

# Demographic Survey: Asking Questions With Reference to Sex Preference

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## INTRODUCTION

Research is one of the tools to deal with problems in order to search alternatives for decision making. Scholars have developed various research techniques and methods for dealing with social science problems. It is not possible to cover every methods and dimensions of the research process in a single piece of work like this. Thus, this paper will discuss and comment on the approach of asking questions in demography with reference to the preference of the parents on the sex of the child. Some relevant questions are extracted from some of the past surveys for the purpose of this paper.

## MEANS AND METHODS OF COLLECTING INFORMATION

The communication between the interviewer and respondents occupies prominent place in the process of data collection. It is known to most of us that, if one wishes to find-out something from someone else then the process involved this course of action is either ask or observe or both (Tull and Albaum, 1973: 133). Generally quantitative data are collected by means of structured interviews. This is also one of the basic techniques for gathering information for research which is generally adopted by most of the survey research. However, informations can also be collected in other ways: from self administered questionnaire, service statistics, or secondary sources as the census, vital records and other existing records and reports. Interviews can be conducted by means of structured questions or without it. If the sample in a survey is large then it is better to employ structured interviews in order to permit better statistical analysis and to have convenience in data processing. Structured interview applies standard questionnaire to ensure that all the respondents are asked exactly the same set of questions in the same sequence (Fisher et. al. 1983: 35-40).

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Now-a-days survey research has become one of the major tools for social scientists to investigate the various problems of a society. Generally survey research is based on a pre-structured questionnaire targeting a section of a society. The responses are then collected, quantified and appropriate statistical tools are applied to detect the cause and consequences using different variables (Stone and Campbell, 1984:27). After analysing the information is presented in the form of report. The same procedure is adopted in most demographic survey research.

Generally, there is no point in asking a question on a topic for which no one is going to analyse the result or if the results are thought to be invalid or if most of the respondents fail to answer. Survey researchers have the choice between imitating and initiating with regards to the questions to be asked. Both these approaches has its risks, particularly if the time and the research location of the surveys differs. The researcher, thus, has to consider the sensitivities of the potential responds in order to choose best questions. Moreover, it is also important to remember that the questions asked are just one part of the entire research process and cannot be isolated from the other parts (Lucas, 1985: 3-14).

As the information gathered through asking question and observations are the base for the entire research work, utmost care should be taken in designing questions in order to minimise the non-sampling errors and the biasness in the result. The Table below shows the types and causes of possible errors in the process of communication with respondents.

Table 1  
Causes of Possible Errors in Communication with Respondents

Types of Errors	Causes of Errors
1. Reactive error	- Response error in communication - Reaction of the respondents to the process of being questioned - Non-cooperation by the respondents
2. Interpretive error	- Different underlying assumptions - Use of ambiguous construction - Use of ambiguous words - Use of language
3. Interviewer induced error	- Influence of the voice - Appearance of the interviewer - Manner of the interviewer - Sex of the interviewer.

Source: D.S. Tull and G.S. Albaum, Survey Research, A Decisional Approach, International Text Book Company, New York, 1973.

Most of these errors are likely to be found in the data from the poorly designed projects.

## ISSUES ON SEX PREFERENCE

Sex preference indicates the desired sexual composition of family (Popline Thesaurus Working Group, 1984:126) where the parents are biased towards either sons or daughters. The persistence of such a feature influences the fertility of the society (Khan and Sirageldin, 1977:126). Chen et al. (1981:55-70) pointed out in their study of Bangladesh that the son preference attitude of parents has had an impact on the health, nutrition and mortality of the children in the country. Further, Cleland et al. (1983:10) found clear evidence of the persistence of son preference in 14 countries out of 27 they studied. Demographers are interested in the degree of sex preference in a country and its impact. Besides, information on the sex preference of parents in a country may help the planners and policy makers to design plans and programmes directed to population dynamics.

### ASKING QUESTIONS

Any answer first needs the questions. Some answers may come from a single question while some may need two or more questions which are later combined in single answer. Similarly, sometimes one question might have several answers. Thus asking demographic questions is not as simple as it sounds.

It is very important to segment the targeted population into male and female to know about the preference of parents for the sex of the child. Besides, there is much significance in analysing male and female separately in a demographic study. This is why almost all the demographic surveys ask questions related to the sex.

Proxy reporting (defined as a situation where the respondents gives information about some one else) plays vital role in demographic survey. Generally the sex of a child in a demographic study is asked with the mother. The answers to these questions are later linked with other variables of interest to find out the relationship between these variables and its consequences in the society. Thus, information on the sex preference of the parents can be obtained by asking questions that are directly related to the sex of the child. Some of the direct questions collected from selected survey report which seek answers on preference for sex of the child are presented here as examples for the purpose of this paper.

#### Example 1

- a. Would you prefer your next child to be a boy or girl ?  
(WFS, 1979:274)
- b. Would you have preferred to have:
  1. Boys--, Why ?
  2. girls--, Why ?
  3. No preference

(Poopalasingham, 1977:54)

The answers to these questions reflect the attitude of the respondent regarding the preference for sex of their child. However, the attitude and the behaviour of the respondent is likely to be different. It is also likely that parents may intentionally hide their behaviour by providing false information to the questions in Example-1. In such instances, there are also techniques through which the behaviour of the parents regarding their child's sex preference can be evaluated. To do so the questions can be put in such a way which will indirectly give answers to his/her behaviour. In this technique of asking questions in a survey provides two answers at a time.

