

# Incorporating social theory into demography and family research

Raquel Zanatta Coutinho\*

JOHNSON-HANKS, J. A.; BACHRACH, C. A.; MORGAN, S. P.; KOHLER, H.-P. **Understanding family change and variation**: toward a theory of conjunctural action. Springer, 2011.

Published in 2011, *Understanding family change and variation: toward a theory of conjunctural action*, is the result of a 7-year-long collective effort of four main authors (J. A. Johnson-Hanks; C. A. Bachrach; S. P. Morgan; H.-P. Kohler), three main contributors (L. Hoelter; R. King; P. Smock) and hundreds of collaborators, with the intention of bringing social demography closer to social theory. Although the book's pages are permeated with references that together comprise a very valuable review of the literature, this is not a handbook of theory for demographers. The authors present an altogether new framework, based on their combined extensive research, which included inviting theorists and experts in family studies to their meetings to discuss and enrich their ideas.

Funded by one of the major governmental agencies in the United States (National Institutes of Health), the initial proposal consisted of reviewing and critiquing existing research, theory and practice in the social demography of the family. When the group realized there was a shared dissatisfaction with the many theoretical models already available, they began re-discussing theories on family, questioning and re-shaping well-established assumptions and meanings in family research, up to the point where a new, more embracing, framework was compiled: the Theory of Conjunctural Action (TCA).

Given that studying family change and variation is important for making sense of the social and cultural patterns of demographic data, the authors argue that demographers miss the opportunity to explain social phenomena when they limit themselves to describing their data without critical thinking, or when they are narrowed by the dominant models of explanation and causality without "questioning the assumptions about the meaning of categories and concepts" (JOHNSON-HANKS et al., 2011, p. x). Thus, the main objective of the authors of this book was to provide a framework that all scholars of the family could draw on for their explanations of its multiple realities.

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Their argument fits into a major sociological debate that seeks to find a balance between agency and structure. Many theories that have already been established in the social sciences are cited throughout the book. Sewell's (1992, 2005) theory of Duality of Structure is the main reference, though Giddens (1979, 1984) and Bourdieu (1977, 1998) are also called in to explain how social structure influences individuals and how individual action can shape structure. Aligned with social psychology, path-dependency and life course research, the authors theorize on micro- and macro-level interaction. This new framework innovates by taking into account not only the social aspects of life and interactions with the world; it also deals with information about how the brain works biologically, interlinking emotion, attitudes, beliefs and action. This approach sometimes challenges the notion that human behavior is entirely rational. In addition, the TCA incorporates relevant aspects of theories from other disciplines, such as psychology, behavioral economics, neuro- and cognitive sciences, biology, sociology and anthropology to advance knowledge in the field of the family. They argue that the TCA can be used to answer demographic questions, making it very informative and, at the same time, very friendly, reading.

The book is divided into five chapters, with the first introducing the Theory of Conjunctural Action (TCA). Chapters 1 and 2, and the Conclusion, were co-authored by Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan and Kohler. In the remaining three chapters, the three authors work in pairs to apply the TCA to fertility change and variation (Chapter 3, co-authored by Morgan and Kohler), to an analysis of social class, timing and context of childbearing (Chapter 4, co-authored by Bachrach, Smock and Hoelter), and to a history of assisted reproduction and adoption (Chapter 5, co-authored by Johnson-Hanks and King).

The main premise of the TCA is that vital events are products of social action and should therefore be treated as such, and this requires a definition of social structure. The concept of structure is divided into two components: *schemas* and *materials*.<sup>1</sup> *Schemas* include expected ideas and behavior one learns by induction or by direct exposure over time through socialization and interaction. This provides mental maps of how an individual is going to respond and interact with the world.

Our interaction partners rely on the schematic components of structure in navigating specific social conjunctures, normalizing the schemas as they go. Each successful reiteration of a cultural schema legitimates and strengthens it, making the schema appear non-ideological and noncontroversial. Uncontested schemas, hegemonic ones, are experienced as normal and transparent modes of being or acting—not as options, but as just the ways things are (JOHNSON-HANKS et al., 2011, p. 6).

Conflicting schemas or the possession of multiple schemas can be problematic. They cite the example of the North American cultural schema that one should only marry for love and only bear children within marriage, causing a schema conflict for a 40-year-old woman who

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<sup>1</sup> The other component of structure, *material*, is the symbolic representation of a schema. The possession of a certain material can be the key access to certain schemas, for example, one might think that he/she needs money in order to become a parent. Access to material varies by class, geographical location, and other characteristics (JOHNSON-HANKS et al., 2011).

has not found a man she loves but wants to have children. Such conflicts are responsible for decline in fertility in many parts of the globe.

