Research Article

Working with teams of "insiders":
Qualitative approaches to data collection in the
Global South

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Abstract

BACKGROUND
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. Even though this approach is becoming more common among population researchers in the Global South to address a range of research questions, little has been published that describes the method and critically assesses its strengths and weaknesses.

OBJECTIVE
We draw on three projects embedded in the Agincourt Health and Socio-Demographic Surveillance System site in rural South Africa that integrate both approaches to demonstrate the benefits and limitations of this strategy.

METHOD
We document, through in-depth description, how these three projects achieve access, efficiency, and insights into issues of population concern (HIV/AIDS, aging, and child wellbeing) utilizing a "team-insider" approach by working with groups of local research assistants.

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CONCLUSIONS

The projects vary in their use of "teams" and "insiders" but collectively deepen our understanding of pressing population concerns in the Global South. In particular, by using teams of insiders, these projects gain insights into local ideas about HIV, uncover ways that HIV affects older women's lives, and provide in-depth understanding of children's social connections. The approach also presents a number of challenges, however, such as grappling with the responsibilities and burdens that are placed on local insider team members.

1. Introduction

Despite the phenomenal growth of qualitative demographic research in Africa over the past 10–15 years (e.g., Angotti and Kaler 2013; Bledsoe and Banja 2002; Johnson-Hanks 2006; Watkins 2004), it is important to continue to develop and share techniques that improve demographers' use of qualitative methods (Coast 2003; Randall and Koppenhaver 2004; Schatz 2003; Watkins and Swidler 2009). Towards that end, we present the "team-insider approach" (TI) – working with "teams" of "insiders" – which we argue can facilitate access, and improve efficiency and insights, into research questions of interest to demographers. In particular, we believe this strategy will appeal to demographers interested in expanding their suite of research tools, especially those who study the health and wellbeing of vulnerable populations. While versions of this approach are becoming more common in the Global South, little has been published that describes the method and critically assesses its strengths, weaknesses, and the various considerations it raises.

We draw on the experiences of three projects conducted in the Agincourt Health and socio-Demographic Surveillance System (AHDSS) 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 population concern in sub-Saharan Africa and more generally in the Global South: HIV/AIDS, aging, and children's wellbeing. The projects outlined here serve as valuable examples of the use of team-based research incorporating insiders. Although each project made use of teams and insiders in somewhat different ways, together the three projects bring to light the benefits and limitations of TI in qualitative research.

2. Background

While collaborating with teams of local researchers is becoming increasingly common in the Global South, and funding agencies are more willing to support such research endeavors (Creswell et al. 2011), to our knowledge little has been published on the methods used in such inquiries. It is sometimes possible to surmise that a research project has used local research teams to collect data. In order to improve demographers' use of qualitative methods, however, it is important to document the use of these techniques and the ways in which they enhance data quality. Moreover, dissemination is critical, both for researchers interested in trying new techniques without having to reinvent the wheel, and, more importantly, to create awareness of the potential problems.

The use of insider research assistants raises questions about what constitutes "insider knowledge". The traditional lone anthropologist model in which one researcher, usually from the Global North, leads all aspects of a research project and works with a local research assistant who, in his/her insider capacity assumes the role of interpreter/informant, was historically how a researcher gained access to "insider knowledge". The subjectivity inherent in such an approach yields what Clifford and Marcus call "partial truths" (Clifford and Marcus 2010; Marcus and Fischer 1999). And yet the notion of a discrete insider-outsider distinction has been challenged by feminist and post-modern scholars on the grounds that it presumes that social positions are static (Sherif 2001; Shope 2006). The question, therefore, is to what extent a team of local research assistants – each bringing his/her own subjectivities and working with outsider Principal Investigators (PIs) – can produce valid "insider knowledge".[7] We believe that the TI approach is beneficial in this regard because, by virtue of including "teams" of "insiders", it recognizes multiple forms of insider knowledge and attempts to incorporate these unique insights at several points throughout the research process.

