

Researcher Intentionality in Knowledge Production Practices: Issues in Demographic and Health Data Collection in Africa

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Our research takes place in five demographic surveillance systems (DSS) in Senegal and Burkina Faso. These research systems imply specific constraints in terms of data collection leading to an increasing weariness and sometimes exasperation by the participants involved. This situation highlights the gap that exists between the scientific objectives and the populations' expectations. Our working hypothesis is that reporting back research findings directly to the participants, and not only to local leaders and decision makers as is usually the case in these settings, would mitigate this problem. Seeking to break with the positivist and ethnocentric research processes common in these specific fields of investigation, we designed a qualitative fieldwork in each DSS site in order to identify the communicative tools best adapted to make findings as accessible as possible to respondents, while taking into account the social and cultural contexts and diversity of each DSS site. However, while following these objectives, our fieldwork led us to reflect on the intentionality of the researcher in the research process, forcing us to critically examine our own conceptual framework and linking this reflection to a broader ethical perspective. In fact, we came to understand that we were reproducing the same social inequalities inherent in research processes typically driven either by foreign or local researchers trained in mainstream methodologies and concepts, which often leads to the production of decontextualized knowledge. This contributes to undermine the objectives for which standardized ethical norms and rules are usually designed, especially regarding the benefits populations might expect from a research. In that we follow Ricoeur's perspective who presents the researcher's ethical intentionality as being part of a broader dynamic where ethics (should) take place in a commitment to the 'Other'. Our question is thus as follows: to what extent do research practices, developed in order to produce knowledge about populations defined as vulnerable groups, end up in the opposite outcome by maintaining and sometimes reinforcing the social inequalities that research aimed to reduce? On the basis of our research, we will show that a 'sociology of intentionality' becomes necessary to highlight the gaps between the research practices and methodologies which have direct or indirect effects on the populations targeted, and the complexity of the realities of these studied populations. We will use the works of Olivier de Sardan, Long and refer to philosophers such as Spinoza.