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Research Article

What kind of theory for anthropological demography?

Jennifer Johnson-Hanks

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What kind of theory for anthropological demography?

Jennifer Johnson-Hanks¹

Abstract:

This paper argues that anthropological demography has, for most part, imported rather than exported theory. However, the discipline has the potential to generate important rethinking of population, culture, and their interaction. After discussing the challenges that must be faced in developing new theoretical approaches in anthropological demography, the paper suggests a framework for research based on the related ideas of the “demographic conjuncture” and “construal.”

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1. Introduction

Anthropological demography is both an old discipline and a new one. It is old in the sense that our core intellectual project—that of integrative understanding of cultural practices and demographic rates—has been conducted in some form for nearly two centuries. Quetelet's analysis of marriage (1968 [1842]) or Durkheim's of suicide (1930) might rightly be called primeval exercises in anthropological demography, because they treat demographic phenomena as social facts with unique, social and cultural explanations. At the same time, our discipline is brand new. It was only in the 1990s that a series of monographs and edited volumes began to codify the emerging field (see especially Basu and Aaby 1998; Greenhalgh 1995; Kertzer and Fricke 1997), and a decade later, we anthropological demographers are still sufficiently rare to count ourselves among a vanguard of a sort. That is not to say that we have no intellectual history between Durkheim and the renaissance of the 1990s. Scholars including Blake (1961); Bledsoe (1980); Fortes (1970); Hammel (1990); Howell (1979); Kertzer (1993); Kreager (1982); Lee (1984); Lesthaeghe (1977); and Watkins (1990, 2000) continued to develop an integrative intellectual program. However, they remained relatively few. Today, by contrast, there is considerable interest in the intersection of cultural anthropology and demography. Papers and books published since the mid-1990s are dazzling in their number, diversity, and quality (examples include: Bledsoe 2002; Castle 1994, 2001; Clark et al. 1995; Delaunay 1994; Hill and Hurtado 1996; Lockwood 1995; Setel 1999; Schneider and Schneider 1996; Smith 2001, 2004). It is an exciting time to be an anthropological demographer.

Given this effervescence of research and writing, what kinds of theory should we look to? The differences in models, methods and epistemologies between contemporary demography and cultural anthropology could hardly be starker. Whereas contemporary anthropology focuses largely on ideology, power, and phenomenological experience, demography in the last ten years has been dominated by the statistical analysis of variation within western populations. Whereas the largest innovations in anthropology have been theoretical, the major advances in demography have been in the domains of data and method. The most widely cited papers in the major cultural anthropology journals in the past ten years address issues such as globalization (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Tsing 2000), modernity and post-coloniality (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Mills 1997), citizenship (Ong 1996), and the politics of space (Escobar 1999; Moore 1998)². In the major anglophone demography journals, by contrast, the most widely

² In the Web of Science (<http://portal.isiknowledge.com/>), I searched for all articles published in *American Anthropologist*, *Current Anthropology*, *Cultural Anthropology* and *American Ethnologist* since 1996 and sorted the results by number of times cited. Within the 20 most often cited papers, I then identified common themes and drew selected examples.

cited papers concern the welfare of American children (e.g. Bianchi 2000; Bumpass et al. 1995) changing rates of marriage, divorce and cohabitation (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Smock and Manning 1997); mortality differentials (Hummer et al. 1999; Smith and Kington 1997), fertility decline (Mason 1997; Bongaarts and Watkins 1996), and methodology (Bongaarts and Feeney 1998)³. In this sense, it would seem to be a very difficult moment to be an anthropological demographer, because the two fields are so distant from each other.

Despite the distance between the contemporary practice of cultural anthropology and demography, the possibilities for mutually productive intellectual exchange are enormous. Demographic rates are true “social facts,” in the sense intended by Durkheim (1962), which offer a compelling way to think about the relationship between the individual and the collective, about agency and structure, intentional action and *conscience collective*. Rates are, in Durkheim's language, “collective and coercive”, evoking certain forms of action from individuals without individuals necessarily being aware of the rates or explicitly orienting their action toward them (see Durkheim 1962: 2-4)⁴. It is profoundly ironic that actions experienced as voluntary and personal so consistently conform to population norms: no one jumps off a bridge because the number of suicides falls below the previous year's total; yet, suicide rates remain remarkably stable. No one bears an extra child to offset the thwarted fertility intentions of the infertile; yet, average ideal family size predicts population fertility rates even when individual-level concordance is low (see, for example, Quesnel-Vallee and Morgan 2000). Although rates structure the social environment, and thereby elicit specific types of action, across a wide variety of cases, this effect becomes particularly interesting in contexts where these rates become the object of explicit public discourse, setting up additional feedbacks between intentions, actions, awareness, and rates (see Krause 2005; Paxson 2004).