Definitions of "teams" in previous collaborative research efforts in the Global South have varied. In many cases there is reference to a research team, but limited information about the roles of the various team members or how the team interacted. One exception is Hirsch et al. (2009), who make use of a "critical comparative approach", in which team members actively engage in collaboration and comparison of findings from multiple global sites. Specifically, Hirsch and colleagues compare and contrast the sexual geographies and social organization that support men's extramarital sex and contribute to HIV infection in five countries. As presented in their book, the team dimension in the study refers primarily to the five principal investigators, all

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[7] 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 study site. LRAs are those who were employed locally to collaborate with the PIs on the study.

trained and based in Northern institutions (though all the investigators recognize the critical role of their local research assistants (LRAs) in the research). Seeley and colleagues (1995) go a step further and call for local interviewers to be considered as more central to the intellectual project, and be thought of as co-investigators. Thus Seeley et al. broaden the definition of "team" to incorporate both the formally trained investigators who conceptualize and lead the research project and the group of LRAs with whom they collaborate throughout the process.

A key aspect and advantage of team research is the availability of a variety of views and perspectives on the topic of inquiry; good team research makes use of frequent team discussions about terms and concepts to develop their awareness and understanding while in the field. For example, Adato, Lund, and Mhlongo (2007) allude to this in their article evaluating the pros and cons of an innovative qualitative method, household events maps: "[This method] was key also in guiding us through evening debriefing sessions – to identify gaps in information to be picked up in later visits, and in our retrospective view of the household, trying to account for the changes in households' fortunes" (2007:256).

Some research teams make use of local research assistants to develop culturally sensitive instruments, clarify and amass essential local terminology, and interpret the meanings of data and interactions in the field. Kriel et al. (2014) highlight some of the reasons why the exclusive use of 'outsider' researchers can bias understandings of concepts as seemingly simple as household membership in South Africa and elsewhere. In interviews completed with respondents from an earlier survey, Kriel and colleagues found that the outside researcher and the local interviewers and respondents differed in their definition of whether particular individuals should be considered household members. Insiders were more inclined to include those living elsewhere but with "ties" to or making contributions to the household.

Plummer et al. (2004) used a team in Tanzania that included young adults to administer surveys to adolescents about sexual behavior, with the explicit aim of improving the validity of their results. Similarly, Porter et al. (2010) included local children as research collaborators and data collectors in Ghana, Malawi, and South Africa in a study of child mobility. In the Children, Transport, and Mobility in Sub-Saharan Africa project,[8] the academic researchers worked with adult research assistants on some aspects of the study, including interviews with key informants, parents, and children. In addition, they facilitated a number of interviews led by child research assistants with their peers to "uncover issues that would not be raised directly with adults, either because of embarrassment or perceived insignificance of problems" (Porter et al. 2010:216). In these ways teams of insiders can be particularly helpful in accessing topics that are culturally sensitive or that include hard-to-reach groups.

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[8] See https://www.dur.ac.uk/child.mobility/.

Community Based Participatory Research [CBPR] approaches, common in the Global South, reflect engagement with "insiders" at the community level, rather than as members of a discrete research team (Kamanda et al. 2013; Minkler 2005; Mosavel et al. 2005). CBPR usually incorporates the research team and community in all parts of the research process, from determining the problem and gaining participant consent to how to address the problem, analyze the data, and provide feedback to the community for community action (Foster et al. 2010; Minkler 2005). The use of lay community members as researchers, however, can raise issues related to their close identification with those being researched (Mosavel et al. 2011; Kanuha 2000). In a particularly insightful paper that highlights these issues, Mosavel and colleagues (2011) discuss ways of uncovering the impact of research on "community researchers". In their study of cervical cancer in one community in South Africa they had their insider team use journals to allow for self-reflection, but also as a therapeutic process to address the fact that through the semi-structured interviews they were conducting they may have had to deal with stressful or upsetting information, which could be particularly unsettling for those who share a background with the research subject.

