

CAUSATION in DEMOGRAPHY: PROCEDURES, PROBLEMS and ALTERNATIVES

In this paper, I will reflect the discussion on the different notions of causation and its implications. In terms of research design, this will lead to the new framework of Mixed Methods research, developed in the last decade upon an old debate between the quantitative and qualitative approach. Considering these approaches is important for Demography because of the better explanations we can achieve, besides the most usual descriptive purposes.

Traditionally, formal demography limited its scope to the measurement of different population processes and dynamics, describing and predicting trends. But within the field of social demography broad and valid explanations are needed, as our discipline is becoming much more integrated and theory – driven. Then, causal attribution is a key component of many studies and should be based on explicit procedures.

In social sciences in general, contrafactual causality is the “traditional” way of achieving a valid link between cause and effect. The notion, taken from medical trails, is embedded in experimental and quasi-experimental strategies. The robust internal validity of this kind of designs allows attribution of change, which make them very useful for evaluating population policies, for example (“natural experiments” are popular for this robustness in terms of validity as well). But these strategies have also certain shortcomings (narrow account of phenomena, context blindness) and in many cases they are just impossible to develop, for ethical or practical reasons. Non experimental approaches have even more validity threats. Then, alternative and complementing notions of causation, such as generative causality, are being taken into account.

In terms of research designs for demographic problems, mixed methods (quantitative + qualitative) strategies should be used when needed (this is usually the case in fertility and migration studies), embedding a broader account of causation.

Considering that in methodological and mixed methods reflection, increasing attention is being paid to notions and techniques such as “modus operandi”, “modus narrandi” or “reasons as causes”, demographic studies can and should integrate this kind of innovations. With mixed methods designs it should be easier to achieve broader and better explanations, constructing a more complex notion of causation. For instance, we can complement findings on fertility determinants with those on “culture of reproduction” (Laura Bernardi) and see the whole picture for causal attribution: structural determinants and subjective reasons.

The same can be pursued on migration (to answer *why* people migrate we need to see beyond the usual determinants provided by surveys) and family change. This latter example is also treated in the paper. We know that to gain a better understanding of changes related to the Second Demographic Transition, it is crucial to take into account the subjective assessment of these transformations, along with the objective conditions.

To sum up, better explanations for many demographic issues will be achieved if we can integrate the notions of contrafactual and generative causation. The former is embedded in a quantitative strategy and the latter has to do with observation of phenomena and qualitative approaches.

Mixed Methods designs can give us the framework for this assessment of causation, because these kind of designs are not only useful for purposes of triangulation, development of tools for data recollection, initiation of new perspectives, or expansion of the range of inquiry. They can provide social demography with a way to complement explanation from the different traditions, quantitative and qualitative. In this sense, it will

be easier for our discipline to take steps forward as a theory - driven discipline with strong explanatory potential.