

## Exploring Digital Context and Its Limitations in Social Sciences: A Concentration on Demographic Research<sup>1</sup>

H. Yaprak Civelek<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

This article offers significant insights from a demographic standpoint concerning the growing trend of employing online data collection tools in both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. It serves as a reminder to social scientists of the advantages inherent in quantitative data, rooted primarily in the positivist approach within demography, while also highlighting the complementary value of qualitative data. The study underscores the effectiveness of incorporating observations and contextual information while addressing potential limitations and drawbacks associated with the preference for online data collection methods. Through a critical exploration that interweaves narratives and theoretical frameworks from the realms of statistics, sociology, and demography, the research strives to cultivate a comprehensive understanding. The integrated approach's outcomes illuminate multifaceted issues, encompassing sample representativeness, data quality, validity, reliability, objectivity, analysis, and empathy, thereby revealing their potential detachment from contextual influences.

**Keywords:** Online population research; research methods; digital context; demography

### Introduction

Asking people questions to understand their experiences and feelings helps us build empathy and develop a better understanding and upgraded knowledge. Therefore, knowing how to ask questions is the most important skill and principle foundation in social science methodology. This article is based on the main idea of a study completed in 2020, titled “The mud issue: The methodological debate in social sciences intensified by the Pandemic” (Civelek, 2023). The study develops a critical argument on the weaknesses of digital research techniques used in sociology and social anthropology and reveals the question marks particularly in the Turkish social scientists’ minds. In this context, qualitative and quantitative methods have been discussed without severing their theoretical backgrounds, and scientific research on the verge

<sup>1</sup> This article has been developed through the main argument of the oral presentation which was presented at The Migration Conference held in Hamburg on August 23-26, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Assoc. Prof. Anadolu University. Open Education Faculty. Department of Sociology, Eskişehir.

E-mail: [haticeyaprakcivelek@anadolu.edu.tr](mailto:haticeyaprakcivelek@anadolu.edu.tr)



of digitalism and theoretically inapplicable aspects of a *meta-context* has been emphasized. Not those who collect data from special Facebook or Twitter groups, but the social scientists who research any social problem by using a computer-or phone sometimes- instead of being in and talking from the field are included in this discussion. Embedding social demographers into this argument is crucial because they take charge of national and international population projects and witness how their results are used as they deserve or do not deserve. This means what the facts revealed by the population data signify to scientists and politicians, and for what purposes they are used.

Demographers closely align with political efforts due to the biopolitical purposes primarily grounded in demographic data and trends. Foucault indicates that a population is a disciplined area of power, and this situation is intrinsic to the nature of being a nation-state (Foucault, 2007; Özdel, 2012; Civelek, 2023). Some theorists and social scientists are on the same page when the word comes to statisticians, too. Demographers and statisticians who typically prioritize informing the public and government about population dynamics or specific occurrence frequencies are generally less interested in the underlying *-disguised-* truths, which might involve emotional and mostly ideological explanations. They use objective data, keep their distance from the participants, and find the *disguised* facts not mentioned by numbers “hung in the air”: The questionnaire works well because our senses are engaged throughout the interview, which is *partly* true.

Plato’s understanding of reality (1997) develops an argument on the idea of hidden truths or forms that exist beyond the physical world, and nothing is calculable about it. Heidegger’s viewpoint based on hidden truths about the nature of being and existence mentions the value of *authentic* understanding (Heidegger, 1962, 2003). Foucault continues to direct our minds to find out hidden power structures and societal truths that are often taken for granted or suppressed (Gros, 2021: 68, 76). In practice, using digital (online or “connecting people” type of communication) methods in social sciences expands the gap between the interviewer and interviewee, making it difficult to reach contextual -authentic- understanding. This results in the loss of the *dialogic* interaction involving the exchange of diverse perspectives and encompassing everything non-technological. While many researchers focus on how the interview surroundings affect the respondent, overlooking how the context also impacts the researcher is a big mistake. Identifiability of how the context influences both the respondent’s answers and the researcher’s perspective are necessary for maintaining the integrity and depth of the research.

For demography, seeking out the frequencies and trends in any population and speaking on them in technical terminology is generally satisfactory. One can think that demographers, thanks to the intense demography training, do not have to care about becoming *empathetic* as sociologists or social anthropologists. However, everything in a social world is related to the human body, human behavior, human relations, and nature, which we call “culture” and/or “historical background”. Characteristically, these cover ideological derivatives, too. That is exactly why Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2005, Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2014; 2015a) warns scientists about how habitus and context are reciprocally constitutive; people’s interpretations and responses are controlled by habitus, so, the variations in vital statistics of a population context represent the developments in structure and socio-cultural aspects. Population size and distribution, age structure, participation in the labor force, education, health services, and sex ratio, family planning, reproductive behavior and fertility rates, age-specific and cause-specific



mortality rates, household composition, income levels, urbanization, migration and mobility which presents hints about ongoing economic processes, cultural diversity, and social integration and the level of demographic transition, *each* trend is open to interests of social scientists, and power-in-charge targeting to turn them into *sources* of discursive demands. Population data, when it comes together with political opinions, can *shape* destinies.

Presumably, such a statistic-driven approach pays no attention to the *meaning of existence*, but the demographers' positivism, as it should be, does not reject empathy related perceptions. They and other positivists who are addicted to objectivity, measurable data and statistically significant relations cannot discount it because social scientists are *naturally* humanist. Preferably, as they step on the *field* "got covered with *mud*"-representing the context and the whole items like routines, sociability, senses, emotions, comments, symbols, sex roles, smells it comprises- the *soul* of the communication or *interview* cannot be free from empathy.

