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## Why demography needs (new) theories

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## **Why Demography Needs (New) Theories**

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### **Abstract**

It is widely acknowledged that the theoretical perspectives that inform demographic inquiry have often come from elsewhere. While economic theory and econometric methods has played a particularly prominent role in the development of some areas of study, including the family, demography has remained remarkably impervious to the theoretical interventions of feminism and other critical perspectives. In this chapter, the author aims to demonstrate how demographic research would benefit from a more conscious consideration of a wider range of theoretical perspectives. To this end, she focuses primarily on one particular (broad and flexible) critical analytic concept – intersectionality – and one particular area of enquiry: the study of the family. Intersectionality, which Leslie McCall described as "...one of the most important theoretical contributions of Women's Studies, along with racial and ethnic studies, so far." (1991), has been a fleet-footed traveler in the past couple of decades, but it has not, for some reason, crossed our disciplinary boundary. It is noteworthy that we see virtually no references to "intersectionality" on the pages of demography journals. For this reason, the chapter begins with a brief introduction to the concept of intersectionality, focusing on the issues most relevant to quantitative research, which outlines its theoretical premise and traces out some of the broad methodological implications. Next, concrete examples illustrate how the application of intersectionality, as a critical and reflective lens, could contribute to the way demographers study families and family policies. The overarching aim is to initiate a discussion amongst the demographic

community about the productive potential of adopting a more critical and interdisciplinary theoretical perspective.

## 1. Introduction

In his 1995 Plenary to the European Population Conference entitled “God Has Chosen to Give the Easy Problems to the Physicists: Or Why Demographers Need Theory”, Guillaume Wunsch observed that “Demography has never had a grand explanatory paradigm, such as the postulate of rationality and the concept of utility in microeconomics...” (3. Do Demographers Have Theories, para 1). He went on to argue that “The lack of a grand unified approach is not necessarily a disadvantage...” (para 3) but it does mean that “that demographers have to cannibalize other fields of inquiry, in order to found their explanations” (para 4). I appreciate Wunsch’s carefully chosen and evocative turn of phrase, even if, from a different vantage point, and one which benefits from an additional two decades’ hindsight, it is not exactly the imagery I would choose. I have tended to think of demographers less as a tribe of cannibals and rather more as a colonized people<sup>1</sup>. But let’s set that distinction aside, at least for now. Whether it has been ingested, plundered, or thrust upon us, the theoretical perspectives that inform demographic inquiry have often come from elsewhere. Few would argue, I think, that economics has played a particularly prominent role in the development of some areas of study, including family demography.

Just a few years before Wunsch delivered his plenary, Eileen Crimmins (1993) surveyed three decades of work published in the journal *Demography* and outlined intellectual developments in the field. She cites the “growing influence of economists and economic modelling” (585) as one of the explanations for changes in “the theoretical models guiding demographic analysis” (585). As new theoretical priorities gained

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<sup>1</sup> This imagery is far from original. See, for example Loriaux and Vichnevshaia 2006, p 871

influence, so too did their associated methodological approaches. Crimmins observes that, in the early years of the journal, a relatively large share of studies involved the analysis of vital statistics and census data, with groups rather than individuals as the unit of analysis. By the early 1990s, she describes nothing short of a sea change in the methodology of social demography<sup>2</sup>: “We have moved from descriptive methods and data to analysis that is based largely on the application of causal models. The availability of certain types of data and the power to easily apply complex statistical techniques have encouraged the development of methods appropriate to this emphasis on causal models.” (1993: 585). We entered what she called the “era of the independent variable” (585), a development marked by the rapid increase in the number of studies making use of multivariate regression techniques, with a trend towards increasingly long lists of (most typically additive and separable) control variables. This latter development, in particular, meant that the empirical models presented in social demographic research came to look and feel far less distinct from the reduced form models that were being estimated by many applied micro-economists (Sigle-Rushton 2014). I have reflected a good deal on what these new meant for the way demographic research has evolved (see, for example, Sigle-Rushton 2012). I find it noteworthy that this transformation coincided with theoretical developments in the social sciences, such as the elaboration of intersectionality which, if contemplated, could have motivated, at the very least, a critical pause.

