

Demographic life transitions: an alternative theoretical paradigm



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Abstract

Event history analyses, while useful, have limited explanatory power in relation to demographic life transitions. This is because demographic behaviour has a future orientation. People marry, cohabit, have children, divorce or migrate primarily because they have expectations or hopes about how these transitions will affect their lives. Individuals weigh up alternatives about their future within their personal and cultural context. The paper proposes and develops a holistic approach to the investigation of demographic life transitions which revolves around three dimensions: the self, the intimate and the social. Event histories were spawned by the life history approach. The paper argues that we need to get back to examining the histories of lives, that is, how events fit into lives, rather than abstracting events from lives.

A standard approach to research of demographic life transitions in the West has been to conduct surveys of individuals (often, women only) spread over a wide age-range (40 years or so) using event histories in which the timing of life transitions is precisely measured. In addition, a series of conventional characteristics of the respondent are obtained such as education, occupation, religion, religious practice, ethnicity, urban/rural background together with similar characteristics relating to the respondent's parents. Results are then analysed using statistical techniques to examine whether the timing of life transitions is related to any of the measured respondent characteristics.

While the event approach provides important insights, it is limited because it excludes the theoretically most important determinants of demographic behaviour. The main point I wish to make is that demographic behaviour has a *future* orientation. People marry, cohabit, have children, divorce or migrate primarily because they have expectations or hopes about how the particular demographic change will affect their lives. Among all types of life events, these demographic events, especially forming and dissolving couple relationships and having children, are near the top of the list of the amount of social adjustment associated with them (Holmes and Rahe 1967). They are central events in our lives. The event history approach is limited because it relies upon time-dependent variables which *pre-date* the change in demographic status and can be precisely measured in a retrospective way.

For example, Santow and Bracher (1994), applying an event history approach, are critical of Cherlin (1980) and Oppenheimer (1988) because these researchers refer to the employment of women *after* marriage as an important factor in marriage timing. Opposing this theoretical viewpoint, Santow and Bracher (1994:490) refer to 'the logical difficulties of incorporating post-marital employment into a model of marriage'. By this approach, individuals are not able to have a future orientation. We are not seen as thinking individuals who weigh up alternatives about our future within our personal and cultural context. Instead, we are considered to be fully determined by census-type characteristics which derive from our past.

Event history approaches tend to eschew psychological explanatory factors such as values, personality, expectations or aspirations because, with some justification, retrospective

measurement of these types of variables is considered to be too unreliable for the standards of precision required for statistical modelling. Yet it is frequently the case that users of event histories interpret observed statistical relationships between demographic behaviour and a measured individual characteristic in terms of these unmeasured variables. For example, in their study of marriage patterns in Australia, Santow and Bracher (1994) conclude:

children from small families acted in a particular way not because they came from small families per se, but because their small family reflected their parents' values,

children whose fathers were highly religious acted in a particular way because the fathers' values were transmitted across the generation,

association of particular behaviour with increasing age reflects increasing maturity, independence or social norms,

those who migrated as young adults behaved differently because they had demonstrated independence from their parents,

a major force in increasing marital instability in western countries may have been an increasing emphasis on the rights of individuals to seek personal satisfaction, and

demographic changes may not be as significant to the participants as they are to the observers.

Results of event histories are reported in this way because it is obvious to the researcher that there is indeed a deeper meaning to observed relationships between life decisions and socio-demographic characteristics. Despite the 'statistically softer' nature of the research, if the researcher is to draw conclusions which extend beyond the statistical observations, some form of direct investigation of those deeper meanings should be pursued.

An advantage of the event history approach is that it pays close attention to measurement of the timing of change. As a consequence, the method often produces the result that historical time has a large bearing on particular demographic behaviour. In many instances, however, the researcher is unable to elaborate upon this finding because of failure to address the time-specific social milieu. That is, users of event histories tend to remove people from the social setting in which they made their decision. Santow and Bracher (1994), for example, argue in relation to research of marriage decisions that 'far too much weight seems to have been given to aggregate-level relationships', that is, to the social setting in which the decision took place. People's expectations of their life subsequent to marrying or having a child or divorcing are crucial to these decisions and individual expectations are strongly conditioned by the social situation in which people live. In this sense, the perceived employment circumstances of married women or women with children are obviously crucial to the respective decisions of marrying or having children.