While much can be learned and adapted from CBPR approaches, community participation adds an additional layer of complexity to the research process; in some cases other approaches may provide more efficient ways of answering particular demographic or population health questions. Building on the studies and approaches outlined above, the "team" in the TI approach includes groups of local research assistants, who, although not academically trained in the methods of research, take on distinct roles that contribute to the research process beyond translating for the investigators or bridging cultural divides. In this work, we appropriate the term "insider" to mean individuals with in-depth knowledge of respondents, their families, and/or communities, and who are themselves indigenous to the communities of empirical interest. As we show in our examples below, this is not without its share of challenges, which include unwittingly placing local insiders in the sometimes-uncomfortable situation of balancing roles as researchers and community members and the lack of clarity surrounding the limits of insider involvement (Kanuha 2000). Despite these challenges, we believe that the TI approach makes an important contribution to knowledge production by recognizing multiple forms of insider knowledge and enabling a comparative/critical dialogue to take place within each team.

3. Site description

The three projects that form the basis of the discussion in this paper were carried out in the Agincourt sub-district, located 500 kilometers northeast of Johannesburg in South

Africa's Mpumalanga Province and close to the border with Mozambique. The Agincourt sub-district is typical of much of southern Africa in three important respects: (1) the land is insufficient for subsistence agriculture; (2) local employment opportunities are limited; and (3) migration and mobility are considerable. As part of the "homeland" system under apartheid, the 31 villages in the AHDSS site, which as of 2013 housed about 110,000 people in 21,000 households (www.agincourt.co.za), were estabilshed 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 and is Xishangaan-speaking. Most families live in multigenerational, extended family arrangements in which adult siblings and other kin live close to one another (Junod 1962; Niehaus 1994). The close proximity of these "stands" allows for the constant flow of people and food between them, and for the sharing of labor, including care and supervision of children.

Since 1992 the Agincourt site has been monitoring vital events through annual censuses (see Kahn et al. 2012). Occasional modules, varying each year, focus on specific research and policy issues such as food security, health care utilization, and temporary migration, and provide additional data on the population. Each of the three projects benefitted from the site's 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 Agincourt researchers and administrative staff in carrying out the project, including in the choice of LRAs. Working at Agincourt meant that all the projects had to ensure that their research practices were consistent throughout the site. For example, money is not used as compensation for respondents, though small gifts as a token of appreciation are acceptable. Moreover, all fieldworkers have access to information about community resources such as health clinics and social services and are expected to share this information as needed.

4. Project descriptions

Conversations: The *Public Conversations about HIV/AIDS* project (2012) trained nine[9] local research assistants (LRAs) living and working in the Agincourt site as participant observers to keep field notes of conversations about HIV/AIDS taking place in public

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

settings in their communities. [10] The project drew its inspiration from research spearheaded by Susan Watkins in Malawi (Watkins and Swidler 2009).[11]

The Conversations data collection followed a community-level HIV prevalence and sexual behavior study conducted in Agincourt the previous year, where HIV infection was estimated at 19% and around 45% in some age groups (Gómez-Olivé et al. 2013). Conversations was designed to capture everyday discourses about AIDS to learn more about local social norms and cultural scripts surrounding the epidemic. Indeed, while the survey provides information on factors associated with HIV status, condom use, and the relationship-types conducive to using condoms regularly, the Conversations data provide insight into the construction, maintenance, and attribution of ideas about condoms during everyday conversations among, for example, friends chatting on a bus or at a bar (Kaler 2004; Tavory and Swidler 2009). Everyday conversations among men and women and their neighbors, friends, and fellow community members – individuals living amidst a severe AIDS epidemic – provide a distinctive perspective on intelletual, emotional, and social responses to the epidemic by telling us what people say to each other rather than what they say to interviewers or in focus group discussions, the two primary sources of local understandings of the AIDS epidemic.

Selected from the pool of Agincourt staff, the team of LRAs – also called "insider ethnographers" (Angotti and Sennott 2014) – were comprised of adult men and women with diverse demographic characteristics and social interests: some frequented *tithavheni* [taverns] while others were actively involved in church or sports. Diversity at the team level provided access to a wide swath of conversations about AIDS occurring in various settings throughout the Agincourt site. The LRAs worked as a team to define and establish the boundaries of what a mention of AIDS looked like (the focus of their field notes), but engaged in participant observation independently, with on-going engagement with the project's Principal Investigators (PIs) throughout the course of the study. The LRAs engaged in participation observation in their own villages in the Agincourt site as well as in neighboring villages they frequented. Although the LRAs wrote field notes about conversations they encountered or participated in during the course of their daily lives, including interactions with family, friends, and neighbors, the project's focus on public conversations – such as those occurring at water taps, on mini-buses, at churches, or at village meetings – meant that they could avoid writing about intimate conversations with their loved ones, for example (or, in fact, any conversation deemed private), and thus could maintain some distance between their different roles.