It is not so much the incorporation of *economic* theories and methods that troubles me, but rather their predominance. I won't pretend that I don't have some particular concerns about its “grand explanatory paradigm” and (even more) its methodological preoccupation with issues of selection and causation (Sigle-Rushton 2012), but I would be

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<sup>2</sup> Crimmins distinguishes social and formal demography in her discussion, and social demography and I adopt her terminology here.

just as concerned about the hegemonic rise of any particular discipline or theoretical perspective. As we become increasingly comfortable with particular tools and methods it is all too easy to start to apply them as a matter of routine, to stop questioning whether and why they are appropriate for our particular purposes. When this happens, the value of utilizing an explicit theoretical or conceptual framework – the self-reflection and the outside scrutiny that it invites and facilitates – is compromised. We might, for example, fail to notice the way a particular perspective lends legitimacy to biases and chauvinism. Arland Thornton's (2001) incisive critique of developmental idealism and the methodology of reading history sideways that it legitimates is a salutary reminder that, even without an explicit theoretical frame, we impose meaning in ways that determine how we describe, interpret and seek to effect change in the world around us. The solution is not to abandon theory but to use it reflexively.

This is why I think it is important to ask why mainstream (and quantitative) demography has remained remarkably impervious to the theoretical interventions of feminism and other critical perspectives (Riley and McCarthy 2003). Previous writers have suggested this might have been a conscious decision: “demography is highly invested in deflecting critical theories, including feminism, that highlight the political nature of science precisely because its theories, research questions, and applications are so very political” (Williams 2010, pg 200). However, if that is the case, I wonder why social policy has not been equally resistant. Scholars in social policy (as well as political science, sociology, and family studies) study demographic processes and ask some of the same research questions that demographers do. As a field rather than a discipline in its own right, social policy has also had to look to other disciplines for much of its theory. Like demography, the influence of economics has figured prominently. However, in the past quarter of a century, feminist theoretical perspectives and methodologies have shaped the intellectual trajectory of

mainstream social policy (Orloff 1996; 2009). Even if some authors suggest that the integration of feminist concerns has been partial and incomplete (Brush 2002; Orloff 2009), critical and feminist perspectives have left a more discernible mark on mainstream social policy research than can be observed in mainstream social demography. This puzzles me.

In this chapter, my aim is to demonstrate how demographic research would benefit from a more conscious consideration of a wider range of theoretical perspectives. To illustrate what I mean, I focus primarily on one particular (broad and flexible) critical analytic concept – intersectionality – and I draw examples from my own particular area of demographic inquiry: the study of families and family policy. Intersectionality, which Leslie McCall (2005) described as "...one of the most important theoretical contributions of Women's Studies, along with racial and ethnic studies, so far." (1771), has been a fleet-footed traveler in the past couple of decades, but it has not, for some reason, crossed our disciplinary boundary. It is noteworthy that we see virtually no references to “intersectionality” on the pages of demography journals.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, I think it is sensible to begin in the next section with a brief introduction to the concept of intersectionality, focusing on the issues that I see as most relevant to quantitative research in demography. I outline its theoretical premise and then trace out some of the methodological implications. By illustrating some of the ways that intersectionality could contribute to the study of particular topics or questions, my aim is to initiate a discussion amongst the demographic community about the productive potential of adopting a more critical and interdisciplinary theoretical perspective.

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<sup>3</sup> Not a single study was returned when I searched (on the publishers’ web pages) the online content of *Demography*, *Demographic Research*, *Population and Development Review*, the *European Journal for Population Studies* for the term “intersectionality”.

