BOOK REVIEWS

VÉRONIQUE PETIT, KAVERI QURESHI, YVES CHARBIT, and PHILIP KREAGER (Eds.)

The Anthropological Demography of Health
Oxford University Press, 2020, 552 p., $145.00

Research in population and development in the past decade has increasingly centered on examining the relationship between health and demographic vital events—fertility, mortality, nuptiality, and migration. Anthropological Demography of Health is a landmark volume that gives a new currency to this debate. First, the editors’ careful and detailed Introduction and Afterword urge the reader to consider more seriously the local variations and heterogeneities in demographic and health behaviour. The questions of what subpopulations compose the demographic and health patterns leading to heterogeneities on the subnational level are put at center stage in the volume. Second, each of the 19 context-specific chapters offer a wealth of perspectives and methodologies to examine these subnational variations in demographic and health behaviors, as well as their governance across contexts in the global North and global South. Third, we learn from this edited collection as much about variations in health vulnerabilities and inequalities between and within subpopulations as we do about individual and community resilience and risk mitigation strategies. These are all crucial, yet challenging aspects developed by this edited collection, which make it the first contribution of its scope and ambition. In this review, I take the three aforementioned aspects as my primary focal points as I guide the readers through the volume’s main highlights.

Anthropological Demography of Health stands in line with the classical edited collections that have laid out this field since the 1990s.1 The Introduction surveys this rich history. Read alongside the Afterword, the two review chapters illustrate why the disciplines of demography—with its focus on vital events—and anthropology—with its focus on rites of passage—did not recognize their common interest in the study of biological and social facts of life until the 1980s. As the Introduction to this collection vividly shows, the dominance of modernization theory in the post-war decades created more synergies between demography and sociology/economics. Nonetheless, the critique of demographic models that undermine variations promoted more careful examination of demographic behaviors on a local scale. Inspired by 1960s and 1970s studies in historical demography, anthropological demography emerged when the shift in the study of reproductive behaviors took place. Separate from the postmodern turn in social sciences, this shift started with the study of reproductive behaviors beyond a mere focus on fertility limitation, and accounting for a wider set of health-seeking behaviors and structural factors that shaped these behaviors on a local level. As this volume illustrates, anthropological demography has indeed urged an inquiry into a systematic study of subnational variations in demographic behaviors through innovative bottom-up qualitative and qualitative approaches. Anthropological Demography of Health builds on this important legacy by taking it a major step forward. The collection presents a convincing case for why
anthropological demography today has become an interdisciplinary field. The wide list of contributors to the five parts of collection illustrates this, while each part also charts the further direction for the field.

Part I explains what anthropological demography of health entails for historical studies. This part focuses on local health behaviors and interventions in four comparative contexts. Chapters by Huges Moussy on the medical topographies in colonial Algeria and Yves Charbit on the governance of prostitution in France offer complementary accounts on the nineteenth century French colony and metropole, respectively. As Moussy’s chapter shows, data collection about local health, sanitary, and environmental conditions through medical topographies was widely carried out, both in the colony and metropolitan contexts, and not only in France, but in Germany, Italy, Britain, and the United States, as well. Moussy shows that in colonial Algeria, the aim of topographies was to determine the survival of French soldiers and the settler subpopulation—and to a lesser extent the native subpopulation—which, he argues, was a strategy that the colonial government deployed to conquer the occupied territories. Charbit’s chapter focuses on the French metropole, where scientific methods were also used to construct top-down groups of people whose behaviors were deemed “savage.” Based on the medical and demographic accounts of contemporaries, Charbit shows that singling out a group of women who sold sex in the cities was an ideological premise. Both of these historical accounts show time and again that these historical top-down population groupings have since facilitated the institutionalization of sexism and racism. They also remind the reader why it is crucial to pay attention to the way demographic and health data sources are constructed—both in the past and in the present—and translated to policies, which is also the focus of Part III of the collection, as discussed below.

Chapters by Ramola Davenport and Shane Doyle, while distant in their historical periods, offer complementary accounts of local values and institutions that helped to achieve successful health management in English and British colonial contexts, respectively. Davenport examines smallpox epidemics that occurred in the north and south of England during the eighteenth century, before any state-wide vaccination campaigns took place. She argues that the southern English parishes were able to overcome the disease faster by deploying isolation of the diseased and immunization strategies at the community level. The role of the Old Poor Laws—not just the population density alone—was a key factor here, Davenport suggests. Taking the reader to the twentieth century, Doyle’s chapter offers a compelling account of knowledge vernacularization around maternal and child health in three ethnic groups in Uganda and Kenya shortly prior to and after their independence from British colonial rule. While East African countries are often recognized for their relative “success” in adopting biomedical forms of family planning and child nutrition, Doyle argues that the role of kin- and women’s groups—not only medical professionals—has been central to the way this medical knowledge was navigated with respect to local understandings of ill-health in the recent past.

Part II of the collection positions health as a central focus in population and development governance programs. The chapters in this part examine historical and present accounts of governance across five contexts. Véronique Petit’s chapter accounts for the history of mental health institutions emerging during nineteenth
century French colonialism in Senegal, to show that the mental health situation there has been closely interwoven with demographic crises, notably forced migration and displacements. Petit argues that, to understand demographic variations in mental health today, a close examination of institutional provision and kin relations is vital. Soraya Tremayne’s chapter surveys the rapid shifts in reproductive health policies in Iran—from the anti-natalist policies promoting family planning and voluntary sterilization to the pronatalist policies prohibiting abortions and promoting the use of in vitro fertilization (IVF). Against this background, Tremayne argues that, in order to understand the fertility decline to the subreplacement level, more attention needs to be paid to the role of ‘white marriage’ (ezdevaj-e sefid)\(^2\) and infertility. Both of these factors are more likely to affect and significantly disadvantage women’s lives in some subpopulations than in others. Leslie Butt’s chapter takes the reader to in East Lombok in Indonesia, where she examines local responses to the Indonesian government’s attempts to introduce universal birth registration. Butt shows that it is not merely the complex procedure of birth registration that promotes lower registration rates in poorer communities. The perception that birth registration benefits the state while having little value for individuals themselves does not help individuals and communities to recognize the value and pay the cost of undergoing individual birth registration; in contrast, general household registration does provide some financial benefits in times of crisis. At the same time, Butt suggests that the lack of birth registration and individual documents among individuals in those communities makes them more vulnerable during their frequent labor migrations. Together, these three chapters illustrate that, by paying close attention to local responses to nationwide policies, it is possible to identify subnational variations not only in health and demographic behaviors but also in related vulnerabilities. Stanley Ulijaszek’s chapter concludes the discussion on health governance and provides the bridge to Part III. Ulijaszek, drawing on examples from the United Kingdom and India during the long twentieth century, provides an evaluation of anthropometric history, especially the body mass index (BMI). Despite the critique of BMI as an inadequate indicator for predicting obesity, especially in non-Western contexts, Ulijaszek shows that the persistent use of BMI, rather than, for example, the hip-to-waist ratio, has been due to the need to maintain standardized measures as part of demographic translation—the process by which lived experiences are translated into demographic data.