The field of demography will only make advances in explanatory power by addressing theory first and method second. That this is not a view universally held is indicated by the following:

It seems to us that important gains accrue from a careful analysis of such (event history) data, motivated by a desire to describe and understand the complexities of the data, and undertaken from a consciously atheoretical approach (Santow and Bracher 1994:490).

A spheres-of-life framework for investigating demographic behaviour

The Level of Living surveys conducted in Scandinavian countries take a whole-of-life approach to the measurement of living standards. People's lives are divided into particular spheres of activity and measures are obtained of their living standard within each sphere

(Erikson and Uusitalo 1987). Understanding and meaning are obtained by seeking a broad range of information. Important interrelationships between different spheres of people's lives are able to be investigated.

Likewise, in economics, radical institutionalists argue that the focus of economic inquiry should be on the processes by which societies provision and reproduce themselves and that economic systems are human creations continually subject to change and amenable to reform (Peterson 1994). Within this framework, individual choice cannot be considered in the abstract (the rational man maximizing his utility), but always within the cultural context in which the decision is made. Besides conventional economic resources, factors such as power, status, politics and networks are relevant to individual economic decision making. Again, the approach is holistic rather than atomistic.

Decisions about marrying, having children or divorcing are at the centre of people's lives. Because the decision made has substantial bearing upon most aspects of life, decisions are taken in a whole-of-life context. Thus, a holistic or spheres-of-life framework is at least equally appropriate to the study of demographic life transitions.

At the broadest level and from the perspective of demographic life transitions, the spheres of a person's life can be defined as: the self; the intimate; and the social. Each of these aspects of the person interacts with his or her social environment to provide the context in which decisions are made.

This holistic paradigm mirrors the dialectical paradigm used in the psychological study of adult development (Riegel 1975) and the symbolic interactionism paradigm of sociology. Symbolic interactionism derives from the work of Mead (1934) who perceived human behaviour as ensuing from the linkages between mind, self and society. Symbolic interactionism holds that realities are constructed through social interaction and that behaviour occurs in a situational context. The adult development literature also emphasizes the importance of the social context (Brandtstadter 1990). The dialectical paradigm (Riegel 1975) emphasizes the role of conflict in development and Erik Erikson's notion that interactions between the individual and society are both inevitable and vital.

The intimate is separately identified in the paradigm proposed here because it is postulated as being central to theories about marrying, having children or divorcing. This follows Erikson (for example, Erikson 1980) who established intimacy as an integral component of adult development. The intent here, however, is not to specify a paradigm for the study of all of adult development, but for the study of demographic life transitions.

The nearest approximation in the literature to the approach proposed here is Levinson's (1980) 'evolution of the individual life structure':

The life structure is the pattern or design of a person's life Its primary components are one's relationships: with self, other persons, groups, and institutions, with all aspects of the external world that have significance in one's life (p. 278).

The life structure as a whole, and every component in it, has both external and internal aspects. The external aspects have to do with the persons, social systems, and other outside realities with which the person is involved. The internal aspects are values, desires, conflicts, skills — multiple parts of the self that are lived out in one's relationships. Our analysis must begin with the overall life structure. Once that has been characterised, we can examine in more detail the ways in which its components operate (p. 278).

Levinson found in his own study of men that components of the life structure can be central or peripheral, and that the importance of components can change over time. However, the components of work and family were usually the central components although their relative weights varied from person to person. Levinson also found that the life structure evolves through a 'relatively orderly sequence' of periods during the adult life years:

The sequence consists of an alternating series of structure building and structure-changing (transitions) periods. a person must make certain key choices, form a structure around them, and pursue his values and goals within it.The primary tasks of every transition period are to reappraise the existing structure, to explore the various possibilities for change in self and world (p. 280).

Obviously, demographic life transitions are among the most important of all structure-changing periods. It must be kept in mind, however, that the process of transition may not be as orderly or logical as the Levinson quotations suggest. Decisions may be almost entirely conditioned by social norms (I didn't think about it; that was just the way things were done in those days) or they may not be clear cut (I had lots of doubts, but in the end decided to give it a try).

Elaboration: the sphere of self

The sphere of self can be divided into three components: the inner self or mind; the conditioned or experiential self; and personal attributes or skills. The inner self refers to psychological dimensions such as personality, temperament and adjustment. With origins primarily in biology or experiences of childhood, the inner self, while not immutable, tends to be resilient to change (Plomin and Thompson 1988). There is a range of measures of aspects of the inner self available in the literature and more use could be made of these measures in studies of the main demographic decisions.