It is not only at the level of rates, but also at the level of aggregate systems that cultural anthropology and formal demography can profit from mutual engagement. Populations are structured and structuring, as cultures are (compare Ryder 1964 with Levi-Strauss 1969 or Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940). They are systems with specific properties that inhere in their functioning as systems, regardless of the hopes or intentions of any individual. In this way, stable population theory and structural kinship analysis are near-perfect parallels: equilibrium models of the necessary implications of the structural characteristics of a system. It is here, perhaps, that philosophically

³ This relies on data collected in the same manner as noted in the previous footnote. The journals are *Demography*, *Population and Development Review*, and *Population Studies*.

⁴ A thoughtful reviewer argued that demographic rates are merely the aggregation of individual events and exposure, and that they do not elicit any form of action, unlike changes in the stock market or unemployment rates. Following Durkheim, I disagree. Demographic rates constitute part of the social environment, and as such, do structure individual action. Rates are quantitative representations of social practices.

sophisticated anthropological demography has the most to offer demography as it is currently practiced, in the form of a better alternative to the methodological individualism of the sample survey and regression analysis showing the covariates of alternative demographic outcomes.

But how are we to capitalize on this theoretical potential? What kinds of theory are appropriate in anthropological demography? What are the prospects for developing a generative anthropological demography, that advances the intellectual projects in the two disciplines in new directions? This paper will address these three questions. After briefly outlining the problems that a generative theoretical approach must address, I will propose a preliminary theoretical model for the intersection of cultural anthropology and demography. The theory is not fully developed, and I intend its description here as the starting-point for broader theoretical discussions across the field. Tersely, I will advocate a model of “demographic conjunctures” that integrates the social practice of Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1998) and duality of structure of Sewell (1992, 2005) with classical population analysis (e.g. Halbwachs and Sauvy 2005; Leridon 1977).

2. The missing theoretical revolution

Stated tersely, there are three primary modes of research and writing in contemporary anthropological demography. The first links biological anthropology and demography, building on work in population biology and evolutionary ecology (see for example Jones 2004, 2006; Joseph 2004; Kaplan and Hill 1985; Leslie and Little 2003; McDade 2003). A second body of research emerges out of science and technology studies and the Foucauldian analysis of demographic science as a core modality of biopower (Greenhalgh 1996; 2003; Kaufman and Morgan 2005; Rivkin-Fish 2003). Although this work addresses core theoretical issues in contemporary anthropology, it risks complete estrangement from demography. The third and largest corpus in contemporary anthropological demography draws on ethnographic methods and theories of culture to provide a richer understanding of demographic rates or, similarly, draws on demographic methods to confirm and strengthen the results of an ethnographic study (for example, Bernardi 2003; Bledsoe 2002; Castle 1995; Feldman-Savelsberg 1999; Greenhalgh 1994; Kanaaneh 2002; Lockwood 1995; Setel 1999). This is the tradition most salient to the present collection, the tradition that has received the most attention from demographers, and the one on which the remainder of the paper will focus.

With some important exceptions, the anthropological demography to date has been consumptive rather than generative. What I mean by that is that most research has taken the insights or innovations of one of the two “parent” fields and applied them to the other, rather than becoming an original source of truly new social theory. I mean this

descriptively rather than in an evaluative manner and include the majority of my own work in the description. This is almost certainly a normal phase in the development of an interdiscipline, perhaps even a phase that emerging fields leave and enter repeatedly as they negotiate an intellectual space for themselves. However, in order for anthropological demography to contribute in a meaningful way to the advancement of social science broadly, it will need to move from being consumptive of theory to generating and exporting theory.

Happily, we are in an unusually strong position to make this transition, although it will likely be a rocky one. Intellectual innovation rests in part on pushing past the straight-jackets of taken-for-granted assumptions and common sense, and one of the most productive ways of doing that is through the mutual confrontation of profoundly incompatible perspectives. Thus, it is because cultural anthropology and formal demography are dissimilar in their views of intentional action, uncertainty, and aggregation that they make particularly appropriate foils for each other. For, although we share a sense of system and structure, we differ radically in our understandings of how that structure is formed and wherein it inheres, how it persists and how it should be studied. In order to advance the project of an integrated theoretical paradigm, we need to first explicitly address how and where we disagree. In making theory, there is a high cost to rapid but shallow consensus that leaves common sense unexamined.