Part III of the collection focuses on demographic translation. Jennifer Johnson-Hanks’s chapter suggests that there are two phases of demographic translation—from lived experiences to data production, and from data production to analysis. As this is an obvious course of events for any demographic survey, Johnson-Hanks reminds the reader that data construction often results in misinterpretations and nonrecordings; this then leads to noninclusion of subpopulations that may be seen as atypical or exceptional when viewed from an aggregate level. Here, it is important to mention that historical demographers will be very familiar with these challenges associated with the construction of data sources discussed by Johnson-Hanks; they are known to be part of the “critical reflexive demography” introduced by Szreter et al. (2004).\(^3\) Linking to this idea, Johnson-Hanks further argues that, in contemporary demographic surveys, both acts of quantification and aggregation require critical attention to the way demographic and health categories are constructed and
applied in the context of local subpopulations. This argument is developed further based on the empirical findings in Sara Randall’s chapter. Randall examines the very process of data collection and construction of demographic categories; that is, household, unmet need, and others which are part of Johnson-Hanks’s first-order demographic translation. Randall then takes the Demographic and Health Survey—the largest longitudinal and cross-national survey of its kind—to illustrate specific limitations associated with the standardization of these concepts across several localities in West Africa. Importantly, Randall does not argue in favor of “endless local studies” (p. 296). Instead, she puts forward a more provocative suggestion: that demographers need to acknowledge and be open to the fact that it may not be entirely possible to harmonize data collection categories completely. This, Randall suggests, would allow us to avoid misrepresentations under the blanket of homogeneity.

Clarissa Surek-Clark’s chapter deals with yet another side of demographics—reporting of causes of death in another major cross-national survey, the Health and Demographic Surveillance Sites (HDSS). By looking at six HDSS localities in East and Southeast Africa, Surek-Clark suggests that the technique of verbal autopsy interviewing could be an ultimate tool to capture the two-thirds of deaths and their causes that are not being reported in the region. Crucial here is that this attempt to develop a systematic way of capturing causes of death is accompanied by a careful examination of why, so far, death recording has been so low. This, Surek-Clark shows, is linked to stigma and refusal to talk about dead relatives; language translation plays a huge role in this first-order demographic translation exercise.

Building on the wealth of the theoretical and methodological approaches in the preceding parts, Part IV of the collection opens up yet another important avenue for the field of anthropological demography. This is the reconciliation of compositional demography—developed by Szreter and Garrett (2000) and Kreager (2011) among others—and vital conjunctural events—developed by Johnson-Hanks (2007, 2017)—to study subnational demographic variations and health vulnerabilities. The chapter by Philip Kreager and Elizabeth Schröder-Bulferfill develops this theoretical debate based on their excellent empirical evidence from a longitudinal mixed-methods study of several localities in East Java in Indonesia. Kreager and Schröder-Bulferfill show that older people have belonged to several subpopulations over their life courses, as they may experience various conjunctural events—turning points or predicaments in one’s life that are often linked to vital events but also deviations from these. Situating individuals’ belonging to these subpopulations against the occurrence of conjunctural events—which often also depend on individuals’ role in these subpopulations—helps to identify the people who are more prone to vulnerability in later life, Kreager and Schröder-Bulferfill argue. Indeed, their chapter suggests a realist methodology to address health vulnerabilities in later life. The chapter by Kavery Qureshi further develops the idea of conjunctural events by examining the context of chronic illness among the British Pakistani community in East London in the United Kingdom. Qureshi suggests that the moment of incapacity to contribute to the workforce is a conjunctural event in one’s life; she explains which resources people need in order to respond to this event. Qureshi also urges the reader to think in more critical terms about the role of intersectionality as a lens to capture one’s social position in relation to the subpopulations to which an individual may belong. What seems evident from this and other
chapters in the volume is that subpopulations build on social networks and community ties, which in some contexts may also be linked to one's individual markers of identity. An intersectional perspective can thus add another analytical layer here by helping to examine the power dynamics within and between subpopulations. The concluding chapter, by Carine Baxerres and Jean-Yves Le Hesran, examines malaria management strategies in several western African localities in Benin and Senegal. Baxerres and Le Hesran argue that alongside the drugs market and pharmaceutical consumption patterns, families also develop their own practices of “maintaining” health and hence have malaria prevention rules that may or may not incorporate biomedical knowledge. Baxerres and Le Hesran’s argument is complementary to Doyle’s argument in Part I, about vernacularization of health knowledge in the east African contexts, as both involve strategies for overcoming health risks.

