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# Reflections on a Golden Jubilee: Celebrating 50 Years of Population Geography within the Royal Geographical Society's Journals

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## Introduction

This virtual Issue celebrates the 50th anniversary of the Royal Geographical Society with Institute of British Geographer's (RGS-IBG) Population Geography Research Group (PGRG). Drawing upon papers published in RGS-IBG journals — *Area, Geographical Journal and Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* — this issue represents a selection of the core research threads within the scholarship of population geography over the past half-century. It is grounded in a bibliographic review of articles that include 'Population Geography' and derivative terms within the abovementioned journals. We offer this collection as a subjective reading of the heritage and direction of the sub-discipline from the perspective of the current committee, rather than a definitive summary of all the achievements within the subfield.

The PGRG was established against a backdrop of increasing pluralism within geography as a whole. A study group of the IBG, it later became a Research Group with the IBG-RGS merger in the mid-1990s. As one of the oldest research groups of the RGS-IBG, population geography research has long shaped debates within RGS-IBG journals. A dictionary definition of Population Geography is the 'study of population, including its spatial distribution, dynamics and movement' (Castree et al., 2013). Our review of papers in RGS-IBG journals highlights how this triad of perspectives has underpinned the sub-discipline's research to varying extents over the last half-century to create three core themes of scholarship:

1) The spatio-demographic characteristics of populations;
2) The movement of populations;
3) Characteristics of places.

These areas are not mutually exclusive. By tracing the history of Population Geography within this triad, this editorial reflects the practice of the sub-discipline to include its methodological pluralism, diversity and 'place' within geography as a whole.

What makes Population Geography distinctive from other sub-disciplines within Human Geography is that it deals with the study of groups – the social unification and segmentation of individuals into populations and the spatial manifestations of this organisation. However, this functional definition does not do justice to the complexity and breadth of Population Geography. An interesting point, and one that merits further attention, is our recognition that not all authors cited in this virtual issue might identify as population geographers. These are included as we consider their work to contribute to the study of populations in geography. We hope this note on inclusion will encourage readers to reflect on their assumptions about, and identifications with, Population Geography. These questions of identity have long occupied the thoughts of population geographers. For example, in 1991, addressing "The Challenge Facing Population Geography", Findlay and Graham suggested that 'population geography has never been weaker nor its continued existence as a sub-specialism within geography so much under threat' (p. 149). From the 1990s, calls for a (re)theorised Population Geography warned of the dangers of becoming 'separated' from the wider discipline (White and Jackson, 1995) and that the growing diffusion of approaches left the sub-discipline at risk of becoming fragmented into niches (Bailey, 2005).

Nevertheless, as this virtual issue demonstrates, the richness and diversity of scholarship within Population Geography over the past half-century is commendable and worthy of celebration. A flavour of some of these contributions, organised around three core themes, is offered below. In the final main section, we return to the field's identity to reflect briefly on the diversity of research within Population Geography.

# Spatio-Demographic Characteristics of Populations

*Population Geography elucidates patterns and processes of human lives across space, thus finding itself at the centre of debates on the nature and consequences of demographic change.* A rich research tradition within Population Geography has emphasised the inherently spatial aspects of fundamental demographic phenomena (Barcus and Halfacree, 2018). An example of this engagement is Avinoam Meir's 1986 paper, in which he adapts demographic transition theory to account for the population-level consequences of changes in mobility patterns amongst conventionally nomadic societies in Israel and elsewhere. By illustrating the significance of mobility in changing fertility and mortality regimes, this analysis helped to expose the limitations of demographic transition theory and extend these debates beyond the field of Demography. Importantly, such approaches highlighted the insensitivity of earlier demographic research to the spatial dimensions of human behaviour. Similarly, population geographers have also been at the forefront of efforts to draw attention to the nature and effects of the contemporary nexus between demographic and economic change. For instance, Jianfa Shen (1998) used population projections to foresee the consequences of rapid urbanisation and fertility declines on economic development in China. Perspectives such as these underline the importance of a complex and contextualised understanding of population geographies that consider different factors which shape people's lives beyond those linked simply to population size, structure and movement.