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[10] Much of the information in this section is discussed in Angotti and Sennott 2014, which provides a comprehensive description of the Conversations project training and data collection process.
[11] For details on the project see: http://investinknowledge.org/projects/research/malawian_journals_project.

Gogo [Grandmother] Project: The *Gogo Project* (2004–2006) hired three LRAs to conduct repeated in-depth interviews with women aged 50-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 three 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 and 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 a 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 2008; Ogunmefun, Gilbert, and Schatz 2011). While the LRAs were from nearby villages to those in which they worked, none conducted interviews within their own village, nor did they interview people to whom they were related or had known previously. Given the extensive social networks across the site, this did not prevent the LRAs from interviewing individuals with whom they or their relatives had some connection. With each respondent in each sample the LRAs conducted three interviews: one focused on life-history and 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 of 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 2010; Madhavan and Townsend 2007; Madhavan, Townsend, and Garey 2008). The impetus for the research was dissatisfaction with the extant research, 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 attempts to broaden this perspective through the use of an innovative research design. The sample households were selected from two Agincourt villages, one at the upper end

and one at the lower end as determined by census village-based wealth rankings (Townsend, Madhavan, and Garey 2006). In each village, two households with at least one school-aged child (10 or 11) from each of three wealth strata were selected. Selection of the LRAs to work on the project was based on recommendations from Agincourt staff as well as interviews with the PIs. Of the eight LRAs chosen, six had worked previously with Agincourt and two were community members who responded to the advertisement. No LRA was assigned to work in the village that she/he lived in at the time of study and the PIs made it clear that no one needed to work with a family with whom they did not feel comfortable. Even though some LRAs knew some of the families through extended kinship, church contacts, or friendship, no LRA requested a change of assignment because of too much familiarity. On several occasions, LRAs did request the assistance of another LRA to help talk to a respondent about a particularly sensitive issue.

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 the "team" differ across 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 might shape understandings related to project topics, and problem-solved fieldwork issues as a group. Although the Conversations project's seven LRAs worked as a team with the PIs to define terms relevant to the project and establish the boundaries of what issues – and by extension, conversations – would be focused on during the course of fieldwork, the LRAs engaged in participant observation independently in and around their respective communities. Outside these parameters the data collected by the Conversations' LRAs were purely inductive, driven by each LRA's observation of the conversations

occurring around him/her in everyday life, rather than circumscribed by a researcher (Watkins and Swidler 2009). In sum, the three projects varied in team members' level of involvement in study design and coordination in data collection, though no LRAs have appeared as co-authors on publications (an issue which we address in the final section).

The definition and role of "insider" also differ for the three projects. Each of the projects hired local residents who were native speakers of Xishangaan, but the LRAs' familiarity with the research subjects varied, from unknown, to acquaintances through church functions or extended family relations. Moreover, their role as insiders differed depending on the project's empirical aims and method of data collection. For example, although the Conversations LRAs were known to be employed by Agincourt in a research capacity, knowledge of their participation with the Conversations project was not widespread, as formally identifying the team would have compromised the data (for example, see Spano 2006). In the other two projects the LRAs were identified formally 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 facilitated access, efficiency, and insights – key considerations for all researchers.

5. Access

One of the advantages of TI is enhanced access to populations and social settings, beyond those easily available to outsider researchers. Working with LRAs of the same ethnicity and sometimes 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. This advantage of TI, however, 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 provided access to certain domains, individuals, and/or information.