The focus on health risks is central to Part V, the final part of the collection. Although they focus specifically on reproductive health risks, the chapters here speak to earlier ones as they also discuss individual and community strategies for dealing with risks and uncertainties. The chapter by Alison Shaw draws on her decade-long research on consanguineous marriages and genetic risk management among various communities across the Middle East and South Asia. Similarly to the chapters by Doyle (Part I) and Baxerres and Le Hesran (Part IV), Shaw shows that biomedical—or Western—knowledge about genetics is neither blindly followed nor completely rejected, but vernacularized, using Doyle’s term, with a view to protecting the community from diseases. In this context, reproductive technologies as IVF may also receive a new meaning, as they offer an alternative to abortion in cases where transmission of genetic diseases is perceived as a risk. The chapter by Lucas Tchetgnia, Yves Charbit, and Benoît Libali further explores the link between risks and uncertainties in the context of youth protection practices against HIV/AIDS in three communities in the Republic of Congo. Tchetgnia, Charbit, and Libali show that, despite youths being aware of the risks associated with unprotected sex, they still engage in it with people whom they know to be infected with the virus. In this view, the stigma around HIV/AIDS has a reversal effect: it constitutes an expression of trust and solidarity with an infected sexual partner, even in short-term relationships. The study is remarkable in that it vividly illustrates that high levels of uncertainty in fact reinforce risk-taking practices among youths. In this respect, the chapter by Elizabeth Krausen gives a somewhat contrasting account of managing uncertainty by minimizing risk. Krausen’s analysis of a community of Chinese workers in the Tuscany region of Prato in Italy suggests that young mothers prefer to send their children to relatives in China rather than using local medical services. Finally, the two chapters by Clémence Schantz and Jan Brunson provide contrasting accounts of maternal care provision effects on maternal death. Brunson’s work on the peri-urban Nepalese community, which has a midrange maternal mortality rate, illustrates the diverse impact that living as a nuclear or joint family has on women’s pregnancies. In the former case, women are encouraged to work during pregnancy and return to work soon after the delivery, which then increases their risk of mortality. This contrasts with the experiences of women who are better off and often have support available from their joint kin, with whom they continue to reside after pregnancy. In contrast, Schantz’s chapter shows that overprotection of maternal bodies, through the combination of vernacular and biomedical practices
in the capital of Cambodia, plays an important role in the overall improvement of maternal care. These biomedical practices are also preferred in the context of deliveries, which are carried out via cesarean delivery (C-section) at rates well above those suggested as safe by the World Health Organisation.

As this review has highlighted, each part of the collection opens up new debates in the field of anthropological demography, for which chapters provide rich empirical bases. With its breadth of contexts across every part of the globe, *Anthropological Demography of Health* will make a stimulating and provocative read for population and development scholars working across various historical periods and geographical localities.

*University of Lincoln*

*University of Groningen*

**Yuliya Hilevych**

### Notes


2. Unlike French marriage blanc (marriage without consummation), Iranian ‘white marriage’ is a form of an unregistered marriage that is more similar to cohabitation in the west.


Debates about the value and the ethics of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) in development economics have been active for at least the past 20 years, since a group of prominent economists began publishing the results of RCTs on a range of development issues. Debates about RCTs, both in high-income countries and development settings, have existed for much longer, but the past two decades have seen a marked increase in the production of RCTs in low and middle-income countries and—with them—a host of criticisms. The 2019 award of the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel to Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo, and Michael Kremer for their work using experiments to illuminate solutions to global poverty provided official recognition of the work, on the one hand; but on the other, it spurred further critical discussion.

A new volume, *Randomized Control Trials in the Field of Development: A Critical Perspective*, edited by Florent Bédécarrats, Isabelle Guérin, and François Roubaud, seeks to add to this debate with a collection of 13 studies, along with an introduction by the editors and a set of four interviews (with an Indian policymaker, an Indian government advisor, a French aid official, and a French aid researcher). The editors assemble an array of voices, mostly economists but also medical doctors, water and sanitation specialists, a biostatistician, and others.

Sometimes the volume feels like a true debate. Pritchett (Chapter 2) argues that RCTs distract from a more holistic view of national development in favor of a focus on specific targets (such as “eradicating extreme poverty”). Morduch (Chapter 3) rebuts that “systemic change is not always possible, and sometimes leaves parts of populations behind. Broadening access and service delivery, and expanding the provision of basic goods, remains a fundamental agenda for governments, aid agencies, and foundations.” Morduch also pushes back against the idea that RCTs drove a shift in focus away from macroeconomic growth, providing evidence that a shift towards private goods began two decades earlier. In another instance, Ravallion (Chapter 1) proposes that RCTs “get less critical scrutiny than other methods” whereas Vivalt (Chapter 11) highlights, in a related if not direct response, that RCTs show less evidence of specification searching (i.e., dropping or adding or transforming variables to get a statistically significant result) than other studies. Ogden (Chapter 4) provides a taxonomy of seven classes of RCT critiques, including many of those in other chapters (along with others unmentioned in this volume), and also provides responses to many of them.

In other places, the argument feels less balanced, as in the article-length critique of the 2015 special issue of *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* on RCTs evaluating microcredit (Chapter 7). To be fair, the editors state clearly that they invited 10 famous researchers who use RCTs (“randomistas,” in the preferred term of the volume) to participate in the volume, and those researchers declined. Why so? While I do not know the specific motivations, Ogden makes the argument that, while RCT proponents have grown less likely to engage in active debate with critics over the method, the RCT movement has evolved significantly, functionally responding to many of the critiques, with experiments on a wider range of topics,
longer timeframes for evaluation, increased use of multiple arms to test alternative
mechanisms, and more engagement with policy.

I have published the results of RCTs (as well as quasi-experimental studies and
reviews of both RCTs and quasi-experimental studies), and I was tempted to assume
a defensive crouch while reading this volume. Many of the critiques throughout are
not exclusive to RCTs but apply just as well to quasi-experimental studies and—in
some cases—to any empirical research. (Many of the chapter authors explicitly rec-
ognize this in their discussions.) As economist Pamela Jakiela put it years ago, “for
some reason they keep spelling ‘study’ as R-C-T” (Jakiela 2016, quoted by Ogden
in this volume). Here are some examples: misreporting of studies by the media and
a failure of authors to correct it (Spears, Ban, and Cumming—Chapter 6), report-
ing estimates as facts in a popular book based on research (Deaton—Introduction),
poorly designed questionnaires and poor reporting of study details (Bédécarrats,
Guérin, and Roubaud – Chapter 7), piece-meal and unsustainable solutions with
insufficient systemic considerations (interview with Gulzar Natarajan), the fact that
“what works” to solve a problem may vary across contexts (Deaton—Introduction),
poor choice of outcome variables, or insufficient sample size (Garchitorena et al.—
Chapter 5). Yet while these problems are not unique to RCTs, neither are RCTs
exempt from them. Hopefully, practitioners of other methods will likewise find in-
spiration to improve here.