The above examples demonstrate how population geographers have been actively pursuing a global agenda and targeting the planetary-scale impacts of population change. In doing so, they have broadened the scope of geographical research beyond the UK, challenging the longstanding association between population studies and the British academic community. Due to the close relationships of the RGS-IBG journals with British geography, it is perhaps unsurprising that the linkages between population change and broader demographic phenomena in the United Kingdom have been and continue to be the focus of much scholarly attention within these journals. In one such UK-focused publication, Paul Compton (1976) emphasises the role of both distinct fertility patterns and emigration propensities amongst Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland in shaping its population composition; and, thus, its constitutional future. Population geographers also used localised studies to re-imagine existing conceptual approaches and re-envisage broader population trends. For example, Ian Gregory, Danny Dorling and Humphrey Southall (2001), building on the analysis of spatial patterning of absolute and relative patterns of poverty in England and Wales over time, raise far-reaching questions about the changing geography of living standards and social segregation. In a similar vein, Paul Boyle, Daniel Exeter and Robin Flowerdew (2004), drawing on analysis of health outcomes in Scotland, stress the interconnectedness of social lives and highlight broader societal impacts of population change – notably, concentrations of social inequality.

Beyond the focus on spatial patterns and trends in the occupation of place, population geographers now increasingly acknowledge and engage with some of the fundamental questions of human lives – namely, why these patterns exist. The studies highlighted above illustrate how Population Geography can, and has, engaged with some of the fundamental questions concerning the complexity of people's lives. As such, it has evolved from descriptions of the drivers and implications of demographic change to the broader analysis of lived worlds through a spatial lens. This analysis of population is a key mechanism through which population geographers have led theoretical and conceptual debates more widely in Geography.

Broadening the agenda of population research has given attention to different population groups and highlighted their spatio-temporal encounters across different lifecourse stages. Nearly half a century ago, Christopher Law and Anthony Warnes (1976) highlighted the distinctiveness of the geography of the elderly in England and Wales. Several decades later, Janet Dobson and John Stillwell (2000) set out

an agenda for child migration research. Other research made a case for exploring age as relational (Hörschelmann, 2011), further contributing to research that focuses on children and youth, both as a subset of the population and as its own sub-discipline. Within Population Geography and further afield, there is a growing engagement with complex social theory that emphasises relational, multiple and heterogeneous understandings of time and space. As a reflection of this change, population geographers increasingly engage with and contribute to conceptual advances within life transitions theory, lifecourse theory and broader philosophical approaches that reflect the complexity and unpredictability of people's lives (Barcus and Halfacree, 2018).

# Movement of Populations

*Another key research tradition within Population Geography is that of human movement through the lens of migration.* Indeed, Graham and Boyle (2001, p.391) highlighted two decades ago that: 'migration has become the predominant concern of those who identify themselves as population geographers.' A hallmark interest of Population Geography is internal migration. For example, John Stillwell, Peter Boden and Phil Rees (1990) provide a temporal case study of population dispersion within the UK, showing some consistency across time and places in terms of population movement streams. Building upon this approach, Frances Darlington-Pollock, Nik Lomax and Paul Norman (2019) examine migration propensity, accounting for spatial factors such as distance moved alongside spatio-temporal characteristics such as prior migration and time spent in the UK. By adding a spatial assessment to migration, the papers outlined transcend conventional demographic analyses of population movement.

Segmenting people into groups enables the comparative study of how place is occupied. Classification of individuals by their broader demographic characteristics highlights the distinctive geographies of population sub-groups. Richard Dennis (1977) provides such a case study of Huddersfield in Yorkshire and the Humber based on the 1851-1861 census enumerator's book. He creates a demographic persona of repeat migrants as 'invariably young, unskilled and born outside' the study area. In a similar vein, Martin Hedlund, Doris Carson, Linda Lundmark and Marco Eimermann (2017) examine international migration across twenty years by distinguishing immigrants to Sweden by region of origin. Focusing on declining rural areas, they provide a descriptive account of migration and the complex relationship of its use as a lever of socio-economic uplift. These examples illustrate the static demographic approaches historically common within Population Geography.