## 2. Theoretical Overview and Methodological Implications <sup>4</sup>

### 2.1 Intersectionality: Its intellectual development and premise<sup>5</sup>

Intersectionality is a concept, or perhaps even a research paradigm<sup>6</sup> (Hancock 2007b), that developed over many decades. It encompasses a number of ideas about the complex multidimensionality of subjectivity and social stratification and the consequences of its misspecification. Its origins can be traced back to an “internal critique and self-reflection of the imagined community of feminism” (Knapp 2005: 260). A number of interventions, some of the most prominent of which came from Black feminist scholars and activists (Nash 2008), illustrated how the same exclusionary practices that allowed (some privileged groups of) men to lay claim to the term “humanity” could be identified in the way some privileged (white, able-bodied, middle class, heterosexual) feminists made use of the term “woman”. These assessments, which rely on an understanding of analytic categories as socially defined, draw attention to the process of categorization as an act of power and exclusion. It follows that the meanings attached to categories cannot be taken as given but must be understood as reflecting a particular (dominant) perspective (Zinn and Dill 1996). Categorical boundaries reflect and reify social hierarchies in a given time and place. However, once particular categorical boundaries are established, it is the experiences and

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<sup>4</sup> The presentation and discussion of intersectionality and its methodology draws heavily on Sigle-Rushton (2014) and Sigle-Rushton and Lindstrom (2012). See Brah and Phoenix (2004) for a detailed and comprehensive intellectual history.

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<sup>6</sup> According to Hancock (2007a), a paradigm comprises “a set of basic beliefs or a worldview that precedes any questions of empirical investigation” (64).

political priorities of the more powerful members that determine how a particular group understands and represents itself, effectively occluding those of the less powerful, multiply marginalized, constituents. Spelman (1988) cites the dominance of a racially privileged perspective in feminist scholarship in the United States as an illustration of this kind of exclusionary process :

Much of feminist theory has reflected and contributed to what Adrienne Rich calls “white solipsism”: the tendency to “think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness defined the world.” While solipsism is “not the consciously held belief that one race is inherently superior to all others, but a tunnel-vision which simply does not see non-white experience or existence as precious or significant, unless in spasmodic, impotent guilt-reflexes, which have little or no long-term continuing momentum or usefulness.” (116).

She argues that “white solipsism” has, in turn, shaped “habits of thought about the source of women’s oppression and the possibility for our liberation” in a way that has limited the “explanatory and descriptive scope” (116) of feminist interventions. Although it was not the central focus of her analysis, Spelman (1988) noted that class contributes another form solipsism. In the context of social and demographic research, I think the influence of class, as well as geo-political location, merits careful consideration since these divisions so often set the feminist demographer (or social researcher more generally) apart from the subject of her analysis.

As these reflections were articulated and refined, some scholars turned their attention to how multiple social dimensions were conceptualized in academic studies, when they were considered at all. The simplifying - but erroneous - assumption that various axes of difference could be treated as separable and additive was extensively critiqued.



Spelman's (1988) *Inessential Woman* provided one of the earliest and most comprehensive assessments of this exclusionary practice. The assumption of separability implies that experiences of sexism and racism can be meaningfully examined in isolation.<sup>7</sup> It suggests we can somehow isolate "sexism" by focusing on the experiences of (white) women who are otherwise privileged. Similarly, we can isolate "racism" by focusing the experiences of ethnic minority men. This "but for" (Crenshaw 1989) strategy becomes especially problematic when comparisons of the most privileged with the otherwise privileged are assumed to apply generally and so can be extrapolated to other oppressed groups like "pop-beads" (Spelman 1988) as and when they apply. This additive, pop-bead approach erases the distinct experiences of the multiply marginalized. In the case of Black women, the possibility that the gendered experiences differ from those of white women or that their racial oppression differs from that experienced by Black men is simply assumed away. The same additive-separable logic - that there is a pure sex effect that applies "all else equal" -- underpins the specification of linear regression models which include a separate "sex" indicator and a separate "ethnicity" categorical variable (Sigle-Rushton 2014). However with statistical models and methods, the most numerous groups tend to have the largest impact on the parameter estimates, and it is small and rare groups (still often the multiply-marginalized) whose experiences may be misrepresented and misunderstood.

