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Nancy E. Riley and James McCarthy

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1 Introduction: why examine demography?

In recent years, the field of demography has spawned a variety of new ideas, conceptual and measurement frameworks, and theories of demographic change. The debates in the journals are hot with conflicting claims on every issue from questions of measurement and the relative importance of causal forces to the ideological bias of researchers and the entire field. (Hirschman 1994: 204)

The bankclerkly and backroom activities that now make up most of population studies are worthy enough contributions to the quantitative understanding of demographic change but are increasingly divorced from any larger, cumulative social scientific enterprise. They make poor use of the fine vantage point demography offers for multifaceted study of behavioral and social change. And in their direction and reach, they seem ill-suited for treating the kinds of population-linked issues that may soon appear on the public policy agenda. (McNicol 1992: 400)

This last decade has been a stormy time for demographic theory. Long-held theories and paradigms for explaining demographic behavior have come under fire and even the methods employed by demographers to explain such behavior have come in for sharp criticism.

(Kertzer 1995: 29)

These three statements, all written by prominent demographers, present quite different views of the current state of the field of demography. On the one hand, the field is seen as vibrant, with scholars fully engaged in profoundly critical debates that are leading to the development of new theories, new methods, and new knowledge. On the other hand, the field is described as “bankclerkly,” providing information that has some use, but that is not vital to either intellectual or policy debates. Rather than a vibrant, self-critical field, demography is seen as going through a “stormy” period in which its very core is in question. The contrast between those views, well represented in the above three statements, is at the heart of this volume.

Demography is a strong, clearly defined, well-established and well-funded field of study, especially in the United States and especially relative

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to other social sciences that address much broader sets of issues. The field is characterized by a great deal of shared understanding of its boundaries and by considerable agreement over what constitutes demographic knowledge and how that knowledge is acquired. Demography is, in effect, a very tightly bounded enterprise.

The field's strength is reflected in the existence of strong academic and non-academic institutions dedicated to promoting and supporting demographic research. In addition, the field benefits from the existence of all the usual attributes of strong academic disciplines: major journals in which research is published; strong membership associations that promote demographic research and the interests of professional demographers; and regular attention from the general public, the media, and political leaders, all of whom are, at least at times, deeply interested in the subject matter of demography. Among these strong institutions interested in demography are a sizeable number of private and public organizations that routinely provide substantial financial support for demographic research and training. These institutional and financial factors combine to make demography an attractive area of inquiry for both students and professionals.

Notwithstanding the considerable strengths of the field of demography, a number of demographers have observed a kind of malaise that has taken over the field. Scholars working in both mainstream and more marginal areas of demography have noted problems with the field. Some scholars have begun to reflect on the field's history and its current status, with the goal of lifting the field out of this malaise through new directions for demographic scholarship. However, virtually all of these reflections have taken place solidly within the very narrow boundaries that contain the core of traditional demography. As a result, these reflections have been neither particularly critical, nor have they been particularly productive in changing the field. Although new topics have definitely emerged in mainstream demography (e.g. the demography of AIDS and violence against women), there have been very few compelling suggestions for new methodological or, especially, epistemological approaches.

Our goal in this book is to undertake a more drastic, more critical review of the current state of demography, a review that goes far beyond the traditional boundaries of the field and introduces perspectives that differ markedly from those that are typical in demography. We do this as a way of addressing the apparent malaise and because we think that this more critical approach could move the field toward productive new directions. In this book, we use the lens of postmodernism to take a new look at the field of demography. Although widely used in other social

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science fields, postmodernism has rarely been used within the field of demography. One of our goals is to examine the reasons for the absence of postmodern influence in demography, particularly given its influence in neighboring fields. A second goal is to make a case for the use of postmodern perspectives in demography. We are not and will not be arguing for wholesale adoption of postmodern approaches by demography or demographers. But, as the experience of other fields makes clear, postmodern perspectives offer the field of demography a number of advantages, aside from a new and different lens on familiar practices. They provide insights into some of the difficulties that demography has encountered in understanding and predicting demographic change and suggest fruitful future directions for demography, directions that would help our understanding of demographic events and might also help to alleviate some of the widespread complaints from and of demography.

Demography's important role

Demography is an enormously powerful field. Its subject matter (fertility, mortality, migration, and population distribution) includes issues that are essential to social scientists who seek to understand how communities and societies function, to individuals and organizations (both public and private) who seek to change social conditions, and also to people simply interested in exploring issues that are central to their lives in society. We read everywhere about the uses of demographic information, from estimates of the number of schools needed in a community to predictions of the size of immigrant streams or national population numbers. Demographic work provides the basis for the monitoring of health status among vulnerable groups such as the elderly or the poor. And, indeed, it is nearly impossible to pick up a daily newspaper without information from demography either highlighted or being used to explain or elaborate on some social issue. Census information on characteristics of the population, data on the spread or control of a disease, reports on numbers of people migrating from one country to another: these are all based on demographic knowledge. Governments rely on demographic research at every corner, and, as we will illustrate later, use demographic data to further their own agendas or to suggest new ones.