However, migration is also a process that shapes, and is shaped by, individual life-trajectories. For example, John Short (1978) examines residential mobility as a rational response to changing space requirements of households in Bristol (see also Ogden & Hall 1996; Power, 2017). Margaret Byron and Stephanie Condon (1996) show how lifecourse events can shape migration. Return migration for retirement, it is emphasised, is highly dependent on one's 'social field': the network of socio-economic relations that individuals are within. Discussing cycles of return migration for ethnic Caribbean groups with comparative case studies of census data in the UK and France, their paper illustrates how questions of Population Geography mirror themselves across different countries.

Global exchanges have also incited an interest in global mobility within Population Geography over the past few decades. Johanna Waters (2006) examines mobility for education as a means of social reproduction focusing on the intergenerational aspect. She reflects on parental choices for social capital gains as creators of links between places. Similarly, Allan Findlay, Russell King, Fiona Smith, Alistair Geddes and Ronald Skeldon (2012) focus on UK students abroad. Using interviews, they engage with the symbolic capital attached to 'world-class' institutions within the context of how capital and class reproduce themselves through the lifecourse. Suzanne Beech (2014) examines 'imaginative

geographies' — the subjective perceptions of destination universities and the lifestyle conceptions they carry. Through a reflection on semi-structured interviews, she discusses the expectations and experiences of student migrants in the United Kingdom. Population and economic geography are brought into conversation with scholarship on the relationship between population, migration and the labour markets. Jon Beaverstock (1990) provides an understanding of how labour shapes migration patterns with a glimpse into the perceived role of migration for the career prospects of globally in-demand professionals. Similarly, Allan Findlay, Ronald Skeldon, Tony Jowett and Lin Li (1996) examine the relationship between production and accumulation in the global city. They do so by examining the characteristics and employment patterns of an expatriate population in Hong Kong. Both papers demonstrate the link between migration and the global economy.

In parallel to the longstanding efforts to map, describe and explain migration, the broader mobilities 'paradigm' (Sheller and Urry 2006) has re-envisaged research on migration to the study of relational interconnections. This shift fortified Population Geography's multi-level research on the movement to include the residential, internal and international scales as discussed above. Recently, population geographers have also developed theoretically critical approaches to explore complex and contested representations of mobilities. For example, Sergei Shubin (2020) questions the meaning of mobility and argues for a 'spatio-temporal uncertainty of evaluation' (p. 811) - i.e. the dynamic serendipity to mobility that goes beyond preferences and planning, attitudes, and behaviours.

Population Geography spans quantitative analysis of flows and characteristics of migrants; but also, a curiosity for the different meanings attached to movement – motivations, experiences and outcomes of migration and mobility. This leads to dynamic but occasionally conflicting approaches and terms in the literature on movement. It also reflects the methodological and epistemological diversity of Population Geography.

## Characteristics of Places

*Population Geography is interested in the relationship between populations and spaces, and how together these make places; populations shape places, and places shape the experiences of their residents.* The previous section showed that migration is a key concern within Population Geography. Population movement, in turn, leads to dynamic pathways of producing differentiated geographies. For example, Michael Lyons and John Simister (2000), examining mobility within London over time, observe spatially unequal access to the housing market. They suggest that location is an advantage that plays out over generations, with repercussions for places beyond the immediate area of study. Similarly, Maarten van Ham, Lina Hedman, David Manley, Rory Coulter and John Östh (2014) take an intergenerational approach towards understanding residential outcomes and neighbourhood poverty. Vivid plots are used to show the returns to different types of places over time, thereby addressing themes of the lagged effect of geography across space and time.

Indeed, residential choices have consistently played a prominent role in Population Geography scholarship. For example, Emma Power (2017) considers how discourses surrounding active ageing frame homeownership as a desirable welfare base, which then has wider implications for shaping housing practices. Mapping out housing wealth in Britain, Chris Hamnett (1992) reflects on the uneven value of place and the consequences of this over time across generations. Nick Gallent (2007) takes an ontological perspective on second homes in the UK, thus providing a critical take on what it means to 'dwell' in a place. He contrasts population-level, public and collective dwelling to private dwelling to unpack the role of place-specific acceptability and the flip-side thereof: Othering of certain groups.