For the Conversations project, insider LRAs 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, genders, and social interests – the team collectively had privileged access to a diverse array of social networks, settings, and the organic conversations taking

place within them (Angotti and Sennott 2014). Their plurality of identities – as neighbor, elder, and sports coach, to name but a few – contributed to the richness and uniqueness of the data they each provided to the project. We illustrate this below with field notes from two of the team's female LRAs. Idah[12] is a young woman and often spends her time with friends at parties and local taverns. In the field note below, she describes hanging out at a music festival, where a group of friends are teasing one of the men [Nelson] about being seen leaving a bar with a woman [Nomia] known for sleeping around[13]:

> *"Nelson, what happened last week at Tavern S* [local bar]*?" and Nelson said "What do you mean when you say what happened?" and Mpho* [the second man] *said, "I saw you leaving with Nomia", and everyone laughed, and Nelson 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 Mihloti* [the third man] *said, "You are lying. We saw you and we were asking our self if you are not afraid to die because she* [Nomia] *is a minora* [razor]*; she cuts too much* [she will infect you]*, and you can get drop* [STI] *or AIDS." Immediately Nelson said, "How* [what] *do you take me for? I know that Nomia, every man that is in a shebeen* [tavern]*, she wants to go with him as long as you buy her beers." And I* [Idah, LRA] *said, "So you mean she is very cheap, just buy her a beer and you are taking her with you?" Sipho* [the fourth man] *said, "So how many did you buy, Nelson?" We all laughed again and Mihloti said, "You can deny, Nelson, we see you in two weeks to come, you will start coughing and that will be the beginning of AIDS…"*

Audrey, another Conversations LRA, is about 20 years Idah's senior. She spends much of her free time participating in church-related activities. In the field note below, Audrey chats with a group of women at a church event about how a pastor's wife was found to be HIV-positive on account of his infidelity. The women discuss the pastor's moral transgressions and how his behavior undermines their Christian faith:

> [Eliza said], *"I heard that Pastor John 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* [saw him]*, we thought he was fasting a lot by seeing him losing weight, meanwhile he is* [HIV] *positive.*

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[12] In the Conversations data, all names of people and places have been anonymized and non-essential details have been changed.

[13] In the interest of legibility, we insert clarifying or missing words in brackets, make minor edits to grammar, and add quotations marks around speakers' comments or questions, even though they may not be direct quotes.

We heard this soon after when his wife, Mpumalalo, went to the clinic [and] *she was tested HIV positive"… So I* [Audrey] *said to her as we listened attentively, "This needs a prayer. If pastors are not able to hold* [control] *themselves, what about other people who are not Christians? I think they need to practice what they preach." Glory* [the second woman] *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 two conversations highlighted above capture different discourses about AIDS circulating in everyday life, from how young men should temper their behavior to protect themselves from wayward women, to how religious authorities are undermining sacrosanct values such as fidelity.

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 built relationships with respondents and opened up space for sensitive conversations that might not otherwise have occured in an interview setting. Two important issues of access were the LRAs' 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 the respondents' plight, and outsiders to the extent that they might take that knowledge elsewhere in order to help relieve the respondents' 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 husbands as gatekeepers to respondents. As one LRA 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 LRA knew how to address and navigate this situation. She explained the project to the husband in order to continue the interview, and thanked 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 LRAs to think about how they might have handled a similar situation. Indeed the husband's reaction to the LRA's presence might have been less extreme had the interviewer been an outsider, a potential limitation of TI we return to in the discussion section.

In the CWSC, TI 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. The fieldwork 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 to probe further. The repeated-visits model also made possible the second crucial dimension of access – intimacy. More time led to greater intimacy, which in turn opened up space for more visits. Such an intense and sustained effort could not have succeeded without the cultural knowledge that accompanies insider status, but it was also facilitated by the opportunity to share, discuss, and 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”. Of course, such reflection can put the LRAs in the awkward situation of balancing researcher responsibilities with obligations to their communities. For example, in one case one of the LRAs, on a routine visit, found the family distraught after having learned that six of their cattle had died mysteriously. The family suspected someone of witchcraft but was reluctant to discuss this with the LRA. She, while appreciating the research value of the incident, made the sensible decision to stay away for a few days. Rather than pursue the issue in her capacity as a researcher, she let her position as a member of the community guide her decision-making. The PI and the LRA had a long debriefing session about the implications for the research as well as for the LRA's standing following the incident; the PI agreed with her decision to delay returning to work.

