Does One Size Fit All? A Field-Based Learning Experience on Applying Respondent Driven Sampling to a South-South Migration-Receiving Country

Victoria Prieto
Clara Márquez
Julieta Bengochea

ABSTRACT

The Ethno-survey on Recent Immigration (ERI) was conducted in Montevideo in the seven months following July 2018. We interviewed 804 immigrants from Cuba, Dominican Republic, Peru and Venezuela. The questionnaire was an adaptation of the Mexican Migration Project and the Latin American Migration Project questionnaires for South-South migration –originally designed to address return and outmigration-, and it was first attempt to apply some form of Respondent Driven Sampling for this project.

This paper describes this fieldwork experience paying attention to (i) sampling techniques used to capture the target population in the absence of a sample frame; (ii) the challenges faced along with the implementation of these techniques in regard to timeliness, costs and the diversity of migrants from four very different communities of origin; and (iii) adaptations made to outreach labor migrants (documented and undocumented), asylum seekers and refugees. Conclusions of the paper include a set of practical recommendations for future research on documented and undocumented immigrants from diverse communities.

INTRODUCTION

Uruguay and the Southern Cone region are moving from net emigration regions to net immigration regions where immigrants from the Caribbean and Andean regions are arriving as the south-north migration faces the consequences of a turnout int more restrictive migration policies. Additionally, south-south migration flows are turning into mixed migration flows as Venezuelan, Haitian or Cuban migration engage in migration to the South American with very diverse levels of voluntariness. These flows include labor migrants, skilled and unskilled workers, family-related migrants, forced and unforced migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Naturally, these transformations trigger new challenges to the measuring and appraisal of the international mobility of people of all ages and conditions for the whole Latin American region.

In 2017, the number of foreign-born people residing in Uruguay increased by 32% compared to 2012. In 2013, one in four recent immigrants was born in non-bordering Latin American countries, and in 2017 this proportion amounted to one in two. But ass for today, no administrative record or household survey fully covers the immigrant population, and none of the administrative records is adequate to analyze documented and undocumented migrants (MIDES, 2017). In the last five years, the scientific study of foreign immigration and return of Uruguayans made some progress in this regard based on the analysis of microdata from the Continued Household Survey, which in absence of updated census data allows them to monitor on annual basis the stock of immigrants and their living conditions (Facal y Casal, 2018; Márquez, Prieto y Escoto, 2018; Prieto y Márquez, 2019). However, this data source focuses on the population of adults over 14 years, and its sampling limits to particular dwellings. The latter implies a significant issue for the study of recent immigration, as most of the newly arrived migrants live in collective dwellings (lodging or rooming houses, hotels, motels, tourist establishments or shelters).

To address the actual magnitude of international immigration, but mostly the main living conditions of this population group, new and specific surveys were needed. Around 2015, we started designing an ethnosurvey on

recent immigrant population groups from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Peru, and Venezuela; and finally in 2018 we conducted the fieldwork interviewing more than 800 migrants living in Montevideo.

As part of this study we were faced with the challenge of selecting a sampling method and a participant recruitment technique without any exhaustive sampling framework. In addition to this, we also knew that there is a high number of asylum seekers among the immigrants of Cuban origin who have arrived in the last two years. Therefore, we chose to treat this population as hidden or hard-to-reach population moving into the search of sampling techniques appropriate to this feature.

This paper narrates the roundabout path of the selection of sampling methods as well as the challenges of implementing the strategy finally adopted. We aim to document the issues we faced in the design of the sampling and its implementation in the field to produce a set of recommendations for future research on very diverse Caribbean and Andean immigrant communities in the absence of sampling frameworks.

