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The power of the interviewer: A qualitative perspective on African survey data collection

By [Sara Randall](#), [Ernestina Coast](#), [Natacha Compaore](#), [Philippe Antoine](#)

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Abstract

Background: African censuses and surveys remain dependent on interviewers for data collection. Data quality is assured through training and supervision. Many survey concepts are difficult to translate into African languages and some, such as "household", may have multiple criteria which are not fulfilled by everyone, leading interviewers to prioritise different criteria. Some questions introduce unfamiliar ideas which require considerable negotiation by interviewers to obtain acceptable answers.

Objective: To identify key stages in the data collection process and domains where interviewer judgement and interviewer-respondent social dynamics play a substantial role in determining who is included in household surveys, and in shaping responses to questions.

Methods: We analyse published definitions, enumerator manuals and qualitative interview data with households, interviewers, supervisors, trainers, survey organisers and analysts along the chain of data production and use in Tanzania, Uganda, Senegal and Burkina Faso.

Results: Despite comprehensive training manuals and definitions, interviewers influence who is included in, and excluded from surveys. Interviewer versatility needs to include both persuasive social skills and an ability to follow precise wording. In Africa, where survey concepts are often different from local concepts and where interviewers are socio-economically distant from respondents, these persuasive social skills are required throughout the interview process with unknown impact on the data produced. Language diversity is a major barrier to harmonisation.

Conclusions: To improve survey data validity more effort should be made to understand the influence of interviewers on data in low-income settings.

Comments: This submission covers important issues for demographers undertaking secondary analysis of African surveys, especially those without fieldwork experience.

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