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## 75 years of *Population Studies*: A diamond anniversary special issue

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## Foreword

# 75 years of *Population Studies*: A diamond anniversary special issue

The celebration of anniversaries is a long-standing, widespread, and popular custom, connecting us to the cycle of life and prompting reflections on who we have become. Celebrations are often linked to demographic events or transitions, such as births and weddings or, in the case of royalty, events such as transition to the throne. As 2021 draws to a close, *Population Studies: A Journal of Demography* completes its 75th year of publication. To mark its golden anniversary in 1996, the editors curated a special issue which brought together a range of reflections about the state of the discipline and the contribution the journal had made in its first 50 years. That issue was as glittery and as *weighty* as something golden should be (with a specific gravity of 19.3, pure gold is one of the heaviest minerals in the world). Many of the papers in that remarkable collection could be described as classics: they remain highly cited and are frequently downloaded by both researchers and students. The issue came out when we, the guest editors of this special issue, were students ourselves and were just beginning the process of academic and discipline-specific enculturation. By describing the discipline itself—its priorities, sources of data, and ways of knowing—the 1996 special issue provided a polished insider view of the scholarly community that was, at that stage in our lives, not entirely familiar to us.

Given how much the world and the discipline—and we ourselves—have changed in the past quarter of a century, we thought the 75th anniversary would be a good time to once again take stock and reflect. With some accounts locating its origins in the German bloc of the Holy Roman Empire, the association of gold with the 50th anniversary and silver with the 25th anniversary is a centuries-old European custom, one which did not appear to make its way to Anglo-Saxon Europe until the nineteenth century. Although the diamond came to be associated with the 60th anniversary when Queen Victoria celebrated her Diamond Jubilee, prior to

that, the ‘traditional’ diamond anniversary was the 75th. What unique aspects of the diamond did we hope to bring to this celebration and this issue? One of the key distinctions between gold and diamonds is that gold is homogeneous and diamonds are not. It is perhaps right then that this issue has sought to include a more heterogeneous set of authors and perspectives than was included 25 years ago. At the same time, diamonds usually come with some kind of imperfection. They are often recut to improve them. Our diamond celebration draws attention to what has been and is so very beautiful about the discipline but also considers its imperfections and ways it might be recut to enhance its value. Like diamonds, our discipline is strong and resilient. We are confident it can withstand some scrutiny and critique alongside some well-deserved appreciation.

What better way to take stock—and to celebrate the journal’s contribution to knowledge—than to construct a detailed profile of the body of research published over the life of this journal? Melinda Mills and Charles Rahal conduct a fascinating assessment of all 1,901 papers published since its first issue in 1947. While most readers familiar with the journal will have some idea of prominent topics that were covered in it and how the research focus has (or has not) changed over the years, their detailed findings do far more than simply confirm expectations. While we were not surprised to find that fertility has been the topic most often written about in the journal, or that there was more research on mortality than migration, we were a little surprised to learn that for a journal that was slower than other demography journals to present research on issues such as women’s employment and childcare (Caldwell 1996; Presser 1997; Desai 2000), *Population Studies* has published even fewer papers on migration than on family and marriage.

Although migration is one of the three components of population change and a demographic

process that influences the age-sex structure of populations, with implications for both fertility and mortality, there was no paper on migration in the 50th anniversary issue of *Population Studies*. While it remains less studied in the pages of this journal than either fertility or mortality, there has been an increased number of papers on migration over the past 25 years, and given its high visibility as a political issue (particularly within the walls of ‘Fortress Europe’), it would now be unthinkable not to commission a paper on how population scholars understand and study this demographic process. In this issue, Ronald (Ron) Skeldon’s rich and thoughtful review outlines the developments in migration research within demography and population studies. Examining four themes: (1) data and measurement; (2) theories and approaches; (3) migration and development; and (4) migration and political demography, Skeldon provides a detailed portrait of the current knowledge base and considers the likely direction (and importance) of migration research in the coming years. He discusses the development of a separate field of migration studies in recent decades and identifies the ways in which greater communication between scholars working in migration studies and population scientists who study migration would be beneficial.

While we wanted to include papers on areas of research—like migration—that were not included in the 50th anniversary issue, we also thought it was important to revisit some of the enduring issues and topics that were covered in 1996, but from a twenty-first-century perspective. Several of the contributions in this issue, such as Alice Reid’s contribution on historical demography, do exactly that. In the 1990s, some of the most noteworthy developments in data sources had been taking place in lower- and middle-income countries. John Cleland (1996) provided an engaging overview of fairly recent and very valuable data collection projects and also touched on important issues of data quality and best practice in methods of collection. In her paper for this issue, Ridhi Kashyap describes the contemporary data revolution and the new ‘data ecosystem’ it has engendered. She provides a succinct summary of ‘old’ data sources in demography, such as censuses and surveys, highlighting how these ‘old’ sources continue to be hugely useful and that they are not just stuck in the past but capable of keeping up with the times. But there are also growing concerns with such sources, including low response rates and cost. ‘New’ big data, including digital trace data, have the potential to add significant value to some demographic analyses. They

may prove more useful for studying migration than notoriously problematic ‘old’ data sources, but Kashyap also draws attention to the challenges, including ethical implications, which arise with their use.

