PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

UNDERSTANDING CIRCULATION IN AUSTRALIA*

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Progress in the nascent field of inquiry concerned with understanding circulation in developed countries requires a balance between individual and aggregate modes of explanation. The sparsity and fragmentation of current studies is traced to the dearth of appropriate data sources and the complexity of circular moves, reflecting the integral connections between data, method and theory in migration research. It is argued that circulation, like permanent migration, can be divided into production- and consumption-related categories, but that measurement of circulation is complicated by three additional features: variable duration, repetition and seasonality. Four dimensions of population movement are identified: intensity of circular migration, movement distances, patterns of redistribution and migration networks. Census and survey data are used to quantify these dimensions.

There seems little doubt that demography owes much of its interest to the bridge it makes between autobiography and sociology. The processes demographers study — reproduction, family formation, migration, mortality — are at once the fundamental underpinnings of human population change and the most significant events in the life course of individuals. Probably few demographers actively pursue these parallels by using professional knowledge to position themselves in the aggregate statistics: ageing is disconcerting enough without tracing one’s own eventual demise in a life table. Nor would it seem wise to suggest that the reverse effect commonly occurs, whereby research foci are engendered by personal interest in particular life course events. For myself, however, a more than tangential connection must be acknowledged between personal experience and the choice of population mobility as my predominant field of research. Such experience has served to underline the tension between individual and aggregate modes of explanation that seems endemic to migration research.

Multiple modes of explanation may be expected to strengthen understanding. In practice, however, individual and aggregate perspectives have emerged as competing, rather than complementary, approaches to the study of mobility (Massey 1990). On balance, the impetus in contemporary migration research lies with studies at the individual and household level, with their emphasis on biographical techniques and humanist accounts rather than with traditional, positivist methods and interpretations of aggregate data (see McHugh 2000).

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In the case of circular mobility (defined here to include all temporary forms of mobility involving at least one night away from home), this bias almost certainly derives from the pioneering work undertaken in 'Third-world' and 'Fourth-world' contexts with its predominant reliance on purposive surveys and the ethnographic tradition (see Chapman and Prothero 1983; Taylor and Bell 1996). While the transfer of these methods and findings to developed-world settings offers a rare opportunity to reverse the conventional path of academic colonialism (see Skeldon 1995), it also raises the challenge of balancing the contemporary impetus towards individual-level studies of circulation (see for example McHugh, Hogan and Happel 1995) with aggregate-level approaches.

This paper aims to take up this challenge, and hence contribute to a pluralist understanding of circulation in the developed world, by exploring the potential for a systematic approach which captures the multiple dimensions of the phenomenon. The paper first elaborates the integral connections between data, theory and method that underpin migration research. Drawing on earlier collaborative work (Bell and Ward 1998a-c, 1999, 2000, forthcoming), the paper sketches the nature of circulation, argues for a broad, working definition and advances a simple classificatory schema. For a concise review of research in the field, a framework is needed within which the plethora of findings from unrelated studies can be situated. Borrowing from a parallel stream of research on cross-national indicators of permanent migration, the paper examines potential measures of circulation on four discrete dimensions of mobility behaviour. It concludes by examining avenues for future work.

Data, theory and method in the study of migration

Migration has long occupied a distinctive niche in the field of population studies. Since it is inherently a spatial phenomenon, it is hardly surprising that a major part of the research effort has come from geographers rather than from demographers; but there are more fundamental differences between migration and the other events that demographers commonly study. Crucial among these is that compared with births and deaths, migration is difficult to define, to measure and to classify; these difficulties have deep-seated origins. As in all science, progress in the understanding of migration is fundamentally reliant on the interdependent development of theory, data and method. In the case of migration, there are clear and distinct links between the types of data which are available and the methods and theories these support (see Table 1). The corollary is, of course, that many of the advances in understanding mobility behaviour have been fundamentally dependent on the availability of particular forms of data. Untangling the relationship between migration and other events in the life course, for example, has only really become feasible with the application of tools such as event history analysis to data from panel surveys and other longitudinal sources.

In Australia, high-quality data are available from the five-yearly Census of Population and Housing. The question on place of residence five years ago which has been asked at each Census since 1971 now offers a time series of seven sequential five-year periods. While this time series is short by comparison with those commonly available in the fields of fertility and mortality, in migration circles it ranks as unusual, if not exceptional. Coupled with the wide range of characteristics and the spatial resolution available, and