BACKGROUND

The literature on sampling techniques with this type of population recommends the use of non-probability sampling. Among them, one of the most widely used is Respondent Driven Sampling (RDS). The RDS is a type of sampling that replicates the logic of "snowball" selection strategies, but in its case incorporates controls of selection bias towards the most popular type of population, given that the one that has more contacts is more likely to be referred and, therefore, may be overrepresented in the sample (Volz and Heckathorn, 2008). As its name indicates, this sample builds the population frame from the information provided by the informants. Thus, each one is asked about the size of the network or the number of people with similar attributes they know. This information allows, on the one hand, to approximate the universe and, on the other hand, is a key input to adjust the weight of each informant within the sample with a criterion of popularity.

This sample was originally developed in the field of epidemiological studies to monitor the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases and overcome the difficulties of working with shameful behaviors and fears of betrayal. To prevent one person from referring directly to another - who may not wish to be contacted or identified - RDS samples are based on a system of monetary incentives in the form of vouchers-invitations administered by the informant. In this way, the researcher does not make contact with future referrals, but it is the informant who invites others to participate and it is they who communicate with the researcher. In the end, the informant receives the incentive - in the form of money or exchange vouchers - for having answered the survey and another for each referral he recruits.

In Uruguay, there are several RDS experiences applied to the study of hidden populations that include trans people (Coimbra, Goyeneche and Zoppolo, 2014) or consumers of smokable cocaines (JNM, 2017), to name a few examples. To develop the ENIR sample design, we implemented an adaptation of the RDS under the direction of IESTA. In this case, we started from five informants for each community of origin, called "s "seeds, which were selected according to a heterogeneity criterion in terms of date of arrival in Uruguay, educational level and sex. From these first contacts we started the chain of references asking each informant for up to three contacts, whose data the informant could choose to share immediately or choose to personally extend the invitation to their referrals so that potential interested parties could contact us.

DATA AND METHODS

The starting point was respondents from the immigrant communities of Cuban, Dominican, Peruvian and Venezuelan origin, whom we call "seeds" -five per each community. From these first contacts, we started the referral chain asking each informant for up to three contacts, whose data he/she could choose to share immediately with us or instead extend the invitation to their referrals so that potential interested parties could contact us.

The implementation of this mechanism worked on practices at a very slow pace, thus, in order to speed up contacts with potential informants, we centralize all information on potential informants at what we called ¨fieldwork secretary¨. The person in charge of this function was receiving the information of telephone numbers and names of referrals provided in real time by the interviewers through an online form that they loaded at the end of each survey; contacting telephone and via WhatsApp with the referrals; making an appointment with the referrals to receive a pollster; assigning the scheduled appointments to the interviewers. This strategy more closely resembles an adaptation of the RDS called researcher-assisted RDS (Platt, Luthra and Frere-Smith, 2015). However, despite having introduced this resource, still the number of surveys we managed to do in the first three months of the field was very low and the implementation plan was delayed well beyond the originally planned completion date (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Accumulated number of survey by community. July 2018 – March 2019
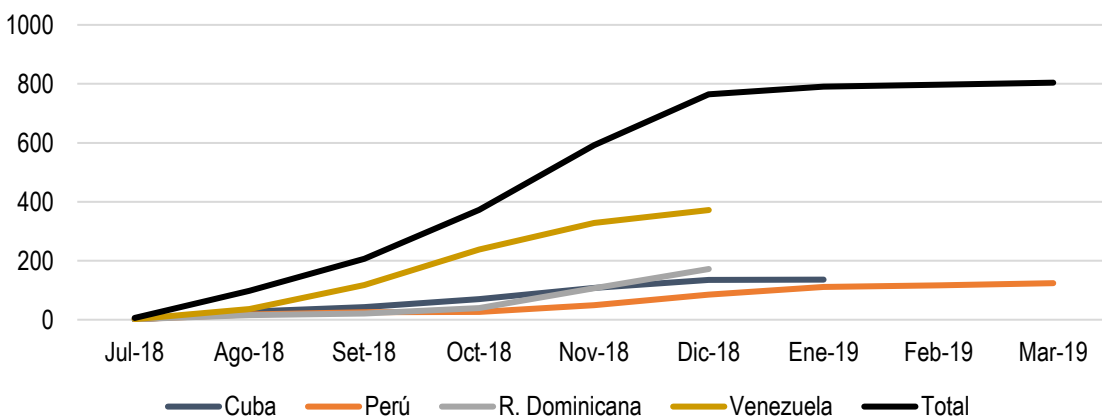
Towards October, we decided to implement a series of complementary strategies to speed up referral chains among which we highlight those that follow: i) we added new seeds (start new reference chains); ii) We recruited these new seeds in areas with a high concentration of migrants, among which we can mention religious festivities, sports activities (basketball and baseball), Peruvian food restaurants, civil society organizations with labor and legal consulting services and the waiting room of the Identity Program of the Ministry of Social Development; iii) we incorporated into the field team interviewers of Peruvian and Dominican origin, which resulted in an almost immediate improvement in the recruitment of immigrants, mainly from the Dominican community, gradually incorporated between October and December 2018; iv) we discussed with the Dominican community and with the Peruvian Consulate in Montevideo (December) which were the best ways to transmit to their communities the symbolic incentive to participate in the survey (knowledge about the situation of migrants to strengthen their social insertion); v) we developed a 1-minute video to broadcast via WhatsApp about what the study consisted of, how the contact strategy worked and what the indirect benefits were of answering the questionnaire and referring to new contacts. For this, we had the support of UNICEF, which produced an animation that improved communication between the field secretary and potential respondents, as well as providing a tool for the informant to invite others by forwarding this video. This video began to circulate in November 2018.

