

FORUM

NOTES FROM THE IMPURE: A COMMENT ON RALPH THOMLINSON'S "GOALS AND CONTENTS OF A SURVEY COURSE IN POPULATION"

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Résumé — Tout en reconnaissant l'importance de la contribution de Thomlinson à l'enseignement de la démographie, l'auteur discute la pertinence de la distinction qui est établie entre les enseignants "puristes" "vulgarisateurs" et "propagandistes." La notion "d'études démographiques" est introduite pour médiatiser la polarisation entre "démographes" et "non démographes." Des stratégies alternatives sont offertes, qui reflètent les différences entre étudiants non spécialisés et spécialisés en démographie. Pour comprendre les pratiques pédagogiques actuelles dans les cours de démographie en Amérique du Nord, il faut tenir compte de l'impact de la sociologie, qui a déterminé les thèmes et le développement de la démographie et de la population en tant que domaines d'étude.

Abstract — While acknowledging the importance of Thomlinson's contribution to population pedagogy, the relevance of labelling instructors as "purist," "popularizer" and "propagandist" is challenged. The conception of "population studies" is introduced to mediate the polarization of instructors as "demographers" and "non-demographers." Alternative strategies for course organization are offered, reflecting differences between student generalists and specialists. To account for current pedagogical practices in American population courses, one must consider the impact of sociology in shaping the issues and development of demography and population as areas of inquiry.

Key Words — teaching demography, population pedagogy, population studies

The appearance of an increasing number of scholarly publications and sessions at conferences devoted to pedagogy in sociology signals a recognition of the importance and difficulty of the teacher-educator role at the post-secondary level. Ralph Thomlinson's "Goals and Contents of a Survey Course in Population," which appeared in the 1979 issue of *Canadian Studies in Population*, displays the need for pedagogical discussions in demography and population thought. The following remarks are offered as one teacher's interest in and response to Thomlinson's views. Although my remarks are organized by using several of the headings employed by Thomlinson, many comments are relevant to more than one section of his paper.

Demographers vs. Non-demographers as Instructors (including Thomlinson's Introduction)

While sharing Thomlinson's concern for quality education and instruction, I would question the utility of his sharp distinction between demographers and non-demographers as instructors. Thomlinson quotes Robert Vance (1959), who decried the "lack of professionalism" as a "soft spot" in American demography (p. 172).¹ Yet Thomlinson overlooks insightful ideas which appear in the same collection as Vance's article. In particular, the broader conception of "population studies" serves to bridge the gap and reduce the harshness of a polarization bet-

ween “demographer” and “non-demographer” (see Hauser and Duncan, 1959a:3-4, 1959b:30-37; Lorimer, 1959:157-158).

There is merit in being concerned about the proliferation of courses which may leave students “fixed at the level of worrying about population increase and wanting to save the world through universal adoption of birth control” (p. 172). But in suggesting that such *problem-centred* approaches are a consequence of inadequately prepared instructors, Thomlinson overlooks an important historical factor. While acknowledging that demography has developed largely within the context of sociology (p. 171; also see Moore, 1959:832-834), Thomlinson does not mention the influence on demography of problem-centred approaches to sociology which dominated the latter in America after the turn of the twentieth century.

Sociologists (exemplified by the early Chicago school) focused attention on “solving” social ills such as poverty, crowding and delinquency which accompanied industrialization, urbanization and large-scale migrations. The legacy of several decades of “problem-centred” sociology is reflected in student expectations. Many introductory students still expect sociology to focus solely on the eradication of social evils. Thus, in accounting for the presence of problem-centred population courses, one must consider the influences of sociology, since the latter has provided a frame of reference for the emergence of many population courses. Rather than seeking to “zap the bad guys” (p. 172), one should first consider some of the historical factors that have contributed to the development of an intellectual fabric within which anyone might emerge as “bad.” Moreover, instructors can harness student expectations to serve broader course objectives. A selective discussion of social and population problems can serve as a useful vehicle for transmitting and illustrating fundamental demographic principles.

Goals Suited to a General Population Course

Thomlinson’s specification of eight goals helps to identify various roles associated with the instruction of demography. His emphasis on the need to teach the components of growth, rather than to focus on total growth, is warranted. What requires clarification is his assertion that “instead of trying to form or change students’ opinions, it should provide them with information — which, of course, may affect their opinions indirectly” (p. 173). Taking “facts” as constituting part of what Thomlinson means by “information,” it is assumed that there is shared agreement as to which “facts” are considered valid and correct. This is questionable since demography, particularly in areas such as migration studies, exhibits conflicting sets of “facts” — sometimes a result of varying methodological approaches. More importantly, Thomlinson’s view presupposes that “facts” as “information” constitute knowledge. Rather, it is the organization of “facts” into meaningful patterns that constitutes the basis for conceptual knowledge. And such organization entails a *direct* influence by scholars and teachers, since one must select out those “facts” relevant to the question at hand.

