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# Review of Counting Populations, Understanding Societies: Towards an Interpretive Demography, by Véronique Petit.

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for contraception and continued rapid population growth in the poorest countries are among the key rationales for this policy change. This comprehensive book provides a wealth of valuable insight and thoughtful commentary on the history of the population movement and offers a fair overview of the ongoing controversies surrounding policy formulation and implementation. Policymakers and researchers will find this an invaluable resource.—J.B.

VÉRONIQUE PETIT

*Counting Populations, Understanding Societies: Towards an Interpretive Demography*

Dordrecht: Springer, 2013. xiv + 208 p. \$129.00.

For most demographers “population” is the unifying concept that ties their discipline together. The relative ease of defining and measuring core demographic variables, except perhaps for migration, distinguishes demography from nearly every other social science; and with time dictating a necessary sequence between many demographic events—deaths always following births, a cohort always aging—even causal modeling often is possible. It is no wonder that demographers are more likely than other social scientists to put on the mantle of positivistic science. Petit, a French anthropologist/demographer who studies migration and poverty in West African societies, finds all of this to be a problem. For her, population is “an artefact that allows researchers to sidestep the complexity of the individual in society,” and she contends that “claiming to work on *populations* is tantamount to ignoring or, at the very least, downplaying the importance of context” (p. xii; emphasis in original). Demographers need to understand contextually how demographic behaviors are understood by their participants, and Petit calls for an “interpretive demography” in which “counting” and “understanding” are given equal weight. She waits, however, until Chapter 6 (“The Practices of Comprehensive Demography”) to illustrate the utility of such a demography. Among other examples in this chapter, she describes her study of modern contraceptive use among women in four rural villages in Senegal. The 1989 and 1997 DHS surveys had shown rising use rates among urban women and extremely low and stagnating rates among rural women. Yet Petit discovered that many women in her villages were actually using modern contraceptives but reporting otherwise. Even as women were denying using them to interviewers, demand for modern contraceptives was high in village health clinics. Petit then re-interviewed women about their contraceptive use and discovered why accurate use rates were not being reported. Women knew that rumors of contraceptive use would ruin their reputations, and they doubted the trustworthiness of the educated urban women who were interviewing them. Local religious and political leaders publicly opposed contraceptive use, and women rarely felt comfortable discussing the topic with their much older husbands. Such experiences in “field demography” offer convincing evidence of the need to supplant “counting” demographic events with fundamental efforts to understand demographic behaviors.

Given Petit’s assertion that “the purpose of this book is to show how demography and anthropology can be used in conjunction in research on population and

development" (p. xiv), chapters 2 through 5 as well as the 28-page appendix on "Contemporary Actors of French Demography" present somewhat of a puzzle. Each is an interesting essay, not especially connected to one another, in science studies. The author seeks to situate demography, anthropology, and social science in a broad cultural, philosophical, and historical context. As science studies essays, they are consistently well done, although all are written from a distinctly French vantage point. My puzzlement concerns how these chapters, the bulk of the book, further the author's stated goal for this volume. Few positivistically inclined demographers who focus on measurement and modeling issues are likely to be convinced of the need for more anthropology in their discipline by reading about the historical development of political arithmetic in Germany, England, and France (Chapter 2), or about the variability of disciplinary boundary issues surrounding demography in different national traditions (Chapter 3), or even about the evolution of the concept of "population" from ancient Greek times to the present (Chapter 4). Such essays just seem an odd way of convincing this audience of the need for an "interpretive demography."—D.H.

**JAMES P. SMITH AND MALAY MAJMUNDAR (EDS.)**

*Aging in Asia: Findings from New and Emerging Data Initiatives*

Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2012. xvii + 465 p. \$69.00.

This volume consists of seventeen papers selected from two scientific conferences organized by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Beijing, 2010) and the Indian National Science Academy (Delhi, 2011). Also involved in organizing the conferences were the national science academies of Japan, Indonesia, and the United States. Despite the oceans of ink spilled in recent decades on population aging and its impacts, data going beyond the demographic basics have often been lacking. Yet, there has been a steady growth in the availability of data in Asia, making possible studies of the sort presented in this book.

The explosion in survey data and computational power has attracted many researchers to the micro-level. A chapter drawn from the National Transfer Accounts project is welcome in that it sets Asian population aging in a macro-economic context. The demographic dividend of fertility reduction is now beyond doubt, but fertility decline today means population aging in the future. The key question for Asia is whether public transfer systems, now modest, expand or family support systems persist. Experience in the region to date is that most policymakers have been reluctant to develop effective public pension and old-age support systems.

Evidence on the role of the family is mixed in Asia. Intra-family transfers in China still appear to be from children to parents, in contrast to most of the developed world. A good proxy for the role of the family in elderly support is co-residence of parents and children, where evidence is inconclusive. In Indonesia, the evidence suggests that there has not been much change in living arrangements. In Vietnam—a populous country not covered anywhere in this volume—expectations of eventual support from children remain high. A pressing question is how living arrangements will adapt to the emergence of the oldest old, many of whom will require care that