An anecdote might tell it better: In a rural area of the Eastern Black Sea Region, I was part of an extensive national survey in 2005. While asking a woman about the cause of her recent miscarriage, she hesitated and eventually selected an option. However, something seemed wrong in her response. Despite my efforts to probe further, she remained silent. After the interview, she offered me tea and a cookie, and as the conversation took a friendlier turn, she suddenly told me that her husband's kicks had caused her miscarriage. There was no option for this response. This incident highlighted a limitation of the questionnaire, as her response fell under the catch-all category of "Other."

The disguised fact, hidden truth, or ideological reality is generally issued in discussions correlated with politics, belief systems, and socio-cultural perspectives. For catching it during an interview, a social researcher utilizes humanism and empathy, moreover, s/he feels "*πάθος/pathos*" which means *feeling anguish* in Antic Greek (Bozok, 2013:86). This point also refers to a practice that can never be discussed without a theoretical ground combining sociological, political, and gender-related approaches and qualitative methodology explains such a specific subject better than the quantitative methodology. Therefore, today, number of social demographers employing qualitative methods as *complementary* is increasing: While studying fertility, it is possible to see that some remarkable and significant statistical indicator can disturb the demographer's mind and push her/his to go deep; to do qualitative research to understand the issue deeply (Giddens, Anthony, 2013, Kümbetoğlu, 2012). The deepest point most probably takes the curious minds to the disguised truths.

Foucault (2013) mentions that the physical and spatial distribution of people is nothing but exposure to the political technology of the body, and this technology is an intervention that once again exposes and injures the essence of human beings. How can digital practices feed this idea? Online research practice does not require being in a *specific* field physically while the time-period is totally definable. Remember, the Covid-19 pandemic has increased desk-bound studies and some social scientists brought up its validity as a potential social scientific method. Imagine a researcher connecting from one city to another (or even one neighborhood to another) and interviewing a half-body participant without observing anything influencing those two people. Kümbetoğlu (2012) the Turkish sociologist suggests that "I can't observe; I don't know which sounds and messages their mind might be drawn to within that environment. Smelling the surroundings, being a part of the environment is crucial for an insider's perspective. Moreover, a pandemic is a sensitive issue, producing sensitive

subjects. Empathy is not enough. If you have spoken to a healthcare worker, you need to see the process they go through, and their working conditions, from within their environment. You need to observe how their boots fill with sweat, how they get tired and fall asleep, and how they stay on duty for days while describing these experiences. You must observe their environment and be a part of it!”<sup>3</sup> An online connection and communication built *its own* meta-context. Whatever the research problem or disaster, each connection is *contextually specific*. Therefore, someone who says that a *computer’s screen* is already progressing on the same line with the usual understanding of research must discuss the advantages and disadvantages of *each online environment* in a chapter titled “Method”. At least, if a purely digital methodological design is under consideration, the author should demonstrate his/her context-specific awareness. Having observed the existing socio-anthropological characteristics within the context, being knowledgeable about the behavioral patterns and forms of relationships, and the forms that language takes in relation to all these, have to be necessarily discovered before the digital research endeavor.

In almost every circumstance the world faces, nature and individuals can be grasped by technical processes, transforming them into raw materials and technological intermediaries in a matter of moments. When you try to collect data in a non-in-person way, for instance, by phone, according to James M. Lepkowski from the Michigan University Survey Research Center (2021:66), one noticeable thing is that face-to-face response rates exceed ninety percent in household studies, which particularly become one of the important parts of demographic surveys with extensive sampling. The pandemic probably hasn't affected the nature of the responses as much as their quality. According to Lepkowski (2021), the concern lies in the potential for variations, hesitations, and estimations to reduce the reliability of answers. This statement effectively illustrates the absence of dialogic communication, as it arises from the sharing of identical identifiable conditions.

Basic demographic variables like age, sex, place of residence, income level, educational attainment, and the like can be obtained from a computer screen effortlessly. However, as Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2014; 2015a; 2015b) suggests, whatever the methodological preferences are, the relationship between individuals and their social environment shows us a system of dispositions derived from socialization. It helps us understand the ongoing perceptions, types of human behavior, mimics, experiences, and practices within a particular context. Individuals' dispositions and social structures interact to produce and reproduce social inequality or every single problem we have tagged “social”. Personal dispositions and societal structures interact to create and perpetuate social inequality and the various issues we label as 'social.' The definitions and social circumstances defining one as a migrant or native, black or white, female or male, young or old, differ worldwide, which is what makes social research intriguing. It involves uncovering the core of social reality. When researchers are confined to computer screens or phones, the element of personal observation, or what Bourdieu terms the “influence of habitus” (2005) disappears. Instead, it leads to a contextual understanding centered around questions, issues, or concepts and takes the form of a technical dialogue.

Say nothing of trying hard in constructing a good theoretical framework: some dare to claim that positivism consent to conduct such mud-free research because it approves the “distance”

<sup>3</sup> An Interview with Belkıs Kümbetoğlu cited by Civelek in *Çamur Meselesi: Salgınla Artan Sosyal Bilimlerde Yöntem Tartışmaları*, p. 73-75



between the researcher and respondents, which is not true. Fieldwork is important for both ethnographers and demographers, and contextual understanding (Winch, 1970) is a requirement for both positivist and hermeneutic perspectives, -as should be remembered at every opportunity. However, these views have never concurred on the notion of a singular context that presupposes a *so-called* uniform realm of experiences for all social issues or any kind of disaster.