The additive-separable logic and its associated methodology is not merely a convenient (if potentially problematic) academic invention or idiosyncrasy. It is a

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<sup>7</sup> This way of thinking, while erroneous, is nonetheless widespread and taken for granted. We see it reflected both in the way academic studies are carried out but also in the meta-data that is used to classify studies. For example, the JEL subcodes for Demographic Economics (J1) include separate categories for studies of age (J12), gender (J13) and ethnicity (J14), reinforcing the perception that it is valid, and indeed possible, to examine any one of these in isolation (Sigle-Rushton 2014).

widespread but often implicit schema that organizes representations of and responses to social issues (Crenshaw 1991). It makes it possible to ask, as many did during the Obama-Clinton race for the democratic nomination, whether America is more racist or sexist (Hancock 2007a). It is a way of thinking that is reflected in and supported by social structures and institutions. For example, Crenshaw (1989) demonstrates how African American women seeking redress for discrimination were forced to base their claim on *either* sex discrimination *or* race discrimination, a constraint which determined the comparator that would be used as evidence. Citing the case of DeGraffenreid v General Motors, she shows how the court refused to allow the plaintiffs to argue that they faced a combination of sex and race discrimination. Such a claim, the court stated, went beyond what the drafters of the legislation intended. The implications of this reasoning are significant. As Crenshaw (1989) suggests, it: "...implies that the boundaries of sex and race discrimination doctrine are defined respectively by white women's and Black men's experiences. Under this view, Black women are protected only to the extent that their experiences coincide with those of either of the two groups. Where their experiences are distinct, Black women can expect little protection..." (59).

Crenshaw's contribution has the added distinction of providing "intersectionality" with its name. Developed and deployed over most of its history without a label or name attached to them, the term "...provided a much-needed frame of reference for the comparison and negotiation of various endeavours, opening up space for critical dialogue" (Sigle-Rushton and Lindstrom 2013, pg. 130). Although it remains a rather loosely defined concept or set of ideas, its main theoretical premise, as I have come to understand it in my own work (Sigle-Rushton and Lindstrom 2013; Sigle-Rushton 2014), is that analytic categories and concepts (hierarchies, axes of differentiation, axes of oppression, social structures, normativities) are socially constructed and mutually modifying. If we accept that

basic premise, we immediately encounter a number of methodological dilemmas that, while potentially productive, cannot be completely resolved.

## 2.2 Methodological Implications

Intersectionality is a methodologically demanding research paradigm that lacks a clearly specified methodology (Nash 2008). This is, I think, more or less inevitable. As a demographer who uses large scale secondary data to study families and family policy, I struggle to envision just what it would mean for me to *do* a quantitative intersectional study. It is telling, I think, that McCall's (2005) careful methodological reflection focuses not on a methodology of intersectionality, but rather on approaches for dealing with the (inevitable and enormous) complexity it evokes. When multiple social dimensions are understood as mutually modifying (and so, in statistical parlance, fully interacted), the amount of information that we must collect and interpret (and without resorting to any exclusionary overgeneralization) quickly becomes intractable. Taken to its logical limit, we would end up splitting our samples into increasingly detailed groups until there is nothing left to study (Young 1994). Nonetheless, we can be more or less intersectional in our thinking and approach.