A simple example of the dangers of common sense comes from the use of ordinary-language terms in demographic writing. When we talk about fertility that is “unwanted,” “desired,” or “natural,” even when we know perfectly well the technical definitions of these terms, the ordinary meanings creep in to how we understand the phenomena at hand. When we describe certain forms of contraception as “modern” and others as “traditional” we invoke a whole range of resonances beyond the technical typology that we are citing. These resonances lead a double life: on the one hand, they give structure to our native common sense about the things we study. On the other hand, they offer the illusion of transparency to what are—sometimes at least—very nuanced and difficult concepts. The advantage of interdisciplinary encounters, then, lies in making common sense explicit, and therefore subject to reflection.

Anthropological demography has the potential to revolutionize theory in both demography and anthropology by working back and forth across the divide between them. Analogies are important here: we need to think not of interdisciplinary “seams,” which suggest an unproblematic interface of two similar fabrics, but rather of interdisciplinary “fault lines,” emphasizing that the two sides are in contrary motion, so that in grinding against each-other, both faces are transformed. We do our most productive theoretical work within the fault line of disciplinary difference. The missing theoretical revolution in anthropological demography comes from our seeking to seam together our parent disciplines, rather than to examine their essential contradictions.

3. Key problems in developing theory for anthropological demography

Despite the last ten years of vibrant new writing at the intersection of demography and anthropology, relatively little new theory has emerged. Indeed, the task is very difficult. We face at least two major analytic problems in the development of a theoretical paradigm for anthropological demography, each of which has generated a large theoretical literature in social science broadly. Happily, the fault line between culture and population generates a plethora of new questions and new perspectives on these classic problems.

3.1 Intention, meaning, and “choice”

In *Economy and Society*, Weber argues that a sufficient analysis of social behavior—such as getting married, giving birth, moving, or dying⁵—requires “adequacy on the level of meaning” as well as mastery of the rates at which various forms of behavior occur (1978). Stated crudely, cultural anthropology has been strong on Weber's first requirement, while traditional demography has been strong on the second. And at first glance, there may appear to be no significant conflict here: let demographers explain what people do and cultural anthropologists explain why they do it. However, there is a profound conflict brewing just below the surface. What sense are we to make of those cases—and they are numerous—in which the apparent social motivations for behavior directly contradict statistical norms? For example, in Cameroon, abortion is illegal and considered sinful at the same time that it is widespread (see Johnson-Hanks 2002). In the United States, people disapprove of divorce and yet divorce is frequent. We advocate tolerance and yet often act to discriminate. We promote public education and send our children to private schools. How should we think about the relationship between social meanings and population rates? What does it mean for statistical regularities to conform to intelligible motivations?

Within demography, most research relies on methodological individualism to solve these kinds of problems, reducing population statistics to the sum of individual decisions. Beginning with biological individuals, these models have the appeal of the

⁵ The close reader of Weber will recall that he explicitly excludes death rates from “socially meaningful action,” arguing that they are not oriented to the future actions of others and thus are more like crop yields or other non-social statistical regularities (1978:12). This interpretation, however, rests on the common-sense assumption that all people seek to reduce mortality as much as possible, an assumption that seems unfounded in light of the profound and persistent differences in death rates by cause across various Western countries, and in particular in light of differential rates of murder, suicide, and accident deaths.

apparently natural and self-evident. These models rely on a variant of rational choice, treating the motivations of behavior as both causal and transparent, erasing cultural difference through a kind of demographic behavioralism, which finds its apogee in the concept of “revealed preference.” For example, in the domain I know best, standard approaches in fertility research claim that “fertility decline is a largely rational process” driven by “the desire for smaller families” (Bulatao 2001:11). In other words, fertility declines are a result of explicit reproductive intentions. These reproductive intentions are often assumed to be oriented toward total child numbers, essentially unchanging over the life course, and clearly articulable in an interview or survey context (e.g. Bongaarts 2001; Coale 1973; Henry 1961; Pritchett 1994)⁶. Even papers that focus on the unmet need for contraception assume that women who do not want more children should be using contraception—that their preferences about child numbers should determine their reproductive behavior—and that their failure to contracept therefore provides evidence of social impediments or market constraints (e.g. Casterline, Sather and Haque 2001; Casterline and Sinding 2000). Quesnel-Vallee and Morgan (2004, based on Bongaarts 2001) offer a particularly cogent example of these standard models, in which:

$$\text{Final parity} = \text{intended parity} * (F, U, M, S, C). \quad (1)$$

Where F, U, M, S and C are distortions caused by sub-fecundity, unintended childbearing, finding partner, desired sex composition, and work-family conflict. That is, the model assumes an individual with clearly articulated, stable fertility intentions that are translated into fertility outcomes with some error, accounted for by F, U, M, S and C.

