

Kreager, Philip and Astrid Bochow (eds.). 2017. *Fertility, Conjuncture, Difference Anthropological Approaches to the Heterogeneity of Modern Fertility Declines*. Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books. 358 pp. Hb.: \$130.00/£92.00. ISBN: 9781785336041.

This edited volume aims to contribute to the discussion about the mechanisms of fertility declines in the modern world, emphasising the inability of the established models of demographic transition theory to account for the differences in fertility regimes between the world regions, as well as between the subgroups within the same country. The ten case studies in this volume combine the ethnographic approach of recording the life histories of women of various backgrounds with “traditional” demographic data (census data, etc.) to elucidate how and why different social and cultural forces shape the opportunities and environments in which individuals make fertility decisions. The results of this process are different pathways to fertility and different subgroup fertility realisations, which are often obscured in the official, aggregate statistics. This heterogeneity in fertility regimes (especially in fertility declines) has been noted before and has been in the centre of compositional demography, i.e., a comparative study of society’s subpopulations (p.2).

The central theoretical concept for explaining the heterogeneity of fertility proposed in this volume is that of “vital conjunctures” by Jennifer Johnson-Hanks. Building on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, she defines vital conjectures as ‘[t]he duration[s] during which multiple potential futures are in play (p. 330). These moments in life mark the time of uncertainty and possibility that conjoins otherwise unrelated aspects of life’ (p. 328). Based on the life circumstances, gender, and socio-economic status of the individual, as well as his/her status in power structures, different events occur, and different horizons of opportunity appear. This concept is crucial in conceiving differential fertility outcomes, as well as other events in an individual’s life-history. Also, as the individuals share the abovementioned social and cultural characteristics, their responses to vital conjectures will be similar, thus contributing to the similar subpopulation demographic realisations, such as the birth of a child, marriage, education status, etc. Nevertheless, it is necessary to emphasise that the response to vital conjuncture is not determined by individual’s social and cultural characteristics; in fact, it is the process of navigation within the opportunities and constraints, making the place for individual agency. By invoking this theoretical concept, and by analysing the ethnographic account of different individuals within the social and cultural landscape, it is possible to explain the nuanced and often contradictory results of the official records data.

The development and the theoretical importance of the concept of vital conjunctures have been delineated in the introductory chapter by the volume’s editors, and some of the concept’s newest aspects and applications have been explained by Johnson-Hanks herself in the closing chapter. The *First Chapter* by Julia Pauli, examines the different fertility pathways of three groups of women in the rural community of Fransfontein, Namibia. The author shows that the emergence of three distinct groups of women is the result of the changing socio-political and economic environments. Some of the women became “elite” housewives, married to influential local politicians; some became independent, unmarried hostel workers, and some became unmarried and economically de-

prived. The individual women in each of these groups faced different vital conjunctures and tried to make the best for themselves in a given situation. The author shows that the reduced fertility in the region is attributable to the reduced fertility of unmarried women who space their births during the reproductive years to accommodate for other personal and economic gains. Thus, the fertility decline is not evenly distributed among women; it is concentrated within a group of women and is a reaction to a specific vital conjuncture.

The *Second Chapter* by Sarah Walters, explains how the missionary work of Catholic priests (White Fathers) during the 20th century not only affected the religious composition of East and Central Africa but also instituted the practice of registering vital events. The process and practice of registration were not identical to European sources, however. As the spread of Christianity in Africa was a process of negotiation and conversion between the mission and people.' (p. 92), so the interpretation of vital conjectures and demographic events were also constructed within the framework of "moral demography". Without the knowledge of how the demographic decision-making stemmed from vital conjectures defined by syncretism of legacy moral codes and Christianity, the parish church records would remain an unreliable source for demographic analysis.

The study of Tajik fertility patterns (*Chapter 3*, by Sophie Roche and Sophie Hohmann) addresses the difference between the high Tajik and low Russian fertility during the Soviet period. The modernisation theory posits that the industrialisation and urbanisation, along with the changing role of women, should bring the fertility rates down. This was the case for the Russian-speaking population, but not for the Tajiks. The authors argue that distinct self-identification of Tajiks, as well as the economic incentives to preserve the wealth within the kinship group, shape the marriage and fertility patterns so that the fertility remains high, despite the modernisation and enforced collectivisation. This chapter provides perhaps the most compelling case of the need to study the vital conjectures in explaining the heterogeneity of fertility decline.