### **Challenging Points of Digital Context: Conditions, Examples and Thoughts**

Digital practice has several benefits for the field of demography, such as cost-effectiveness and access to hard-to-reach populations. It makes it easier to conduct longitudinal studies where researchers track the same individuals or cohorts over an extended period and enables researchers to conduct cross-national and comparative studies. The online platform allows demographers to access records or data from government agencies, international organizations, and research institutions, which can be used to study population trends, migration patterns, fertility rates, mortality rates, and other demographic indicators. However, the disadvantages point out the shortcomings or failings related with an observable context.

Acquiring a *representative* sample is vital in demography to ensure that research findings can be generalized to the broader population. Online research frequently relies on convenience sampling, which can introduce biases and lead to biased results. Self-selection bias occurs when individuals voluntarily contribute to research, which may not accurately represent the larger population. Respondents who choose to take part may have different socioeconomic and cultural characteristics and opinions compared to those who do not participate, potentially impacting the validity and generalizability of the findings.

The unequal access to digital technologies and the internet among different populations is a well-known truth. Additionally, even within the population we study, whether considered "developing or developed," the number of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds or older age groups may not be negligible at all. Social scientists encounter such individuals very frequently, and they may have limited access to or familiarity with online platforms. Also, the lack of direct interaction between researchers and respondents in online studies can make it harder to verify the authenticity of responses. Conducting research online or via phone raises many ethical considerations<sup>4</sup> related to informed consent, data privacy, and the privacy of participants. Additionally, online security can be a concern when collecting sensitive data, as there is a risk of someone eavesdropping on the interview, especially in cultural contexts where certain topics such as fertility preferences, family planning, contraceptive use, and gynecological diseases are considered taboo, as in Turkey. Moreover, women in many countries use fertility apps effectively, which are mostly considered low-cost, tech-based methods to help them conceive and measure fertility (Mehrnezhad & Almeida, 2021). Even the applications produced by companies seem to focus on women's digital health, indicating their understanding of handling sensitive data properly, and explaining their policies and practices accordingly. Mehrnezhad and Almeida (2021:10-12) suggest that there are numerous concerns related to data privacy and data sharing with mostly invisible third parties, including medical clinics and research centers.

---

<sup>4</sup> See also Franzke, Aline Shakti, Anja Bechmann, Michael Zimmer, Charles M. Ess ve İnternet Araştırmacıları Derneği. *İnternet Araştırmaları: Etik Kılavuz 3.0*. Çev., M. Burak Özdemir. Ankara: Alternatif Bilişim Derneği. [https://ekitap.alternatifbilisim.org/internet\\_arastirmalari\\_etik\\_kilavuz\\_3/\(erişim 10. 09. 2020\)](https://ekitap.alternatifbilisim.org/internet_arastirmalari_etik_kilavuz_3/(erişim%2010.%2009.%202020)).

Akyıldırım<sup>5</sup>, a Turkish statistician and researcher, highlights the differences between focusing on face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews. Even with the phone number and working under the guarantee of a safeguarding policy, the emergence of ethical problems is inevitable. It is possible to reach the interviewer everywhere, but often they may not be in a suitable situation. In a workplace setting, if the interviewer is not under the supervision of the employer, the employer may want to participate in the interview, resulting in additional burdens on the participant. The interviewee can also be called unexpectedly at odd hours, such as evenings and weekends, which further raises ethical concerns. Moreover, measurement errors are the most frequent, including misunderstandings of questions, the nature of asking questions over the phone being an issue, and the participant being in communication with their parents, spouse, or child during the call. These issues are particularly prevalent in low-income and small households. Of course, if the household is large, the problem becomes even more significant. Additionally, distractions such as the participant watching television during the interview, or someone else's phone ringing can disrupt focus during the conversation. Those who carefully consider these ethical points will realize that most of them are relevant to online research practice as well.

Social scientists concentrating on any abnormal frequency reflected from a population in a defined geography and period mostly direct the research problem towards classic positivist theory, which is ready to investigate it reasonably and logically with clearly defined hypotheses, graphs, tables, and some other figures. However, such a positivist manner, when it uses technological tools and presentations more than necessary, has the risk of turning into a kind of orthodoxy because of the researcher's attitude, leading to results that overlook the nature and meaning of human existence. If there hasn't been a prior visit and sufficient familiarity with the field, using hermeneutic means can solve potential problems related to comprehension. This utilization of methodological pluralism allows for a more comprehensive and observationally valid explanation of all human-created phenomena. Whatever the technique is -in-depth interview, focus group, etc.- it *must* be based on a face-to-face interview to challenge the problematic result derived from the numerical and representational means of demography. Such a preference gives way to an *open-minded thought* and will not promote a *question-effective* view (Yanchar, Gantt, and Clay, 2005: 28). This is also what critical methodology suggests: A reevaluation of methods considered usual or classical which points to the need for new and advanced theoretical and methodological constructions. But such a call is not for the ones ignoring any authenticity, saving any hidden truth or sense negatively affecting human life.

