

ANTHROPOLOGICAL DEMOGRAPHY

Laura Bernardi

Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research and Rostock University Germany.

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Summary

Anthropological demography has grown from the interest of demographers in socio-cultural anthropology theories and methods applied to demographic phenomena. We delineate the birth of such sub-discipline within demography and review the major contributions by anthropologists and by demographers to the field. We then address the theoretical contributions that anthropological demography has brought to population studies through the specification of fundamental concepts like culture, gender, and political economy, as well as their inclusion in explanations of demographic behavior.

In the second part of the chapter, we use selected case studies in the domain of fertility, mortality, and migration to illustrate the empirical research approach used by anthropological demographers. This is the occasion to discuss the challenges of integrating data and analytical perspectives across disciplines and the advantages of mixed methods.

Finally, we conclude by indicating a few directions towards which research in anthropological demography could develop: on a theoretical level the integration of institutional demography and political economy with the concept of agency, on an empirical level more research directed to population phenomena in post industrial societies.

1. Introduction

Anthropological demography is a specialty within demography which uses anthropological theory and methods to provide a better understanding of demographic phenomena in the current and past populations. Its genesis and ongoing growth lie at the intersection between demography and socio-cultural anthropology and with their efforts to understand population processes, mainly fertility, migration, and mortality. Both disciplines share a common research object, namely human populations, and they focus on mutually complementary aspects of this research object: demography is statistically oriented and is mainly concerned with the dynamic forces defining population size and structure and their variation across time and space, whereas socio-cultural anthropology is interpretative and focuses on the social organization shaping the production and reproduction of human populations. The main theoretical concepts in anthropological demography are culture, gender, and political economy; its empirical research approach includes a mix of quantitative and qualitative methodologies applied to case studies. Ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation are often central to this approach as is an interpretative reading of secondary data and historical material.

The approach of anthropological demography is increasingly represented in population studies. Its development faces major internal challenges mainly due to the different epistemological and methodological traditions of its two 'constituent' disciplines. Demography is more positivistic and oriented to the quantification of population processes; socio-cultural anthropology is more interpretative and oriented to the qualitative specification of the behavioral and institutional mechanisms defining such processes (see *Introduction: Past, Present and Future of Demography* by Zeng Yi). The consequence of this is that demographers are often puzzled by aspects of socio-anthropological work such as (i) the subsidiary role that theory testing plays in a substantial part of it, (ii) its critical approach to universal analytical categories such as the concept of age and time, and (iii) the work on non-representative case studies. In turn, anthropologists tend to be skeptical about the fact that the demographers' emphasis on the statistical representativity and on comparable nature of their data is not balanced by a corresponding emphasis on the validity of the data, of the analytical models, and of their interpretation. Despite the challenges inherent in this enterprise, scholars in both disciplines have come together in multidisciplinary research teams to create complex research designs in order to build on mutual strengths and reduce disciplinary limitations, thus launching the field of anthropological demography.

The emergence of anthropological demography has been gradual and its definition as a specialty within demography is still under development. The history of demography and anthropology does provide a few examples of scholars turning to the neighboring discipline, but the birth of anthropological demography can only really be dated back to the last two decades of the twentieth century. Theoretical and empirical papers using anthropological demography have appeared in major demographic and anthropological journals since the 1980s, and the visibility of anthropological demography in the demographic community has been enhanced by the constitution of specific interdisciplinary working groups and international committees. The mission program of the IUSSP Committee of Anthropological Demography, active from 1998 to 2002, consisted precisely of fostering interdisciplinary work in demography and anthropology.

While the IUSSP Committee mainly had a focus on non western societies, the Working Group on the Anthropological Demography of Europe in the European Association for Population Studies, active since 2005, aims to produce comparable theoretical and methodological collaboration in the European context. Anthropological Demography sessions have been held since the 1990s in the most important professional meetings dedicated to population issues such as the meetings of the Population Association of America. Specific grants and graduate programs, such as the Andrew Mellon Foundation population program and the Anthropological demography program at Brown University have been established to enable junior scholars to receive appropriate training in both anthropology and demography and international organizations and funding agencies have put a special emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches.