Accepting the basic premise of intersectionality means acknowledging that it is (potentially) problematic to conceptualize individuals, or any broad category of individuals, such as "women", as a homogenous group. Applied to quantitative analysis, it underscores the need to exercise care when extrapolating from what we observe on average, at the population or group level, to particular sub-groups. Because it is concerned with the exclusions and loss of information involved when a diversity of subjects are treated as similar, or as similarly situated, intersectionality directs our attention both towards the wider social and economic context and to individual level heterogeneity within any

particular context (Bose 2012). A consideration of intersectionality's basic tenets, therefore, directs our attention towards the specification, interpretation and use of categories as well as the explicit and implicit assumptions we make about how they relate to one another. It is through its application as a critical lens – a “frame checker” and “method checker” (Garry 2011: 830) -- that I have come to think that intersectionality has the most to contribute to the way research is designed and conducted in quantitative disciplines like demography.

### 3. Methodological Implications: Dilemmas, Opportunities, and Insights

In this section, I consider how a more conscious consideration of critical theoretical perspectives like intersectionality could extend and enrich demographic enquiry. Put simply, intersectionality asks us to consider the consequences of what happens when heterogeneity is ignored or made visible. This requires a (renewed) effort to assessing patterns of difference which might otherwise be hidden and to remain attentive to issues of diversity and exclusion at all stages of the research process. If demographers took these commitments seriously, the primacy of economic models, priorities, and methodologies might be disrupted and, in the process, open up space for the development of a more varied, creative and critical approach to research.

#### 3.1 Assessing Difference

Intersectionality reminds us to remain ever vigilant to the fact that categorization and assumptions of additive-separability are strategies for managing difference. Decisions we make about how to manage difference have consequences for what we see and how we understand and interpret social phenomena. At the same time, it is also important to stress that its contribution as a critical methodological lens should guide the search for additional complexity rather than impose or stipulate it. The art of model building and theory will always require some amount of simplification. We should decide which combined

characteristics to consider with some care, and we should remove unnecessary complexity when there is not substantive or substantial loss of meaning (Sigle-Rushton 2014; Hobcraft and Sigle-Rushton 2012). However, such decision-making requires a detailed descriptive foundation so that the conceptual and methodological implications of any simplifying assumption can be carefully considered. It calls for doing more than simply acknowledge heterogeneity. We must attempt to locate, understand, and explain it, as an integral and early stage of the research process and with reference to the particular research aims and objectives.

McCall (2005) describes two methodological approaches which can be used strategically and pragmatically to guide this sort of exploration: the inter-categorical approach and the intra-categorical approach.<sup>8</sup> She uses the term “inter-categorical” to refer to a largely descriptive endeavour that examines how analytical categories – gender, ethnicity, social class, and age – interact to produce particular patterns of inequality. In an effort to document complex inequalities, some researchers have estimated standard linear regression models with high order interaction terms (see, for example, McCall 2000; 2001). In a study that used this approach to examine the relationship between motherhood and employment in the UK, Diane Perrons and I (2006) showed how ethnic differentials in the employment rates of mothers of young children are not uniform across educational groups. We were also able to document variation within broad categories – such as Asian or Black – that are commonly used in British social research. The findings from such descriptive efforts can be used in a number of ways. However, the results of models with a large number of

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<sup>8</sup> She also outlines a third approach to the complexity of intersectionality which she calls anti-categorical. This approach aims to deconstruct categories and so strip them of their power and meaning. While this approach can offer useful insights into the way we attach meaning to or interpret categories, this approach has less to offer researchers interested in identifying meaningful interactions.

interactions can be difficult to interpret and present to readers, which, as McCall (2005) cautions, can be an impediment to publication. In previous work, I have suggested that a wider range of methodologies could be considered (Sigle-Rushton 2014). Nonetheless, in a discipline where the identification of causal relationships has become a priority and where the contribution of studies which are ‘merely descriptive’ is often called into question, it may be difficult to captivate readers with a detailed discussion of inter-categorical complexity regardless of how well the results are distilled and presented. For this reason, it may be strategic to frame the discussion around the implications for the study of particular research questions. Hill Collins (1999) suggests an incremental approach where the researcher takes as her starting point “a concrete topic that is already the subject of investigation and ... find the combined effects of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation, where before only one or two interpretive categories were used.” (278). The approach she advocates would complement and refine existing research efforts rather than challenge them.