For Lesthaeghe (2016a, 2016b), fertility behavior must be reviewed within the social, cultural, and institutional context. The variables like education, household size, women's participation in labor, gender roles, and social order, each have distinct and culturally endorsed factors that play a significant role in influencing fertility decisions. Getting in contact with local communities, associations, institutions, and key persons is crucial due to the matter of recognizing local and regional contexts. Clarifying the variations in demographic behavior is possible just by engaging in fieldwork. Being in the field is essential for scientific observation

<sup>5</sup> Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies, HIPS, Interview with Oğuzhan Akyıldırım. "Covid-19 Sırasında ve Sonrasında Araştırmalar" çalışması, Tandans Veri Bilim Danışmanlığı CEO'su Oğuzhan Akyıldırım'la Salgının, Türkiye'deki Özel Şirketler Tarafından Yapılan Araştırmalar Üzerindeki Etkisi ve Deneyimleri Üzerine Bir Söyleşi, 22.10.2020.





which is gaining insights from the residents and ensuring the relevance and applicability of demographic research. An anecdote can be a good example, here: Before preparing the questionnaire for the Turkey Demographic and Health Survey (TDHS) conducted every five years in Turkey, in 2003, young demographers dispersed across Anatolian regions to conduct qualitative research on family planning, contraceptive methods and induced abortion. They aimed to explore local concepts related to these subjects before finalizing the actual questionnaire. Thus, the wording of the questionnaire would be much more precise. They anticipated that such an approach to understanding would assist in achieving high response rates and clarifying social realities. This anticipation materialized.<sup>6</sup> TDHS-2003 Report states this as follows: *"the TDHS fieldwork teams successfully completed interviews... A total of 11,659 households were located and visited, of which 10,836 households were successfully interviewed. Overall, the household response rate was calculated as 93 percent...The household response rate was higher in rural areas than in urban areas and highest in the East, North and South regions. In the interviewed households, 8,477 eligible women were identified, of whom 96 percent were interviewed. Among the small number of eligible women not interviewed in the survey, the principal reason for non-response was the failure to find the woman at home after repeated visits to the household"* (HIPS, 2004:183).

The events of TDHS-2003 serve as a prime example of a well-designed questionnaire in action. This endeavor employed two distinct types of questionnaires: one for households and another targeting women in their reproductive years. Both questionnaires were carefully crafted with vernacular nuances in mind, and interviewers underwent intensive training to ensure a deep understanding of locally relevant concepts surrounding fertility, contraceptives, and abortion. As Stalder (2018) highlights in "The Power of Context," the contextual characteristics of an environment significantly shape people's thoughts, behaviors, emotions, and potential actions. Stalder aims to establish a link between the "human environment" and "overall well-being," recognizing that uncovering this connection is crucial for informed judgments and a better grasp of others' decisions. Some publications (Morrison, 2007; Goleman, 1998) guide social workers, emphasizing the importance of a strong grasp of sociocultural contexts and cultivating heightened social awareness through empathy. By doing so, social workers can navigate interpersonal dimensions effectively and interpret the outcomes of non-verbal communication more accurately.

Edward Said (1994: 107-111) advocates for academics to engage with local languages and perspectives, encouraging them to comprehend cultures and represent them on their own terms. This approach liberates research from the lens of Western biases, allowing a distinct strand of knowledge to emerge. The use of language, even within a quantitative research process – envisioning a study characterized by demographic attributes and a sample maintaining national representativeness – introduces a unique facet. It imparts specificity to the questionnaire and supports the exploration of nonverbal communication, extending an invitation to methodological collaboration. However, technology's role in these invitations is limited to the processes of data entry, analysis, and reporting.

---

<sup>6</sup> The report is in Turkish. Possible to find it on the institute's website. Turkey Demographic and Health Survey/Türkiye Nüfus ve Sağlık Araştırması, 2003. SoruKağıdı Hazırlık Çalışması. Niteliksel Araştırma: Gebeliği Önleyici Yöntemler ve İstemli Düşükler. Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies, Hacettepe Üniversitesi Nüfus Etütleri Enstitüsü. <https://hips.hacettepe.edu.tr/en/menu/reports-121>.

It should be noted that what makes a demographer best of breed is not the ability to use technology at a high level, it is how s/he knows what controls the contextual characteristics. The *online* methodological challenges are related to a *digital context* producing new methodological questions. For example, researchers need to adapt survey instruments for online administration, and mostly such an effort requires rephrasing or restructuring questions. Moreover, online data collection is susceptible to response bias. It may push for the interview-time; make it shorter and by eliminating the demographer's considerations, it can create problems related to response rates, survey weakness, and failure while explaining responses in real time. Building on this notion, Connerton (2011) emphasizes, hidden, invisible connections exist between urban and rural areas, and these turn the city into a specific space established according to its structural type, while also concealing rural places as suitable spaces of their kind. Nevertheless, some of the everyday knowledge we acquire in living areas is obtained through the car window. The interesting point follows this idea: He says that the use of computers accelerates time and pulls individuals into a hyper-present, a process which includes an unnecessary speed. He relates this statement to the rapidity of micro-scale events caused by technological practices that speed up time, making it difficult to perceive even recent events as "real". However, if we replace the image of an individual looking at the living space from a car window with a researcher looking at the researched area from a blue screen, then we begin to realize how scientific practice also transforms due to the acquired rapidity. This situation pushes the researcher towards an undesirable superficiality. The speed and superficiality that emerge inevitably distance scientific action from objectivity. Moreover, a presentation based on statistical or demographic terminology can make it significantly politicized.

Remember Heidegger talking about the subversive influence of *destiny*: He claims after thrown into the world without their choice or control, humans confronted with a particular historical, cultural, and linguistic context. Today, neoliberalism gives importance to creative enterprise and has expectations based on exercising power, a characteristic which is subversive for young people and laborers (Blitz, 2014). May one question -like this article- whether high technology creates a kind of *influence of destiny* on social scientists or not? Heidegger puts forward that technology is never purely objective. Technological progress is always political, accumulative, and coordinated. It is always imposed to be a means for our experiences. However, to truly understand technology itself, we need to see, recognize, and comprehend everything - including our capabilities and creativity - independently of technology, without falling into its manipulation.

