

## Daily Conversation Logs and Diaries in Rural Malawi: New Insights about Topics and Patterns of Social Interactions in Ethnographic Journals 1999-2005

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### Abstract

**Objectives:** This paper uses non-traditional data collected in rural Malawi to examine the characteristics of social networks in which villagers talk with friends, relatives and neighbors about AIDS.

Demographers have long known that such informal conversations provide information on topics such as family planning methods and on diseases, including AIDS. Sophisticated statistical analyses of longitudinal survey data collected in rural sites by the Malawi Diffusion and Ideational Change Project (MDICP) has shown that these networks influence attitudes and behavior related to contraceptive use as well as to AIDS. In addition, information on the content of conversations in these networks is available from standard semi-structured interviews as well as from unusual ethnographic data.

What neither the survey nor the qualitative data permit, however, is situating informal conversations about AIDS in a wider context. We thus collected new data to address three questions: (1) Is AIDS a major topic of conversation in a high HIV-prevalence setting where deaths from AIDS are frequent, or are topics, such as food, income or malaria more frequent? (2) What is the range of topics that are informally but publicly discussed—for example, do people talk frankly about sexual practices or disapprovingly about people with AIDS? (3) Does the topic of conversation seem to depend on who is present—e.g. does it change as new people enter the conversation or others depart?

The paper relies on new data collected in the summer of 2005, using a systematic sampling approach designed to reduce participant selection bias. Informal topics of conversation and patterns of discussion are collected through key informants using several new innovative ways (e.g., daily conversation logs, contact diaries and systematic time sampling). This approach, we show, can enhance our understanding of the content and structure of informal conversations in demographic research.

**Background:** Standard quantitative survey techniques and even semi-structured interviews are particularly poor at capturing detailed information about informal conversations about AIDS occurring in public settings, such as markets or buses. To provide such information, the MDICP asked local ethnographers to keep journals in which they wrote about any conversation about AIDS that they overheard in the course of their daily lives. From this rich set of journals, we have learned much about local understandings of HIV, about discussions in social networks of how to prevent infection, etc. (Watkins and Swidler 2005); moreover, standard methods of assessing the validity

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of qualitative data show that they provide credible data (Kaler 2003; Kaler 2004; Watkins 2004).

The journals are, to our knowledge, a uniquely rich set of data on the content of conversations within social networks. What is not known from the journals, however, is the frequency with which people talk about AIDS compared to other potential topics that the ethnographers were not asked to record in their field journals. Thus, we designed a unique approach to investigate to what extent our existing qualitative corpus is representative of daily conversations, and to what extent our collection of ethnographic journals conceal any other important topics of conversation, as well as whether our core set of journalists exhibit any systematic reporting bias.

**Data and Methods:** This study uses a new set of qualitative and quantitative information (dairies and journals, and conversation logs) collected between 11-24 July 2005 from a core group of ethnographers who contributed the most to the collection of ethnographic journals since 1999 (3 males and 2 females).

These new materials are unique in several ways. First of all, this research builds on the methods of time-use diaries by asking each ethnographer to systematically keep track of all significant daily conversations (instead of daily activities, as in time-use diaries). But unlike time-use surveys, information was not collected retrospectively at the end of the day or the next day through a third party interviewer but directly by the participants through near real-time logging of all significant daily conversations. This approach thus limits omissions due to recall lapse or selective memory. On alternate days with this daily logging and to reduce fatigue, each journalist was also asked to write the stories of the previous day in journals, as they did for the conversations about AIDS. Additional background information about each conversation and the conversation partners involved was also collected through a short standardized form (contact diary).

Several strategies were used to preserve as much as possible the random nature of the experiment and to prevent journalists from changing their daily routines or selectively picking and choosing topics of conversation, conversation partners or settings: (1) all journalists were asked to participate in the experiment during the same period, (2) systematic recording of all significant conversations (not just about AIDS) with logging of the starting time, subject and brief summary was required, (3) recording was performed from wake-up time until sleeping time and (4) systematic time sampling was used over 2 weeks by alternate days (i.e., conversations started to get recorded on Monday 11 July, then Wednesday 13 and so on, totaling seven days of daily conversations).

**Expected results:** A major disadvantage of this study is that it only applies to one period, rather than to the many years that the journals have been collected. Nonetheless, we believe that this more systematic knowledge of the range of topics commonly discussed in casual settings as well as the context, location and characteristics of the people involved, can enhance our understanding of the patterns of daily conversations, the extent AIDS is a subject of conversation, how frequently it is discussed, with whom, in what context, and what is said.

This new set of data in particular is expected to yield new insights about the more banal conversations, those that the journalists may not usually record because they consider them either not interesting, not relevant or not “juicy” enough for the researchers, or simply too boring because of their high frequencies and monotonous repetitions. This information, therefore, can greatly help us in cross-validating the existing set of ethnographic journals, in assessing the correspondence between data collected by more conventional methods, and in suggesting the extent to which previous findings can be

generalized. Although our analysis is specific to rural Malawi, we also conclude that daily conversation logs, contact diaries and systematic time sampling are more broadly useful for two purposes: (1) at the initial stage of inquiry to help researchers to investigate to what extent certain topics are discussed, in what context and with whom (making it easier to develop more targeted questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and focus groups), and (2) to evaluate the generalizability of ethnographic data.

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