DISCUSSION

The implementation of the project yielded important observations. First, communities responded differently to the survey. People also had varying immigration statuses and educational levels, which impacted their mobility strategies and timelines. Furthermore, the project was carried out by referrals, which altered the research timeline: since recruitment was beyond the control of the researchers, the time spent in the field doubled the initial projection.

The main concessions to RDS's traditional sampling methodology included the following: (i) the use of replacements among referrals when any of them refused or was not available to respond; (ii) no use of material incentives, instead, we worked with communities on the symbolic incentive and sought audiovisual communication strategies to optimize contact forms and efficient transmission of information; (iii) introduction of a field secretariat that centralized referral contacts and scheduled appointments; and, finally, (iv) incorporation of new seeds (respondent) in communities where the response rate was lower (Dominican Republic, Peru and Cuba). Despite this initial concessions, further more others were needed to finally achieve the goals and expectations:

- We incorporated the communities in the research development, which allowed the development of a strategy to speed up recruitment.
- A decision was made to hire Dominican and Peruvian interviewers, whose shared background with the respondents facilitated recruitment and rapport.
- Lastly, WhatsApp worked as a useful and low-cost way to contact participants by spreading the invitation through a short video that explain symbolic benefits from participation and the main rules
- Empowering respondents by allowing them to define and communicate the relevance of the study for their community ultimately facilitated recruitment and the implementation of the project while fostering social trust at the same time.

Finally, our fieldwork is an experience that successfully attempted to flexibly overcome some of the restrictions of the orthodox application of the RDS, originally conceived for samples where the unit of survey and analysis is the individual. In this study the survey unit was the migrants, but the unit of analysis was extended to the entire transnational family of the migrant residing in Montevideo. This represented an added challenge and brought with it the need to make an assumption about the socialization of networks within a household. In the first place, we had to avoid duplicating information on the members of the same household (two persons belonging to the same household could duplicate information on the same household), so we made sure that the spouse or another member of the family had not been contacted to participate in this study. For this purpose, we gave the participants a magnet that we asked them to stick in the refrigerator (understanding that the kitchen is a common space between those who share ¨olla¨); in this way each house was identified once we surveyed one of its members. Secondly, we had to assume the informant as the network and the size of the household network, which is a debatable assumption since it is not clear how many of the members of a network are common or not to the other members of the household. Imagine, for example, the case of an individual in a couple who is counted among the list of people who know those with whom they have contact through their partner. However, this is a methodological challenge that we will continue to work on in the coming months before publishing the microdata from the survey.

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