When considering the intersection of population dynamics, survey methodology, technology, and the importance of demographic indicators, there is a general tendency to focus on the question: "How can a modern state politically and socially arrange its population policies so that it never deals with any ontological calculation and struggle?" Putting the "modern state" as a prime determinant of population dynamics and using technology to understand them without worrying about "empathy level or operational distance", "contextual characteristics and causes," "seeing in situ" and the probable -distinctive- consequences, you can simply see the indicator and do the -relatively- necessary: "*The government has become obsessed with population. With a fertility rate around 2.1%, Turkey can no longer be classified as a young country. Erdoğan has called*





“on those sisters who are devoted to our cause. Come, please donate to this nation at least three children.”<sup>7</sup> In the face of such a call, there was the following reality coming from research fields: Turkey is a country that has been striving for decades to reduce high infant mortality rates to reasonable levels. Sociologists, anthropologists, and demographers have explained the causes of high infant mortality rates with variables such as the intensity of patriarchy in different cultural and social contexts, gender roles, maternal and paternal education levels, household income level, housing type, household size and place of residence (Delaney, 1991; Akşit, 1992; Gürsoy-Tezcan, 1992; Sirman, 1993; HIPS, 2008, Eryurt ve Koç, 2009; Civelek, 2013, 2015). That is why a modern country should be considered an entity with its citizens and residents and admit that its population plays a vital role in shaping its demographic future. It has greatly influenced ontological anxieties like identity crises, the level of erosion of state sovereignty, refugees, and actual critics about giving or not giving them a life in consideration of human rights.

As for the pandemic, it was an extensive, all-encompassing phenomenon. Every individual, regardless of age, gender, or location, was vulnerable, no matter where they lived on Earth. All nations chose to adopt a more introverted approach, closing their borders and formulating political, social, and medical strategies to combat the coronavirus. Each nation had its own description of quarantine conditions. This evident response demonstrated that the 'individual experience of the Covid-19 pandemic' was shaped by a country's unique politics. However, it's important to separately examine every physical part of each country, as they reflect distinct institutional, relational, and behavioral patterns influenced by local demands, cultural values, challenges, expectations, news, and various voices. When it comes to conducting demographic or sociological research during the pandemic, interviewing elderly participants for example poses an ethical burden due to their vulnerability, as it puts them at risk of infection. The correlations between age and the body, age and kinship, age and vital needs/diseases, age and social life, and age and ways of coping with health problems, are all cultural and influenced by various contextual factors. Overall, the impact of the pandemic is multifaceted, affecting people differently based on their age, culture, and circumstances, which adds complexity to any research conducted during this time.

During the Covid-19 pandemic in Turkey, social researchers, who were also “potential patients or victims” adhered to the guidance provided by political and press statements by staying in their homes or offices. They maintained connections with their beloveds or potential respondents while in quarantine. *On the one hand*, some indicated in their articles that they conducted an online qualitative survey by connecting from İstanbul to Mardin, Adana, and/or İzmir -each province is in different regions of the country- moreover, added that they realized in-depth interviews with 250 or 300 people which is unnatural for the hermeneutic approach and methodology which they claim that their field study based on. *On the other hand*, some researchers preferred to send or apply questionnaires online and tried to demonstrate how the analysis was by quantitative methodology. The possible suggestions should be formed like those: Positivist approach highlights the objective analysis of facts and data, seeking to establish causal relationships and formulate general laws that govern phenomena. Within this context, the desirable *distance* could be relevant to the physical separation between the one who is *searching* and the one who is *searched*, which means overlooking subjective experiences,

---

<sup>7</sup> The Conversation. Erdoğan banned cesarean sections, so why does Turkey have the highest rates in the OECD? Published: September 26, 2016 8.47am CEST. <https://theconversation.com/erdogan-banned-caesarean-sections-so-why-does-turkey-have-the-highest-rates-in-the-oecd-65660>

emotions, and values. But it's important to remember that positivism primarily focuses on the observable and measurable aspects of reality. It directly imposes empirical observation, and data collection in *natural* settings, which allows researchers to define some rational effects and develop evidence-based strategies for real-world problems (Kümbetoğlu, 2021; 2022).

If we imagine a social researcher focused on the real interviews with real individuals, we expect that s/he is aware that the digital context in social science has various dimensions like technological set-up, online interaction, digital media and information, digital identity and self-presentation, socio-economic status, and digital inequalities. Understanding the online context in social science involves examining how digital technologies and their associated practices, norms, and structures shape social behaviors, relationships, and institutions. It involves analyzing the social, cultural, economic, and political implications of digital technologies in various domains of human life, such as communication, work, education, politics, and social interactions. While explaining the concept of population growth in the case of the United States in 1979, Rowland (2003: 54-58) uses a logistic curve to observe growth. According to him, the curve provides a more realistic illustration of long-run national or global population growth compared to straight lines or exponential curves. It acknowledges that numbers cannot increase indefinitely, and that social goals and environmental limitations might bring about a slowing of growth. Rowland briefly summarizes the subject by stating, "*like other mathematical concepts, it cannot predict the future, because it is not founded on an explanation of changes*" (2003: 55). Basic population dynamics are related to human life and encompass the reasons that drive human decision-making processes (Hinde, 1998: 121, 129). Even though their choices are made under the complicated effects of social institutions and change, achieving the best data quality is the ultimate goal of this discipline.

