

Preface



The papers in this volume were presented at a seminar held in Canberra, Australia in August 1995 to celebrate the distinguished career of the editor of *Health Transition Review*, Professor John C. Caldwell known usually as Jack. The Symposium was centred on the theme of 'The Continuing Demographic Transition', and it brought together demographers, anthropologists, epidemiologists, sociologists, economists, and statisticians who have been influenced by the work of Caldwell and his wife, Pat. That is the common theme which runs through the rich and diverse offerings of this and the other two major publications that have emerged from the seminar.¹

Improved understanding of the transitions in demography, epidemiology and health which are taking place at different rates and in profoundly different ways in differing population groups, has become urgent. How else will policy directed towards the stabilization of world population growth be grounded? The papers presented in this volume cover the gamut of issues from sexual initiation, to marriage customs, to women's education, to life course perspectives, biomedical models of health, the nature of transition research and the social and political environment that surrounds these transitions.

Is there a simple story that emerges from all of this? The answer is: not nearly as simple as it seemed when demographers first set out to explain the profound shifts in mortality and fertility that were taking place in the industrialized world in the late nineteenth century. A unifying grand theory has been neither articulated nor postulated. Health, reproductive, educational, and economic decisions by humans are products of the complex interplay of social, biological, cultural and political forces which vary in their emphasis across time and place.

What the Caldwells have taught us all is that transition research demands a marriage of the quantitative and qualitative sciences, a willingness to immerse ourselves in the human detail of life decisions, and a capacity then to stand back and place the findings in a broader frame. The papers presented here cross the spectrum of that activity. And they portray a dilemma for population scientists as we approach the millennium.

The dilemma is this: how will this smorgasbord of growing understanding be most effectively translated into useful public policy? The evidence is growing rapidly that human numbers are outstripping their ecological niche. The sustainability of our unprecedented levels of life expectancy is being seriously questioned.² How will the world scientific and research communities deal with these issues in the next century? Will the study of human transitions continue as exemplified here as *ad hoc*, investigator-driven, and largely intellectual activity,

¹ *The Continuing Demographic Transition*, ed. G. Jones, R.M. Douglas, J. Caldwell and R. D'Souza, to be published by Oxford University Press; *The Third World AIDS Epidemic*, ed. I.O. Orubuloye, J. Caldwell, P. Caldwell and S. Jain.

² *Climate Change and Human Health*, ed. A.J. McMichael, A. Harris, R. Sleaf and R.S. Kovats, Geneva: WHO 1996.

or will there be a coherent effort by the world community to use this and future research systematically to develop population policy? Some of us at the meeting saw the need for this research to move now into high gear, to develop a policy arm and to be housed in a prestigious international institution that could interact freely with national and international governments and population agencies.

The John C. Caldwell seminar would not have been possible of course without its central figure, whose seminal contributions to transition theory are now widely acknowledged. But it also depended heavily on the activities of Dr Gigi Santow, a former editor of *Health Transition Review*, who worked unstintingly to ensure the intellectual integrity of the program. It also rested on a range of sponsoring bodies who provided support for authors to attend the meeting. For that we sincerely thank the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, the Australian Population Association, the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), the Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health, the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population, the Overseas Development Administration, the Population Council and the Research School of Social Sciences and the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University.

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