Although these models often fit well at the aggregate level, their fit at the individual level is poor. Quesnel-Vallee and Morgan note that two-thirds of American respondents had misestimated their own future fertility (2003:512). Johnson-Hanks and Thayer (n.d.) find that in 17 African countries, stated intentions account for less than 10% of the variation in fertility outcomes. Perhaps as important, standard models correspond weakly or not at all to individuals' own descriptions of their reproductive behavior. Recent work has shown that people do not necessarily have explicit plans of action in reference to reproduction; those plans may change before they are accomplished; the plans may be vague, underspecified, or relatively unimportant compared to other simultaneous plans; and actions with reproductive consequences also have other, even more important, functions (Bledsoe 2002; Caetano and Potter 2004; Fisher 2000; Fisher and Szreter 2003). In addition, people must collaborate with others

⁶ Although not explicit in the quote from Bulatao, much of this literature further assumes that fertility limitation occurs only through parity-specific control within marriage.

in the relevant actions (Andro and Hertrich 2001; Doodoo 1998); and even when people have clear intentions, biology often thwarts their achievement.

All of these errors, complications, and forms of ambiguity are taken as the baseline in contemporary cultural anthropology. Indeed, in most of anthropology the issue is not to what degree social actors are able to effectively translate their fixed intentions into concrete action, but rather the processes of subject formation that inculcate people with certain kinds of aspirations, habits and intentions in the first place (see e.g. Foucault 1990, 1997; Keane 1997; Mahmood 2005). Instead of treating action as the consequence of a set of relatively universal kinds of intentional projects, contemporary cultural anthropologists have explored how specific historical and cultural conditions influence not only what people intend, but more profoundly whether their action is “intentional” or “rationalized” at all. The basic insight in this literature is that personhood and identity are cultural products: cultures are not built up out of an aggregation of independent actors with fixed aspirations or ways of viewing the world. Rather, what people hope for—and even how they hope—is a consequence of cultural entrainment (see Miyazaki 2004). In this perspective, there is no use in thinking about intentions, goals, or choices without considering the social processes through which the categories of intention and choice are formed.

The conflict here between demographic and ethnographic ways of reasoning about human action is radical and unavoidable. The two models propose entirely opposite starting places for analysis; each treats as derivative that which the other considers foundational. Are intentions the basis of society or its product? Is choice a universal human activity or a historically particular invention of modernity? Clearly here, an anthropological demography that seeks to combine the insights of the two fields without working through their contradictions will remain theoretically muddled. By contrast, working at the fault line may produce new readings both of intentions and of their conditions of possibility. For example, when Coale (1973) argued that fertility could only fall once child numbers entered into the “calculus of conscious choice,” he was reasoning from within a standard demographic logic. However, if we rethink his analysis against the ethnographic literature on subject formation, we may begin to develop a different perspective. The move to thinking about child numbers in an abstract and atemporal manner may indeed mark a radical social transformation. The idea that “I would like six children” relies on the same kind of synoptic illusion that Bourdieu addresses in his discussion of the Kabyle calendar (1977). He argues that “a calendar substitutes a linear, homogenous, continuous time for practical time, which is made up of incommensurable islands of duration, each with its own rhythm” (1977:104). At the point in history when people began to ask themselves how many children that wanted to have had by the end of their reproductive lives, they began to think about life and their life projects in a radically new way. This new way erases the

process of child-having, collapses into a single moment the “incommensurable islands of duration” of the birth of the first child, conception of the second, weaning of the third, and so on. Coale’s concept of the “calculus of conscious choice” is given a different interpretation when put into dialog with ethnography and social theory. Working between statistical regularities and cultural meanings will be an essential component of new theoretical approaches in anthropological demography.

3.2 Boundaries and things

Just as the relationship between the individual and the aggregate poses a basic problem in socio-demographic analysis, so too do the boundaries of aggregates. By definition, when we calculate demographic rates for specific populations—Californians, African Americans, immigrants, or Catholics—we are making an implicit claim that this aggregation is socially or demographically meaningful. That is, we are making a claim about boundaries. Of course, we could calculate rates for either idiosyncratic or highly diverse populations, but our interpretative models presume that our populations are both “natural” and relatively coherent. A paper that presented mortality rates by zodiac sign rather than age would be considered inapt, because we know that age matters for mortality in a way that zodiac sign does not. Similarly, a geographic analysis of fertility relying on gerrymandered boundaries would rightly receive little scholarly attention. Intuitively, population rates should be calculated for “real” populations, that is, for populations that have some relevance external to our demographic estimates.