At least two critiques highlighted in the volume do apply principally to RCTs.
The first is that RCT advocates claim that RCTs sit at the top of a hierarchy of empir-
ical methods (i.e., they represent a “gold standard”). Deaton, Ravallion, and Heck-
man each discuss this at length, highlighting that RCTs face their own statistical in-
ference challenges, especially but not limited to when implementation is imperfect
(which it usually is), and also that RCTs may be good at identifying an average effect
of a treatment, but that often that is not the most policy-relevant statistic. (There
is much more, but that’s a taste!) While most of the quotes used to establish that
RCT practitioners claim pride of place are from well-known advocates (like Banerjee
and Duflo), another cited as placing RCTs at the top of a hierarchy is econometrician
Guido Imbens, who is not a practitioner of RCTs.

My impression is that much of the concern stems from the concern that
“gold standard” language leads some people to believe that, as Ravallion puts it,
“RCTs are not just top of the menu of approved methods, nothing else is on the
menu!” The extreme version of this position clearly does not apply to the most
well-known producers of RCTs. For example, although Bédécarrats, Guérin, and
Roubaud define randomistas as “proponents who are convinced that RCTs are
the only way to rigorously assess impact in evaluation, and that they are superior
to other methodologies in all cases,” all three winners of the Nobel for their
experimental work have quasi-experimental and descriptive work. (Banerjee and
Duflo, together with Qian, published a quasi-experimental evaluation of road-
building just last year!) Yet a form of this does manifest in reviews of the literature
(either stand-alone or within empirical papers) that only consider RCT evidence,
implicitly or explicitly imposing the assumption that only RCTs deliver impact
evidence of value. Spears, Ban, and Cumming (Chapter 6) quote relevant earlier
work by Deaton and Cartwright: randomization “does not relieve us of the need
to think.”
A second critique that is felt more by RCTs than by observational studies is ethical. Quasi-experimental studies have ethical issues as well—any data collection or even data use may require ethical considerations—but RCTs have the additional ethical challenge of manipulating treatment. (Again, RCTs are not unique in manipulating treatment for the purpose of evaluation, but I would propose that they do it much more commonly than most quasi-experimental approaches.) In their thought-provoking article, Abramowicz and Szafarz (Chapter 10) ask “should economists care about equipoise?” Equipoise is the principle that in advance of the RCT, researchers should be genuinely ignorant as to whether the treatment is beneficial or not. (Or, if an RCT is testing two alternative treatments, researchers should be ignorant as to which is best.) This plays an important role in medical ethics, but development economists leave it largely undiscussed in their work. In their defense, economists may argue that many interventions that advocates support are not actually proven and that RCTs have demonstrated zero effects for interventions that intuition or anecdotal experience suggested would be effective. Yet there are interventions—cash transfers are an easy example, now that hundreds of studies have studied them across many contexts—for which it is difficult to say that the treatment group is not likely to be better off than the control group.

RCT implementers may further defend a departure from equipoise by proposing that rationing will take place anyway in cases where there are insufficient resources to benefit everyone, and that randomizing may be fairer than other allocations. But as Ravallion points out, we often do have some information about who is likely to benefit the most (e.g., the poorest!). Even Ogden, whose article offers the most robust defense of RCTs in the volume, comes up empty on this one: “On the questions of equipoise, as noted above, this remains an area where the RCT movement has yet to significantly engage as best I can tell.” Yet even this may be shifting in the wake of recent controversies around the ethics of certain RCTs. A group of prominent economists, including some whom the editors of this volume would call “randomistas,” have proposed that social science RCTs include ethical discussions, including a discussion of equipoise and, in the case of scarce resources, a rationale for why randomization was better than targeting specific groups for benefits (Asiedu et al. 2021). I suspect that norms will evolve significantly in the coming years in this regard.

The volume includes much of interest that I have not touched on in detail here. Morduch (Chapter 3) highlights how RCTs, even if one is unconvinced of their value for evaluation, are valuable for exploring new types of “economic contracts, behaviors, and institutions.” Vivalt (Chapter 11) explores how incorporating prior beliefs from policymakers can help us learn more from RCTs and other evaluations. Garcia-Torena et al. (Chapter 5) advocate for including faster moving, nonrandomized implementation research in health delivery, a plea that is echoed in the interview with Indian policymaker Gulzar Natarajan at the end of the volume. On the whole, the volume delivers much of value, even if not all critiques are unique to RCTs.

A final point, raised repeatedly in the volume, is the hopefully obvious fact that RCTs cannot answer all questions and that even those questions that are well answered by an RCT are often best answered in complement with other methods. Questions about economic growth and trade policy are not amenable to randomization, and RCTs by themselves will not yield deep, thick characterizations of health
systems and bureaucracies. An RCT will not reveal whether the goals of a program “were worth pursuing in the first place” (Picciotto, Chapter 9). Ultimately, as Spears, Ban, and Cumming put it in their discussion of water and sanitation evaluations (Chapter 6), “there is no gold standard other than careful, thoughtful research.” This standard leaves lots of room for RCTs and a wide range of other tools.

Center for Global Development

DAVID K. EVANS

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TASMIN BRADLEY

Global Perspectives on Violence against Women and Girls

Zed Books, 2020, 208 p., £65.00

I write this review as tragic reports of sexual assault are unfolding in the highest echelons of power, from the prime minister’s office in Canberra, Australia, to the governor’s mansion in Albany, New York. This comes amidst a year of COVID lockdowns that have been associated with worsening reports of intimate partner violence (IPV) that have been described by the U.N. Secretary General as a “shadow pandemic.” And the major international agencies reporting the prevalence of violence against women confirm that the latest data—pre-COVID—mean that one in three women experience violence in the hands of a husband or boyfriend during their lifetime.

In the midst of ongoing and new tragedies reminding us of the urgency of preventing violence, this new volume, by feminist anthropologist Tasmin Bradley, provides important new insights. Beyond offering in-depth, context-specific insights into several different settings, the author shows the value of a gender lens and intersectional approach in understanding what works to end violence against women and girls (VAWG). An overarching argument, demonstrated in a range of contexts, is that activists on the ground working for and with survivors are fundamental to achieving the goal of ending all forms of VAWG. The book also provides a useful review and typology of programming to end VAWG in broad categories: behavioral change, public health campaigns and one-stop centers, school-based interventions, supporting social movements, and access to justice programming.

