eyes of the *Gogo* LRA team, included the status of one's house, possessions, the wealth of kin (which can be drawn on in a crisis), as well as access to pensions.

The use of a team-insider approach in the *CWSC* greatly expanded insights through one critical mechanism: continuous discussion amongst the team members. Having eight LRAs provide feedback offered a much more varied set of insights than would have been possible with just one LRA and the PIs. Insights were enhanced specifically through: (1) the design of instruments, (2) daily debriefings and discussions, and (3) continuous participant observation. Unlike more conventional ethnographies where the PI designs all the instruments, the *CWSC* began the study without any completed instruments. Rather, the PIs started the process with a general discussion of the conceptual approach and the LRAs were actively involved in designing the necessary instruments. For example, in designing the protocol for collecting kinship diagrams, there were lively, sometimes contentious, debates about the correct kinship terminology. This was invaluable in not only educating the PIs about the range of terms but also served as an important tool for the LRAs to learn from one another and make decisions on standardizing terms. It also underscored the need for caution in interpreting extant findings on the influence of family context on child outcomes. Collecting intrahousehold relationship data is now fairly common practice in most demographic and health surveys. However, nearly all these endeavors involve having one person from the household provide the data with the assumption that kinship is a fixed attribute. The field experience of *CWSC* made it abundantly clear that kin relationships are highly subjective and fluid. Therefore, the design phase interactions set the stage for sustained debate about the use of these terms throughout the project and eventually, led to strengthening validity of the terms themselves and interpretation of the influence of these relationships in children's lives. Moreover, it provided a venue for critically thinking about "local knowledge" and challenged LRAs to reconsider strongly-held positions. A similar approach was used in designing children's residential history forms and the intensive 40-hour observation protocols (Madhavan & Gross, 2013).

Daily debriefings and discussions with the *CWSC* team, by definition, rested on interaction between the team members. These occurred in a number of ways: one-on-one between the PIs and one or two LRAs; one-on-one between two LRAs; and as a team to discuss common problems that arose. For example, on one notable occasion, the whole team gathered to provide suggestions to one LRA who was experiencing difficulty engaging one of her younger respondents in discussing her relationship with the father of her child. This forum made it possible to present a wider array of options than a discussion with PIs alone would have produced and offered much needed social support for the LRA in tackling fieldwork challenges. This is not usually present in the more common "solitary" context of qualitative research, which, in turn, may have negative implications for data quality. These debriefings also made it possible for the PIs to take note of commonalities across children and families without having any one case influence the others. Unlike more conventional ethnographic approaches in which it is only the PI and a research assistant who discuss and analyze common patterns and differences across respondents, the team approach allows for multiple and, to a certain extent, independent analyses to emerge because they come from multiple LRAs, each of whom is working with different respondents. This ability to work "independently" primarily occurred early in the project when LRAs had had limited interactions with one another (and limited influence on one another's impressions), but it was present throughout the project to varying degrees.

Finally, the team enabled the PIs to optimize insights gained through continuous participant observation. Here the greatest value was having additional sets of eyes and ears. For example, it was not uncommon for several LRAs to show up at the same funeral or pension receipt venue. Each LRA took field notes, which they compared with one another. The most interesting comparisons were observations of conflict. While an older and, in this case, female LRA may have noted a particularly tense interaction between a grandmother and her son, a younger male LRA had a more sanguine interpretation. This is particularly salient for research on child wellbeing as the quality of relationships between family members can impact several facets of children's wellbeing. However, our knowledge on the topic is far more limited in the African context. The team/insider approach was particularly effective in this sense because it enabled different LRAs to discuss sensitive issues with relative ease, which, in turn, led to more nuanced insights about family context and children's wellbeing

Discussion

As with any methodology, there are both benefits and limitations to the team-insider approach described here. These projects have a unique advantage in that all three were associated with the Agincourt Health and Population Unit. This affiliation meant that the projects had access not only to the communities in which an annual census had been conducted since 1992, but also to LRAs who were identified as trustworthy and professional and, in some cases, previously trained with skills to perform the methodological tasks needed for each project. Although not a requirement for using an integrated team-insider approach, combining these research strategies may be easier for PIs who are connected to an established research site with trained staff. There are now many such sites in the Global South, including other demographic surveillance sites and long-standing longitudinal projects.

While each project has its unique limitations, there are a few overarching limitations relevant to the team-insider approach across all three projects. First is the necessity of surrendering some control of the *process* by which data are collected. For the *Conversations Project*, in which the LRAs engaged independently in ethnographic data collection, the PIs effectively had no way of knowing if the LRAs actually heard the conversations they wrote about in their field notes. Thus the plausibility of field notes collected by LRAs can only be assessed by virtue of their persuasiveness (Angotti & Kaler, 2013; Watkins & Swidler, 2009). However, as Kaler (2003) notes of a similar project in Malawi, "It would have been more work to invent all the situations and conversations than to simply record them" (2003: 354). Indeed, given the prominence of AIDS in Agincourt (and South Africa writ large), everyday talk about the epidemic is commonplace. As Audrey, one of the *Conversations*' LRAs remarked, "People are talking [about AIDS]. If you are with people, you will hear them talk." Thus, while outside researchers might work with insiders to enhance insights, the outsider must also be familiar enough with the setting to be able to detect fakery. PIs must also be actively involved enough throughout the course of fieldwork to be privy to such concerns and address them as they arise.