But what makes a population “real”? What are its boundaries? How can a population be both systematic and open? These same problems apply to the other aggregates that matter to anthropological demography, namely culture and society. For nearly a century, anthropology has struggled over the problem of cultural borders, puzzling through the partial association of different aspects of cultural practice, and through the even more partial associations of culture with race and language (see Boas 1938). In anthropology since the early 1980s, we have increasingly come to see culture as incoherent, contradictory, and lacking clear boundaries. As transnational flows of commodities, people, and symbols increase, so do references to cultural pastiche, simulacra, and fragmentation (Baudriillard 1988; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Jameson 1991; Kearney 1995). This movement has been a significant intellectual advance, making possible the exploration of questions that were previously precluded by structural and functional holisms. Yet, the resonance chambers of culture—in which a gesture reflects gender relations, which reflect myth, which reflects architecture—have not gone away. Cultural production can be polyvalent and innovative, but it cannot be completely unmoored from local practices and modes of meaning-making.

Anthropology profoundly needs an analytic language that makes room for both contradiction and coherence, seeing social reproduction neither as mere simulacrum nor as the inevitable product of a cultural grammar. A core theoretical contribution of anthropological demography may be to the development of this analytic language.

One solution to the boundary problem is an ecological one: an ecological system clearly behaves as an interrelated whole without having clearly definable borders. Resources, stressors and organisms can fluidly move between ecosystems, while the structural unity of the whole remains. This analogy works better for the analysis of culture and society than of population, if only because classic demographic methods require more fixity in membership (see the discussion of migration in Ryder 1964). Bledsoe and her co-authors (n.d.) are beginning to develop a model of demographic events that begins with the problem of partial, sporadic, and even partially strategic membership in the various populations under study, treating the processes of (self-) selection into and out of differential risk as part of the demographic material. Profoundly innovative, this approach demonstrates the kind of theoretical advance that comes from working in the fault lines.

An alternative to the ecological view of systems and boundaries is that proposed by sociologist Andrew Abbott. Abbott argues that boundaries are both conceptually and temporally prior to the units that they encapsulate and differentiate (1995). Instead of worrying about the boundaries of things, he proposes, we should ask how things are produced by their boundaries. The consequences for anthropological demography are profound. If demographic units—that is, populations—are the products of the perceived and performed differences between them, then we need truly new kinds of explanations for those differences. For example, we cannot treat “culture” as an unproblematic explanation for demographic differences, as intimated by the publications of the Princeton project (e.g. Knodel 1974; Lesthaeghe 1977; Livi-Bacci 1971), because the cultural units are themselves under construction. This does not mean that cultural differences are not associated with demographic rates—clearly they are—but rather that anthropological demography must attend to the reciprocal effects of rates and practices and of their consequences for individuating populations as socially identifiable units.

In this way, Abbott's analysis of things and boundaries unites the problems of aggregates with the problem of intentional action. In both cases, what seemed fixed and foundational is argued to be uncertain and derivative. In both cases, what was taken as the beginning of analysis is now thrown open to be, itself, reanalyzed. We cannot take our objects for granted. For, as Abbott argues, “[s]ocial theories that presume given, fixed entities—rational choice being the obvious current example—always fall apart over the problem of explaining change in those entities, a problem rational choice handles by ultimately falling back on biological individuals, whom it presumes to have a static, given character” (Abbott 2001:263). Indeed, as we have seen, most existing

fertility theories rely on some variant of rational choice, assuming that women or couples select the number of children that they intend to have by optimizing some utility function, and then use contraception, abortion, or infertility services as necessary to achieve that intended outcome. But reproductive action is rarely that abstract, and reproductive actors are never that simple. Many of the factors relevant to fertility behavior are overwhelmingly concrete, local, and temporally specific: intimacy with this partner, the convenience of this contraceptive method, or the difficulty of getting maternity leave this academic year matter as much or more as total child numbers. That is, we cannot assume a single, coherent rationality, for social actors are as much cultural products as they are the producers of events. At the same time, we need to attend to processes through which persons are categorized into or out of specific populations. These processes may be social or autobiographical, as the vast literature on selection points out. But they may also be implicit claims in a scientific model. Where we draw our boundaries and how we define our populations as “things” matter directly for our results and their interpretation. The problems of aggregation and meaning-making are both the challenge and the promise of a truly new body of theory in anthropological demography.

4. Toward a theory of demographic conjunctures

I have argued that anthropological demography has not, for the most part, as yet realized its extraordinary potential to reconfigure social theory. Although demographic rates are social facts of the most compelling kind, although “culture” and “population” offer contrasting concepts of social structure, and although the theoretical problems of boundaries, things, and intentional action are posed with striking clarity in the material of anthropological demography, most of the field remains theoretically derivative. In this section, I propose one kind of theoretical framework for the field, in order to launch debate and discussion. This theoretical framework is still incompletely developed, and I explain it here as much to incite debate as to persuade. Concretely, I propose that we focus on the fact that demographic rates are events divided by exposure to the risk of events, and therefore that we model the social conjunctures in which events occur. I will argue that rates should be seen as the product of the distribution of conjunctures (that is, specific, local contexts of action) and the culturally-configured processes of construal, through which actors make sense of, and engage with, those conjunctures.