Example 2

- a. For how many months all-together did you breast fed him/her ?  
 months ---- still breast feeding -- (WFS, 1979:259)

Actually this question is directly related with breast feeding and does not appear to be related with sex preference. In fact the importance of asking this type of questions is that it identifies the behaviour of the respondent according to preference of sex of child without letting them know. It also helps to evaluate the attitude and behaviour of respondents to sex preference. Further, this type of question helps to check the consistency of the answer by comparing it with the answer from the question of Example 1 and this will increase the validity of the information. This type of questions can be related to the education, the type of food given to the child and the care and treatment given to the child during the sick period, by sex. The answer to all these questions serves the purpose of the researcher to study on parent's preference for the sex of their child. Moreover, questions based on such style are also likely to provide valid information on attitude and behaviour of parents on sex preference. For example, if the mother is breast-feeding sons for a longer time or more frequently than the daughter than their till towards male sex is clearly visualized by their answer. Similarly, if their response after tabulation shows that they are giving better food, education and better care during the sick period to sons than to daughter then this also shows their sex preference behaviour.

The question related to the treatment (care during sick) given by parents to their child by sex is asked in the survey conducted by New Era (1986:116) which is presented below:

- b. Did you treat the person prior to his/her death ?

Yes                      No.

(New Era, 1986)

This question intends to seek answer to the differentials on treatment rendered by the parents to their child by sex.

As these questions are indirectly related to the sex preference behaviour of the parents, sometimes it is necessary to do a cross tabulation. For example, it is important to cross tabulate the answer to Example 2(b) with answers related to age so that the population can be segmented to show treatment received by age and sex. This makes possible to identify the behaviour of parents according to preferred sex of the child only after separating the answers related to children from the total answers to this questions.

In Example 1, the purpose of the question is to identify the degree of sex preference in a society where a survey has been conducted. But the question is not asked by saying 'male child' and 'female child' because these words may sounds odd to the respondent. It is thus very important to know synonymous words which can be incorporated in the question so that appropriate words can be used to make the respondent feel comfortable. The same thing is done in Example 2 where 'him' and 'her' is used instead of 'male' and 'female'.

#### SOME VISUAL PROBLEMS IN ASKING QUESTIONS

The questions designed for a survey may be ineffective if due consideration is not paid to minor things. For example, the question may not be appropriate or be too complex for the respondent to answer, or it may ask two questions at a time. The question in Example 1(b) above is trying to trace the sex as well as the desire of the person to have a boy/girl child by asking two things at one time. Such a tendency should be avoided as much as possible. One cannot justify such things saying that it is possible in the case of an easy question, for, the term 'easy', most of the time is not relative. A question which seems easy to the designer may be very difficult to the respondent, especially in those countries where the level of education of the people is poor. Thus instead of asking the question as it is put in the Example 1(b), it would be better to split it into two parts like:

- a. Would you have preferred to have:
  1. Boy ----
  2. Girl ----
  3. No preference ----
- b. Why do you prefer to have a boy/girl:

The advantages of breaking the question into parts is that it helps to save loosing information. Further, the boy and girl could be mutually exclusive to some of the respondents and equally likely to others in terms of their preference. So the arrangement of this Example (a) is applicable for both types of respondents. They may answer either girl or boy if they have a sex preference or the third option if they have no preference for the sex of the child. Similarly the open ended question 'Why' asking separately increases the importance of the question and it is possible to get a better answer than by combining two questions at one time as in Example 2. Fisher et al. (1983:35-37) suggested 15 points that must be considered before designing a pre-structured questionnaire for a survey.

CONCLUSION

Asking demographic question is not as easy as it is seen. Each and every words in questions that are targeted to respondents should be considered very carefully from different angles. While doing this the questionnaire designer should be able to think from the perspective of respondents and not as a designer. It is well known that most surveys use pre-tested questionnaires to get feedback so that problems in the field can be minimised. Still the problem is that no designer can anticipate all the likely problems of field work in advance. Similarly, no pre-test can help to anticipate all the possible problems relating to field work. This is why the questions asked in any surveys cannot be said perfect one, no matter how big the survey is. So whatever time and attention is given to designing a demographic survey question, it almost always is insufficient. Still, as a researcher, one must try to minimise the likely problems of questions keeping two things in mind - to make the respondent feel comfortable about answering the question without distorting the purpose as well.

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# Estimation of Paddy Production: A Case Study of Saptari District.

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## INTRODUCTION

Agriculture plays a predominant role in the economy of Nepal. The contribution of this sector to the G.D.P. is 62 percent.<sup>1</sup> This sector provides the employment opportunities to 91.1 percent of the total population<sup>2</sup> and there is no other country in Asia where more than 90 percent of its people are engaged in agriculture.

As agriculture is the backbone of Nepalese economy, the development of Nepal is closely related with the development of this sector. Within agriculture, among crops it is worthy to note that food crops cover almost 90 percent of the total cropped area. Paddy is cultivated in 55 percent of the total cultivated land of Nepal and it contributes 59 percent of the total grain production. Despite long history and predominant position of paddy cultivation in Nepal, it is characterised by small farm size, use of primitive tools, high labour intensiveness and low productivity. Therefore an increase in production of paddy is related to the quality and quantity of inputs and also to some extent the related technology. To ascertain the quantities of different inputs to be used, it is necessary to estimate the relative contribution of inputs to output.

The focus of the study is the production analysis of paddy in Aurahi Village Panchayat of Saptari district. Saptari district is an important paddy producing area of the country. The share of Saptari district in the total production of paddy in Nepal was 4.06 percent in 1981/82.

## Objectives of the Study

Specifically the study had the following objectives:

1. To estimate the production function of paddy taking out the production as the dependent variable and inputs human labour, bullock labour and capital investment as explanatory variables.
2. To make policy recommendations relating to paddy production in the study area.

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