The author’s nuanced treatment of norms provides important insights. While norms are clearly important, Bradley argues that an excessive focus on norms can
underplay the role of the political and economic context. More generally, she argues, and shows, that the “web-like nature of our lives,” where a web of spheres and dimensions weave and combine in multiple ways, needs to be understood—because multiple factors can weave toxically together. This has implications for thinking about entry points, and which interventions are likely to bring about change. Knowledge alone, and even changing attitudes, is not sufficient; perpetrators of VAWG continue their violence even in contexts where there is a high level of acceptance that violence is wrong. A family may commit publicly to stopping female genital mutilation (FGM) but then go on to cut their daughters in private. She also warns that change is unlikely to be linear, not least because of embedded power relations and the risk of backlash.

The author is skeptical of behavioral change programs working with groups of men in specific locations—observed changes may not be sustainable change because, she argues, “they do not necessarily manage to alter the domination of discourses that sanction patriarchy and endorse VAWG.” It is well noted that attention needs to also focus on the influence of the political and economic context because “even when new ideologies emerge that support an end to localized violence, transformation is often slow or non-existent.”

The book argues that “underpinning” norms will shift only when women have resilience and a collective agency strong enough to respond to the backlash that change often brings. The argument is certainly persuasive, though I am not entirely sure that the case studies demonstrate these positive results in a range of settings.

One important area of inquiry is the role of religion. Bradley underlines that, while religious ideas are far from homogenous, “they are gendered and carry a certain authority that can feed into the construction of a social ecology that renders women inferior to men, and ultimately vulnerable to different forms of violence.” The review of efforts in Sudan by the government with international support to combat FGM, including by arguing that FGM is not a religious practice and enlisting religious leaders, is instructive. She underlines the importance of women and spaces at the grassroots levels in which harm and violence are being challenged.

Bradley argues—and many would agree—that “there are no magic bullets, and as such economic empowerment and income generation should be seen as components of a more integrated and nuanced approach to confronting—and ultimately ending—violence against women and girls.” Paid work outside the home may mean that women face sexual discrimination, intimidation, and violence in the workplace, as well as in public spaces during their commute, and for some, worse violence at home due to male backlash.

The chapters on Nepal and Pakistan provide valuable insights about economic opportunities. Women working in Kathmandu’s construction sector are often overburdened in terms of their work at home and outside, yet “all of the women interviewed stated that they would work even if they did not need to. They talked about the material necessity, the need to earn money in order to buy food and pay for school fees, but most of the women also said that earning an income increased their confidence and meant that they could influence decisions at the household level” (p. 89). However, many were also facing violence and harassment traveling on public transport to and from work, as well as violence in the home.
Bradley points out reasons to be optimistic about the future of women and girls in Nepal—given the 2015 constitutional commitment to gender equality, and the associated national equality and social inclusion framework working at all levels. However, she warns that the autonomy of women’s networks and organizations needs to be preserved, and that such groups should not be instrumentalized. The fact that Nepal remains among the group of countries with the highest estimated current IPV prevalence—at 22 percent—underlines the size of the challenges faced.

The chapters on Pakistan offer contrasts in the situation of relatively better off middle-class women working in the corporate sector and as entrepreneurs, with that of home-based workers. There is growing knowledge about the opportunities and constraints facing home-based workers through the efforts of networks like HomeNet South Asia and Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). The picture of such workers doing subcontracting work in Lahore reveals that many are driven to this work by poverty and very low levels of income. However, their lack of mobility meant that home-based work was the only real option available. Some hid the work from their husbands, and many women faced violence, most often physical and verbal. Earning an income did not prevent violence yet, Bradley concludes, there is “undoubtedly a psychological benefit to earning income across different socio-economic contexts, even in very poor and violent situations such as those faced by home-based workers.” Organizations such as HomeNet can help to negotiate better work and pay conditions and provide peer support and advice, but there are limits to change given “the hostility of the environment and the limited employment options open to women because of the norms tying women to a domestic role.” (p. 167). Pakistan is also among the bottom dozen in the 167 countries ranked in the Women, Peace and Security Index, with weak achievements across each of the dimensions of inclusion, justice and security.

One welcome finding from Pakistan—which otherwise “arguably has one of the most deeply discriminatory legislative and criminal justice systems in the world” (p. 126)—was that work-based harassment legislation had led to codes of conduct being enforced in some formal sector employment settings, and women interviewed who worked in these settings reported “an environment in which they felt safe and relatively supported” (p. 122).

Among the interesting areas of exploration is sex work. Based on qualitative interviews in Nepal and drawing on evidence from elsewhere, Bradley seeks the perspectives of sex workers in order to gain insights into the empowering impact that sex work may or may not bring. She points out that the violence represented through their profession must be seen relative to the extreme violence Nepali suffered in the home given dominant patriarchal systems. She argues that earning an income needs to be supported by an enabling environment with strong peer ties that serves to bolster individual agency and drive collective action. In Kathmandu, support in the informal entertainment sector is provided by a network of local organizations mostly run by women who themselves were sex workers, who have turned their backs on patriarchal convention and also campaign for safe and dignified lives for the women who have sought independence by working in the sector.

The volume usefully suggests practical ways forward. Chapter 2 presents and tests a continuum approach to measuring change in attitudes—from support,
through recognizing as a problem but tolerating, through recognizing as a problem and the need for change—applied to FGM in the UK, although it can be used to measure shifts in relation to other forms of VAWG, from IPV through to work-based harassment.

A key upshot worthy of a broad audience is that approaches to intervention need to be nimble enough to weave across and between interlocking layers. Bradley underlines the importance of open spaces to hear and see the challenge that change agents are experiencing and voicing on a daily basis, building on existing groups and resources. “Top-down campaigns capture global attention and funding, but will not transform social norms unless they are responsive to the work already going on and are able to harness the agency of women who battle and navigate violence on a daily basis.”

Finally, Tasmin Bradley importantly underlines the point that, while programming is moving in appropriate directions, “reversing deeply engrained patterns of violence will not happen quickly.” We need to remind funders that the current and increased levels of resourcing will be required not just for years, but for a number of generations.