In his contribution to the 50th anniversary issue of *Population Studies*, John Hobcraft suggested that demographers spend too little time trying to explain the phenomena they measure and describe (Hobcraft 1996). Twenty-five years on, Elspeth Graham examines the way demographers apply theory and approach the task of explanation, asking whether and how much things have changed. Like in Hobcraft’s paper, fertility research is (in an almost taken-for-granted way) given pride of place. Graham deftly demonstrates how the explanatory language researchers use leads to differences in explanatory strategies that are rarely explicitly scrutinized. Despite some evidence of increased attention to theory and explanation, Graham suggests that more engagement with critical theories and the philosophy of social sciences would contribute, and add clarity, to these interventions.

In an amazingly concise and authoritative contribution to the golden anniversary issue, Samuel (Sam) Preston (1996) provided an overview of a quarter of a century of research on the second most prominent topic in the journal: mortality. Twenty-five years on, Alyson van Raalte picks up the baton, expertly describing a variety of theoretical and methodological developments in the field since then. Her paper touches on similar themes to Graham’s: both highlight the sheer volume of empirical research focused on individual-level analysis and the difficulties of translating this research into ‘big picture’ theoretical advances or population-level conclusions. Van Raalte suggests that a return to ‘classic descriptive models’ might be useful in mortality analysis and concludes that demographers should not shy away from the parallel development of more general theories. Her insightful intervention offers a compelling vision of a path for future research and will be a hard act to follow when *Population Studies* celebrates its 100th year of publication.

Raya Muttarak tackles the highly relevant topic of population and the environment but in a very different way from the paper on ‘Population growth, development and the environment’ by Nathan Keyfitz (1996). His contribution to the golden anniversary issue made a number of thought-provoking points, particularly about the different time frames that are used to think about social change and environmental change and also the reliance on methods that are well suited for identifying single

causes but unable to capture the complex drivers of social change. At the same time, the paper, which to contemporary eyes is an uncomfortable read in places, could be used to illustrate some the reasons Muttarak gives for demographers' tendency to veer away from integrating the environment more consistently into their research. These include the bitterness surrounding the population–environment debate in the mid- to late twentieth century, the perception that the topic is the preserve of other disciplines, and the intractability of the problem of trying to understand, let alone change, population–environment relationships. Yet Muttarak argues that research on how global environmental change affects current and future demographic processes and consequently population trends is badly needed, especially as the climate emergency intensifies, and that this research must be informed by demographic expertise.

As our decision to include a contribution on migration already indicates, we wanted to go beyond revisiting some of the important issues covered 25 years ago. We also considered whether there were any emerging areas, issues, and voices not well represented in the journal or in its 50th anniversary issue, that (we thought) deserved more attention then or now. We noted that the papers made little mention of the recent feminist victories at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development and the potential consequences of a shift of focus from reducing fertility rates to delivering reproductive health. Would the demand for demographic research and evidence decline as a consequence? Would demographers' contributions to the development and deployment of international development policy be sidelined? Or would we continue with business as usual, changing the terminology but not the content of policy or the key players? These questions were being posed and (often hotly) debated elsewhere (Lane 1994; Cleland 1996; Harvey 1996; Presser 1997), and we found it curious that the meaning and implications of this apparent paradigm shift were given little attention. Despite—or perhaps because of—this oversight in 1996, we decided we wanted to explore how, from a feminist perspective, demographic thinking about family planning and how it should be delivered has changed in the past quarter century. Rishita Nandagiri's assessment of 'voluntary' family planning suggests that while individual reproductive rights are now seen as the appropriate policy target, the legacy of a paradigm of population control can be discerned in contemporary conceptualizations and operationalizations of coercive practices. Similarly,

Sigle's contribution describes the ongoing lack of engagement with critical and feminist perspectives, which is identified as a problem in Nandagiri's paper as well as Graham's.

