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A Deep–Fried Delight: the Oliebollen Framework of Demographic Research*

Remund, Adrien P.P.¹

Meijering, Louise B.¹

Haisma, Hinke H.¹

¹ Population Research Centre. Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen.

Corresponding author:
Adrien Remund
a.p.p.remund@rug.nl

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Résumé – Abstract

Résumé

Cet article présente l'approche Oliebollen de la recherche en démographie, une approche révolutionnaire inspirée par la pâtisserie traditionnelle néerlandaise. En s'appuyant sur, et en allant au-delà, de la métaphore du donut de Ron Lee, qui critiquait l'état de la démographie, ce cadre propose un modèle plus inclusif et dynamique pour notre discipline. L'objectif principal de cette étude est d'introduire et de formuler les principes de l'approche Oliebollen, en mettant en évidence son potentiel à faire progresser le domaine de la démographie. Nous avons développé l'approche Oliebollen à travers un processus d'élaboration théorique sur la nature de la démographie et des expérimentations culinaires visant à comparer la valeur respective de diverses gourmandises internationales (frites) en tant que métaphores pour le domaine de la démographie. L'approche Oliebollen propose une rupture avec la métaphore traditionnelle du donut. En dispersant la démographie formelle dans l'ensemble du domaine, à la manière des raisins dans une pâte, et en incorporant divers ingrédients liquides connecteurs, ce cadre facilite une compréhension plus globale des phénomènes démographiques. Cette approche permet aux chercheurs de traiter à la fois les tendances au niveau macro et les processus au niveau micro, tout en favorisant la collaboration interdisciplinaire et un impact sociétal accru. Elle ouvre également un espace pour des perspectives théoriques plus diversifiées, dans une discipline qui a traditionnellement été centrée sur l'empirisme. L'approche Oliebollen offre une alternative savoureuse aux représentations traditionnelles de la démographie. Alors que la recherche démographique continue d'évoluer, l'approche Oliebollen se distingue comme une approche novatrice qui célèbre la richesse et la complexité des phénomènes démographiques.

Mots-clés : *Cadre Oliebollen, Démographie, Inclusivité, Interdisciplinarité*

Abstract

This paper introduces the Oliebollen Framework of Demographic Research, a revolutionary approach inspired by the traditional Dutch pastry. Building upon and beyond Ron Lee's donut metaphor, which criticized the state of demography, this framework offers a more inclusive and dynamic model for our field. The primary objective of this study is to introduce and articulate the principles of the Oliebollen Framework, highlighting its potential to advance the field of demography. We have developed the Oliebollen Framework through a process of theoretical elaboration on the nature of demography and engaged in culinary experimentation to compare the respective value of international (deep-fried) delights as metaphors for the field of demography. The Oliebollen Framework proposes a departure from the traditional donut metaphor. By dispersing formal demography throughout demography like raisins in dough, and incorporating diverse connecting liquid ingredients, the framework facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of demographic phenomena. This approach enables researchers to address both macro-level trends and micro-level processes, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and societal impact. Also, it opens up space for more diverse theoretical avenues, in a discipline that has traditionally been empirically focused. The Oliebollen Framework offers a flavourful alternative to traditional representations of demography. As demographic research continues to evolve, the Oliebollen Framework stands as a maverick approach that celebrates the richness and complexity of demographic phenomena.

Keywords: *Oliebollen Framework, Demography, Inclusivity, Interdisciplinary*

In this paper, we introduce the revolutionary Oliebollen Framework of Demographic Research. With this framework, we contribute to the continuous evolution and relevance of demographic research. The origin of the framework can be traced back to discussions at the Population Research Centre (PRC) at the Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, where the three of us work. The PRC consists of researchers with various interdisciplinary backgrounds, including geography, spatial planning, development studies and nutrition sciences, as well as demography and population studies. When developing the PRC vision and mission, quite existential questions emerged around the demographic nature of our work. Who is a demographer? Are we all doing demography? Being hosted in a Faculty of Spatial Sciences, how is our demographic work situated in relation to the socio-spatial context? This inspired us to organise a series of discussion sessions on the topic. The Oliebollen framework is the indirect result of these discussions.

The Oliebollen Framework has evolved as a response to the donut metaphor presented by Ron Lee in 2001 in his seminal paper “Demography Abandons Its Core”. In Lee’s view, the core of demography is formed by formal, mathematical, macro-level demography. This core is surrounded by other fields, such as history, geography, economics, sociology, biology and medicine that ask demographic questions through their own theoretical frameworks and apply micro-level methods. The adjacent fields look into both the key concepts of demography - fertility, mortality and migration - and their consequences. Lee condemns what he sees as a trend in demography, in which the adjacent fields are taking over from formal demography, leaving a virtually empty core. Lee argues that many critical demographic questions, such as population ageing, the population-environmental nexus, and immigration, require macro-level analysis and abandoning these tools would undermine demography’s ability to address these societal challenges.