We start this chapter by briefly delineating the history of the growing interest of demographers in socio-cultural anthropology and by mentioning the major contributions of anthropological theory and methods to demographic research. We then illustrate some achievements in anthropological demography to date and conclude with some reflection on the possible future direction of the sub-discipline.

In order to provide the framework of the rest of this chapter, it is worthwhile to clarify the choices about where to set the borders of anthropological demography. First, the following discussion of anthropology refers solely to socio-cultural anthropology (the terms are used interchangeably). There is another area of overlap between demography and anthropology, namely the large field covered by evolutionary anthropology, archeology, and paleodemography: these branches of anthropology are characterized by the use of demographic methods to understand the bio-demographic structure of past or contemporary populations, such as hunters and gatherers or isolated populations. Although there are partial overlaps with anthropological demography, their theoretical concepts of reference are different: evolution, adaptation, kinship, and the relation between population and resources. The interested reader is redirected to the specific literature mentioned in the bibliography and to the chapter on *Biological Demography* (Roth 2004, Howell 1986, Hammel and Howell 1987, Schacht 1981). Second, this discussion is written from a demographer's perspective and emphasizes the contributions of anthropological demography to the field of demography; no attempt is made to systematically elaborate on its contribution to (socio-cultural) anthropology.

2. Demography turns to Anthropology

Kertzer and Fricke (1997:1) characterize the relationship between anthropology and demography as “long, tortured, often ambivalent, and sometimes passionate” and recognize that anthropological demography is mainly the result of the opening of the demographic community towards anthropological insights into population processes, while the majority of anthropologists still hesitate about learning and adopting demographic techniques. In the early decades of the twentieth century the situation was quite different, social anthropology made great use of population data, with a main focus on the study of kinship as one of the pillars of the social organization of production and reproduction. Together with extensive fieldwork census-taking in the local population was one of the basic tools for understanding family processes such as household structure, marriage, divorce, and childbearing (see classics, among others

Radcliff-Brown 1964, Firth 1968[1936], Fortes 1946). In contrast to this approach, cultural anthropology put an emphasis on the cultural and ritual manifestations of populations rather than on their social organization; therefore, its development remained immune to demography for many years, with the exception of research in cultural ecology and cultural materialism, which focused on population issues and paid attention to the balance between population and resources (Harris and Ross 1987).

Demography began turning to the wisdom of the anthropological literature in the early 1950s, when a few anthropologists were invited to join the Committee on Population Problems in Non-industrial Societies of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population. The necessity of addressing the influence that local forms of social organization and culture had on population dynamics became even more evident between the 1960s and 1970s: in this period two major demographic projects showed the methodological and theoretical boundaries within which demography had been contained until then. One project was the *Princeton European Fertility Project*, whose original aim was to empirically prove the transition theory with historical data from Europe. The other project, which was run in the same period, was the ambitious data collection program of the *World Fertility Surveys*, which aimed at producing comparable population estimates for countries with incomplete data.

The first source of renewed interest in anthropology among demographers came from the group working on the Princeton European Fertility Project. Their declared aim was to test and confirm the demographic transition theory by documenting the empirically changing patterns of marital fertility, infant mortality, urbanization, industrialization, and literacy in historical European populations. According to the project's conclusions, the transition theory was at best an inaccurate depiction of the historical process of demographic change and an incomplete account of the determinants of demographic change. The diffusion of ideational values had an important role in determining the timing of the onset and the rhythm of fertility transition. The idea that cultural settings influenced fertility decline and that such influence was independent of socio-economic factors opened the door for a reformulation of the transition theory which could incorporate culture and ideational change (Cleland and Wilson 1987, Knodel and van de Walle 1986, Watkins 1996).