Georgetown Institute of Women, Peace and Security

Jeni Klugman

Notes

1 https://www.who.int/news/item/09-03-2021-devastatingly-pervasive-1-in-3-women-globally-experience-violence.

2 https://giwps.georgetown.edu/the-index/
The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020. Transforming food systems for affordable healthy diets

The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World is an annual flagship report jointly prepared by FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO to summarize progress towards ending hunger, achieving food security, and improving nutrition. The headline number for 2019 indicates that almost 690 million people, or 8.9 percent of the global population, were undernourished. This number is substantially below the 2018 estimate, suggesting important improvement. Unfortunately, this is not the case, because a revision of the entire series of undernourishment estimates for China back to 2000 resulted in a substantial downward shift of the global series. In fact, the 2019 data confirm a major turning point in the global situation around 2014. After years of decline before 2014, the numbers of undernourished starting increasing in recent years. Moreover, preliminary estimates for 2020 suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic may add between 83 and 132 million people to the ranks of the undernourished. Projections to 2030 indicate that the world will likely fall well short of reaching SDG target 2.1 (ensuring access to safe, nutritious, and sufficient food for all people all year round) and target 2.2 (eradicating all forms of malnutrition). There are several causes for this shortfall, including conflict, economic slowdowns, climate change, environmental constraints, the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as unprecedented Desert Locust outbreaks in Eastern Africa.

The second half of the report examines the cost and affordability of healthy diets. Poor people often eat a low-quality diet consisting mostly of starchy staples because healthy diets cost on average about five times more and are therefore unaffordable. In 2019, at least 3 billion people could not afford a healthy diet. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the food supply system and, as a result, the FAO food price index rose substantially in 2020, making food still more unaffordable. The report identifies the main drivers of the high cost of nutritious foods and provides policy options for countries to transform their food systems to make healthy diets more affordable while maintaining environmental sustainability. The highly accessible text contains many figures and extensive annexes provide statistical tables and methodological notes. —J.B.
ANKUSH AGARWAL and VIKAS KUMAR
Numbers in India’s Periphery: The Political Economy of Government Statistics
Cambridge University Press, 2020, 371 p., $120.00

In global discourse, India is often lauded for its statistical system. In recent years, this image has been dented by concerns about the quality of its core economic statistics. However, much of the criticism rests on lack of investment in data collection machinery, poor design of data collection instruments, and inadequate supervision. The political economy of statistics has received relatively little attention.

Ankush Agarwal and Vikas Kumar, professors of economics at the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, India, and Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, India, set out to address this often-overlooked field by carrying out a statistical audit of data for Nagaland. The book’s central premise is that the deep and multifaceted relationship between statistics and politics is a defining feature of modern states, and that government statistics are sites of political contestation. This argument is illustrated by an evaluation of official statistics for Nagaland.

Nagaland, located on India’s North-Eastern periphery, was the first small state formed after Indian independence. It was granted full statehood in 1963 in response to one of the oldest armed insurgencies on the Indian subcontinent. It has a special status that grants it preferential access to Central government funding. It is also home to a variety of tribal groups that continually compete for political power and resources. Tribes are primarily Christian and speak more than 20 mutually unintelligible languages. Nagaland is home to communities found across the border in neighboring states within India and in Myanmar and has long-standing border disputes with its neighbors. Immigration from the nearby state of Assam, Bangladesh, and Myanmar has led to widespread fears of getting swamped by “outsiders.”

Agarwal and Kumar carefully trace the relationship between these unique political conditions and creating statistics and maps. The introduction sets the stage by noting, “During an exploratory visit to the state to study the abnormalities in census data, we were struck by the multiplicity of mutually inconsistent maps displayed in government offices.” Subsequent chapters carefully trace these errors, relating them to competing claims for resources and political power.

The chapter on census data is fascinating. It notes that Nagaland registered the highest growth in population across India between 1981 and 2001 (from 774,930 to 1,990,036). However, in 2011, the population showed a slight contraction to 1,978,502 while the population in other states was steadily growing. This stagnation in the absence of epidemic disease, natural calamity, and any significant change in its political status and socioeconomic conditions is termed demographic somersault by authors. They attribute it to the political claims of different tribes using inflated figures until 2001, which was then corrected, at least partially, in the 2011 Census.

Authors carefully examine the internal consistency of various censuses and compare with other demographic information and conclude that this is due to inflation of population estimates in successive censuses until 2001, resulting in an overestimation of Nagaland’s population by as much as 36 percent. The most exciting part of this chapter is their discussion of possible explanations for this phenomenon. These explanations include political transition following the statehood of Nagaland, an armed insurgency that subsided only in the late 1990s,
leading to the deployment of armed forces who would have been included in census, increased coverage of census as the insurgency subsided, and immigration from nearby states and Myanmar as well as Bangladesh. Authors examine each of these and discount their role, arriving at their favored explanation, political claims for power and resources made feasible through inflation of headcount.

After dismissing conventional explanations, the chapter on Winning Censuses argues that a desire to seek favorable policy changes led to deliberate manipulation of the census. A higher census count would allow for the creation of a new district and increased allocation for welfare schemes. For demographers, it is interesting to ask how the numbers game could be manipulated. In some cases, rural to urban migrants were counted in both rural and urban areas. In other instances, village authorities carefully manipulated census figures resulting in the falsification of headcount.

While statistical data often come under attack from scholars who have an inherent mistrust of statistics, the authors of this book are economists trying to uphold the sanctity of statistics. This results in a rigorous examination of statistical data and evaluation of various sources of error. This paradox makes for careful focus on data quality that is rare among books of this genre. —S.D.