He moreover deplores that individual rational choice becomes the dominant theoretical perspective guiding empirical micro-level research, diverting away from societal and aggregate processes. He points for instance to the influence of the economic theory of individual rational choice on the formulation of the demographic transition (Becker 1981), which he deplores has come to “dominate the thinking and approach of demographers”. Moreover, Lee, and later Lutz (2021), refer to the influence of adjacent fields used to investigate human behaviour underlying demographic processes as hyphenated demographies. They recognize this development as a prolific but dangerous evolution of our field if it takes place at the expense of its core. While we agree with Lee that demography needs to preserve the elements that make it unique, we dispute other aspects of his vision and particularly his use of a center-periphery depiction of the field. Let us slightly elaborate on this position.

We agree with Lee that traditional macro-analysis has an important role in picturing the macro-level characteristics of populations for which an individual has no agency. This is true notably of the current societal debates on sustainable growth, de- and over-population, and migration, where the dynamics of population size and structures are essential contributions to the discussion. It is also true in the study of individual outcomes like health behaviours, where, once macro-level processes such as the obesogenic environment are taken into account, very different cues to action emerge beyond the individuals themselves. A strength of demography as a field in its own right is thus to give insight into such macro-level processes.

However, Lee’s argument implies a normative perspective that places some of the components of demography at the supposed centre of the discipline. It may be true that the roots of demographic analysis are to be found in aggregate quantitative analyses such as the first study of mortality rates (Graunt 1662), the

invention of life tables (Halley 1693), the first laws of mortality (Gompertz 1825), the standardisation of census techniques through the Congrès international de statistique co-founded by Quetelet in 1853, or the formalisation of the relationship between mortality, fertility and growth rate (Lotka 1939), to cite just a few of the most influential pioneers of the field. However, other approaches such as qualitative methods (Hennink et al. 2020), event-history analysis (Courgeau & Lelièvre 1992), and sequence analysis (Billari & Piccaretta 2005) have since then proven very powerful in understanding population processes by including the experience and voice of individuals in shaping social meta-structures. These new approaches might not originate from demography, but have become equally important constituents and have earned the right to be considered just as central in defining demography as traditional aggregate quantitative methods.

Moreover, we assert that the richness of demography extends to its “periphery” and that Lee’s description of “hyphenated demography” as dominated by rational choice theory does not do justice to the actual subtlety of theories at play in ‘the periphery’. The attention to micro-level questions and methods ought not to rest on the rational choice perspective that emphasizes the responsibility of individuals in their demographic outcomes. Indeed, micro-level perspectives have long addressed this theoretical bottleneck, notably by adopting the life course paradigm (Elder 1974) and the capability approach (Sen, 1999). Applying a life course perspective to, for instance, migration, can shed light on the connections between migration and certain life events, the historical context or the importance of linked lives. The capability approach allows looking at demographic processes such as migration from the real opportunities that people experience as opposed to what they could theoretically aspire to. These capabilities vary immensely between different socio-spatial contexts, think of, for instance, a war-ridden country in the Middle East and a stable Wester-European country.

Figure 1: Representation of demography as a donut field



In consequence, as much as we agree with Lee that demography needs to nurture its unique asset, we argue that the donut representation (Figure 1) is unfair and outdated. The image of the donut, while used by Lee as a critical representation of what he sees as adverse developments in the field, implies that demography should have a single dominant centre. In fact, we might extrapolate from his metaphor that a “healthy” field of demography should look more like a Berliner (Krapfen), filled with rich and creamy formulas. This would however not solve the issues that we just raised since the rest of the pastry would, in contrast, be made of a quite bland and unexciting dough. The field of demography deserves a new metaphor capable of presenting a more positive, contemporary and inclusive image of itself. In order to find this new gastronomic representation, we hungrily explored different alternatives.

Despite our concerns, we still considered the Berliner, which might seem a natural remedy to fill in the empty core of the donut, but despite our efforts to spread the jam across the whole dough, we could not get a satisfying even distribution without breaking the round shape. Then we turned to the more exotic churros, which would have the advantage of providing a more diverse perspective. We however felt that their shape was too elongated and risked taking its constituting elements too far apart. A rounder shape was necessary, but the crepes and poffertjes seemed too flat and too small, respectively, to contain the depth of population science. The ‘gauffre de Liège’ was a strong contender, with its square shape and tiled pattern capable of structuring a rich variety of toppings, but we felt that social reality is rarely so squarely shaped.

