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RESPONSE RELIABILITY OF DEMOGRAPHIC DATA: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY IN SRI LANKA

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Summary. Response consistency was examined by linking the records of women interviewed in the 1982 Sri Lanka Contraceptive Prevalence Survey with records from the same individuals followed up 3 years later. Seventy-eight percent of women reported identical year of birth in the two surveys, but only 58% were consistent for age at marriage. Data on sterilisation and number of children born were highly reliable, but wives' reports on husband's age and education were relatively weak. Multivariate analysis of the effects of socioeconomic factors on consistency in age reporting confirms that education is the most influential factor related to consistency, followed by religion and husband's occupation.

Introduction

It is generally believed that data collected in demographic surveys and censuses in Sri Lanka are of reasonable quality (Trussell, 1980; Alam & Cleland, 1981; Lightbourne, 1984; Ratnayake, Retherford & Sivasubramaniam, 1984; Retherford & Rele, 1989). Such conclusions have been entirely based on single-round surveys, and there is no information examining response consistency through longitudinal survey design. Through comparison of the responses of the same individuals from one survey to another, it is possible to measure the extent of the consistency for comparable questions asked both times (Ewbank, 1981; O' Muircheartaigh & Marckwardt, 1981). Consistency does not guarantee reliability or accuracy as intentional mis-statements or stereotypical responses may be repeated even though meaningless or incorrect, but the level of consistency is generally taken as an indication of reliability. The main objective of the present study was to measure the reliability of data on selected factual items, namely year of birth, age (if year of birth is missing), year of first marriage, educational attainment, number of live births and sterilisation, using a longitudinal data base from Sri Lanka. Naturally, characteristics such as year of birth and year of first marriage cannot change over time, while education and number of live births are likely to change for some respondents.

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