ANDREW JEWETT
Science Under Fire: Challenges to Scientific Authority in Modern America
Harvard University Press, 2020, 356 p., $39.95

Rejection of science—or what is labeled as rejection of science—is a notorious feature of the contemporary cultural and political landscape in the United States. Highly visible instances are dismissals of evolutionary theory, climate change denial, and antivaccine movements. In this deeply researched and thoughtful book, Andrew Jewett describes tensions about science over the past century, with a focus on the 1920s, the 1960s and 1970s, and the present. Jewett argues that the 1920s witnessed the first intense and widespread disputes in the United States over scientific authority. The controversies in this period concerned not only evolutionary theory (e.g., Scopes Trial) but also, and more importantly, modern psychology, which became a fixture in widely read newspapers and periodicals, to the dismay of those attached to religiously grounded understandings of human personality and what constitutes proper child socialization. The second period of tension about science Jewett identifies and examines in depth was the post-WWII decades, especially the 1960s and 1970s. Ironically from the standpoint of the present, it was if anything public intellectuals on the left who expressed dismay and distrust of science. “scientism” was viewed as intrinsically hostile to humanistic values, with soulless technology and an implicitly materialistic worldview posing at least as much risk to the achievement of a just and compassionate society as conservative religious institutions. The final period that Jewett considers is the first two decades of the twenty-first century. The tensions he describes are entirely familiar, but they take on a fresh appearance with the historical backdrop he provides, and his nuanced portrait of the positions of the key protagonists produces a welcome respect for the
complexity of ongoing intellectual and political controversies. Over the entire century from the 1920s to the present, the unifying theme in the questioning of scientific authority has been the allegation that scientists, while ostensibly value-neutral, have injected social philosophies into American life that have damaged the social and moral order. Jewett concludes with a plea to approach science more matter-of-factly. Scientific tools can be credited with producing tremendous gains in human well-being but within rather circumscribed domains. Much that is highly valued in the human experience lies outside the reach of modern science. —J.C.

CHARLES KENNY

The Plague Cycle: The Unending War Between Humanity and Infectious Disease
Scribner, 2021, 320 p., $28.00

Charles Kenny, senior fellow at the Center for Global Development, begins his history of infectious disease with a two-century old quote from An Essay on the Principle of Population (1798): “Premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race.” Malthus reasoned that the power of population was so superior to the power of the earth to produce subsistence that periodic outbreaks of “misery”—either war, pestilence, or famine—were inevitable. Kenny begins his story circa 1800 on purpose. It was an inflection point in the history of infectious disease. Two hundred years ago half of all people born in the world died before their fifth birthday; today it is one in twenty-five. Life expectancy at birth was below 30 in 1870; now it is above 70. Only recently has our ability to control infectious disease made premature death the exception and not the given that Malthus believed it to be. In chapters 2 and 3, Kenny updates Malthus’s story of misery’s past by noting that infectious disease actually played a relatively minor role when humans lived in hunting and gathering groups and while they gradually spread from Africa across the globe. It assumed a central role, more important than war and famine combined, only with the rise of farming and “civilization,” when humans and animals began clustering together in villages and cities. The virulence of infectious disease rose dramatically with increased density, social interaction, and trade. With over half the world’s population now living in cities, and trade and travel at record levels, our current containment of infectious disease is historically unprecedented. In fact, Kenny believes, these levels of globalization and urbanization cannot exist without this containment.

On this larger frame, Kenny appends specific narratives of major pandemics, strategies of containment, public health innovations, vaccines, and responses to new infections. Chapter 4 tells of the massive die-offs that happened when European explorers with their Eurasian diseases of “civilization” arrived in long isolated regions. Chapter 5 tells of the “exclusion instinct” that people repeatedly exposed to deadly outbreaks developed: treating the infected with disgust and quarantine, and fleeing them when possible. Chapter 6 examines various “cleaning up” attempts: cooking food, reducing bad odors, sequestering excrement. By tracing responses to cholera, a fecal-oral bacterial infection which first appeared as a global pandemic in 1817, Kenny documents the trial and error attempts to reduce contamination in water supplies that finally produced tangible infection control. Chapter 7 examines
the similar trial and error process that produced beneficial vaccines. Chapter 8 reports the good news that arrived by the mid-twentieth century with the completion of the first stage of the sanitation and medical revolutions: city living being more healthy than rural, life becoming healthier and longer, families becoming smaller and better educated, and trade and travel making the world more interconnected and prosperous.

The concluding chapters examine the vulnerability of our urban and globalized world to new outbreaks of infection. We have lost tens of millions of lives to HIV/AIDS, and face a continual emergence of new threats: avian influenza, Nipah virus, Hendra virus, Ebola, Marburg fever, Lassa fever, cryptosporidiosis, cyclosporiasis, Zika, and hantavirus. Our response often has been too late and too uncoordinated. We have allowed older foes like tuberculosis and malaria to develop multidrug resistance due to our misuse of antibiotics. Covid-19 is proving just how difficult it is to contain and control an emerging viral threat in a world like ours. Kenny argues that we need consistently good sanitation and health systems throughout the world, and better systems of surveillance, screening, isolation, and research. Our modern world simply cannot exist without it. —D.H.

TOBY ORD

The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity
Hachette Books, 2020, 480 p., $30.00

By existential risk the Oxford philosopher Toby Ord means the “permanent destruction of human potential.” Actual human extinction is existential, but so would be the irreversible collapse of civilization. In the latter category, for example, catastrophic climate change through a runaway greenhouse effect could yield such a future, with human population reduced to a remnant left clinging to life; a world-wide totalitarian regime, self-perpetuating through “technologically enabled indoctrination, surveillance, and enforcement,” would also count. In this book, Ord lays out the range of existential threats, both familiar and novel, and offers a well-documented and (where documents fail) well-reasoned assessment of their various likelihoods. His bottom line: “Given everything I know, I put the existential risk this century at around one in six: Russian roulette” (p. 30). Alarming enough, and if continued, as he says, an unsustainable level of risk, “unlikely to last more than a small number of centuries.” For humans to survive over the longer term it will have to be greatly lowered. The period we are living in now, with humanity at high risk of destroying itself, Ord calls the Precipice.