The fourth chapter, by Patrick Heady, questions the usability of both economic and evolutionary models of explaining very low fertility in Southern Europe. By focusing on the community of Carnia in northern Italy, the author posits that these models predict a moderate decline in fertility, rather than the observed, severe declines. By relying on Dalla Zuana's explanations, Heady emphasises the impact of social pressure on fertility. The changing economic and social environment of contemporary Italian society puts the burden on psychological security to reproduce, especially in endogamous communities. Also, the waning of cooperation and social capital through mutual economic help erodes the ties needed to sustain the psychological support during family formation. The author closes with the statement that since fertility preference are not given exogenously, '[...] the system as a whole has certain properties that may not be deducible from the attitudes of the individuals within it' (p. 158).

The *Fifth Chapter* by Sarah Randall, Nathalie Mondain and Alioune Diagne, shifts the focus to the men and their attitudes on fertility control in Senegal. The authors identify three types of men based on their attitudes towards contraception: the ones strongly opposed, the ones in favour of contraception in the cases of birth spacing and health, and the ones in favour of contraception. The opposition to contraception stems

from the Islamic pronatalistic creed. Nevertheless, these values are in contrast with objective economic circumstances. According to the authors, Senegalese men stand in the middle of a vital conjuncture that could shift their attitudes toward more permissible ones.

Erica van der Sijpt in her study of reproduction in Cameroon (*Chapter 6*) focuses on exemplary cases of two women. Coming from different social backgrounds, these women experience a series of vital events (marriage, births, death of a child, etc.) that shape both the responses of their family members, but also their decisions during these vital conjunctures. The author stresses the importance of one's position among siblings and within a wider kin group, as well as the position in the wider network, on the marriage market, and in the marriage itself. Even though some of these positions are fixed, the author shows that the woman's "navigation" through the events during vital conjunctions determines possible future outcomes.

The following two chapters (*Chapter 7* and *8*, by Astrid Bochow and Lena L. Kroeker, respectively) examine the low fertility in two countries of Southern Africa, Botswana and Lesotho, respectively. For the case of Botswana, Astrid Bochow argues that as Botswana economically expanded, the women took up the role of educated professionals, trying to reconcile reproduction with their professional lives. Birth spacing with the use of contraceptives became ubiquitous. Later, other facets of modernity and consumption, along with the higher prevalence of HIV infections, established the patterns of low fertility. As for Lesotho, the modernisation created the need for female workers, making them their family's breadwinners, but also the supporters of larger family networks. These women adopted the use of contraceptive methods to space births and to choose when to become pregnant, thus initiating marriage negotiations by their own individual agency' (p. 271).

Eleanor Huskin (*Chapter 9*) provides an interesting study of contraception use in Cambodia. Her research shows that educated, urban, wealthy women prefer traditional contraceptive techniques such as withdrawal, periodic abstinence, and the calendar method, over more "modern" ones (condom, pill, IUD, etc.), which are used more by less educated and less wealthy women. These counterintuitive findings are explained by the beliefs of wealthy and educated women that the health is achieved using "natural" methods, without resorting unnecessarily to the "artificial" biomedical ones. Furthermore, some traditional methods such as day-counting assume the knowledge about the Gregorian calendar, which poor and uneducated women lack. As the author puts it "'Tradition" is a value-laden concept, signifying characteristics that do not fit with the meanings ascribed to such methods in Cambodia' (p. 305).

The last chapter (*Chapter 10*, by Yves Charbit and Véronique Petit), other than the afore-mentioned closing chapter by Johnson-Hanks, dives right into the heart of the relationship between anthropology and demography. It gives credit to the quantifying nature of demography to reveal the often-hidden societal patterns such as family structure, marriage patterns and household size. However, as seen in some of the other chapters, the very concepts that demography uses to operationalise the measurement process are value-laden and culturally constructed. The authors make four general points in addressing the 'epistemological weakness' (p. 319) of demography. Firstly, the "rational" action should

be assessed from the point of the actor and the context in which he/she acts, not from the researcher's viewpoint. Secondly, the researcher should be able to differentiate between the many merely ideational adjustments in the way in which life course events are seen [... and] more fundamental cultural change.' (p. 329) Thirdly, given that many individual characteristics are context- and culture-specific (e.g., religion, ethnicity, etc.), they should not be treated as monolithic "explanatory variables". Fourthly, '*homo oeconomicus*-type rationality' (p. 322) should be abandoned as the only epistemological position.

In conclusion, this volume offers much needed empirical support to the concept of vital conjunctures, but it also provides a more theoretical discussion explaining the reproductive decision-making beyond the mere economic rationality of the actors. The fact that demographic explanations should pay closer attention to the compositional effects, achieved through the individual agency within the "multiple potential futures" stands as the biggest strength of the book, despite the misprinted title on the front cover ("conjecture" instead of "conjuncture").

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