Before explaining this model, it may be helpful to contrast the basic approach I take here with that of quantitative microsociology and what has been called “social demography” in the United States. Work in these traditions has made important contributions to knowledge, and the contrast here serves to clarify my theoretical

approach, rather than to denigrate theirs. In particular, I use social demography as a comparison because it represents the primary, and in many ways ascendant, alternative to anthropological demography. The classic methods of social demography are the nationally representative sample survey and regression analysis using individuals as the units of analysis, posing research questions such as “is there an association between parental divorce and high school success, and is that association altered by income, gender, race, or birthweight?” That is, differences in outcomes are attributed to characteristics of individuals, some of which may be time-varying, but which are generally treated as independent of context⁷. The core of the analysis is to distinguish traits that are directly associated with one another, as opposed to those whose association is the result of selection. The problems with this approach, in my view, are twofold. The first problem is interpretive. In order to explain why gender inflects the effect of divorce on high school success, or why Catholic religion used to matter for fertility but does not any more, the analyst must rely on information about social meanings that are external to the formal model, and therefore not tested by it. Papers can include exquisite mathematics but incoherent explanations of their results. The second problem is theoretical. If we are interested in population rates, we are interested in events and exposure, not individual-level traits. Traits may be associated with the probability of different events, but only indirectly, that is, through the kinds of actions or interactions that they make probable. In a direct sense, events are the outcomes of historical conjunctures. Death may come from a car accident or heart attack; pregnancy from a contraceptive failure or unexpected act of intercourse. The probability of a heart attack or contraceptive failure may, in turn, be associated with individual characteristics, but only in the sense that they constitute part of the background context in which the conjuncture of the event occurs. In his discussion of causes, Hume (2000:87) asks whether the fact that dice do not change shape, alter the number of pips on their sides, or smash to pieces when they hit the ground should be counted among the causes of having a certain sum come up on a specific roll. Here, Hume is asking about the relevance of the dice's traits for the outcome. Like human traits, these are part of the context in which a specific outcome may arise. But to understand the outcome itself, we require a theory of processes and events.

A theory of demographic conjunctures focuses on events in context. It begins with the premise that demographic events are the products of social action, which occurs through the interplay of social structure and contingency. We can do little to directly model contingency, or the randomness of historical specificity⁸. Rather, the theory of

⁷ The literature on multi-level effects represents a partial exception to this generalization. Still, however, the units of analysis are individuals and their traits, rather than situations *per se*.

⁸ But see Bledsoe 2002; Johnson-Hanks 2004, 2005; Wagner-Pacifici 2000 for discussions of the centrality of contingency in social life.

demographic conjunctures focuses on social structure and its instantiation in specific interactive contexts. To develop this model, I draw on two sources: first, theories of practice, including Bourdieu (1984, 1998), Sewell (1992, 2005) and others (de Certeau 1984; Giddens 1979, 1984; Sahlins 1985); and second, the classical demography of vital events, in which birth and death rates are the products of life circumstances, rather than the traits of individuals (for example, Halbwachs 1960; Leridon 1977; Ryder 1978; Halbwachs and Sauvy 2005). When we calculate birth rates separately for the married and the unmarried, rather than including a marital status variable in a regression model, we are explicitly claiming that marriage constitutes a key factor of the social context relevant for childbearing. In specific times and places, that claim may be more or less empirically true, but it is always analytically clear and theoretically coherent.

4.1 Conjunctures

Abstracting from the slightly different uses in Bourdieu (1984), Sewell (2005), and others, I use the term “conjuncture” to refer to the full set of conditions relevant to the ongoing flow of action at a given time. “Conjunctures” are short-term configurations of context, the historically specific situations in which structure is mobilized and social action takes place (see Sewell 2005:220-224). Demographic conjunctures are highly structured and entail elements from a number of life domains—household structure, opportunities for advancement at work, the kinds of contraception available, and the recent reproductive events of friends—and they involve multiple time frames. Although modeled as synchronic structures, conjunctures are in constant flux. The boundary of the conjuncture is not sharply delineated, but characterized by the concept of “relevance” or “context” (see Sperber and Wilson 1986; Hanks 2006). Culture functions to make certain structural elements commonly relevant (for example, most Americans would consider finances salient to reproductive action); other structural elements may become relevant in specific contexts (for example, a would-be mother's health condition).