The studies mentioned above allude to a logical topic of concern that unites Population and Urban Geography: gentrification. Tim Butler and Loretta Lees (2006) provide case studies in gentrification

and globalisation that reflect both the population-level, class-led pathways and actor-level, capital-led strategies towards change at the neighbourhood level. Reminiscently, Chloe Kinton, Darren Smith, John Harrison and Andreas Culora (2018) examine the role of transient student populations within urban spaces. They question how this group changes local housing markets in processes akin to gentrification. Philip Ogden and Ray Hall (2004) explore how evolution in household dynamics reconfigures the city, focusing on shifts to smaller household structures and people living alone. Smaller households, in turn, play a role in urban regeneration and urban lifestyle reproduction. The shifting perceptions and dynamics of urban and rural related population changes constitute a significant feature of understanding places. Aileen Stockdale, who tragically passed away in early 2021, made a sustained contribution to the intersection of Population Geography and Rural Studies. Her 1993 *Area* paper was significant in drawing attention to the increasing trend of repopulation in many rural areas and the attendant implications in terms of service provision and rural development initiatives.

Another area of particular expertise in Population Geography is ethnic residential inequalities. Alongside ageing, ethnic diversity is increasingly one of the most fundamental shifts in the geographies of many places. The work of Colin Pooley (1977) helps to contextualise contemporary diversity trends within more historical experiences of migrant communities in mid-Victorian Liverpool. More recently, research on ethnicity and religion such as Paul Doherty's (1989) study of segregation in Belfast and the Northern Irish 'Troubles', and Ceri Peach's (1996) work which challenges claims of the development of ghettos in British cities, exemplify the close relationship between Population Geography and policy debates. Similarly, Phil Rees and Faisal Butt (2004) provide a meticulous account of ethnic change and diversity in England in the twenty years between the 1981 and 2001 Censuses. Nissa Finney (2011) uses the lens of the lifecourse and ethnic disparities to examine residential segregation through the residential mobility of young adults in Britain. Chris Lloyd (2015) highlights differing scales of residential segregation, arguing that policymakers should pay greater attention to scale when considering this phenomenon. Most recently, Gemma Catney's (2018) work has helped to draw attention to what appears to be a significant and growing trend in Britain and elsewhere: the increasing ethnic and racial diversity of non-metropolitan places.

While quantitative approaches to segregation research provide evidence of how populations are changing at various spatial and temporal scales, qualitative perspectives explore lived experiences on the ground. They consider individual and group case studies that challenge dominant representations of inclusion. For example, Deborah Phillips, Peter Ratcliffe and Cathy Davis (2007) examined segregation within the political landscape, exploring the choices a British Asian community makes in shaping where they live as a response to their 'Othering' by White British groups. Another thread of research highlights how communities change: Kate Botterill (2018), for example, uses Brexit as a lens to explore the formations of communities as inherently temporal and relational.

Population geographers have also been attentive to the diversity of less typical in-situ experiences. For example, Heather Fyfe and Nicholas McKay (1999) use interviews conducted with judicial witnesses who are relocated for their safety, sometimes severing all ties to their former homes. This extreme case study reflects on the general sense of ontological security and identity crisis that mobility can bear at the individual level. Similarly, Nancy Worth's (2008) reflections on disability geographies and its research investigate how personal experiences with disability – in contrast to ableism – were often central to her and others' decisions to pursue the topic as a field of research. Other examples of the breadth of the differential experience of place include consideration of income and religion. Jamie Pearce, Elizabeth Richardson, Richard Mitchell and Niamh Shortt (2010) present a relatively early contribution to neighbourhood effects research. Using national quantitative data for small areas, the paper illuminates how the income-poorest populations disproportionately experience environmental deprivation and health inequalities. Peter Hopkins (2011) considers the lived experiences of the

university campus for Muslim students. Using interviews, he shows that the university was simultaneously a place of liberal acceptance, whilst at the same time one of marginalisation and persecution.