The conditioned or experiential self is the sum of our values, attitudes, beliefs and expectations about the world and our place in it. It is the meanings we have gathered through our previous experience of people and the world. These change with experience and as the situation in which we live changes (Stevens-Long and Commons 1992). As argued above, because the important demographic decisions have a future orientation, the conditioned self is the core component of these decisions. Again, there are numerous measures available in the literature of aspects of the conditioned self. The selection of which measures are employed in a particular investigation depends upon the theory or theories to be tested.

Measures of the inner and outer self are necessarily current and are therefore better applied in the study of current or impending behaviour. Nevertheless, the association between aspects of self (measured currently) and past behaviour is worthy of investigation if the alternative is to ignore this sphere of life entirely. Furthermore, especially in respect of the conditioned self, it is possible to have people reflect upon how their values, attitudes, beliefs and expectations have changed and how any changes may have affected their family behaviour. More directly, when we are dealing with some of the most important decisions in people's lives, while there may be elements of *post-hoc* rationalization, it is not unreasonable to have them describe their current image of their conditioned self at the time they were making the decision. Finally, longitudinal surveys allow the measurement of aspects of the self at different points in time and to relate these measurements to behaviour between the interviews.

Personal attributes and skills consist largely of the standard set of 'background' variables used in event history analyses (education, occupation, ethnicity, race, work experience, religion, urban/rural background, etc.). In the context of the paradigm, these variables can be seen as summary measures of past interactions between self and world.

The sphere of intimacy

From within the sphere of self, almost all of us have a strong need for companionship and intimacy. Being needed, loved or valued by intimate others and especially, another, is

fundamental to our self concept. It is to fulfil this need that we form intimate relationships with others. An intimate relationship is one in which we are prepared to reveal our self-perceptions, worries and anxieties, in the understanding that the intimate other will be supportive rather than destructive in the use of this personal information. Intimate relationships also often provide us with core linkages to the broader society. Most prominently, being 'coupled' has a distinct meaning and bearing upon our interactions with the wider society. The type and nature of intimate relationships that we form and how we form them are specific to the culture or social organization in which we live.

Intimate relationships can be divided into three broad types: the couple relationship, intra-familial relationships (parent-child, sibling-sibling), and intimacy with friends. In Western culture, women are usually considered to obtain a higher level of intimacy than men from the second and third of these types. This does not mean that women have less of a need for relationships of the first type, but it does mean that they have more support outside the couple relationship. Being empty has much more meaning to the vessel of intimacy than being full, suggesting the use of measures which indicate low levels of intimacy in a person's relationships.

The couple relationship, whether it be opposite-sex or same-sex, is of central importance to the major demographic decisions. This implies careful investigation of the nature of the relationship and how the relationship interacts with other aspects of people's lives. The extent to which couples make free choices about the nature of their relationship as distinct from the relationship being socially structured is an important factor. Of particular interest is the extent to which the partners operate autonomously or in an enmeshed or dependent way. Measures that might be considered would be degrees of attachment, commitment, dependency and self-disclosure. A theoretical proposition is that today's couples are seeking to be less dependent upon each other financially but more dependent upon each other emotionally if compared to the Parsonian ideal of the 1950s couple: husband as breadwinner, wife as homemaker, living in mainly separate worlds.

It has been observed that today there is a less-structured and more 'do-it-yourself' approach to relationship construction (Glezer 1993). The nature of the construction is certain to have a major bearing upon whether the relationship is constructed in the first place, whether it involves children and whether it lasts. Oppenheimer (1988) argues that the difficulty of negotiating a new relationship in a less gender-segregated society has contributed to the decline in marriage rates. Furthermore, the rise of forms of relationships other than legal marriage has been attributed to a greater emphasis upon individual autonomy within a couple relationship (Wiersma 1983; McDonald 1988; Lesthaeghe and Moors 1993; Glezer 1993; Carmichael 1995).

The social sphere

The social sphere involves levels and forms of interaction with the rest of the world. Important to all people and to their demographic decision making is the interaction with the economy and, more specifically, the labour market. Other potentially important social interactions may be with the extended family, the neighbourhood or community, the government and its services, political and social organizations or clubs, the media, and religious organizations.