Recognition of the strengths and value of demographic research comes from a broad range of constituencies. For example, in a plea to feminist scholars to pay more attention to demographic research, Greenhalgh and Li (1995) argue that male–female demographic differentials are

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important measures: “because they deal with vital matters such as life and death and because they provide a bird’s eye view of the whole population under study, [they] can provide stark clues to the changing relations between the genders in the society as a whole” (602).

In fact, we will argue that it is partly that very advantageous position that demography holds that has brought confusion to the direction of the field. The need for demographic data by many constituencies contributes to demography’s pull away from its position as a social science, and toward it being accepted, and seeing itself, as a policy science.

Consensus and dissatisfaction within demography

In addition to being an important field, demography is a remarkably coherent field. Although there are differences and disagreements within demography and among demographers, demography maintains a large following of quite loyal and active members, claiming the allegiance of thousands of individuals scattered over most countries around the world (the membership of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population numbers nearly 2000 individuals in about 100 countries).¹ The subject matter, the dominant theoretical paradigms, the epistemology and methodology of demography are relatively easy to define, and the vast majority of people who identify themselves as demographers would agree on those definitions. We find this situation to be in marked contrast with prevailing conditions in other fields of inquiry with which we are associated, namely economics, anthropology, women’s studies, sociology, and public health. By contrast, in each of these fields, fundamental, far-reaching debates and conflicts over subject matter, theory, epistemology and methodology, and ideology are common.²

Although we are convinced about our conclusion that demography is – to a very large extent – a coherent and internally consistent field, over the past decades there have been expressions of concern about the field that have appeared in mainstream journals. These have not approached the level of those we observe in other fields, but their emergence is, we think, important. McNicoll (1992), for example, in an article published in *Population and Development Review*, argues that there is a “lack of excitement” among demographers, in spite of the huge demographic changes going on around the world. In her Presidential Address to the Population Association of America, Karen Mason asserts that “the field . . . suffers from a sense of malaise caused by our apparent inability to explain one of the most important demographic phenomena in human history [fertility decline]” (Mason 1997a: 446). Like others (Demeny 1988; Furedi 1997), McNicoll argues that demography is not making

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the contributions it might to understanding of social processes or to the larger issues facing the world today.

Although he writes more positively about the field than McNicoll, Sam Preston too argues that “it is possible . . . that the field is missing important opportunities for expansion” (603) and warns about how we need to retain imaginative young demographers. Worries and concerns about the narrow focus and limited number of approaches are at the heart of the complaints of many working centrally in the field. Watkins (1993), for example, discusses the problems of the limited number of variables that are generally used in demographic models, even though there is an “almost infinite list of economic, social, cultural, and organizational features of ecological areas that could conceivably affect fertility” (Hirschman and Guest 1990, quoted in Watkins 1993: 559).

Other writers have argued that demography does not have the theoretical and methodological scope that it needs. Greenhalgh (1990) describes the advantages of adopting a political economic approach, one that would incorporate social influences on fertility beyond the individual level, in this way broadening demography’s reach. In another piece (1995), she argues for the need for a feminist demography, “the construction of a politically engaged demography motivated by feminist concerns and informed by feminist theory . . . [which would address] the narrowness and general weakness of demographic theories of reproduction, problems widely recognized by demographers themselves” (Greenhalgh and Li 1995: 602). Others (Dixon-Mueller 1993; Riley 1998; Mason 1997a; Presser 1997) have pointed to the ways that demography and its theories and policies do not attend to women’s rights and needs. Horton (1999), who is concerned with the treatment of race in demography, has recently called for “a new paradigm that would facilitate the development of theories, concepts, and methods that mainstream demography fails to accommodate” (Horton 1999: 363).

There are others working even further from the center of the field who also have written of the weaknesses in demography. Ginsburg and Rapp (1995) argue that demography has “largely ignored the complex ways in which culture enters into reproductive decisions and results” and call for “models that place the cultural and social dimensions of human agency and its structural constraints at the center of analysis” (161).³ A group of scholars and activists working together on population issues argues that we need to rethink the idea that population is at the root of all of our problems, and also calls for recognizing the underlying structural and historical influences on demographic behavior (Sillman and King 1999).

