Inference under Constraint: North Korean Migrant Surveys

ECNK Online Workshop 2025

Panel 2: Considerations When Analyzing North Korea

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Proposition

The value of migrant survey data depends on ***how*** it is used and ***what*** it is used to infer.

Common Myths and Misuses

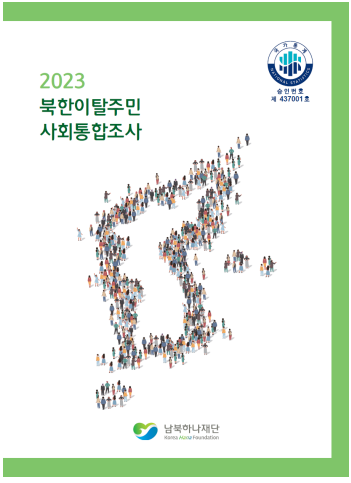
- **“This data tells us nothing.”** (Epistemic fatalism)
- **“All North Koreans lie.”** (Essentialist bias)
- **“It’s useful because there’s no alternative.”** (Scarcity fallacy)
- **“Standards must differ for North Korean research.”** (Methodological exceptionalism)

Result: These assumptions obscure both the risks and potential of the data.

Use Case I: Migrants as Migrants

- Most defensible use: study North Koreans *as a migrant population*.
- Comparative reference cases:
  - East Germans → West Germany
  - Japanese-Brazilians → Japan
- Situates Korean data in broader migration and integration literature.
- Emphasizes co-ethnic communitarianism, identity questions, and integration.
- Proper sampling techniques can be used (stratified random sampling, curated panels).

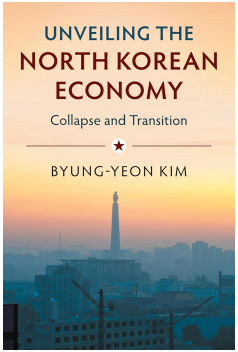
Premium Standard



Use Case II: Conditional Insight into the DPRK

- Inference about DPRK society using migrant surveys should generally be avoided.
- **Primary risks:** selection bias, memory distortion, preference falsification.
- Nevertheless, conditional inference may be justified if:
  - *Defection timing is recent*
  - *Behavioral recall is concrete*
  - *Sampling stratifies by defection year and region*
  - *Questionnaire is structured and temporally anchored.*
- Use of weighting or statistical adjustment can mitigate known demographic skews, but does not address self-selection/bias.

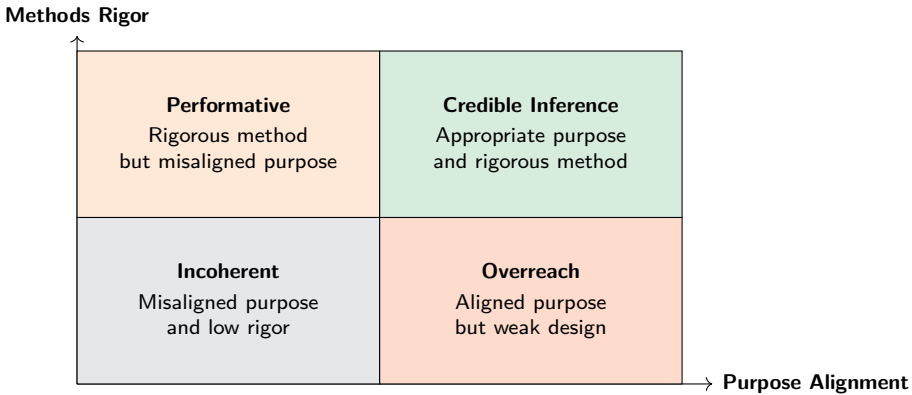
Examples



Byung-Yeon Kim, *Unveiling the North Korean Economy*

Ward & Denney (2024)

Inference Fit: A 2x2 Guide



Takeaway: *Method and purpose must cohere for valid or reasonable inference.*