Ahead, not aloof. Frans van Poppel’s contribution to agenda-setting in historical demography

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Frans van Poppel has changed the field of historical demography in two ways. First, by constituting a monumental body of knowledge, in the form of literally hundreds of articles, book chapters, monographs and edited volumes. His scientific output is, and undoubtedly will remain, an essential source for all those seeking information on family and demographic behavior in the past. Second, by inspiring others to follow his lead, to take up new topics, to explore new sources, and to experiment with new methods. In this brief essay I will focus on the latter, and I will do so by looking back as well as by looking forward. Looking at the past decades, how has Frans achieved to move the field, and in what directions? And how does his work constitute a challenge for the next generation of historical demographers?

Differential demography

Speaking for myself, but surely also for many others –both in the Netherlands and abroad-, I think that Frans van Poppel has been exemplary by his choice of topics, his typical mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches, his quest for new data, and finally, his research collaborations. In terms of topics, Frans has early and consistently made the choice to work on differential demography. Until well into the 1980s, historical demography in the Netherlands had been focused on mapping and contrasting locally and regionally aggregated data, in order to understand the epidemiological and fertility transitions of the 19th and 20th centuries. Frans set out to decompose these aggregates into their smallest components possible, with a clear preference for the level of the individual. Although his work frequently offers an introduction on spatial differences and trends, the apotheosis is more often than not an elaborate multivariate model showing how demographic behavior differed by social class, church denomination, and household composition. Moreover, he also integrates period effects in his models, such as food crises (e.g. the Famine of 1944/1945), GDP per capita, unemployment rates and even temperature. His work proved, among others, that religion and social class exerted autonomous influences on all aspects of behavior.

However, Frans was also quick in recognizing that the behavior of individuals had to be placed squarely in their social networks. This led him, for example, to explore genealogies to reconstruct kinship networks, and to use the witnesses on marriage certificates to study the networks of Jews and Christians in The Hague (Van Poppel and Schoonheim, 2005). In his choice of topics, Frans has managed to straddle both (social) history and demography, thus keeping open the dialogue between these disciplines and countering a trend of academic fragmentation and disassociation. On the one hand, and naming just a few examples, Frans has contributed to social history by his studies of the ‘housewife ideal’, the institutionalization of the elderly, social mobility, the history of leaving home (in international perspective), the study of naming practices, and the fates of reformed boys, illegitimate children, permanent celibates, and widows. On the other hand, he has taught social scientists the relevance of the ever-changing societal and normative context of behavior and the need to adopt a long-term perspective.

Suggesting research topics is one thing, coming up with convincing results is quite another. Frans’s results appeal to a wide audience (going beyond historians and demographers) because of his mixed methods approach. His hypotheses are well-grounded in the literature, including 19th century medical reports, government enquiries, ethnographic material, and egodocuments. They are tested on representative datasets, often the result of painstaking data collection, in many cases by Frans himself. Finally, the analytic handling of the data has always been—as far as I can see—of great quality. His dissertation on marriage and divorce shows his great love for history and literary sources in the detailed analysis of contemporary debates between politicians, church officials, social reformers, and eugenics on the ‘proper’ age to marry. Popular attitudes to marriage are studied through regional customs, proverbs and may other sources. In the same book, however, Frans tackles the regional variation in marriage in a linear regression model, and goes on to study remarriage hazard ratios in one of the first event history analyses to be performed in Dutch historical demography (Van Poppel, 1992).
Another example of his sophisticated mixed methods approach is his study with Hugo Röling on contraceptive behavior of medical doctors, in which they combined a history of debates on contraceptive techniques with family reconstitutions of a large number of medical professionals in Holland. They showed that although doctors were clearly pioneers of birth control in their private lives, concerns for the respectability of their profession prevented them from openly advocating neo-Malthusianism (Van Poppel and Röling, 2003).

The success of Frans’s research stems—in part—from his fine nose for data. In his earlier work, historical census data still played a large role, but Frans soon cast his net wide to include sources as diverse as cause-of-death statistics, collections of marital records (e.g. Gouda), automatically reconstituted family trees (GenLias), archives of churchyards, interviews with priests and parishioners, and complete life course reconstructions of regional or even national samples of individuals. This could imply, as in the case of the Historical Sample of the Netherlands, a long-term involvement in organization, quality control and dissemination of the specific data infrastructure.

**Agenda-setting**

His success can also be attributed to his ability to collaborate across disciplines, generations and frontiers. Until recently, historians kept very much to themselves, in terms of data and methods. The ‘collaborative model’, as shown by Frans, expanded the scope and relevance of historical work through the fine-tuning of hypotheses and results, incorporating specialized knowledge (e.g. on statistical modeling), and allowing for large scale or comparative research. A recent example is the special issue by Frans and Tommy Bengtsson in Explorations in Economic History (2011) on change over time in social class differences in child and adult mortality. They refute conventional wisdom by showing that, for a long time, high income and high social status were not consistently translated into health benefits. Even more recent is his cooperation with Spanish authors (Van Poppel et al., 2012) who had demonstrated that child survival affected fertility decisions in pre-transition populations. By replicating their approach on Dutch data, Frans showed on the one hand that this association appears to be universal, on the other hand that the effects differed strongly by social and religious group, reflecting strong socio-cultural differences in self-agency.