In recent years, people from many corners of the world have argued for a new approach to population issues, one that does not focus exclusively

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on the “population problem.” Their voices and perspectives are increasingly heard, even within the population establishment. Many of the discussions and debates around the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1995 and the UN Women’s Conference in Beijing the following year are related to these efforts. As one woman asserted at that time, “Women know that childbearing is a social, not purely personal, phenomenon: nor do we deny that world population trends are likely to exert considerable pressure on resources and institutions by the end of this century. But our bodies have become a pawn in the struggles among states, religions, male heads of households, and private corporations” (Sen and Grown 1985: 42, quoted in Kabeer 1994). Even closer to home, Presser (1997) has argued that demography has mostly ignored issues of gender, especially empowerment and inequality. She asserts that it is lack of attention to gender that has caused demography to lose some of its previous influence in policy-making.

Given the apparent disconnection between continuing interest in demographic issues and the dissatisfactions voiced about the current state of demographic work, demography is clearly positioned to re-examine its goals and assumptions. Undertaking such a process is vital to the health of the field and to its effectiveness. There are, of course, many possible paths towards solutions for the dissatisfactions and malaise within demography. Some that have been suggested attempt to retain demography’s central assumptions and early goals. For example, Hirschmann (and others, see Caldwell 1997) have argued that because demographic theories of fertility decline have limited explanatory or predictive power, the field needs to develop better, and probably more all-encompassing theories. Others, including Mason (1997b) and Lesthaeghe and Surkyn (1988), make more modest suggestions, namely that we need to expand the testing of existing theories by adding additional, more powerful, independent variables into demographic models, especially variables that more effectively capture elements of culture.

Still others have suggested that what might be necessary are new methodologies, methodologies that might help to overcome some of the weaknesses of methods currently in vogue in the field. Kertzer and Fricke (1997) see demography’s recent interest in anthropology as motivated by two issues. “First, the perceived insufficiency of traditional demographic methodology, with the call for employing anthropological methods to supplement and enrich these methods; and second, the perceived insufficiency of the theoretical explanatory models employed by demographers” (13).

Although at least some of these suggested changes would, perhaps, add a new and useful dimension to demographic research and insights, they

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will not alone address some of the fundamental problems of the field. Many practitioners in the field are recognizing that there is no grand theory out there that will answer the questions we are asking, nor will adding new variables to our old models get us out of the rut that we are in. The problems and solutions must go further than finding better grand theories or new variables. And as several scholars discussing demographers' new interest in anthropology have pointed out, simply switching or adding new methods does not take into account the interrelatedness of epistemology and methodology, and the ways that each informs the others (Harding 1986). We argue that we need to critically rethink the questions we are asking and the way that we ask those questions and seek answers. The solution to this malaise, to reawakening the field, is not business as usual or even a few tweakings of what we currently do or how we do it. Postmodern perspectives, developed and used extensively in nearly all neighboring fields, offer important aids in this rethinking, and suggestions for future work.

A world of change

In calling for a critical examination of the fundamental theories, methodology, and epistemology of demography, we are – to a great extent – simply suggesting that demography engage in debates and discussions that have been going on in other social sciences in recent decades. While there are many changes that we could speak to and document, we will focus on two that are key to demography's current position in the scholarly world. The first change occurring in most social sciences is the way that positivist approaches to understanding the social world have been subject to serious challenge. That is, positivist research remains alive and quite evident in many disciplines, but it has a much less central or unproblematic role than it did in the past. Secondly, the boundaries between disciplines (within the social sciences, but well outside them too) have become much more porous. Interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and cross-disciplinary approaches to scholarship and understanding are commonplace. Part of this new phenomenon is the creation and development of new disciplines, including Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies, Queer Studies, Cultural Studies, and others. Within the traditional social science disciplines too, new methodologies and cross-disciplinary approaches have become more acceptable and more common. These changes reflect and encourage new forms of scholarship and new ways of thinking about and understanding the world around us.

Many have pondered and written about why these developments in scholarship have occurred at this time. While we are not prepared to

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discuss all the reasons why scholarship has moved in the directions it has, it is clear that there have been social changes across the world that have been related to the changes in scholarship. The movement of peoples across borders has been faster and more common than in the past, so that “prior configurations of border and boundaries are rapidly reshaped, effecting change in the politics of gender, class and place” (Oza 2001: 1070). New technology has allowed easier contact between people who would not have had such easy contact in the past. This technology includes electronic mail, inexpensive telephone connections, communication and information available through the internet, and transportation that allows easy and fast travel across the world. Since the decline of colonialism, voices that had previously been unheard are now much more easily heard and, perhaps, listened to. Exchanges in a wide variety of forms – movies, literature, music, language – happen frequently and easily.

Demographic changes have played an important part in many of these recent changes. Particularly important have been the massive movements of people across borders. Both international and internal migration have contributed to increased contact between peoples of vastly different background and experience. Better communications and transportation connections have meant that these movements have taken place at an increasingly rapid pace. But these same changes mean that once established in a new geographical area, many people and communities maintain ties with their previous communities. The euphemistic small world is becoming an everyday reality in many societies.

