

## Chapter 16 Using Demographic

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PUBLIC SPEAKING: AN IDEA PERSPECTIVE  
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**General Educational Objectives:** This chapter helps you to:

1. understand the weakness of demographic analysis as it relates to public speaking.
2. understand how demographics may be used in combination with other information and in combination with themselves.
3. be more familiar with commonly discussed demographic factors

**Specific Testable Objectives:** As a result of studying this chapter, you should be able to:

1. explain the need for caution in using the generalizations about demographics.
2. state the appropriate usage of demographics.
3. identify examples of twelve common demographic factors.

Demographics are outward factors which define a population. By their very nature demographic assessments are the easiest analyses to make; and thus, they often constitute the primary focus when audience factors are discussed in public-speaking textbooks. A demographic analysis, as it relates to a *population* (i.e., a large number of individuals) provides useful information as related to the population as a whole. However, for face-to-face audiences, the approach is of questionable value. Information in the social-context chapter, which is only slightly more difficult to obtain, is much more germane to public speaking.

A statistical example may help: consider the results of multiple rolls of two dice. The average (mean) result is seven; indeed, the most typical (mode) and middle (medium) roll is seven. Still a roll of seven occurs only one in six times.

Humans are more complex than the roll of dice. Advice for applying demographic is based on mean results that may occur in small groups less than the one-in-six odds found in the rolling of two dice. When we have some research that links a particular demographic variable to behavior, that knowledge, in a sense, might completely apply to less than one audience out of six typically found in that population.

Given many applications, as in many rolls of two dice, this application will be successful more than any other lone application, as seven is the correct prediction more often than any other number. Thus, demographic data is useful in mass-media campaigns where the generalizations involved are appropriate to

a large number (though clearly not nearly a majority) of the people. With immediate audiences, the application may not apply to anyone present in the audience.

When teaching in China, our students would often make surprising statements to us such as, “Americans are rich.” Taken “Americans,” as they intended, to mean peoples in the U. S. A., the statement is as true as any statement one might find in discussions of demographics. In comparison to Chinese in China, the average standard of living is greater for people in the U.S.A. However, given the diversity of the U.S.A (not to mention all Americans), many of us would take exception to the statement. Indeed, given that the statement was being made by a Chinese college student, as was generally the case, the statement might not be correct as compared to the speaker who probably came from a family whose standard of living would be superior to most Americans.

While our example did not say, “All Americans are rich,” there is a tendency for people to treat the statement as if it were an “all” statement. Thus, a strong sense of limitation is needed when considering principles involving demographics. We told our students, “If you start a sentence with “Americans are...,” it is most difficult to complete the sentence in a way as to make it apply to most Americans. The same is true of statements that start, “Chinese are...!” Still, it is easy to find statements that start, “Asians are/have/do/behave...,” in discussions of demographic traits (even in a chapter supposedly stressing intercultural sensitivity). Extreme caution must be used in applying generalizations from even the best demographic research.

In public-speaking, as contrasted with media campaigns, we should, where possible, base our decisions on other audience characters than demographics. Within a broad analysis, demographic traits can help to reinforce conclusions reached with other information. In all cases, we need to be aware of many demographics in applying them to audiences. In situations where the only information available is demographic, we must precede with caution. In those situations, we combine our understanding to form a composite and design the speech so as to minimize the possibility of alienating the audience before we have an opportunity to get to know them better.

With all the preamble above, I will provide the best analysis for each of the following demographic traits that were generated by Holtzman. As you read the discussion, my prediction is that you will want to tell me of the many exceptions to observations I am presenting. Please do remember that I am well aware of how the exceptions out number the situations where the rules apply. However, the more you know about all the rules, the better able you’ll be to select the ones that apply in a particular situation.

### **Demographic factors**

**Age:** People do become more conservative as they become older. That is they take less risks, accept fewer challenges. The older the audience, the more likely it is that they will continue to do what they have been doing. You

might also note that there is some "anchoring" which takes place when the person is in her/his early twenties, or sooner for less educated individuals. Issues which are important during that period in a person's life remain important to the person throughout life. Similarly, styles and tastes often get set at that time.

**Sex:** Men and women do vary. And, the older the individuals, the more differences there seem to be in the frame of reference of the two groups. Women tend to be more interested in domestic issues; men more in sports, etc. The difference extends to political issues where the "gender gap" has manifested itself in the last few (US) elections: women were a major block in Clinton victories and in the election of new women senators in this century. Male voters were more responsible for the Bush victories. Of course, gender was a factor in McCain's selection of Palin with interesting consequences in the contrasts in reactions thereto.