Understanding the constitutive interactions between people and the places they define is at the heart of much of the work of population geographers. Who resides in a place? How do their experiences and values matter for that place? And in turn, how does this matter for outcomes of that place, or of people in that place? These are all questions population geographers share in common.

## The Practice of Population Geography

In the concluding section of this editorial, we highlight two key observations from reflecting upon 50 years of Population Geography in RGS-IBG journals: diversity in approaches and practice.

## Diversity of Approaches

The papers in this virtual issue span various topics of interest for population geographers; however, they also demonstrate diversity in terms of methodological and epistemological approaches. Thus, our collection traces changes to agendas both within Population Geography and the wider discipline. Earlier papers draw upon the statistical and positivist methodologies that characterise Human Geography in the 1970s. Quantitative methods, particularly those to capture segregation and inequalities, are continually used and developed within the sub-discipline. For example, Doherty (1989), Peach (1996), Rees and Butt (2004), Lloyd (2015), Harris (2017) and Catney (2018) all utilise indices of dissimilarity or entropy to measure ethnic segregation and/or diversity. Lloyd (2015) develops spatial statistical approaches for understanding changing population structures, showing how Geographical Information Systems are an essential tool in the modern study of populations.

The papers also demonstrate that throughout the 50 years of the Population Geography Research Group, the UK census has been a core dataset for spatio-temporal analysis but also critique (Robertson, 1969). Applications and debates related to the UK census have appeared most prominently in the RGS-IBG journals to reflect the significance of this institution in British geography. However, discussions on population censuses in other countries are equally relevant. Funsho Olorunfemi (1981) advocates for the use of a crowding index as opposed to the census in Nigeria due to the 'inadequacies' in the census data collection. Considering the UK's recent Census 2021, it is evident that analysis and discussions around this and other census data will continue to be the basis of important contributions from population geographers.

In parallel to quantitative methods, population geographers have also embraced the humanist and poststructuralist turns within Human Geography. Qualitative methods as a means to explore and understand populations are now as mainstream within Population Geography as the use of the census. The re-envisaging of Population Geography to qualitative methodological approaches pays tribute to the diversity of experiences needed to gauge the precariousness, unpredictability and diversity of lifecourses across different geographies. For example, the desire to capture an in-depth understanding of motivations and experiences has lead research on migration to commonly turn to interviews as a means to gain insight into how individuals experience place (Byron & Condon, 1996; Findlay et al., 1996; Fyfe & McKay, 2000; Waters, 2006; Worth, 2008; Phillips et al., 2007; Hopkins, 2011; Findlay et al., 2012; Beech, 2014; Botterill, 2018; Kinton et al., 2018; Shubin, 2020). However, it is important to note that much research in Population Geography does not employ a solely qualitative or quantitative

perspective. Instead, it draws upon mixed methodologies, which offer different perspectives in applied research.

There is no one singular approach that defines Population Geography. The papers covered thus far exemplify diverse populations, different means through which they can be segmented into units of study and various ways these can be researched and understood. Indeed, Population Geography's diversity is a concern to some and a celebration to others (Finney, 2020). This diversity echoes the historic concerns of prominent population geographers mentioned at the start of this paper about the fragmentation of the sub-discipline. However, the plurality of approaches is also a reflection of the field's evolution as it has sought imaginative ways to conduct meaningful research on the nature and effects of contemporary population change. The meaning of population has evolved conceptually to include the intersection of different dimensions—how populations together produce 'life' to include technologies, affects and non-human populations. Increasing epistemological, methodological and substantive diversity in the sub-discipline sits alongside emerging pathways and responsibilities of knowledge production and dissemination. The papers in this issue show how Population Geography is well-suited to contribute to our understanding of the most salient demographic, social and political challenges of the 21st Century. These include the effects of population movement on relations between places and communities, processes of re- and de-population, and more subtly, the production of geodemographic differentiation through the distribution and concentration of ethnicity, age, class and family structures in space.