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 every 15 minutes the minutiae of all activities in which children engaged and their interactions with adults. Therefore, it necessitated LRAs

spending long periods of time in selected households, and if necessary following children to other households or venues. As this was the most intrusive part of the project it was phased in towards the end. Because the LRAs had intensive access to these children it was possible to collect observational data on time use and quality of interaction.

The main problem faced by LRAs in this exercise was determining the limits of observation. In other words, how does one record detail, such as the size of food portions served to children, without becoming intrusive? This was addressed in several ways. As a general rule, LRAs were instructed to be as "invisible" as possible. Specifically, the LRAs tried to maintain an optimal physical distance from the children that allowed them an unobstructed view of their activities. Second, where observation was impeded (e.g., if a child disappeared into a neighbor's kitchen), the LRAs made judicious inquiries to those standing in the vicinity to gain more details about the relationship and exchanges that normally occurred. Third, and perhaps most important, the LRAs did periodic checks with adults to ensure that they had not overstayed their welcome.

5.1 Efficiency

Efficiency in data collection is critical for all researchers, but particularly for those working in international contexts, who often have limited time and funding to conduct their research. 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 time period. 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 (described above), the Conversations project was able to gather extensive amounts of data in a limited amount of time. Over seven months the project's seven LRAs wrote 39 sets of field notes, comprising 947 handwritten pages and 194 distinct conversations that occurred organically during the course of the LRAs' daily lives. These conversations included an array of people and situations, from a small group of neighbors gossiping about the infidelity of a boyfriend caught in the act, to 300 people interacting at a church service discussing a member's untimely death to AIDS. Because the project's LRAs were engaging in participant observation simultaneously, using a team enabled this project to

gather diverse information from a heterogeneous group of people (e.g., men and women, young and old) interacting in various settings (e.g., taverns, bus stops, church services), at the same time.

The Gogo Project worked across a number of geographically dispersed villages. During the project's initial phase the team of three LRAs conducted and transcribed 90 interviews (three sets of interview questions, each with 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 subsequent interview guides. By increasing the depth of research possible in a short time period, 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. In turn, the expansion of the sample 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. In short, TI permitted a 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 was conducting 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.

5.2 Insights

Through group interactions and asking LRAs to connect their work to their own ideas and experiences, the TI approach can expand and deepen insights. LRAs can provide feedback, clarify cultural misunderstandings, and vet information learned during the course of data collection. In addition, it is possible to triangulate different perspectives within a diverse team that includes LRAs of different ages, genders, and experiences in order to better understand the data, thus accessing multiple forms of insider knowledge and bringing Hirsch et al.'s (2009) critical comparative approach to bear within each team. This, in turn, strengthens internal validity.

The use of a team of LRAs in the Conversations project was crucial to 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 discussed and then developed a list of emic ways of invoking HIV/AIDS. In all, the team identified ten common colloquial references to the disease, such as using sign language by placing three fingers over one's head as well as euphemisms like *Xinghunghumana* (something frightening but invisible, similar to the "bogey man") (Angotti and Sennott 2014). This engagement with the LRAs highlighted local understandings of AIDS as illuminated by symptoms (e.g., coughing, losing weight), by the emotions it generates (e.g., fear or discomfort), and as part of a category of diseases for which there are many unknowns and uncertainties about its etiology.

The Conversations PIs met with the LRAs individually at the end of each month when field notes were submitted. During these 30–60 minute sessions each LRA discussed his/her field notes with the PIs, who solicited additional details that might be missing and had the LRA vet his/her understanding of the captured conversations (Angotti and Sennott 2014). In these dialogues the PIs expanded their insights by observing the LRAs' emotional reactions (e.g., humor, sadness, disgust), moral reasoning, explanation of the larger context, and interpretations of the data. For example, in one set of field notes, Entle, a female LRA, documented a community health awareness event where local clinics and NGOs made testing for blood pressure and HIV, as well as enrollment for medical male circumcision, available in small tents throughout the village. In her field notes Entle described the high turnout, the public health lessons shared, and the prayers and songs that opened and closed the event. The field note, however, did not reveal why the event generated so much enthusiasm. While meeting with the PI, Entle explained that the apparent enthusiasm was due to the accessibility of health services without prohibitive transportation costs. Thus, LRAs also served as key informants and cultural interpreters, adding local insight and embedded knowledge to the PIs' understanding of the data.