The second opening of demography towards anthropology was caused by the World Fertility Survey program in many African and Asian countries. These surveys were employed as a complement and enhancement to traditional sources for population estimates like registers and censuses, most of which suffered from questionable coverage and accuracy. This rich source of individual level data highlighted the necessity of gaining contextual information about the local culture in order to achieve a reliable data collection and its valid interpretation. John Caldwell, an Australian demographer, was the first in his field to lament the limitations in the use and interpretation of these data, echoing to a great extent a common criticism of quantitative data collection in empirical social science. The criticism is that data of this kind only reflects what is included in the questions, and the social reality they seek to represent is distorted if the questions are formulated by a researcher who is not involved in the process of data collection or exposed to the social reality from which the data originate. Caldwell was himself involved in village studies in West Africa in the late 1970s. This

experience and his reading of the anthropological literature about that area led him to abandon what has been regarded as an ‘armchair approach’ to demographic analysis (a substantial disengagement of the analyst from the field) and to launch what he defined as micro-level demography or an anthropological approach to demography (Caldwell and Hill 1988). Echoing parallel calls for small scale studies in demography (Leibenstein 1981), Caldwell’s approach implied the use of village studies to gather contextual information and to understand the complexity of the social realities in which demographic behavior is embedded. He felt that only with such information can one correctly interpret the association between variables. Similarly, the presence of the researcher in the field and the daily collaboration with anthropologists within a common project would allow a better evaluation of the validity of the data because of the use of unprompted information on local meanings, on motivation for actions, and on sensitive topics. In recent years other demographers have employed micro-demographic approaches (Lesthaeghe 1980, Massey 1987), partially inspired by the body of pioneering research generated by Caldwell and his numerous colleagues during those years. An *ad hoc* IUSSP committee on anthropological demography gave further visibility to this approach and contributed to a widening debate on anthropological demography and its foundation.

With a renewed interest in culture as one of the most influential contextual dimensions reflected by demographic behavior, demography started from the 1990s to welcome anthropology as a social science discipline from which it could borrow, in addition to methodology, also societal concepts, and theories. The integration of anthropology and demography initiated then still poses major challenges like the operational definition of anthropological concepts and the integration of holistic analysis of case studies with the statistical correlation between selected variables.

3. Theoretical Challenges: Culture, Political Economy, Gender, and Institutions

Anthropological demography substantially contributed in providing a redefinition and a critical use of concepts like culture, political economy, gender, and institutions in relation to demographic phenomena.

3.1. Culture

The role of culture in the analysis of demographic processes is at the center of demographers’ renewed interest in anthropological theory. Culturally sound explanations of demographic behavior seemed essential to shed light on the otherwise inexplicable observed variation in demographic behavior. However, the issue of how to define culture and how culture should be taken into account in empirical research are questions which have yet to yield a definitive answer that meets with unanimous agreement. This debate has been raging for a long time in anthropology and definitions range from a “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols”, a “learnt repertory of thoughts and actions exhibited by members of social groups”, the “application of criteria of right and wrong”, to an “organized system of shared meaning”. In his seminal paper of 1990, Hammel describes how the concept of culture in anthropology has been used alternatively as “an identifier of social groups, a body of autonomous traditions, a set of coherently patterned behaviors, a determiner of human

action, an artistic expression of human experience, and a set of symbols negotiated between social actors” (Hammel 1990: 457).