In all these aspects of historical-demographic research, Frans was ahead of the rest. Yet, he clearly never was ‘aloof’—he never distanced himself from the other players in the field. As supervisor of trainees, peer reviewer, commentator at conferences, co-promotor of Ph.D. students, editor of journals, board member of organizations and in many other ways, Frans has encouraged others to take up the fascinating subject of family and population history. To summarize: Frans’s track record of agenda-setting amounts to exploring promising research fields, demonstrating the added value of mixed methods, investing in data infrastructure, and setting high quality standards.

However, Frans is only human. There are still areas he has hardly touched upon. Actually, some fields may have been relatively underdeveloped by the concentration of Frans and other historical demographers on the topics mentioned above. Firstly, Frans has dedicated most of his energy to the demography of the Netherlands in the data-rich period after 1850. There are still many issues to be addressed in the earlier period. For instance, when and how did the positive association between wealth and family size disappear? Secondly, although studies on migration are not absent in Frans’s publication list, he has refrained from systematically linking migration to other aspects of demography, such as fertility or mortality. Finally, Frans is not a ‘system-builder’. In most of his work, he seems to studiously avoid holistic concepts such as ‘demographic regime’ or ‘family system’. Also, he is not engaging (probably for good reasons) in debates with, for instance, those economists who seek to explain the great transformation of the nineteenth century in the form of a Unified Growth Theory that links the industrial revolution to fertility and mortality decline.
What next?

Although Frans will hopefully remain active for a very long time, the occasion for which this essay was written begs the question: What next? What are now the challenges for historians and demographers? For historians, Frans offers, firstly, a puzzling array of subtle differences in behavioral responses between occupational and religious groups and, secondly, a set of compelling questions on long-term change. Referring to the first, the next generations will have to dig deeper still. Thus, we need to find out how the assumed differences in attitudes and outlook between Catholics and (Liberal) Protestants have emerged, and how they could persist over time. What is the role of social control mechanisms in this respect? Also, the distinctions by socio-occupational group identified by Frans may hide other, possibly even more important fissures in society. How does the picture change once we compare life courses by education, income, property, or even expectations of inheritance? Referring to the second, Frans’s studies suggest that change in demographic behavior is more influenced by socio-economic factors than by cultural/ideational ones, thus adding to the growing critique of diffusionist models. In a recent article (Schellekens and Van Poppel, 2010) it is argued that mortality decline coupled with the rise in real wages are the most important factors in explaining the Dutch fertility decline before 1940. However, it is still not clear how the supposed ‘quality-quantity trade-off’ functioned at the level of individual couples. Moreover, Frans’s analyses of nineteenth century demography need to be integrated into new narratives for non-specialist audiences. For instance, what do Frans’s findings on social mobility, networks and social group differences in mortality and fertility tell us about class formation during Dutch industrialization? Can we translate Frans’s remarkable findings on the life expectancy of widows and orphans to a new vision on Dutch welfare? And, finally, how do Frans’s finding on strongly internalized religious norms affect our view on the meaning of Pillarization?

History matters

For demographers, Frans’s legacy is clear: History matters. And it does so in at least three ways. First, Frans’s recent work on family composition of adolescents in the past 150 years has shown the relevance of taking the long view. The current experience of growing up in broken families is mirrored by the many (semi-)orphans in the past (Van Gaalen and Van Poppel, 2009). Clearly, the 1950s do not represent ‘traditional’ Dutch society. If anything, the period 1945-1965 was probably the most ‘untypical’ period in Dutch recent history with respect to family life. The great challenge of historical demography, as demonstrated exemplarily in Frans’s work, is to show and understand precisely when demographic behavior can be understood in terms of continuity, and when it is subject to change. Secondly, the added value of the longitudinal perspective in Frans’s demographic analyses is clear; people act on past experiences and we cannot understand demographic events in isolation from earlier ones. Finally, history serves as an ideal laboratory for testing socio-biological aspects of demography; e.g. determinants of starting, stopping and spacing in a non-contraceptive environment, or the intergenerational transmission of behavior (as Frans has done on the age at marriage (Van Poppel, Monden and Mandemakers, 2008)).

It is to be hoped that historical demographers will take up this challenge and pursue research along the lines suggested by Frans van Poppel. Preferably, by expanding into the more distant past as well. Above all, let’s hope that future generations will be able to work in the true ‘Poppelian’ spirit. That is, by tackling the research questions with a balanced mixture of qualitative and quantitative content, soundly embedding them in the literature, formulating a clear body of testable hypotheses, cautiously interpreting results, and where possible, working in a truly interdisciplinary setting.

References


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