Similarly, the Gogo Project LRAs, the Project Manager (a PhD student), and the PI met regularly as a team 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. As insiders, however, the LRAs' ideas about what was important or surprising - how the respondent received the interviewer, or assessments of household appearance and wealth - provided additional insight into the ways of reading narratives or situations highlighted in the field notes.

One example 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. The LRAs then assessed 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." At 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, of another, "…her children have a big house made of fancy bricks, roofed with tiles. Everything is good for her." Housing materials (mud or brick) and furniture were part of the interpretation of who was wealthy, but so were having a child with a nice house or children who were working, which 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, and the wealth of kin (from which to draw in a crisis), as well as access to pensions.

The use of TI in the CWSC greatly expanded insights through one critical mechanism: continuous discussion amongst the team members. Having eight LRAs provide feedback offered a more varied set of insights than would have been possible with just one LRA and the PIs. One important example of insights gained through TI was in CWSC instrument design. 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 not only in educating the PIs about the range of terms but also 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. 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 both the validity of the terms themselves and the 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 and Gross 2013).

A final example is how 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 then compared with one another. The most interesting comparisons were observations of conflict: when an older female LRA 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. TI 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 into family context and children's wellbeing.

6. Discussion

As with any methodology, there are both benefits and limitations to the team-insider approach. The three projects discussed here have a unique advantage in that they were all associated with the Agincourt Health and socio-Demographic Surveillance System site. This affiliation meant that the projects had access not only to communities in which an annual census had been conducted since 1992, but also to LRAs who were familiar with conducting research, were identified as competent and trustworthy, and, in some cases, had previously been trained in qualitative data collection. Although not a requirement for using TI, 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 TI. 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 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 and Kaler 2013; Watkins and Swidler 2009). Given the prevalence of HIV in Agincourt (19%) (Gómez-Olivé et al. 2013), however, and the extent to which the epidemic is discussed on radios, in the newspapers, and in social marketing efforts throughout the country, everyday talk about HIV/AIDS is commonplace. As Audrey, one of the Conversations' LRAs remarked during the course

of the study, "People are talking [about AIDS]. If you are with people, you will hear them talk". While outside researchers might work with insiders to enhance insights, the outsider must also be sufficiently familiar with the setting to be able to evaluate the plausibility of the data, to understand the colloquial ways of speaking recorded in field notes, and to interpret the resultant data. Furthermore, the PIs must be actively involved throughout the course of fieldwork to be privy to such concerns and address them as they arise (Angotti and Sennott 2014).

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 also lost its novelty for some LRAs quicker than for others, resulting in highly varying observational detail. The variation amongst team members introduces biases that may undermine or constrain PI efforts at cross-respondent analysis.

A second limitation of TI regards 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 TI 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: as is the practice in good ethnography, they asked each LRA to take detailed notes of who was present when a particular conversation took place (e.g., number of men and women, ages, and other attributes of interest). Then, the PIs captured this information in the coding process for each set of field notes, thus enabling the use of the LRAs' identities vis-à-vis those in the conversation as data points. While this is one strategy for dealing with particular elements of LRAs' positionality 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 when the data are collected.

The Gogo Project tried to partially address this by selecting LRAs who were close in age and experience to those being interviewed, to limit the number of possible

confounding positions. However, the LRAs' insider status and limited social distance at times led to awkward situations where their embeddedness in the community 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 and 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 if/what information the respondent withheld in the final interview as a result. Similarly, the gender dynamics described previously, that is, the LRA's having to legitimate her presence to a husband as gatekeeper, 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.