While fertility studies often aim to understand fertility preferences, behaviors, and experiences across different socio-economic, cultural, and geographic contexts, mortality studies also face a potential for self-selection bias, like fertility studies. For instance, individuals who choose to participate in online mortality studies may have different experiences, such as infant mortality or maternal mortality, which are rare events compared to those who do not participate. It should be appropriate to mention here that the World Health Organization (WHO) has used a good word that can be considered as a high sign: *Usability*. This concept has been developed in order to evaluate the overall quality of death registration data. It refers to the percentage of all deaths which are registered with meaningful cause-of-death information. "*Usability is calculated as completeness (i.e. the percentage of all deaths in a geographic area that are registered with medical certification of cause of death) multiplied by the proportion of registered deaths that are assigned a meaningful cause of death...*"<sup>8</sup> Following the explanations, they do not imply why, but some data-exclusions are mentioned in the related report: *from the Philippines, the years 1998, 1999 and 2002 were excluded because the trends in specific causes were implausible. Data from Suriname were excluded because of implausible trends implied by the data. Data from Kuwait were excluded due to a high percentage of deaths assigned with unknown age and in ill-defined cause categories not captured above. Data from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Guatemala were excluded because the cause of death patterns implied by the data were implausible.* (2020:6-8). One can claim that WHO is an international institution collecting demographic data coming from the countries and this is totally related to the processes of generating vital registration data recorded by the national institutions of the countries, so, not

<sup>8</sup> WHO, *Methods and Data Sources for Country-Level Causes of Death, 2000-2019*. Global Health Estimates Technical Paper WHO/DDI/DNA/GHE/2020.2. See the References.



proper to evaluate the online practices. However, *usability* should be seen as a crucial aspect of data collection processes for all social scientists and research institutions that still prioritize field research and obtaining objective data. This concept aligns with the purpose of this article, as it encourages researchers to reassess online data collection processes in demography.

The fact that fertility and mortality studies, especially, involve more sensitive and personal issues, has been pointing out a reality for years: Sociocultural data *intricacies*. Whether using qualitative or quantitative methods, questionnaires or question guides, whatever tools a demographer employs in the field, the inherent nuances in responses will challenge them. In-person interviews allow researchers to observe non-verbal cues, body language, and other contextual factors that contribute to a deeper understanding of participants' experiences. If a social scientist begins to overemphasize technological possibilities and *data subjects* over social possibilities, cultural backgrounds, and *human subjects*, it becomes tougher to interpret and capture all the emotions and complexities related to fertility and mortality. Even something as seemingly simple as *pregnancy* intertwines with multiple contextual levels, including reproductive health, women's rights, political discourse, justice, patriarchy, ethnicity, identity, conservatism, and the like (Hinde, 1998: 129). Moreover, online interviews may raise concerns about privacy and confidentiality and not encourage an empathetic environment enough as participants may feel hesitant to share intimate details through a digital platform that could potentially compromise their anonymity or expose their experiences to unintended audiences. In terms of building trust and rapport in-person interviews can create encouraging surroundings, allowing participants to feel more comfortable sharing their experiences.

On a particular level, mortality studies require coping with achieving narrowed-down time periods and the most complicated estimation processes in demography. There is always a struggle to collect accurate, dependable, and consistent data on causes of death, demographic information, associated risk factors, and the like. Incomplete information inevitably produces measurement errors (Hinde, 1998:19-23). Additionally, the lack of direct interaction and the inability to review responses in real-time can cast doubt on the depth of any mortality data.

Demographic migration research mainly involves discussions of demographic data collection and basic and advanced analysis methods, conveniently utilizing official records, censuses, surveys, or indirect estimates. It also addresses difficulties in estimating migration flows, stocks, illegal immigration, emigration, and other related methods. Migration studies, being a naturally distinct population dynamic, deserve a more specific critical approach (Hinde, 1998: 190-196; Galevska, 1998). These studies generally focus on internal or international movements of ethnic or marginalized and/or vulnerable populations. Migrant groups with distinctive characteristics, facing language and cultural barriers, often have less opportunity to obtain internet connectivity compared to others. Qualitative research methods are more suitable for understanding migrants' actions and behaviors and for longitudinally observing the process of their integration into the host society (Galevska, 2018: 5).

Conducting online interviews generally assumes that participants have a secure and comfortable environment for using digital platforms; however, this is not always the case. As a result, certain migrant groups may be underrepresented, leading researchers to encounter an incomplete perception and interpretation of the migration phenomenon. Even though migrants can effectively participate in online interviews, language proficiency, cultural values, and the specific and uncertain conditions they live in can impact the quality of responses and

the depth of interaction between researchers and participants. Therefore, these factors may limit the opportunity for explanations, non-verbal clues, and contextual observations that could enhance the understanding of immigrants' experiences. Additionally, migrants facing legal uncertainties may feel too anxious to risk speaking about their problems in online interviews. The risk of creating a *gray* atmosphere may make obtaining rich qualitative data more challenging and may lead to skewed or incomplete understandings of migration processes for researchers. In this regard, geographic flexibility and cost-effectiveness become less meaningful. Combining multiple data collection approaches, including face-to-face interviews, field observations, and document analysis, may prove essential to ensure a more comprehensive study.

## Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has prompted social researchers to conduct online research during quarantine. Some of these researchers have noted that online methods offer advantages in explaining the sociological and psychological consequences of the pandemic. Consequently, they have embraced the "pandemic atmosphere" as a context that spans every geographic area and allows researchers to define human experiences uniformly. While certain researchers have been mindful of potential limitations and have documented them in their method chapters, others have not. In nearly all scientific and marketing domains, digital methodological processes were initiated years ago. However, comprehending the digital context and its impact on social science is crucial for conducting meaningful and relevant research in an evolving and potentially changing landscape. When employing the selected method, it is crucial to give priority to recognizing methodological **limitations** or challenges. Even amid a pandemic environment, social researchers must actively explore human experiences, evolving human relationships, obstacles, solutions, medical requirements, and deficiencies by immersing themselves in a specific region or field. They are expected to be enthusiastic and competent in establishing a theoretical foundation that would also guide them in their steps.