I use the concept of conjuncture rather than the more general idea of “context” in order to emphasize two things. First, for some specific action, only certain elements of context will be relevant: which elements of context matter and how those elements are related both constitute important parts of the explanatory story. Second, part of what is compelling and surprising about the conjunctures of social life is what they bring together (that is, conjoin). Decisions about child timing are notoriously dependent on work and cross-country moves may hinge on a child finishing high school: “conjuncture” nicely captures the fact that the specific configurations of context in which action occurs are striking juxtapositions of different life domains. Is work the

context for reproduction? Or reproduction the context for work? Thinking instead about “conjunctures,” when work and reproductive trajectories become mutually salient and their futures contested, gets us out of that kind of chicken- and egg problem.

Most of the time, conjunctures are mundane, their changes gradual. Occasionally, however, structural elements converge that dramatically reconfigure the kinds of futures that are possible or even desirable. An unintended pregnancy, health emergency or sudden job loss may instigate a time of uncertainty and reevaluation of all major life domains. I have called these durations “vital conjunctures” (Johnson-Hanks 2006). The current theoretical work extends the vital conjunctures approach to mundane conjunctures, that is, to the influence of ordinary, common changes in life circumstances on demographic practice.

4.2 Construal

The second component of this model is the actor's interpretation of, and engagement with, the conjuncture in the form of demographically relevant action. In fertility studies, these are obvious: taking time off work to get an IUD fitted or removed, setting up a routine to remember your birth control pills, getting treatment for endometriosis, timing intercourse, or interrupting it to get a condom are all reproductively relevant actions, nested in context. I use the term “construals,” borrowed from the literature in social psychology and linguistic anthropology, to refer to these actions because they interpret the complex set of relevant structural elements into a concrete behavioral stance. This process of intuitively “reading” a situation is generally called construal in neighboring social sciences (see Keltner, Nisbett, and Gilovich 2005).

The basic insight behind a theory of construal is that social actors can neither experience nor respond to the world except through some set of schemas that, like the cognitive processing necessary for vision, interpret an unordered array of dark and light into trees, vistas and faces. That is, our access to the world is necessarily mediated by eyes and brains, and these organs apprehend through appraisal, evaluation, and classification. We do not choose the schemas through which we interpret our surroundings, and can step outside them only with extraordinary difficulty. Try to listen to people speaking a language you know and hear only the pitch, tone, and volume—not the meaning of the words. It is almost impossible, as it is almost impossible to interpret your interlocutor's speech without interpreting his actions as “promising,” “lying,” “gossiping,” or “negotiating.” Schemas are unavoidable components of ordinary human engagement with the world. This inescapability of schemas applies to conjunctures as well: social actors must “read” the short-term configurations of context through existing categories and values. Social actors draw on both shared, cultural

frameworks and individual predilections in making construals, which may be more or less conscious, more or less consistent, and more or less effective. In every case, however, the construal of a conjuncture motivates specific forms of demographically-relevant action. Conjunctures and construals, rather than traits, are therefore the appropriate proximal framework for understanding the distribution of vital events.

Although we could theorize each individual construal as a decision, there are two reasons not to do so. First, most construals merely support an existing one: each day that you take a birth control pill is not really a choice to contracept, but more like the absence of a choice to stop. From a social or phenomenological perspective, habit or “creeping non-choice” differs significantly from repeated decisions. More importantly, construals may entail or imply decisions, but they are not necessarily decisions themselves, any more than gestalt-interpreting an unlit, abandoned parking lot as “dangerous” is a decision. Construals are interpretations of context; at their most iconographic, they are so routinized and normalized that they never surface as mental schemas, let alone as “decisions.”

4.3 The structure of conjunctures and construals

In a model of demographic conjunctures, rates are the product of the distribution of conjunctures and the processes of construal. But this leaves several questions open: What are the sources of conjunctures and construal? How are they organized? And how do they work? Sahlins (1985) explores the difference between thinking about a conjuncture of structures and about the structure of the conjuncture. That distinction is not important here, but the inevitable association between conjunctures and structure to which he points is indeed very important. A theory of demographic conjunctures is fundamentally about the relationship between vital rates, social structure, and subject formation. And the locus of their interaction is the contingent, temporary, eventful conjuncture.

For Sewell (1992, 2005), social structure is the continual product of the interplay of resources and schemas. For Bourdieu (1977, 1984), structure lies in the mutual alignment of *habitus* and field. For both theorists, however, social actors’ inclinations, habits, or intuitions are produced out of their daily experiences in social worlds where authority and capital are unequally distributed. And that distribution, along with the ideology that legitimates it, is in turn reproduced by the actions of those persons whose inclinations it has formed. That is, we behave as we do not because we have considered all the alternatives and selected this one as maximizing our utility, but rather because we are habituated or predisposed to act in this way. These predispositions are the product of our past experiences, which took place in a social world of people who

themselves had similarly structured predispositions. The consequences of our acting based on these predispositions are both to recreate the world to which our predispositions are attuned and to model them for subsequent generations of social actors. While a full analysis of the relationship between Sewell's duality of structure and Bourdieu's theory of practice is beyond the scope of this paper, these basic points of agreement are critical building blocks to a theory of demographic conjunctures.