The intra-categorical approach, which draws on the epistemological contributions of standpoint feminisms, involves a narrow and intensive analysis of an outlier. At the macro-level, this outlier could be a particular country that appears “puzzling” in some way. At the micro-level it would involve, as Crenshaw (1989) advocated, a focus on a particular, multiply marginalized group whose experiences may have been previously oversimplified or overlooked. Case studies are often the methodology of choice (Few-Demo 2014): comparisons with some more broadly defined category to which an outlier belongs provides opportunities to identify differences that may be theoretically (outliers) or substantively (the multiply marginalized) relevant (Sigle-Rushton and Lindstrom 2013). When this approach involves close scrutiny of small and rare groups, those with combinations of characteristics

that would be not be (well) represented in secondary survey data, more narrative and qualitative approaches have been employed with good effect (Few-Demo 2014).

The “intra-categorical” approach (McCall 2005) stands in stark contrast to the *ceteris paribus* approach characteristic of linear regression modelling, where the distinctive experiences of special groups or outliers are seen as something to be expunged or controlled as a confounding effect. However, it represents a way of thinking and an approach to research that has the potential to make a significant theoretical contribution. At a macro-level, we see it reflected, for example, in Caldwell’s (1986) classic exploration of the relationship between GDP and health which focused intensively on high achievers – those countries with better than expected health given their national income. A similar logic might inspire a close consideration of groups such as non-white, migrants from poorer countries who have settled within a particular destination country, like the UK. This group, which is often observed to have better than average health and health behaviors than the more advantaged, native population, could provide meaningful information as high achievers at the micro-level. However as a small group, their experiences – a limited marital status differential, for example - are occluded when estimation methods that rely on population averages are utilized (Sigle-Rushton and Goisis 2014).

To illustrate the utility of thinking carefully about both inter- and intra-categorical difference, consider the following example from my own research. Suppose we consider that the moderate fertility/ high employment<sup>9</sup> group of European countries includes both the Scandinavian countries and England and Wales in its ranks. Although in recent years, entitlements to paid leave have been extended and improved, the British family policy

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<sup>9</sup> France and Ireland, have relatively high fertility as well (Sobotka 2004), but their female employment rates are closer to the EU average.

model remains far less generous, and so much less expensive, than the family policy packages that characterize the Scandinavian countries. If we think that generous family policy and fertility rates are (or should be) associated, England and Wales could, to use Caldwell's terminology, be characterized as a high achiever. In a case study of England and Wales that I carried out a few years ago (Sigle-Rushton 2008; 2009), I suggested that the UK exhibits a qualitatively different version of "moderately high fertility" than what is observed in the Scandinavian countries. The use of an inter-categorical lens directed my attention to the "fertility-relevant structuring effects" (Neyer and Andersson 2008: 707) of family policy on particular groups of individuals. I described a moderately high but relatively disadvantaged (as measured by education level) fertility profile (as measured by the TFR) compared to other moderately high fertility countries (see also Rendall et al 2010). If the pattern of moderately high fertility is qualitatively different across countries, there might be multiple paths to the same fertility level which are shaped by the wider social and institutional context. My analysis suggested that the "highest-low" (Andersson 2008) fertility in England and Wales might well depend on its flexible, low-wage labour market (with easy entry and exit), high levels of inequality, and an income support system with benefits that are not generally categorized as family policy but that make it easier for low earners to become mothers at young ages even if they have not built up entitlements to maternity leave benefits (Sigle-Rushton 2009). In contrast, high earners have strong incentives to postpone childbearing and rates of childless are higher than what is observed in Scandinavian countries.