Bourdieu's caution is evident concerning the shared attributes of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, along with field studies: "Theory without practice is empty; practice without theory is blind" (Akşit, 2021; 2022). Like all social scientists, demographers also find value in establishing their research and discourse within a theoretical framework. For demographers, any population-related subject cannot be effectively addressed without a foundation rooted in sociological, social anthropological, and demographic theories. It is both a methodological and ethical obligation for them to objectively elucidate the variables underpinning numerical data, percentages, or any statistically significant relationships. While online interviews may offer particular advantages, such as cost-effectiveness and geographic flexibility, demographers conducting fertility and mortality studies, in particular, need to carefully consider the limitations and potential biases associated with this method. Combining multiple data collection approaches, including in-person interviews, medical record reviews, and statistical analysis of official data sources, can help ensure more comprehensive and reliable findings in these kinds of studies. In fertility studies, for instance, researchers should carefully consider the advantages and limitations of online interviews and ensure that they supplement online data collection methods with other approaches, such as in-person interviews, surveys, or focus groups.



This mixed-methods approach can help lessen potential biases and provide a more comprehensive understanding of fertility-related phenomena. A similar point of view should be adopted for studies on mortality and migration. Today, a world filled with ambiguities in meaning and entirely new experiences is also shaping global and interconnected human histories/stories. During the pandemic, in the context of Turkey, certain social scientists could be observed venturing to establish a theoretical framework that directly linked online practices to positivist or hermeneutic approaches, yet often omitting a thorough discussion of the theoretical limitations accompanying such connections. Covid-19 has reminded people of this quite effectively. However, distinctions persist that are geographical, cultural, and local in nature. Social research cannot embrace a uniform contextual categorization for everyone (Civelek, 2023).

Utilizing a variety of data collection methods, integrating online and offline approaches, and employing sound sampling techniques can help mitigate these challenges and enhance the credibility of the findings. In general, challenges are often linked to scope and response, with measurement error emerging as the most critical factor. The broad scope of the interviewer's skills, the rapport developed during the interaction, and the ability to effectively pose questions over the phone to elicit high-quality responses are all significant factors.

Maintaining a humanistic perspective and acknowledging the influence of context holds relevance and validity for both positivist and hermeneutic methodologies, despite the prevailing notion that empathy is an aspect better captured by qualitative surveys.

A persistent positivist research should be present in the field at least before the research to enhance the data quality that an online conditional research design could possess. It must become acquainted with the field. Formulating complementary research will generally contribute to its overall contribution to the literature. Research conducted without observation and contextual influence means neglecting theory, and the information gathered along the way is as if in need of a guide when obtained.

## References

- Adalı, T., Koyuncu, Y. and Türkyılmaz A. S. (2021). *Surveys in Covid-19 and Post-Covid-19 Days*. Ankara: Hacettepe University, Institute of Population Studies and United Nations Population Fund-Turkey.
- Akşit, B. (2021). "Sosyolojik Araştırma Güzergahında Yaklaşımlar ve Çıkardığım Dersler" *Araştırma Denince* Der., Sezgin Tüzün, İstanbul: Bağlam Yayınları, 96-107.
- Akşit, B. (2022). "Yüksek Lisans Dersi: Bourdieu: Araştırmaz Kuram/Teori Boştur, Kuramsız/Teorisiz Araştırma Kördür." Son güncelleme: 03. Ağustos, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVQOTJFLxU8>.
- Akşit, B. (1991) Türkiye'de Bebek ve Çocuk Ölümünde Anne Eğitiminin Rolü, *Toplum ve Bilim*, 51-52: 117-127.
- Blitz, M. "Understanding Heidegger on Technology," *The New Atlantis*, 41/Winter (2014), 63-80.
- Bourdieu, P. (2005). *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. ve Wacquant, L. C.D. (2014) *Düşüünsel Bir Antropoloji İçin Cevaplar*. (çev.) N. Ökten. İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları,
- Bourdieu P. (2015) *Bilimin Toplumsal Kuramları Bilimsel Alanın Klinik Bir Sosyolojisi İçin.*, L. Ünsaldı. Ankara: Heretik Yayınları. 2.bs.
- Bourdieu Pierre (2015). *Ayrımların Beğeni Yargısının Toplumsal Eleştirisi*, (çev.), D. Fırat ve G. Berkurt, Ankara: Heretik Yayınları.
- Bozok, M. (2013). "Eleştiren ile Eleştirilenler Arasında Nazik Karşılaşmalar: (Pro)Feminist bir Yaklaşımla Trabzon'da Erkeklikleri İncelemek," *Fe Dergi*, 6/1, 78-89.