In the *Gogo Project*, giving up some control over the process of data collection meant, at times, placing LRAs in awkward situations where their own embeddedness in the study site turned out to be a liability. For example, one LRA wrote in a field note that, "After finishing our interview, [the respondent] wanted to tell me a story of the headman [village leader] that she hates. I said the headman is my uncle. She stopped." While this happened outside of an interview, the exchange was likely uncomfortable. In addition, it occurred during the second interview, so could have negatively affected the responses and the respondent's willingness to participate in the final interview. The LRA's field notes for the third interview did not record any reluctance, but it is not possible to know what information the respondent withheld in the final interview as a result. Similarly, the gender dynamics described previously, that is, the LRAs' having to legitimate their presence to husbands as gatekeepers, might not have been an issue had the interviewer been an outsider. Instead, the husband might have been less antagonistic towards an outside researcher, whom he might have welcomed as a guest and offered a chair or a cup of tea. He may have questioned the LRA's presence because he saw her as no different from his wife, and thus felt he had the authority to question the LRA's right to speak with his wife. Thus, these types of problems might be less likely to occur with an outsider researcher who is less intimately connected to local village life.

For the *CWSC* study, LRAs varied in their ability to do this type of work, which complicated efforts to standardize the process of data collection across LRAs within the team. This, in turn, had an effect on data quality and data validity. For example, the level of detail in field notes varied enormously, ranging from vague statements such as “things were the same as the last visit” to much more informative observations such as “I noticed that the yard looked cleaner, the *gogo* [grandmother] was having a conversation with her *makoti* [daughter-in-law] and the oldest daughter was helping her mother with cooking.” Such variation had a significant impact on coding and eventually produced differential coding across families with some having higher levels of indeterminacy than others. The attention to detail was particularly challenging for some of the LRAs during the intensive observation of focal children in which they needed to record all interactions and activities every 15 minutes. This activity lost its novelty for some LRAs quicker than for others, resulting in highly varying observational detail. The variation in skill level amongst team members introduces biases that may undermine or constrain PI efforts at doing cross-respondent analyses.

A second limitation to the team-insider integrated approach is a bread and butter concern for qualitative researchers: addressing positionality. Qualitative researchers collecting their own data think critically about how their own identities and subjectivities vis-à-vis research participants affect the type of data they collect. PIs utilizing a team-insider research strategy need to think about how far to engage their embedded teams in this type of reflection. Will the LRAs reflect on their own positionality and their influence on the data or will the PIs do it for them? Either way, how will this be done? In the *Conversations Project*, the PIs utilized a strategy of inference: they asked each LRA to note who was present when a particular conversation took place (e.g., number of men and women present, ages, and other attributes of interest). Then, in the coding process for each set of field notes, the PIs captured this information, thus enabling the use of the LRAs’ identities vis-à-vis those in the conversation as data points. For example, the authors are currently working on a paper that analyzes how men and women cast blame for HIV transmission differently within their homosocial gendered social networks as compared with when men and women are talking with one another (Sennott, Angotti, & Naseri, 2013). While this is one strategy for dealing with a particular element of LRAs' positionality (i.e., gender) vis-à-vis other people, a major limitation is the detail, observation, and critical self-reflection that is lost when the PI him/herself is not physically present during data collection. The *Gogo Project* tried to partially address this by selecting LRAs who were closer in age and experience to those being interviewed, to limit the number of possible confounding positions. Beyond this, the project did not engage the LRAs in discussing or contemplating how their positionality might have influenced the data collected. The *CWSC* project encouraged each LRA to include his/her own emotional responses to discussions they were having with respondents and to scenes/interactions that they observed. Certain issues such as corporal punishment of children and alcohol use elicited sharp and forceful judgments from the LRAs. Precisely because of their insider status and because of their higher educational level, they felt that they had a right to make such judgments on behaviors, something the PIs were more reluctant to exercise and simply unable to do on most occasions. However, all recognized the PIs' power stemming from education and more extensive worldly experience.

In light of these limitations, researchers interested in utilizing an integrated team-insider approach need to think through issues that are fundamental to qualitative inquiry and how far to engage their embedded teams in addressing them. Indeed for the projects discussed here, we believe the aforementioned benefits of using a team-insider approach for gathering data outweighs the drawbacks. The approach can be usefully extended to other sensitive topics (e.g., those related to sexual relations, stigmatized behavior, etc.), which might best be collected by insiders or peers, as well as those that require extensive data collection within a short time frame (Mutchler, McKay, McDavitt, & Gordon, 2013; Plummer et al., 2004). This approach consciously attempts to obviate, though does not completely remove, hierarchical Global North-South relationships that are, at times, found in research conducted in the Global South by PIs from the North (for example, see Hirsch et al., 2009). Working with teams of LRAs provides expedited access to local and diverse populations of interest, and allows for efficiency in data collection by using several research assistants who are often gathering data in tandem. Finally, a team-insider approach provides a variety of enhanced insights into local knowledge, often unavailable to outsider researchers or those working with one local assistant who serves primarily as an interpreter/key informant. Indeed the projects discussed here benefitted at several stages of the research process – on the front end by developing appropriate terms for kin (*CWSC*) and indirect references to HIV/AIDS (*Conversations*), in the middle of the project by revising interview materials (*Gogo*), and at later stages by engaging LRAs in discussions about the data (*Conversations*) – from using an integrated team-insider approach.

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