Conjunctures are the short-term configurations of social structure—"situations," if you will—that are the proximal context for vital events. Think about the situation of a young, unmarried man living in a small town in what was once East Germany. Perhaps he finds himself unemployed and living with his parents, actively involved in a small and zealous church, and perhaps he gets his girlfriend pregnant. In broad strokes, we have here a conjuncture. Whether conjunctures of this kind are rare or common depends on social structure, including for example the labor and housing markets, patterns of religious engagement, the availability of contraception and cultural practices around its use. How he and his close consociates construe the conjuncture is also a product of social structure, refracted through the habits of thought and interpretation that he has acquired as a member of this society. And the outcome of his construal—whether he offers to marry the girl, tries to persuade her to abort the pregnancy, or leaves town to avoid responsibility—is at once the product of his construal of the conjuncture, and an element in the reinforcement or partial transformation of the social structures that brought it about.

We can see the importance of social structure for conjunctures and construal, and therefore for vital events, in comparing the improbable and fictional conjuncture described above to a very similar, but real event, that occurred in the United States. In 2005, Kenisha was still in school, unmarried, evangelical Christian, and pregnant. She felt conflicted because several schemas seemed to apply in her situation, but these schemas suggested mutually exclusive courses of action. Was the pregnancy a trial that God had given her? The consequences of sin? An indication that she had been in school long enough? The result of bad luck that could be corrected with a legal medical procedure? Each construal suggested a distinct course of action. The resolution came a few weeks later, through the intervention of her boyfriend's mother. He had been unready to marry Kenisha because he was "waiting for a sign from God" that she was the one. His mother argued that the pregnancy itself was a sign that they were intended to marry: God loved and wanted this child enough to call him into the world contrary to mere human will, as Kenisha had gotten pregnant while using contraception. They did indeed marry.

This turn of affairs both reinforced and partially transformed the social structure of Kenisha's community. Her future mother-in-law used a schema available throughout their social community to construe the conjuncture. Divine intervention in human life

was not a new idea. What she did was to interpret this specific event as an example of that broader category. Her construal was successful because the situation fit the reading well enough to be convincing, and because ancillary schemas—such as God's love of children—could be read as supporting her construal. Note that there is nothing inevitable about this interpretation of the situation. Construal is sometimes highly contingent, as multiple schemas could apply. Before the working through of the conjuncture, its outcome is frankly uncertain. Through this construal, the boyfriend's mother effected two transformations of structure. First, this innovative application of the schema of divine intervention partly transformed the schema itself. Within their entourage, perhaps within their church, future unintended pregnancies will be more readily construed in this way.

Second, this construal resulted in actions that lead to changes in the distribution of resources, such as by generating support in the community for the pregnancy. From a wayward schoolgirl, Kenisha became the bearer of a divinely ordained pregnancy, and her evangelical brethren offered her material and emotional support that would not have otherwise been forthcoming. Thus, we see in this case how mobilizing structure to navigate a specific conjuncture both reinforces aspects of that structure at the same time as it makes incremental changes to it. Structural reproduction and change occur together. We also see how concrete events are not only the basis of calculating demographic rates, but are also the pivots for subject formation, social structure and social change. Vital events are the direct consequences of specific conjunctures and construals; vital rates are the precipitate of the distribution of conjunctures and the processes of construal. We can analytically separate vital events, social structure, and the formation of persons; but in the world outside our models, each is the context for the others.

5. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the present state and possible future of anthropological demography. I have argued that our discipline has extraordinary potential for theoretical innovation, but that this potential has gone largely undeveloped. Working in the fault line between the social science discipline that is the most quantitatively exacting and the one that is most experientially rich, anthropological demography has exceptional material for rethinking social action and its consequences. Developing the idea of the demographic conjuncture, I have tried to offer one possible theoretical frame for our work. In contrast to the trait-based models and assumption of universal rationality that have defined so much of social demography, I have proposed that we should focus on the social contexts of events. A theory of demographic conjunctures begins with

situations and their interpretation—with conjunctures and construal—to examine the social structures and kinds of persons that produce them and which they, in turn, partially reproduce.

The theory of demographic conjunctures is, at present, imperfect and incomplete. I propose it here in order to inspire debate. We have often agreed too easily, ignoring profound theoretical differences in order to get on with the work of description. But the differences matter, and the debate is worthwhile. If anthropological demography is to become an important locus of theoretical innovation, we have to confront our intellectual disagreements. Working in a fault line, we can take advantage of the contrary motion in demography and anthropology to reconfigure the surfaces of both fields. Otherwise, we will be crushed between them.

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