**Race:** We do differ in race. This difference is a matter of culture (covered later) and movement up the socio-economics scale (below) reduces the differences. The best advice in terms of race is to be aware when the dominant race in the audience is different than yours: do not offend, do not condescend and don't attempt to be ingratiating.

**Educational Level:** Traditionally, education has affected the way in which people think as well as the amount of information which they have on topics in general. Although education in the US has been under continual attack for the last four decades, it is best to assume that the more formal education which a person has, the more that she/he is likely to know about your topic. The more formal education which a person has, the more likely it is that he/she is an opinion leader who exerts influence within the group. And most importantly, the better educated a person is the more critical the person will be of what you say.

**Occupation:** People spend a considerable amount of time "at work." Thus, aspects and issues of their work occupy a considerable amount of their thought. It is generally best to assume that they know about work-relevant issues. In addition, for most educated individuals and many others, occupations are selected because of interest.

**Avocational interest:** This is a fancy way of saying hobbies, although it may be a little broader than hobbies in the "free time" activities included. These activities are (almost) always selected by choice; thus, they show not only knowledge of the area but a good degree of commitment as well.

**Socioeconomic level:** This factor is an indication of the class of individuals with whom the audience associates. The key factor is then the social dimension. However, it seems that income, the economic dimension, is the key determinant of with whom the audience can afford to socialize. Thus, a quick and generally correct indication of class is the wealth and job (or recent job in difficult economic times) of the individuals. Upper class individuals generally do not have to work for a living, although many of them do have "professions." Middle class individuals do have to work and are able to maintain jobs with salaries which provide at least enough for the necessities. Lower class individuals do not earn adequate incomes. The three classes are subdivided into

three subdivisions (upper, middle & lower) which are then modifiers of the class. Thus, in the upper-upper classes are the extremely rich, their parents' parents had money; the middle-upper class are generally "second generation" rich; and, lower-upper classes are first generation, "self made" rich. Upper-middle classes are "white collar" workers; middle-middle classes are generally "blue collar" workers; and lower-middle classes are generally "gray collar" workers. Upper-lower class individuals often have jobs, but for various reasons (seasonal nature of job, illness or dependency) they do not earn (or use what they earn well) enough to make ends meet; middle-lower class individuals are able primarily through social assistance to have the minimum to survive; lower-lower classes are those individuals who have reasons to wonder where they will get their next meal. Beyond obvious implications of power, reputation and interest differences among these groups, a major motive consideration is that, for the most part, people strive to have the "things" of the next higher class.

**Political affiliation:** Obviously, it is difficult to generalize from a person's political party. Democrats in the US tend to be for a strong federal government to assure "social justice." Republicans have favored a strong military posture. Independents have generally been more "person" (personality?) oriented than issue oriented.

**Religious groups:** Probably more important than religious affiliation, parse, is intensity of religious commitment. People who hold their religious beliefs strongly are very similar in their tendency to be dogmatic. You can also level denominations in terms of how literal they are in the interpretation of "holy books" (e.g., the *Bible*). The more literal that the religion is in interpreting scripture, typically, the more dogmatic is the personality of its followers and the less liberal they are in their life styles.

**Social organizations:** This speaks to how many and what type of groups the individuals join. It is an index of how social the individuals are, and how influential they might be. Knowledge of membership and the activities of these organizations may provide a basis for common ground with the audience.

**Cultural background:** The national heritage of the individuals can provide a suggestion of the type of individuals they are. The stereotypes of different nationalities have developed because there is some basis in "fact." Then, the stereotypes are reinforced in the culture. Thus, there is some true to them, varying of course from situation to situation.

**Geographical background:** Where the individual and his/her forefathers spent most of their lives may be a source of information. Two things may be worthy of note. What is the principal source of income in that area? Dominance of commerce in an area often dictates attitudes. Secondly, what is the weather conditions in that area. Weather conditions are often somehow related to views on morality or and willingness to be open in their expression.

## Summary

In this chapter, I have cautioned you about over generalizing with demographics. Demographics are best applied in mass-media campaigns. In public-speaking situations, they may help supplement more predictive

information. In situations where other information is not available, I advised caution in speaking with the audience while gaining other information. Within that context, we briefly discussed twelve of the more common demographic factors.

Key Source:

Holtzman, P. D. (1970). *The psychology of speakers' audiences*  
Glenview, IL" Scott, Foresman & Co.