Inspired by Clifford Geertz’s (1973) distinction between models *of* reality and models *for* reality, and addressing the related dialectic between structure and action, Hammel proposes a parallel distinction: “culture *for* the people” versus “culture *by* the people.” In the former sense culture has the function of actually determining people's actions by providing them with blueprints of how their lives ought to be conducted. Individuals learn the norms existing in their social environment and either internalize them and conform, or rebel against them after they have taken into account the cost opportunities of their conduct. This “culture for the people” is useful in order to justify the inclusion of cultural dimensions into behavioral models providing an explanation as to why people in the same cultural context act the way they do. However, this vision of culture is criticized by mainstream anthropology since it treats individuals as “cultural dopes,” underestimates the role of individual agency, and leaves little room to explain cultural change. A “culture by the people” represents the way in which social actors perceive the world and attribute significance and symbolic meaning to social behavior. In this sense culture represents a frame of the possible paths available, while the actual path taken is a matter of individual choice. In this definition of culture individual agency and practices are central. Cultural symbols are susceptible to be transformed and interpreted by individuals for their own purposes in specific circumstances. Since this process of transformation and interpretation takes place in social interaction, in conversation and in practices, individual agency appears to be “socially distributed” (Carter 1995) and to take place in “dialectical relation between persons acting and the setting of their activities”. This vision of culture as an “evaluative conversation” is consistent with the fact that individual subjective attributes like values or attitudes on specific behavior may be ambiguous and even contradictory within a specific cultural context.

According to Fricke: “Culturally sensitive population studies require an assumption that people engage their world in terms of highly various and local systems of meaning, and a willingness to explore existing sources with an eye to relating those meanings to demographic outcomes” (Fricke 1997 : 186). Anthropological demography needs to face three challenges in trying to incorporate culture in demographic studies.

First, it needs to ensure that standard demographic variables such as education or age at marriage are informed by the cultural meaning that this variable assumes in the specific context. For example Johnson-Hanks finds that education is related to higher age at first birth among Beti women in Cameroon mainly because formal schooling is closely connected with a higher motivation to have a good reputation and behave according to a local concept of respectability. Schooling functions as a socialization factor that reinforces the characteristics of an honorable conduct through specific practices, one of which is self-domination. This explains why education is also consistent with the widespread use of natural non-western contraception in this context (Johnson-Hanks 2006).

Second, anthropological demographers need to be attentive to the symbolic systems of reference in the population they study and thus open to the necessity to modify standard variables or introduce new contextual variables into behavioral models. The fieldwork

by Susan Short's team in China indicated a much more refined and valid definition of the characteristics of women's employment than the classic division into waged and unwaged. It was only by accounting for the different level of intensities and degree of compatibility with childrearing in specific non-wage activities that the relation between working time and childrearing time could be appreciated in full (Short et al. 2002). Similarly, in research aiming at counting the homeless people in Paris, the explorative fieldwork phase of the research design needed to account for the multiple definitions of 'home' held by the informants in order to allow the researchers to collect valid data in enumeration (Marpsat 1999).

Third, anthropological demographers need to interpret the complexity of individual motivations that are beyond local patterns of behavior. An example of such complexity was found by Bledsoe and colleagues in rural Gambia. They showed that the use of western contraception there actually is consistent with Gambian women's interest and motivation in bearing as many children as possible, and thus does not directly serve the goal of limiting fertility. The social organization of this community makes having adult children the most important source of wealth and social respect for women. The local idea of reproductive biology identifies childbearing life as *body resource expenditure* (Bledsoe 2002) and reproductive capacity is thought to diminish not with age but with the stress suffered by a woman's body. One of the most stressful events in this sense is considered to be the experience of a mishap (miscarriage, still birth or the early death of the infant). A woman in this society considers resting between pregnancies as the most effective way of restoring her own reproductive capacity (her own "body resources"). This combination of a local social organization and a concept of fertility that depends on physical rather than on ageing leads Gambian women whose pregnancy ended in mishaps to use western contraception in order to maximize the survival chances of their next child. In this last example anthropological demography refutes the conceptualization of culture and social organization as separate forces affecting demographic outcomes.

3.2. Political Economy

Anthropological demography, like social history, pays attention to the intersection of global and local forces and in its resulting agency-structure dynamic. This focus is best represented in the political economy approach to demographic processes, which aims at analyzing the impact of economic forces within their cultural and political context and not in opposition to it (Kertzer 1995, Greenhalgh 1990, Schneider and Schneider 1984).