If meaningful diversity can be masked within the boundaries of broad categories and if the wider institutional context represents a potentially important modifying factor (see also, Shalev 2008), there are both practical and theoretical implications. The sudden adoption of the Swedish parental leave model - as happened recently in Germany (Geisler



and Kreyenfeld 2012) - might, by increasing incentives for low earners to postpone childbearing, might actually reduce fertility in England and Wales, at least in the short term. Similarly, tax relief for paid domestic work and child care – available in Sweden since 2007 -- is only feasible if it is affordable. This requires that the purchaser earns (far) more than the provider of care (Donath 2000; Himmelweit 2007) . In labour markets with fairly compressed wages – typical of Scandinavian countries -- the option will be feasible for only a small segment of the population. The take-up and impact of this new Swedish policy (which has been rather low) might be far greater if exported to the UK setting where there is far more wage inequality.

While the implications for issues of policy sharing are readily apparent, a consideration of intra- and inter-categorical complexity has implications for the specification of statistical models. If the pattern of moderately high fertility is qualitatively different across countries, does it make sense to estimate cross-national regressions of the TFR on the indicators of the generosity of family policies? Aggregate measures like the TFR may mask substantively relevant cross-national variations in the underlying behaviour we are seeking to model. Indeed, a number of demographers have concluded that individual-level analyses are better suited for the study of how fertility outcomes respond to family policy (e.g. Neyer and Andersson 2008; Rønsen 2014). By focusing attention on the data generating process, a consideration of intersectionality problematizes individual-level analyses which rely on average levels of social expenditure (Kalwij 2010) or an indicator of the average (or some other “representative”). Measures of average social expenditure which do not account for the details of how that expenditure is accessed (the details of entitlement) and allocated fail to capture variations in the design and delivery of policies as they are experienced by individual decision makers. These concerns have been well articulated in other disciplines. Welfare regimes were developed, in part, as a response to concerns about

the use of crude social expenditure measures and represent an effort to develop theoretically grounded conceptual measures which reflect “more fine-grained distinctions among patterns of social provision” (Pierson 1996: 150) that vary across national contexts. This sort of variation is a particular concern in the case of family policy which involves a vast array of policies, each complex in their design and delivery (Gauthier 2002; Thévenon 2011). Even if we could easily identify and separate out what is “family policy” from other policy, which my analysis of England and Wales suggests is not entirely straightforward, it is not clear that the average level of expenditure is in any way a valid indicator of the reduction in the direct costs of childbearing that the average person could anticipate. Moreover the extent to which it falls short of this interpretation may vary across countries depending on the way their policies are designed.

### 3.2 Recognizing Power

Drawing on critical and feminist perspectives, more generally, feminist demographers have challenged the belief that demography is conducted by value-free researchers who engage with hard facts to arrive at objective conclusions (Riley 1998; Williams 2010). Once we concede that objectivity is neither realistic nor attainable, we must consider the role of the researcher in the production of knowledge. For example, at recent debate on low fertility in Europe, Gerda Neyer (2011) pointed out that:

it is demographers, politicians, the media, or other groups of people or public institutions who produce the perception that fertility levels are too “low” or too “high” or “normal.” Likewise, it is they who construct the social, economic, and political consequences of fertility levels by transforming demographic measures into ostensibly negative outcomes for the future.... (237).

This suggests that the interests and perceptions of the demographer merit close consideration. Intersectionality provides a reflexive tool that can direct and focus those efforts.

Accepting the basic premise of intersectionality means acknowledging that power hierarchies not only stratify two supposedly homogenous groups -- 'women' and 'men' -- but that power hierarchies are also involved in determining whose experiences count and who gets to speak on behalf of 'women' (Spelman 1988, pg. 77-79). For example, with insufficient reflection, it becomes easy to use descriptive terms like "woman friendly" to refer to policies that (predominantly) benefit particular groups of women (most likely those that resemble the person uttering the phrase). Many feminist researchers who would not otherwise support regressive redistributive measures strongly endorse high levels of wage replacement in parental leave policies which, by their very nature, provide more resources to (already) well-resourced families.