Continuing our culinary tour, we also considered the Italian Panettone, which, with its majestic cupola shape, candied fruits and lavish decoration, would make a prestigious model for our discipline. But we felt that the gentle world of demography was not ready for such an ostentatious representation. Equally delicious, but more modest in size, the English Christmas pudding also had strong arguments, but we were afraid that it would be too sticky to allow a fluid dialogue between its components. This is when it hit us. We had been looking all around Europe while the solution was laying just under our noses! The good-old Dutch raisin oliebol was just what we needed.

Careful consideration led us to choose the Oliebollen Framework as the next-generation model for demography over many other options. Its round shape conveys unity and equity, as none of its constituents sticks out and no side offers a better perspective than the others. It is not plain though and does justice to the specific contribution of demography. In the raisin oliebol framework, formal demography, symbolised by the raisins, is not placed at the core but is instead dispersed throughout the whole oliebol. It is a big leap forward from the core-periphery depiction of the field of demography as it allows approaching demographic questions from both the macro and micro levels, comparing findings from alternative methods, and combining arguments from formal demography and its adjacent fields. In the raisin Oliebollen world, formal demography is not the secluded core of the field; it becomes the delectable ingredient that feeds the diverse, transdisciplinary flavour of society, indulging in a smorgasbord of insights, each bite revealing the unique sprinkles of life events.

Figure 2: Representation of demography as an Oliebollen field



Despite being convinced by the raisin oliebol’s qualities, we feared that it still would not do full justice to the wonderful field of demography. A key ingredient was missing to connect all the small raisin nuggets of wisdom and diffuse their taste throughout the dough of demographic knowledge. Our quest for the missing

ingredient took the form of hours of dissecting and tasting oliebolle with different types of frosting and powdered sugar, leading to intense, passionate, and greasy discussions. Slowly, it dawned on us that we had been thinking in the wrong direction: we had only contemplated solid ingredients and wrongly ignored liquid ones. At first, we thought of black tea. And indeed, a tea-infused raisin-oliebol could present quite a sophisticated vision to aim for. However, we also wanted to consider an oliebol infused with a liquid with a satisfying percentage of alcohol, along with a tempting scent and taste. In Northern Netherlands, this function is often played by brandy (brandewijn). Imagine an oliebol with raisins, drenched with brandy. It has the potential to not only connect the solid elements of formal demography throughout the dough but also to diffuse and reduce tensions between different areas of the oliebol. This capacity has already proven itself in the Netherlands, the country where we work. There, this so-called “boerenjongens oliebol” might have initially appealed to the strong Northern farmers, but is also very much appreciated by the intellectuals of The Hague! Different variations of this recipe are of course possible, depending on regional and individual tastes, different life course phases or times of the day, for instance through the addition of rum, gin, tequila, caipirinha, or sake, making it a versatile solution to all the World’s demographic problems.

Last but not least, let us not forget the societal impact of the boerenjongens oliebol once we eat it! Oliebollen are not just the right framework, they also invoke the desired impact. Imagine the drenched raisins enter the body and the alcohol disperse and assert its effect. It will make a happy person and many happy people will make a very happy population which will ultimately result in an inclusive demographic party where everyone is invited to savour the richness of demographic diversity.

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated that through adopting a more inclusive and positive gastronomic framework, demography will be better equipped to address the complex challenges of our time associated with the causes and consequences of the core demographic themes of migration, fertility and mortality. The Oliebollen framework enables demographers to combine and integrate formal demography with other fields, which will result in novel insights. Similar to van Dalen & Henkens (2012) we argue that it is vital to work across disciplinary boundaries in order to address the complex problems of our time.

We conclude that donuts might have had their moment of fame in demography, but Oliebollen are the future. They are not stuck in a ring-shaped rut, but embracing the wholeheartedness of a round, puffy universe where demographics are as sparkling as the raisin and brandy-infused dough being dropped into bubbling hot oil. The Oliebollen framework is the true maverick of demographic research. After all, life is too short for bland pastries and outdated visions – let’s spice it up with some deep-fried demographic delight!

Note

An earlier version of this paper was written for the Liber Amicorum that was put together by NIDI on behalf of Leo van Wissen’s retirement. The Liber Amicorum has been handed to Leo on 25 April 2024. We used ChatGPT for initial inspiration to write a paper that was both serious and funny. The editor of RQJ used DALL-E to generate the illustrations.

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