It is prudent and necessary that instructors explicate those values that are, or may be, influencing a particular mode of analysis. The question of the relations between “facts” and “values” is an old and continuing issue. Demography could gain much from a careful consideration of Max Weber’s (1949) now classic distinction between “value relevance” and “value judgments.”

Purists, Popularizers and Propagandists

Thomlinson uncritically accepts the distinction between “purist,” “popularizer” and “propagandist” proposed by Rogers (1974). Furthermore, “purist” becomes equated with “demographer,” one characterized as a “serious,” “rigorous” teacher who separates “personal

concerns” from teaching (p. 174). In addition to the unfortunate common-sense connotations of such categories, one could also argue that the very criteria used to identify “purist” reflects a normative bias. The conception of “purist” takes on its meaning relative to some notion as to what constitutes a “non-purist” viewpoint.

Thomlinson suggests that “propagandists” and “popularizers” were attracted to the field of population after the mid-1960s because of the “surge of interest in avoiding *oblivion* by controlling populations” (p. 174, emphasis added). Yet during the 1930s, many formal demographers, when speaking of fertility trends in Western nations, professed concern not with oblivion but with *extinction*. Even though their concern turned out to be erroneous, it is nonetheless true that many 1930s demographers became “pro-fertility propagandists.”

Student Expectations, Aversions and Attractions

Some students may fear or have an aversion to statistics and quantitative techniques. Others may be disappointed by population courses which place little emphasis on “doing problems,” such as working out a life table or projection. Professor Thomlinson’s comments on the merits of such “doings” (p. 176) can be elucidated by identifying students as specialists or as generalists.

Students who have no intent of majoring or concentrating in demography may gain more from learning how to read a life table and understanding its wider applications outside the domain of demography. Doing things such as life table constructions seems more appropriate for student specialists — those intending to pursue demography and population courses beyond the introductory level. The expectations and needs of students as generalists and specialists are captured in the distinction between “population studies” and “demography” as areas of inquiry.

Specialists should, at some stage, anticipate experiencing the reality of Thomlinson’s dictum “give us this class our daily table.” The dictum for generalists might better be read as “give us, some classes, our sense of how to read any table.”

What Should Be Taught

Decisions about course content require an awareness of the need to balance the expectations and backgrounds of both the instructor and the anticipated audience. Overall, I agree with Thomlinson’s recommendations; therefore, I offer only a few suggestions for an organizational strategy meaningful to student generalists.²

After establishing a framework for the course by differentiating “demography” from “population studies,” I turn attention to an overview of world population history. This is followed by presentations on the basic sources of demographic data. *Prior* to a discussion of Malthus, pre-Malthusian and classical population thinkers, it is useful to introduce central ideas of the “big three” (mortality, fertility and migration) and to describe their relations. This enhances a student’s ability to grasp processes underlying Malthusian and pre-Malthusian thought; moreover, it opens the way for a fruitful, later discussion of the links between contemporary and early population perspectives.

In addressing ways to terminate an introductory course, Professor Thomlinson proposes that a satisfactory psychological closure for students and teacher is to end with a discussion of policies, especially in developing countries (p. 179). In my experience, policy discussions are better integrated into an elaboration of the “big three.” This strategy has helped students to evaluate the extent to which policies have been or can be shaped to reflect observed demographic patterns and trends. In addition, this orientation overcomes the polarization of

“purist” and “popularizer” positions which is inherent in Thomlinson’s article. “Purist” and “popularizer” are brought into a dialogue which moderates extremism at either end.

It seems appropriate to end an introductory course with projections, futuristic discussions and even some speculations. By this stage, students have been exposed to an array of population issues and basic demographic techniques. Consequently, one is prepared to evaluate the problems while appreciating the need for futuristic topics. Furthermore, such a conclusion seems in keeping with Thomlinson’s goal that students recognize “the uncertainty that inheres in knowledge” (p.174).

Disparate Cultures and Teaching Goals

In the long term, there is “little scholarly purpose in teaching anything that students will forget three weeks after the final cramming” (p. 180). While concurring with this remark, I do believe that Thomlinson’s uncritical acceptance of categories such as “purist,” “popularizer” and “propagandist,” coupled with the polarization of “demographers” and “non-demographers” as instructors, may work against long term pedagogical objectives. In closing his article, Thomlinson emphatically states that the “best criterion of teaching success is whether a student can confront a new idea or fact, years and miles away from the assistance of an instructor and, unaided, add it to his intellectual kit” (p. 180). To this I would add that it is important that students also be able to recognize that ideas and facts, whether old or new, take on their relevance within a humanly constructed and socially supported frame of reference.

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Footnotes

1. To simplify references, page numbers standing alone refer strictly to Thomlinson’s (1979) article.
2. Varying pedagogical approaches, coupled with the wide selection of textbooks, make it difficult to build a case for or against specific books. In addition to Thomlinson’s suggestions (p. 179), Canadian instructors might like to consider, among others, Beaujot (1978), Foot (1982), Grindstaff (1981), Kalbach and McVey (1979), Overbeek (1980) and Stone and Marceau (1977).

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