Providing expert and critical perspectives on Population Geography research might never have been more urgent. The most pressing issues of our time – social inequalities and climate change – are inherently spatial in nature and bear differentiated severity of effects across populations. The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the management of 'populations' with the control of life and death constituted in biopolitical terms. It has brought into sharp focus that populations are not homogeneous regarding their resilience to health and economic crisis. These are areas that are already being addressed in population geography research and teaching. However, in an age of misinformation and noisy data, it might be argued that the role of population geographers is to provide understanding and clarity, thus informing public and political debates, as well as policy. In parallel to academic publications, shorter retrospective and reactive pieces are now part of the ongoing contributions of Population Geography, as seen in the Research Groups' blog series created in 2017. The sub-discipline has already made contributions beyond the academic context with exchanges that have informed central and local government policy-making, co-produced research with voluntary and community sector organisations and thus challenging misinformation in the media. The vociferous case made by population geographers for the retention of the census is a case in point. However, as Smith (2019) notes, there is scope for a much more impactful sub-discipline in the area of policy. His recommendations include asking the appropriate questions and communicating effectively to an often distrustful public. Indeed, the contributions the field might strive to offer is a balanced, ongoing conversation that brings more actors to the table in post-COVID debates and beyond.

## Diversity of Practice

Geography as a whole has traditionally been seen as a male-dominated and masculinist discipline. Although there have been some welcome changes in this respect, gender disparities persist (Maddrell et al., 2016), as do other forms of exclusion and under-representation. Population Geography is not an exception in this narrative. The masculine experience dominated understandings of populations until the emergence and growing recognition of feminist scholarship, which emphasises differences in experiences between male and female populations (for example, Valentine, 1989). This virtual issue

highlights that in the past 30 years, researchers have become more critically attuned to intersectional lived experiences and the need for a more inclusive approach towards research.

Despite being dominated by men, contributions to Population Geography by women are as old as the research group. This is exemplified by the work of Isobel Robertson, who was writing on the census in the 1960s. Nevertheless, this raises broader questions as to why the work of pioneering women researchers, such as Robertson (1969), has been largely forgotten. Questions about visibility and whose knowledge is seen to count are perhaps reflected in a wider politics of recognition and citations (Mott & Cockayne, 2017). This collection suggests an issue of visibility in the framing of Population Geography debates as just over a third of 45 papers included in this review are sole or lead-authored by women.

Geography has also been characterised historically as a white discipline (Noxolo, 2020). Again, Population Geography is no exception to this, despite the questions of international migration, ethnic diversity, inequalities and segregation that have characterised many parts of the sub-discipline. Reflecting on the past 50 years of scholarship, the collection of papers in this issue presents Population Geography as Anglo-centric in how knowledge has been produced. Population Geography's ability to do justice to the variety of populations that co-exist will be deficient if it does not more urgently engage with decolonising the discipline.

Therefore, although it has been recognised for some time (Smith and King, 2012) that there is a need for diversity in the scholarship of Population Geography, the sub-discipline still has a long way to go. Issues of gender, race, or other intersectional axes of [dis]advantage cannot and should not be considered in isolation from each other because they frame the lived and conceptual understanding of populations. Diversity of research and researchers within Population Geography is one of the challenges that face the sub-discipline, but also they constitute its structural spine. Recruiting, embracing and integrating a broader range of voices is a task for this generation of population geographers.

## Conclusion

> 'Geography is a sprawling, ragged, gorgeous, discipline… It's a discipline that both knows what it's about and yet were you to ask a group of academic geographers what exactly it is that defines geography each would give a different answer. Stuffy and hip, it's a discipline with too much difference for some and yet not nearly enough for others' (Geoghegan et al., 2020, p462).

By inserting "population" geography into these statements, we can draw the same conclusion. Population Geography's diversity is at once its challenge and its strength. The selection of papers in this issue has offered a flavour of that diversity. This brief overview cannot hope to do justice to the quantity and quality of scholarship within Population Geography. However, it serves as an indication of how the sub-discipline has, is and will continue to shape debates on the complex nature, drivers and consequences of population change. Despite differences in methods and approaches, the sub-discipline unites to explore populations in space. The papers in this virtual issue give readers a sense of the value of contributions from the study of populations towards geographic knowledge as we look forward to many more years of lively debate.

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