Others have trod this ground. John Leslie’s The End of the World: The Science and Ethics of Human Extinction (1996)—reviewed in PDR 23 no. 4—was an early entrant in the genre. Leslie’s treatment, more casual than Ord’s, arrived at a roughly 70 percent overall chance of avoiding extinction over the next five centuries, somewhat higher than Ord but in the same ballpark. In Ord’s enumeration, anthropogenic risks are the main threat to survival, vastly exceeding natural risks. The largest natural existential risk is eruption of a supervolcano like the ones that created the Yellowstone caldera in Wyoming and Lake Toba in Sumatra, which is put at a one
in 10,000 chance over the next century. (Existential risk from an asteroid collision is far smaller.) In contrast, anthropogenic risks are one or even two orders of magnitude greater. An existential catastrophe this century through nuclear war or from climate change are both assessed at one in 1,000; from a human-engineered pandemic, one in 30. Without the condition of irreversibility, of course, these risks would be much greater. Most threatening of all in Ord’s account, though also the most speculative, is the possible malign consequence of the development of artificial general intelligence (AGI) to a degree that exceeds human levels, a prospect the “expert community” on average evidently considers achievable, more likely than not by the end of the century. An AGI system “optimized toward inhuman values,” could arrogate an ever-increasing share of power, with humanity, in effect, ceding its control. We may then face “a deeply flawed or dystopian future locked in forever.” The judged risk for the century: one in ten.

The risk assessment exercise points to where remedial efforts need to be directed, and to their urgency. The agenda is straightforward, calling for improvements in international coordination on security, devising institutions that take greater account of the interests of future generations, and strengthening the governance of potentially dangerous new technologies. Such efforts are grossly under-resourced: “we can state with confidence that humanity spends more on ice cream every year than on ensuring that the technologies we develop do not destroy us” (p. 58).

That might seem to wrap up the author’s task. But Ord’s vision, spelled out in a final chapter, is more expansive. With existential security attained and humanity’s potential secured, “we will be past the Precipice, free to contemplate the range of futures that lie open before us… the grand accomplishments our descendants might achieve with eons and galaxies as their canvas” (pp. 190–191). The time horizon is unlimited: mammal species in the fossil record typically last a million years. For us, therefore, “almost all humans who will ever live have yet to be born” (p. 43). (Interestingly, this directly contradicts an argument of Leslie, who applied a version of the so-called anthropic principle—that we today should be seen as temporally average, not exceptionally early, observers among all humans past and future—to conclude that an ultra-long human future is highly improbable.) Ord’s future has no place for mundane demography, which might worry about sustainable net reproduction rates, or for regional differentiation, which might bring in geopolitics. Indeed, a radical impartialism prevails: all lives matter, and not just spatially, as in Peter Singer’s One World: The Ethics of Globalization (2002) or in Ord’s own innovative project on “effective altruism,” but also over time: “people matter equally regardless of their temporal location” (p. 44). Ethical purism accords massive weight to future generations.

The book ends with seven meaty appendices, on topics such as the purported inadmissibility of time discounting, past nuclear weapons accidents, and the value of protecting humanity (with existential risk formalized as a hazard rate, r). —G.McN.
PAMELA STONE and MEG LOVEJOY
Opting Back In: What Really Happens When Mothers Go Back to Work
University of California Press, 2021, 264 p., $29.95

In 2007, sociologist Pamela Stone published a book entitled, Opting Out: Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home that described the experiences of 54 urban, mostly white women in the United States who had worked in professional or executive positions and left those jobs for full-time motherhood. The main finding of the study was that, contrary to depictions in the popular media, these women had not exactly “opted out,” but rather had left their jobs in an attempt to ease the conflicting demands of family, motherhood, and high-pressure employment. Many had immersed themselves in full-time motherhood, sometimes with significant volunteer commitments, and/or redirected their careers towards professions that are more historically female, such as teaching.

Opting Back In describes the results of a follow-up study by Stone and co-author Meg Lovejoy that is based on interviews with 43 of the original group of women roughly 12 years later. At the time of the second interview, the study participant’s median age was 54. We learn that the majority of the group had resumed, or tried to resume, paid employment in some form. Much of the book is devoted to detailed accounts of the pathways of their lives, beginning with six women who exemplify common patterns. The book then turns to women’s lives at home with compelling depictions of the rewards and challenges of motherhood, household management, and community volunteering. The heart of the book lies in the three chapters that outline the women’s navigation of the return to work. The concluding chapter revisits the six representative women’s lives and reviews their ongoing efforts to confront choices constrained by the demands of work and family, ending with policy recommendations for change.

The impact of gendered expectations, not only of employers but within households, on the women’s actions is striking. There are multiple examples of husbands who seem to happily take advantage of their wives’ willingness to shoulder full responsibility for the household and children so they can devote themselves entirely to their careers. (It would have been fascinating to hear from these husbands.) Only two of the 43 women who stopped working to stay home are divorced; almost all are still in intact marriages. It is likely that a study sample that included women who did not stop working given the demands of high-level jobs would have resulted in a different yet equally important story, one that would no doubt have included more dissolved marriages but also some stories of successful two career households.

The authors sum up the dilemma faced by women as they weigh the trade-offs by the phrase, “the paradox of privilege - the phenomenon whereby the gender-based interests of high-achieving women—for professional accomplishment, gender egalitarianism, and economic independence—are at odds with their class interests, which place a high premium on full-time caregiving as a means of class transmission within the family” (p. 20). The class-based demand for and rewards of highly involved and time-intensive mothering is clearly a major factor in women’s narratives about their choices. At the same time, their marriages to successful men made it possible for these women to leave the workforce with few consequences for their economic well-being.
The paths taken by the women who returned to work were varied and often circuitous, with multiple starts and restarts. Some opted to move towards careers that are seen to be more flexible and more meaningful (e.g., teaching, nonprofit work). Others worked part time or as freelancers in their previous fields. A decrease in the amount of money women earned compared to their former employment was common. Only a few returned to full-time work in their previous professions.

The policy recommendations are familiar (as the authors say, “depressingly familiar”). They include changing the corporate culture that demands long hours and near-constant availability, reducing gender discrimination in pay and a gender-segregated labor market, and encouraging men to participate more in household management and childcare. Yet, the authors argue that the #MeToo movement and its attendant activism provide an opening to pursue these policy directions with renewed vigor and perhaps more success. The book was published just prior to the moment when the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the stark effects of the persistence of traditional gender roles and rigid corporate work cultures for women’s careers, especially those with small children. Now, the choice to opt out or to opt back in is even more complicated, but perhaps there is increased understanding that, for sustainable improvement, it is institutions rather than individuals that need to adjust to accommodate current realities. —A.B.