But along with these demographic changes are others that are also important and have been influential in the development of postmodern perspectives. These societies, especially in the west, that used to be dominated – in numbers and power – by whites, are becoming more diverse. Whereas people of African, Asian, and Latin American origins made up 28 percent of the total population of the United States in 2000, that proportion is expected to rise to 47 percent by 2050 (Martin and Midgley 1999). These different groups often have competing interests, and certainly different perspectives, needs and priorities. No longer do all assume that the views and interests of the white majority should prevail over all others. As one writer has described this change in the United States, “power in America has historically been distributed along racial lines, and Anglos now feel their influence diminishing before new demographic and cultural realities . . . white America in the 1990s is . . . increasingly losing control of the political agenda” (Hwang 1994: xii). Many have argued that we need new tools and new ways to understand these and other changes

around us, and that the new directions in scholarship have allowed us to do that.

Why postmodernism now?

One of the major shifts in scholarship is toward postmodern and interpretive approaches in the social sciences and humanities. Postmodern perspectives have arisen partly from the changes, events, and movements that have occurred in recent decades, although postmodern perspectives are being and have been used to understand and examine events and processes from the distant past as well. Although postmodernism refers to a theoretical perspective used primarily in intellectual work and debates, it comes from and is necessarily connected to the concept of postmodernity. The use of the term postmodernity is meant to distinguish the current social world from a past era and to describe the widespread cultural and social changes taking place across the world. These changes are vast, but particularly important has been “the advanced erosion of that global structure of domination which... supplied the ‘evidence of reality’ of... [the] Superiority of the West” (Bauman 1994: 189). With the collapse of the old colonial system and the old systems of domination, local groups are finding ways to assert their interests. Along with these changes have come others. “Instead of a coercive totality and a totalizing politics, postmodernity stresses a pluralistic and open democracy. Instead of the certainty of progress... there is now an awareness of contingency and ambivalence” (Sarup 1993: 130).

Postmodernism, then, is a theoretical perspective arising from this view of modern society. As Cahoon (1996: 2) puts it: “At a minimum, postmodernism regards certain important principles, methods, or ideas characteristic of modern Western culture as obsolete or illegitimate. In this sense, postmodernism is the latest wave in the critique of the Enlightenment.” We can see that changes within the scholarly world reflect recent changes in the social, economic, and political world; they are thus both part of those changes and allow us, as scholars, better to understand the social world.

Postmodern themes seem especially visible in the realm of knowledge. For example, disciplinary boundaries are blurring and new interdisciplinary, hybrid knowledges such as feminism, lesbian and gay studies, ethnic studies, urban studies, and cultural studies are moving into the center of the human studies. The lines between science, literature, and ideology, between literature and literary criticism, between philosophy and cultural criticism, and between high cultural criticism and popular criticism, have blurred considerably... As disciplinary boundaries

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and the line between science and nonscience blur, as claims to universal knowledge lack credibility, as knowledges are viewed as interlaced with rhetoric and power, the very meaning of knowledge is changing. (Seidman 1994b: 2)

Postmodernism and demography

As a field that deals with many of these recent social changes, demography has much to gain from postmodern perspectives. For several reasons, our goal is not to set out a grand postmodern scheme here as a solution to the concerns in and about demography. There is not widespread agreement about the definition of postmodernism, although, as we point out later, there are areas of agreement over its general scope. Further, while postmodernism offers rich and important contributions to understandings of the world, its weaknesses have also been widely noted. Our approach, then, is not to argue for a particular definition of postmodernism, nor to assert that an exclusively postmodern agenda should be operating in demography. Our argument is that postmodern perspectives offer many elements and insights that would enliven and strengthen demographic research and debate. We argue that the field needs to address the postmodern nature of the world. Postmodern epistemology and methodology offer productive and useful directions, both within demographic work itself, and in the way it would allow for fruitful connections between demography and neighboring fields. In fact, as we explain in Chapter 7, there is already much work going on in the area of population that draws from postmodern perspectives. Our purpose here is to underscore those contributions and to explain both why demography has had a difficult time drawing from these new perspectives in the social sciences and why broadening its tools and approaches to include them will strengthen the field.

Situating ourselves

Our decision to write this book comes from our own recognition of elements of the “malaise” that others have described, and that we’ve summarized above. Each of us has – in different ways – moved away from traditional elements of the field of demography and has gravitated to quite distinct academic and applied fields; Riley to feminist studies and sociology and McCarthy to community health. Although we were both trained in demography and maintain allegiance to the core elements of the field (namely better to understand and address the determinants and consequences of demographic events), we have each found that other fields provided us with theoretical, methodological and practical inspiration that we have not found in demography itself. Our personal migration