Working with insiders as the eyes and ears of the research can raise unique ethical issues, particularly with respect to the dilemmas LRAs may face in balancing their identities as both community members and researchers. Whether LRAs are working more discretely or are explicitly interviewing respondents, they invariably have to balance their own ideas, morals, relationships, and subjectivities with their other role as a researcher. And while the LRAs might be more attuned to sensitive topics because they are researchers, and hence may grapple with these issues in ways they otherwise might not in their ordinary lives, the benefit of being part of a research team is that they have access to an administrative system that can provide information on community resources and referrals for services.

Each project encouraged LRAs to share with the PIs their emotional responses to discussions with respondents and/or to scenes/interactions that they observed. Two incidents from the CWSC are instructive. The first is the use of corporal punishment by adults to discipline children. As long as the punishment is reasonable (e.g., hitting the back side) and does not pose a threat to the physical wellbeing of the child, this practice is acceptable in the community and, as such, is not seen as a major transgression. Whereas LRAs voiced their disapproval of these interactions amongst themselves and to the PIs, they did not openly criticize the adults themselves. A more challenging situation was being confronted with a blind, elderly woman who was clearly not getting enough to eat. In this case the LRAs expressed their concerns to the PIs but were not in a position to directly offer assistance. Instead, the protocol established by the AHDSS

was followed: the community liaison office, which facilitates communications with local social workers and non-governmental organizations that provide food parcels to poor households, was informed. Similarly, in the Gogo Project there was significant concern among LRAs about how to deal with extreme poverty among respondents, given the strong sense of social responsibility that community members share. As noted earlier, the Agincourt site does not condone providing fieldworkers, or in this case LRAs, with cash to give to poor households. Instead, when such households were identified, which happened two to three times in the course of the Gogo fieldwork, information about the household was shared with the community liaison office. In at least one case an interviewer used her own money to buy bread to have tea during an interview with an older woman, who said she had no food to eat that day. In the Conversations project these moral/ethical dilemmas were attenuated by the fact that the LRAs were detailing public conversations that they confronted organically in the course of their day-to-day lives. As such, any interventions they might make in such situations would likely be consistent with the recourse they would otherwise take in their capacity as community members. However, as in CWSC and the Gogo Project, Conversations LRAs also had privileged access to information and resources through the Agincourt site that they could share with others.

In light of these challenges, researchers interested in utilizing TI need to consider issues that are fundamental to qualitative inquiry. Notably, social desirability is always a concern when conducting research. While the TI strategy can be usefully extended to other topics that might best be collected by insiders or peers (Mutchler et al. 2013; Plummer et al. 2004), some topics might not lend themselves to an insider strategy, particularly when heightened levels of social desirability might bias findings (Houle et al. 2015). Another issue is how far to engage embedded teams. TI 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). Yet one possible criticism of the TI approach is that it does not clearly identify or acknowledge limits of the collaborative approach. For example, while all three projects would have welcomed including LRAs as co-authors, none did so, nor was there any clear discussion about the issue. This is partly justified by the fact that the LRAs did not take part in any post-fieldwork analysis, and that the currency of authorship on publications does not have the same value to LRAs as it does to PIs. Future work that explores the politics and possibilities of LRAs contributing to analyses and as co-authors would be a worthy endeavor.

We believe the aforementioned benefits of using TI for gathering data outweigh the drawbacks. 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, through critical dialogue within insider teams, PIs accessed a variety of enhanced insights into local knowledge, often unavailable to outsider researchers. Indeed, the projects discussed here benefitted from using TI at several stages of the research process: at the front end by developing appropriate terms for kin (CWSC) and indirect references to HIV/AIDS (Conversations and Gogo), in the middle of the project by revising interview materials (Gogo), and throughout the project by engaging LRAs in discussions about the data (Conversations, Gogo, and CWSC).

While all three of these projects were embedded in Agincourt, TI could be used to leverage other types of data sources and other research topics of interest to demographers. For example, it might be useful when exploring issues related to food insecurity, fertility decision-making, or barriers to contraceptive use among young people. It might complement work with Demographic and Health Survey data, or data from other INDEPTH or Alpha-network longitudinal data collection sites. Although there are benefits to making use of existing data collection infrastructures, this framework could be used in stand-alone projects as well.

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