A good example of such approach is Kertzer and Hogan's study of the differential timing of fertility decline by occupational category in Casalecchio di Reno, Italy. People's behavior at the local level seems to have been clearly influenced by a set of factors ranging from the introduction of compulsory school attendance, the promulgation of child labor laws, and the type of class-specific living arrangements which affected the economic value of children to parents in a different way for sharecroppers compared to all other social classes (Kertzer and Hogan 1986). Similarly the reconstruction of fertility decline in Sicily by Schneider and Schneider (1984) and that in the Swiss Alps by Netting (1981) are both role models of studies of political economy applied to fertility. They employ oral memories and archival data to define the

forces behind the fertility transition; using historical data on vital events they also test how the fertility transition was experienced by the various social groups. In the words of the Schneiders:

“A political economy approach is above all concerned with the power differences that have emerged, and will continue to emerge, in the course of history: differences of age and gender within families and kin units; between the official institutions and their clients, customers or followers; between classes or ethnic groups; and across these lines as a result of interactions. And it is oriented towards embedding any kind of change, population change included, in history as distinct from evolution” (Schneider and Schneider 1996: 8).

Ideally, approaches inspired by political economy include five key elements: they focus on multilevel analyses; they are historical in perspective; they are practice-oriented; they account for economic, political, and cultural forces; and they use mixed-methods research approaches. A political economy approach challenges the tendency in demography to perpetuate a rather artificial distinction between the effects on behavior of cultural and social organization, as if these represented two independent institutions. For instance claims that religion as a cultural force and industrialization as the main economic force acted separately on fertility transition should account for the political role of the Roman Church in defining what was a legitimate birth and the effect of such a definition on infant mortality. The bottom line is that relationships between cultural and social institutions need to be explored in their local context. This type of approach has the potential to identify the relevant unit of behavioral decisions (whether the individual, the couple, the patrilineal unit, the nuclear family, or other networks) and the level at which the situational framework for decisions is defined (local, regional, national, or global). The challenge for anthropological demography is to move beyond single case studies and promote comparative research designs which would enhance theory testing and the generalization of theories.

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Biographical Sketch

Laura Bernardi, Professor for the Sociology and Demography of Life Course at the University of Lausanne (2008-) where she teaches sociology, fertility theory, sociological and demographic approaches on life course studies. Previously she was the Head of the Independent Research Group "Culture of Reproduction" at the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (2003-2009) and Junior Professor of Demographic Change at the University of Rostock (2004-2008), where she also taught anthropological demography, demographic analysis, and qualitative methods for empirical research in social sciences. From 2002 to 2007 she taught in several postgraduate seminars on multi-method approaches to demographic issues at the International Max Planck Research School of Demography, the University of Geneva (Switzerland), University of Groningen (Netherlands), University of Padua (Italy), and the University of Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso). In 2002-2003 she was visiting scholar at the Population Training and Studies Center and Department of Anthropology at Brown University (USA); she holds a Dr. phil. degree from the University of Rome "La Sapienza" and a postgraduate Master degree from the Université Catholique de Louvain La Neuve (Belgium). Ms Bernardi is a member of Population Association of America (PAA), European Association for Population Studies (EAPS), International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP), German Sociological Association - Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie (DFG) and Italian Statistical Association - Societa Italiana di Statistica (SIS), and Research Associate of the Rostock Centre for Demographic Change (RZDW); she also chairs the EAPS Working Group on Anthropological Demography (2005-). She is Book Editor of the *European Journal of Population* and member of the editorial board of *Population Research and Policy Review*, *Genus*, and *Demographic Research*. Her published articles focus on the impact of cultural beliefs, social

influence, and socialization on demographic behavior: Bernardi, L.: Channels of social influence on reproduction. *Population Research and Policy Review* 22: 527-555, 2003; Bernardi, L., H. von der Lippe, and A. Klärner (2007): Job Instability and Parenthood. *European Journal of Population* (in press); Mynarska, M. and L. Bernardi (2007): Meanings and attitudes attached to cohabitation in Poland. *Demographic Research*, 16, 519-554.

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