In addition to the influence of institutions, people are not simply passive recipients of structures. Rather, they are cognitive beings. Thus the TCA defines *identity*, which is shaped by social structure and also by *agency* as a “capacity for autonomous social action” or “ability to resist structure” (CALHOUN, 2002, p. 7; EMIRBAYER; MISCHÉ in JOHNSON-HANKS et al., 2011). In addition, an identity will develop and change through time and space in response to social position, and vice versa, as symbolic interactionists would argue. Sometimes, however, identities cannot be altered. If one comes from a poor neighborhood, for example, her/his agency might not be enough to change life opportunities. Thus, the TCA framework is also useful for explaining persistent social inequality and class privileges. While demographers assume that people are free to make choices, the TCA sees choice as a very complex social product. Sometimes a non-action is an action; for example, the non-usage of contraception may or may not be a reasoned action. Even a person’s own preference cannot be perfectly forecasted. TCA recognizes that much of human behavior is not a product of decision-making, and that not all behavior is the product of pure instinct.

These findings suggest that the temporalities of reproduction – the fact that child bearing takes a long time, that children come (usually) one at a time, and that decisions about children are often difficult and postponable – should matter a great deal, and should produce reproductive outcomes different than those predicted by rational choice. Reproductive decisions are not in fact “made once-and-for-all, generally at the beginning of the reproductive lifespan (Greenhalgh, 1995: 22), as our models assume” (JOHNSON-HANKS et al., 2011, p. 59).

Chapter 1 also discusses the difference between a *structure* and a *conjuncture*. While the former is relatively more stable, as explained above, the latter is more temporary and more linked to the present situation. As the authors say, “stuff happens.” The authors also discuss rational choice, culture and other terms attractive to sociologists but that demographers tend to use in certain specific contexts: the error term. In sum, one of the strengths of the TCA is to formalize the unpredictability of human behavior. In Chapter 2, the authors explain the process of *reconciling*, which is to cause an agreement between approaches proposed by different academic areas. They go on to cite knowledge from many academic fields in order to conceive their TCA, as human processes are far too complex to be explained using a single model.

In the following three chapters, using the lenses of the TCA, the authors integrate previously disjointed theoretical approaches that are employed in fertility and family research. In Chapter 3, for example, the authors are able to bring a reconciliation to the endless debates surrounding the Demographic Transition. They show how schematic and material interaction provide a coherent framework for analyzing low fertility patterns and how, within this framework, the differences in fertility across developed countries, as well as the variation in fertility patterns within the United States and other developed countries, can readily be explained, such as variations by race/ethnicity, SES, religion and other aspects.

Chapter 4 broadens the understanding of how social class sets the context for timing of childbearing in the United States, elucidating different conjunctures in the path to family formation. Chapter 5 sheds light on the field of infertility, showing how changes in conjuncture, propitiated by advances in reproductive technology, the successful birth of the first IVF baby, and the civil rights and feminist movements helped to increase the search for assisted reproductive technology.

In reading the book, the first question the reader might have is that the authors are proposing a grand new theory, as the TCA leaves no room for counter-argument or refutation. But they do not call the TCA a grand theory, not even something new, but an adaptation to Sewell's dual structure model, giving the reader the freedom to call it a paradigm, a model, or a framework. They make the point, however, that this way of thinking is new to social demographers and brings in remarkable contributions of human, social and biological sciences.

A second question is whether such an embracing theory will in fact be used by demographers. If the TCA is based on so many theories, it continues to be appealing to simply pick out the parts that are most useful to explain one's findings, without having to address a whole framework that cannot be measured completely. In this regard, although the TCA may look very appealing theoretically, the challenges of operationalizing such an embracing model are not easily resolved, and remain a challenge.

Demographers measure schemas indirectly when they are interested in learning what is "moral, legitimate and socially appropriate". Structures can then be modeled as they have always been, through religion, sex, education, family, SES, and other institutions. Regarding conjunctures, they can be studied, but not perfectly, of course, by inserting variables of context as controls. Still, how agency can be modeled, or how much autonomy one has over one's own life course and decisions remain unexplored in this book. As stated in the introduction, the TCA is a stepping stone for more work, an invitation for new ideas. My suggestion is that a mixed-method approach would do a reasonable job in capturing these many nuances.

Unquestionably, the main contribution of this book, which won the 2012 Otis Dudley Duncan Award for outstanding scholarship in social demography, is that it makes enjoyable reading for demographers as they broaden their minds and reflect on issues in family studies that are behind the variables, and how to capture them. Beyond the benefits of absorbing theories of family change and variation, the reader of this book also has the opportunity to make contact with excellent present-day research topics, as well as with problems that are likely to become the concern of the demographers of tomorrow.

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