From the vantage point of 2021, the most obvious issue to have emerged recently was the Covid-19 pandemic and the disturbing evidence of its differential impact on the mortality, morbidity, and life chances of different groups. Demographers in national statistical agencies did valuable—but often not very visible—work collecting the data needed to understand and describe the impact of Covid-19. We were, however, a little perplexed that when demographers are so vocal and visible in so many other policy debates, they seemed somewhat excluded from expert discussions about appropriate policy, especially at the start of the pandemic. As people who are used to being asked to advise on policy issues that involve demographic processes and within-population variations, many demographers found themselves having to develop sharp elbows and loud voices in order to share their views. Drawing on what we knew other contributors might say about the importance of history, we decided we wanted a piece which examined how 'unprecedented' the effects of the pandemic really were. And ideally, we wanted a contribution which would explicitly consider how demographic evidence can inform policy responses. So although the paper on pandemics is unlike most of the other papers in this issue, in that it does not offer a retrospective view on papers in *Population Studies* or a consideration of how a particular aspect of demographic research has changed over the past 25 years, it deserves an important place in this collection as it reflects a particular concern of demographers in 2021 and one that is likely to live on in the form of academic research in demography for many years. When considering the best angle on this topic and who to invite to write a pandemic paper, we felt that a historical comparison would allow the sort of longer-term perspective that would be fitting alongside a set of retrospective papers. Sverren-Erik Mamelund and Jessica Dimka, experts on the influenza outbreak in 1918–19 (the previous great pandemic), discuss the mechanisms (differential exposure, susceptibility, and consequences) underlying the mortality and morbidity disparities by socio-economic status and race/ethnicity in both pandemics, emphasizing the tendency of pandemics to inflate pre-existing health disparities through these means. Making excellent use of both historical and contemporary data, they make the case for thinking about the reduction of health disparities as an important pandemic preparedness strategy.

That all of the authors in 1996 were men at an advanced stage of their career and all were from the Global North reflects, in part, the gender and geography gaps in the pages of the journal that the paper by Mills and Rahal so clearly documents. The top 10 most highly cited authors were (and continue to be) all male, and more than 80 per cent of papers were by authors based in Western Europe or North America. Even today, male authors outnumber female authors in the journal. But the proportion of female authors has increased over time. While a ‘long view’ from someone with a lengthy and successful career in the discipline (if being highly cited is an unbiased and valid indicator of success) can be very valuable, we thought this might have contributed to a collection that in 1996 spent more time looking back over 50 years than looking ahead. Without doubt, a survey of developments in the past is interesting and important, but it runs the risk of ignoring: (1) what should or could have happened, but hasn’t; (2) developments outside the discipline and how they interact (or not) with demography; and (3) newly emerging topics and concerns. We maintain that these need to be more than the material of footnotes (which *Population Studies* does not allow anyhow!) or brief mentions in other papers. We all agreed that the perspectives of those who will be more responsible for the direction of the discipline in the next 25 years were needed as well. More generally, we shared a commitment to showcasing the perspectives of thinkers from a diversity of disciplinary and social locations.

Our efforts to bring together a wide range of perspectives were more successful in some ways than others. The authors of the papers in this special issue are certainly more diverse in terms of their disciplinary background, career stage, ethnicity, and sex than those of the 1996 special issue. We were, however, sorely disappointed that the scholars outside Europe and especially those working in the Global South who first agreed to produce contributions were, for entirely understandable reasons, unable to deliver them in the end. Consequently, the timely and extremely policy-relevant topics of demographic dividend, global fertility trends, and ageing in the Global South are not covered. This, we think, is a salient reminder of the structural advantages that make it easier for some people to participate in knowledge production and agenda setting.

We were more successful in our efforts to include the perspectives of people with different orientations to the discipline: those whose methods or epistemological commitments give them a more critical, insider–outsider view. We thought that a few critical

reflections were essential, but as it is a celebration issue—marking a milestone and celebrating the journal—we sought to identify people who would write not as critics but as critical friends. Rishita Nandagiri, for example, expertly builds bridges between demographers and feminist critics, facilitating the kinds of dialogue necessary to design and deliver services that promote all aspects of reproductive health. Similarly, Elspeth Graham and Wendy Sigle demonstrate the scholarly and policy implications of inattention to the contributions of philosophy of science and the taken-for-granted assumptions that inform our approaches. Rebecca Sear reminds us that when we do not learn from history, it has a tendency to repeat itself. She highlights how an uncritical and non-reflexive rejection of eugenics in the period after the Second World War has had important legacies both for how we understand the role of biology in the social sciences and for how we are equipped to respond to the recent resurgence of scientific racism. Finally, the categorization of historical demography as a separate area of research—as Alice Reid’s paper documents—contributes to a lack of appreciation not just of historical evidence but also of the importance of history more generally. Harkening back to John Caldwell’s (1996) observation that demographers’ ‘main failing is probably that they ... equate ... statistical categories, defined in the first place in order to make measurement possible, with the underlying social reality’ (p. 312) and drawing on Sigle’s intervention in this issue, Reid’s reflections on the category ‘historical demography’ illustrate that conceptual decisions don’t just describe the world (in a worse or better way), they can have a tangible impact on the world we inhabit.

Demography’s strengths have always been in its attention to data and detail, but recognizing the dangers of getting lost in the detail at the expense of the bigger picture—as many contributions to this special issue acknowledge—is a significant step forward in shifting demographers’ attention towards productive future research priorities, including more critical data collection and analysis, greater interaction between theory and data, and more consideration of relationships between micro- and macro-phenomena.

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