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Correspondence and Commentary

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VIII. CORRESPONDANCE AND COMMENTARY

*Response to Shyam Thapa on Survey Research Data: Misunderstanding Misuse?

by J. Gabriel Campbell and Linda Stone

We appreciate the critical attention given by Shyam Thapa to the family planning data presented in Use and Misuse. If the monograph has helped researchers and implementers to approach family planning data critically, or question the methodological basis of such data, it has served much of its purpose. It would appear, however, that some people question the validity of data more on the basis of their emotional attachment to disciplinary traditions than on the merits of the data alone.

Shyam Thapa's presentation of the Nepal Family Planning/Maternal and Child Health Data Analysis: Final Report's criticisms of Use and Misuse is a case in point. While repeating their criticisms of our methodology, Thapa fails to mention the 300% increase in family planning knowledge over the Nepal Fertility Survey found in the Family Planning/Maternal and Child Health Project "random control villages". This result is similar to our findings and actually lends more support to our data than to the Nepal Fertility Survey whose findings Thapa defends.

Perhaps more importantly, the criticisms levied by the Family Planning/Maternal and Child Health Final Report represents a misunderstanding, or rather, a misreading, of Use and Misuse. For one thing, we did not intend that our data be taken as a national sample--and this was explicitly stated. It was certainly plausible in the absence of other data that the level of family planning knowledge was higher in our sample villages and among our respondents, which included 40 percent males. In the monograph, therefore, we were careful not to generalize these results for all Nepal. Subsequent surveys, however, have shown that properly worded questions reveal over 80% knowledge of family planning throughout Nepal (1980 APROSC Rapati and RCUP Baseline Surveys, 1982 Community Forestry Household Survey). These figures are within 5% of our survey data, while remaining 60% different from the Nepal Fertility Survey. Furthermore, statistical analysis of our own data only shows a significant difference in knowledge of family planning by sex in one of our three villages, suggesting that there may not be as much difference as Thapa thinks (based on his "anthropological" insinuation as no survey has tested this).

But the main points of the monograph do not rest on a direct comparison of our data with the Nepal Fertility Survey in any case. As stated in Use and Misuse the significant comparison is between our survey data and our cross-check data. The divergent responses obtained in our own survey and our cross-check then led us to suggest that the Nepal Fertility Survey data (like our own survey data) was likely inaccurate on some points.

Surprisingly, Thapa repeats the Family Planning/Maternal and Child Final Report concession that "even if the data reported by Campbell et al. were assumed to be representative of Nepal", it would only represent a 14% increase in Nepal Fertility Survey data, or $.22 \times .14 = 3\%$. This lapse in statistical logic is disconcerting. The fourteen percent increase was from 84% to 98%, a limit which imposes a "ceiling effect", making this 14% a very different kind of numeric interval than those in the mid-ranges. The Use and Misuse monograph in fact asserted that virtually everyone has heard of family planning, suggesting that the correct interval would have been 76% (or 450% greater) if survey figures of 22% had been obtained. This is also reflected in the amount of variance associated with 22% of a population possessing a trait compared to 98%. Furthermore, one would not multiply 14% times the rate of knowledge as a correction factor, as Thapa did, but add it, since total error is the sum of sampling error and nonsampling error squared.

The most interesting thing about these criticisms, however, is that they have been voiced in print twice despite the fact that few researchers or officials in the Ministry of Health any longer believe the Nepal Fertility Survey data unless they were instrumental in producing it. (After all, do you believe that only 6% of the women between the age of 15 and 49 in Nepal have ever even heard of abortion or abstinence as a method for avoiding children?) Perhaps Use and Misuse should have looked more at the role of ego-investment in particular methodologies, disciplines, and data sets as an explanation for the persistence of large sampling error in anthropological studies and even larger nonsampling error in family planning knowledge and attitude studies than at the methodologies themselves. As Blustain noted in his earlier review, more attention could have been focused on the actual use of data as well as the misuse of methods.