

Theory and *Demography*:
An empirical analysis of theory use in contemporary demography*

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Extended Abstract

Although there has been substantial attention paid to methods and methodology in the field of demography, contemplation on the use of theory is negligible. In fact, there has been no systematic, empirical analysis of the use and development of theory within this field. This lack of reflection means that we know considerably less about how demographers use theory and the leading type of theories and disciplines that reign within this discipline. This paper provides an empirical review of theory use in contemporary demography over the past 10 years by analysing all available articles in the prominent journal 'Demography' from 1995-2005 (N=384).¹ The analysis engages in a combination of a qualitative discourse analysis approach, combined with a quantitative content analysis method. The level of theory use is examined first. This is followed by a categorization of theory use (e.g., formal theory, as heuristic, as tool, hit and run referencing), demonstrating both the positive and negative sides of theoretical applications. The analysis then turns to an examination of the prominent disciplines, theorists and theories that contemporary demographers drawn upon. Clear patterns emerge with a concentration of economic and sociological theory, followed by work from other disciplines such as anthropology, biology and psychology. Certain theorists also dominate, with the work of Gary Becker, for instance, appearing in 16 percent of all articles, a number that is considerably higher in different subject fields. The paper then moves to an interpretation of the findings, including a discussion about the attractiveness of certain theories, such as those that make individual agency more predictable and measurable. The implications of the persistence of dominate theories and disciplines are then considered. The paper ends with a detailed discussion of suggestions for theoretical innovations, isolating the areas and approaches that have been to this point underdeveloped or ignored.

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¹ Further extensions of the paper will include an analysis over a longer period.