- Civelek, H. Y. (2013). "Kırmızı Kuşağın Kuramsallığı Ataerkil Söylem ve Anadolu Kırsalında Kadın," *Doğu Batı*, 16 (64), 87-119, 2013
- Civelek, H. Y. (2015). "Cultural Determinants of Liminal Lives in Rural Anatolia Patriarchal Veils Framing Infants Destinies," *Review of European Studies*, 7(7), 46-59.
- Civelek, H. Y. (2023). *Çamur Meselesi: Salgınla Artan Sosyal Bilimlerde Yöntem Tartışmaları*, 2022. Ankara: Nika Yayınevi.
- Connerton, P. (2011). *Modernite Nasıl Unutturur?* (çev.), K. Kelebekoğlu. İstanbul: Sel Yayınları,
- Delaney, C. (1991). *The Seed and the Soil: Gender and Cosmology in Turkish Village Society*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Eryurt, M. A., ve Koç İ. (2009). Yoksulluk ve Çocuk Ölümlülüğü: Hanehalkı Refah Düzeyinin Çocuk Ölümlülüğü Üzerindeki Etkisi. *Çocuk Sağlığı ve Hastalıkları Dergisi*, 52(3), 113-121.
- Esteve A. and Lestheaghe, R. (2016a). (Eds.) *Cohabitation and Marriage in the Americas: Geo-historical Legacies and New Trends*, 1st ed. Switzerland: Springer Open.
- Foucault, M. (2007). *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, M. Senellart. (Ed.) Translated by Graham Burchell. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault M., (2013) *Güvenlik, Toprak, Nüfus*. Collège De France Dersleri 1977-1978. İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, İstanbul.
- Franzke, A.S., Bechmann, A., Zimmer, M., Ess, C. and the Association of Internet Researchers (2020). *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0*. <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>
- Giddens, A. (2013). Sosyolojik Yöntemin Yeni Kuralları, Yorumcu Sosyolojilerin Pozitif Bir Eleştirisi. (çev.), Ü. Tatlıcan ve B. Balkız. Bursa: Sentez Yayıncılık.
- Gros, F. (2021). *Michel Foucault*. İ. Birkan. (çev.). İstanbul: iletişim Yayınları.
- Goleman, D. (1998) *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Gürsoy-Tezcan, A. (1992). Infant Mortality: a Turkish puzzle? *Health Transition Review*, 2(2), 131–149. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40651980>
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time*, J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (trans.), Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd.
- Heidegger, M. (2003). *Philosophical and Political Writings*, M. Staasen, (ed.). New York: Continuum.
- HIPS (2004), *Turkey Demographic and Health Survey, 2003*. Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies, Ministry of Health General Directorate of Mother and Child Health and Family Planning, State Planning Organization and European Union. Ankara: Hacettepe University.
- HIPS (2008). Türkiye'nin Demografik Dönüşümü (Doğurganlık, Aile Planlaması, Anne-Çocuk Sağlığı ve Beş Yaş Altı Ölümlerdeki Değişimler: 1968-2008), Hacettepe Üniversitesi Nüfus Etütleri Enstitüsü/Hacettepe University, Institute of Population Studies, Ankara, 2008.
- Hinde, A. (1998). *Demographic Methods*. London: Arnold Publications.
- HIPS (2020). "Covid-19 Sırasında ve Sonrasında Araştırmalar" Oğuzhan Akyıldırım ile söyleşi" Tandans Veri Bilim Danışmanlığı CEO'su Oğuzhan Akyıldırım'la Salgının, Türkiye'deki Özel Şirketler Tarafından Yapılan Araştırmalar Üzerindeki Etkisi ve Deneyimleri Üzerine Bir Söyleşi. Hacettepe Üniversitesi Nüfus Etütleri Enstitüsü/Hacettepe University, Institute of Population Studies, Ankara, 22.10.2020.
- Lestheaghe, R. (2016b) Submit A Book Review of *The Decline of Belgian Fertility, 1800-1970*. Princeton University Press. N.J.
- Kümbetoğlu, B. (2012). *Sosyolojide ve Antropolojide Niteliksel Yöntem ve Araştırma*. İstanbul: Bağlam Yayınları. 3. bs.
- Kümbetoğlu B. (2022) "Bağlam ve Çevrimiçi Araştırma Çelişkileri". Söyleşi. Ekim. Foça-Eskişehir.
- Mehrnezhad, M. and Almeida, T. (2021). "Caring for Intimate Data in Fertility Technologies". In *CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '21)*, May 8–13, 2021, Yokohama, Japan. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 11 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3411764.3445132>
- Morrison, T. (2007) "Emotional Intelligence, Emotion and Social Work: Context, Characteristics, Complications and Contribution" *British Journal of Social Work*, 37, 245–263
- Özdel, G. "Foucault Bağlamında İktidarın Görünmezliği ve 'Panoptikon' ile İktidarın Gözü Göstergeleri", *The Turkish Online Journal of Design, Art and Communication*, TOJDAC 2/1 (2012), 22-29.
- Plato (1997). *Plato: Complete Works*, J. M. Cooper (ed.) Indianapolis: Hacke.
- Rowland, D. T. (2003). *Demographic Models and Concepts*. London: Oxford.
- Said, W. E. (1994) *Culture and Imperialism*. N.Y.: Vintage Books.





- Sirman, N. (1993). 1980'ler Türkiye'sinde Köy Kadınının Aileve Evlilikte Güçlenme Mücadelesi. In Ş. Tekeli (Eds.), *Kadın Bakış Açısından Kadınlar*. İstanbul: İletişimYayımları (247-276).
- Stalder, D. R. (2018) *The Power of Context: How to Manage Our Bias and Improve Our Understanding of Others*. Prometheus. New York.
- Winch, P. (1970) "Understanding a Primitive Society", *Rationality*, B. Wilson, (ed.). Oxford: Blackwell, 307-324.
- World Health Organization. (2011). *Child Mortality Statistics. WHO-Millennium Development Goal 4*. Retrieved from [http://www.who.int/pmnch/media/press\\_materials/fs/fs\\_mdg4\\_childmortality/en/](http://www.who.int/pmnch/media/press_materials/fs/fs_mdg4_childmortality/en/)
- World Health Organization. (2020). "WHO methods and data sources for country-level causes of death 2000-2019. Global Health Estimates", *Technical Paper*, WHO/DDI/DNA/GHE/2020.2 Department of Data and Analytics, Division of Data, Analytics and Delivery for Impact, December, Geneva: WHO.
- Yanchar, S., C., Gantt E. E. and Clay S. L. (2005). "On the Nature of a Critical Methodology", *Theory & Psychology*, 15(1):27-50.