Following Levinson, we should be attempting to evaluate the importance of different social interactions in the way that people define their lives. Most particularly, we should be measuring the centrality of paid employment to people's social world. To what extent is fulfilment obtained through work or through other means? Paid employment can meet many needs: income, autonomy, a sense of worth, fulfilment of expectations, social acceptance, security, social integration and social networks. How important is it in fact in meeting these

needs in individual cases and how is the level of involvement in work related to the demographic decisions that individuals make? In this regard, successful use has been made of work-family values scales (Glezer 1993).

Involvement with the labour market has been largely compulsory for men and is taking on more of a compulsory nature with each successive generation of women. Involvement with the extended family also carries a heavy degree of social obligation and can be demanding, but in most cases, this involvement is not demanding and, indeed, is often supportive (McDonald 1995a). Involvement with other social institutions, however, is more voluntary in nature. Despite this, for some people, the important social interactions in their lives are with institutions other than the labour market, for example, with a religious organization or with an 'interest' organization (politics, sports, arts or crafts, neighbourhood, schools, social services or welfare). What do we know about people who define their lives in terms of these largely voluntary interactions? What implications does involvement outside of work and family have for demographic decision making? A conventional view is that as involvement with the labour market becomes more concentrated, involvement with other, more voluntary social institutions reduces. This, in turn, may narrow social networks to those that are work-based.

Another dimension worthy of consideration within the social sphere is what might be called an 'anti-social' orientation. This is marked by absorption in the self or the intimate spheres. Activities are individualistic or inclusive only of intimates.

Theoretical considerations

The aim of the paradigm is to provide a framework for the formulation of theories about demographic life transitions and for the specification of means of testing those theories.

The most important change in women's lives in the past 30 years has been the increasing importance of paid employment, especially in the lives of women who have children, still a substantial majority of all women. The most important change in men's lives has been the change in women's lives. While they may be out of the labour market from time to time, mothers today are rarely out of the labour force for the entire time that their children are growing up. Within the Australian family context, the mother's role in the labour force still remains largely secondary to that of the father, often by preference (McDonald 1995b; Wolcott and Glezer 1995), but the balance is changing with each successive generation. Now, in Australia, there is almost no difference between the ordinary-time wages of women and men employed full-time, if we omit those who are managers (ABS 1995). Men currently maintain their advantage in the labour market primarily through working more hours. They are less likely than women to drop out of the labour force or spend time at home for the care of young children; they are more likely to work hours of overtime at lower occupation levels and more likely to work hours of unpaid labour at the managerial level. The Australian Living Standards Study has shown that, under present role-sharing arrangements, full-time work puts mothers under more pressure than other workers. Thus, men and women without children continue to maintain the labour-market advantage of being able to work more hours (Wolcott and Glezer 1995).

A theoretical proposition that I have made before (McDonald 1988, 1995b) is that most people experience conflict of the three spheres of life: their social sphere (particularly work), their sphere of self (personal autonomy) and their intimate sphere (couple relationships and children). The need to resolve the conflict between individuation (autonomy) and fusion (intimacy) was the subject of the presidential address to the American Psychological Association by Janet Spence in 1985 (reported in Stevens-Long and Commons 1992). These conflicts are acute in the transition periods of the life structure such as forming and ending couple relationships and having children. The changes in women's and men's lives over the past 30 years have accentuated the degree of conflict.

The societal solution to this increased conflict has been to allow people greater flexibility in the ways they arrange their relationships and to provide new supports in combining work and family responsibilities. The growth of cohabiting unions, divorce, later marriage, later child-bearing and having children outside of marriage can all be seen as social experiments that the society has been prepared to tolerate as people seek their own solutions to these conflicts. Rather than being driven by conformity, behaviour becomes ethical, driven by personal principles (Stevens-Long and Commons 1992:85). This shift to ethics provides an understanding of why it is that some experiments have been cut off at onset. For example, so-called 'open relationships' where coupled individuals openly have sexual relationships with others have not been tolerated. They are unethical in a context where the quality of the intimate relationship is highly valued.

Thus, forming or ending relationships or having children are not events that occur in a moment of time as implied by the event history approach. Rather, in Levinson's terms, they are constructed during a transition period. The decision to form a relationship is not independent of the nature of the relationship being formed. The decision to have a child is not independent of the effects upon the spheres of life that ensue from the decision. A decision to end a relationship is taken in consideration of the gains and losses that the decision can be expected to bring.

Event histories were spawned by the broader, life history approach. It is proposed here that we need to get back to examining the histories of lives; that is, how the events fit into the history of the life. Life histories collected on a larger scale offer the opportunity to relate changes in demographic behaviour to temporal social change, to social aggregates.

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