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Reflexion

**What can anthropological methods
contribute to demography - and how?**

Patrick Heady

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What can anthropological methods contribute to demography - and how?

Patrick Heady¹

Abstract

This reflexion focuses on the connection between anthropological fieldwork, quantification and theory - arguing that anthropologists should not content themselves with locally valid explanations, but should contribute to general theories. The paper originated as part of the "round table discussion" at the Workshop on the Anthropological Demography of Europe, held in September 2005.

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Fieldwork and other methods

Before getting on to the substance of these remarks, perhaps I should provide a little background information to explain the perspective from which they originate. I am both an anthropologist and a statistician (rather an unusual combination!) but I am not a demographer and nor do I have any formal training in qualitative data analysis.

There has been a tendency at this workshop to equate anthropological methods with qualitative interviewing, but I think that this equation is mistaken. Anthropologists are an individualistic and disputatious lot, so only a brave or foolish person would try to set out definitively what anthropological method *is*. At most one can talk of a range of methods, including that of following one's own intuition, which different anthropologists draw on in ways that suit their research problems and personalities. As such, anthropological methodology is both less and more than qualitative interviewing – *less*, because many (not all) anthropologists can be very free and easy in their interviewing methods, and still more in the way they analyse their notes – but *more*, because their impressions are based, not just on interviews, but on living with the people concerned, which includes casual chats, observation, arguments, socialising, attending rituals, noting how they decorate their houses, and eventually a level of imaginative involvement that generates ideas whose precise relation to specific bits of data one may not actually be sure of.

This may sound like a critique of anthropological data-gathering, but it is not meant to be. Loosely structured long term fieldwork seems to me to be just about the best way of getting close to the action and, above all, of identifying unexpected causal connections. Anthropological fieldwork provides rich descriptions and informed interpretations. But these interpretations do need to be disciplined. One important way of doing this is to use quantitative methods – since most interpretations, even of apparently intangible things such as emotions or religious commitment, have at least some implications for actions or objects that can be counted – and so numbers can both check existing interpretations and suggest new ideas. For instance, having formed an idea, on the basis of conversations with a fairly non-representative sample of people and some personal reflexion, that changes in spatial marriage patterns were causally connected with changing patterns of economic cooperation, it was useful to be able to check this interpretation by collecting data about the geographic origins of married couples living in the village, to sort the data by decade of marriage, and compare the results with local statistics of economic change. In this situation it is of course very important not to rig the results – and so one should use either complete enumeration or random sampling. Unfortunately many anthropologists prefer to base quantitative findings on data gathered from their own personal networks (so-called “snowball sampling” or “ethnographic sampling”), but by doing this they lose the ability to use the

figures as an *independent* check on the conclusions they have drawn from their fieldwork experience.

Anthropology and theory

But it is not enough to check that one's interpretations are consistent with quantitative data from one's field site. In the end the results will only be useful if they contribute to the cumulation of knowledge, and this means comparing them critically with existing theory – both anthropological theories developed on the basis of studies of other places and also theories developed in other social sciences such as social and cognitive psychology, economics or, indeed, demography. One point on which we disagreed in the workshop was on the purpose of this criticism of existing theories. A common view is that general theories inevitably miss out on cultural specificity and locally important detail, that people do different things in different places, and that therefore the aim of anthropological analysis should be to replace general theories with locally appropriate explanations. The alternative view, which I hold, is that general theories do not predict that the same things happen everywhere, but rather aim to identify the essential and invariant relationships between the relevant factors, which explain the particular behaviour patterns found in different places. To take an analogy, the fundamental physical rules governing radiation and gravity are the same everywhere – but this does not mean that astronauts weighed the same on the moon as they did on earth, or that average temperatures at the north pole are the same as at the equator. Of course people in different cultures categorise their experiences – including experiences of birth, marriage, gender, parenthood, kinship and death – in different ways, and these differences are associated with differences in the ways they behave. But the description of a set of cultural categories, and the values associated with them, is not enough to explain behaviour. People react to culture, as they do to the material environment, using the basic psychological apparatus that we all share. If we can understand how this operates, we will have the basis for theories that can really explain what happens in particular cultures, and also identify the sources of differences between cultures and explain the ways in which they change.

I would like to conclude these remarks with a specific recommendation: which is that demographic anthropologists should pay more attention to ritual. Ritual is an area in which anthropologists can claim special expertise, and a vast amount of ritual in all societies is associated with demographic events – celebrating, or seeking to transform in various ways, the way people experience the events that demographers count: births, the formation of reproductive partnerships, death. The conventional interpretation of these rituals is that they seek to adjust and reaffirm the social structure in the face of these

natural events. Only a few anthropologists have suggested that the causal path might also run the other way, and that ritual itself might have an impact on reproductive behaviour. But surely it must do. It is simply not credible to assume that the vast expenditures of time and resources that accompany life-cycle rituals have no effect on the events they purport to deal with. This seems to me a theoretical priority for demographic anthropology, and one which calls for a combination of detailed description and analysis of local data with the development of a robust body of general theory.

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