Similar biases and "solipsisms" can shape the way explanatory variables are deployed and interpreted. For example, it might not be immediately obvious to a white, well-educated, and otherwise privileged researcher that the socio-economic benefits that accompany fertility postponement could be higher for some women than others. Education and career opportunities, discrimination, and rapidly declining health might modify the net benefits of delay for some ethnic minority groups and, as a consequence, the meaning attached to measures of *early* or *late* motherhood may be qualitatively different for particular subpopulations (Goisis and Sigle-Rushton 2014). Informed only with summary statistics or parameter estimates that reflect the average experiences of the wider (larger) population and viewed through the lens of our own (often privileged) experience, she might conclude that some groups of women are behaving "irrationally" and should be encouraged to delay parenthood (or to marry (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2004)) without asking

whether they are likely to benefit in the same way from the processes thought to be attached to that behavioural change. The result of such errors of representation could be unhelpful or even harmful policy innovations.

#### 4. Conclusions

In the past decades, intersectionality has transformed feminist theory and politics which, as part of a larger theoretical movement, has influenced the way research is conducted in most of the social sciences. Although demographic research relies to a great extent on the theoretical perspectives of other disciplines, there is little evidence that these critical perspectives have been embraced or integrated in any meaningful way. Instead, demography appears to have embraced the methods and methodological priorities of economics, in a way that has limited its scope, its methodological range and, as a consequence, its potential contribution to knowledge.

While demographers have paid increasingly careful attention to important issues of causality, selection, and unobserved heterogeneity, I would maintain that it is equally important to consider what those findings mean and how they can be put to use. Critical and feminist perspectives when applied as critical methodological lens, could add some much-needed breadth and depth to demographic scholarship. They might inspire a new appreciation for previous demographic methodologies – descriptive and group-focused -- which were increasingly set aside as we moved into the era of independent variable. Similarly, case study approaches which delve more into both the social context and the detail of policies and which seek to understand any differential treatment and incentive effects, can be used to build theory and to inform the design and interpretation of subsequent studies. Neither approach provides solid evidence of causality, but both could help generate testable hypotheses which would help us tease out meaningful causal

relationships in creative ways. We can and should make use of findings from studies in other disciplines which apply these approaches, but I would like to see more work of this kind carried out by demographers, guided by our own research interests and questions and published in the pages of top demography journals.

To be clear, I am not calling for a rejection of what I see as the dominant economic perspective and approach that characterizes much of the extant literature in demography, but rather an uncritical, almost internalized acceptance of some aspects of it. It is time to worry when certain ways of thinking, certain approaches, and certain priorities are internalized to the point that they go without saying whatever the question, whatever the underlying motivation for asking it, and however many additional complexities we acknowledge might be relevant. If and when this happens, a more interdisciplinary critical perspective can be a valuable, if somewhat disruptive and importunate friend.

Of course, many of the critiques I discuss could be identified and developed without making any explicit reference to intersectionality or critical theoretical perspectives more generally. In an excellent methodological reflection which was described as “Drawing on sociological and political science research, [to] outline how studies of the effects of policies are best designed conceptually and methodologically in order to measure potential effects or non-effects of the policies.” (700), Neyer and Andersson (2008) touch on many of the same issues that I identify in my analysis.<sup>10</sup> My core argument is not that everyone should adopt and apply the particular conceptual tool that I utilize here, but rather that demography would benefit, one way or another, from (more) critical reflection. It is possible, without the (explicit) assistance or prompt of a theoretical tool, to think critically about our motivations,

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<sup>10</sup> This is to be expected because sociology and political science have been rather more influenced by critical race and feminist perspectives than demography which, in turn, draw on the criticisms that comprise intersectionality.

methods and the extent to which they are aligned (e.g. Neyer 2011; Kravdal 2010). While not strictly necessary, good theory can, however, help organize and direct that endeavour.

## 6. References

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