Anthropology and Demography: A complicated alliance

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Venue: Seminar Room, II floor - Department of Sociology and Social Research

Speaker: David Kertzer – Brown University

Abstract

Had it not been for a strong feeling within mainstream demography that anthropological methods and theory could help enrich the field, it is possible that anthropologists investigating demographic topics would have continued working in almost total independence of demographers studying the same topics. It is still the case today that much of the anthropological work on such topics as fertility and migration takes place without reference to the demographic literature (and, one could add, vice versa).

There are various reasons for this, including a certain degree of disciplinary insularity among anthropologists, as well as a strong antipositivist and antistatistical bias among many (but far from all) sociocultural anthropologists.

What has been so exciting about recent developments in anthropological demography, however, is that they have not simply come from the more behaviorist, or postivist, wing of anthropology, which is linked to studies of social organization.

Rather, this new work has been enriched by anthropological theory on culture and the role of symbolism. Research exemplars illustrate this in various ways, as political economic, social organizational, feminist, and symbolic theoretical strands from within anthropology are all brought into play.

Those demographers who, in calling for anthropological involvement in their field, simply sought advisors who would help them do better what they were already doing (e.g., in designing survey questions) may be either pleasantly or unpleasantly surprised that what they are getting is something quite different. Anthropological demography, as it is now developing, is poised to enrich demography as an interdisciplinary field by forcing it to confront some very basic epistemological and ontological questions. While this may produce some discomfort, the potential payoffs for both demography and anthropology are great.