

DEMOGRAPHIC DESTINIES

**Interviews with Past Presidents of the Population Association of America
A Project of the PAA History Committee**

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**Interview with Arland Thornton
PAA President in 2001**

**Interviewed by Karen Hardee and Dennis Hodgson
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Dr. Arland Thornton is Professor of Sociology at the University of Michigan, where he is also a Research Professor at the Population Studies Center and Survey Research Center. He received his B.A. in Sociology from Brigham Young University in 1968, and then his M.A. in 1973 (after a brief stint as an officer in the U.S. Coast Guard) and his Ph.D. in 1975 in Sociology, both from the University of Michigan. He has spent his entire academic career at the University of Michigan. His work focuses especially on the study of marriage, family, and life course structures and processes.

HARDEE: Good morning. This is the History Committee of PAA, and we're here to interview Dr. Arland Thornton, who was the past president of PAA in 2001. Welcome.

THORNTON: Thank you.

HARDEE: I'm Karen Hardee. I'm a senior associate from the Population Council. And this is Dennis Hodgson. I will be primarily asking the questions. And Dennis will add in—

HODGSON: Cut in occasionally.

HARDEE: Yes. So the first question that we have is maybe you could tell us about where you grew up and then where you went to college.

THORNTON: Okay. Starting at the very beginning. I'm an Idaho farm boy; I grew up in southern Idaho, about twenty-thirty miles southwest of Boise, in a little town named Kuna. And my first introduction to population things was a sign as you went into town that said, Welcome to Kuna. Population: 516.

HODGSON: Wow.

THORNTON: And when the next census came out, that sign was changed, and it said 534. I have no idea why I can still remember that. Maybe that was a gene that I had that played out later on as well. (I checked this after the interview and discovered that I had reversed the years and that the actual census population number was 534 in 1950 and 516 in 1960.)

I was raised on a farm. We grew sugar beets, onions, sweet corn, and row crops on irrigated land. I had a very small world view growing up. But when I became a demographer, I discovered that knowing the ins and outs of farm life—the routines, what matters, what doesn't matter, the long hours, the family structure, and family modes of organization—was very useful as I traveled around the world twenty, thirty years later.

HARDEE: That's interesting, very interesting.

THORNTON: So when I visit a farm in Taiwan and I see a flooded paddy field, and when I see Nepali people farming mountains, I have a little feel for it that I think I got growing up milking cows, hoeing beets, changing water, and things like that.

HARDEE: Wow. And college?

THORNTON: College—I went to Brigham Young University. When I started as a freshman there, I thought I was going to be a math major. Although math came fine to me, I discovered this field called sociology and it pretty well hooked me. I discovered something called central place theory, about how population is distributed. It sounded very fascinating to me. I discovered Dudley Duncan and Don Bogue and a few other people who were important in that area. And I thought, I'd like to study that some more.

HODGSON: Was there an undergraduate population course?

THORNTON: Yes. But it wasn't titled "population". I don't think the word "demography" was yet in my vocabulary. And "population studies" was probably not either.

HODGSON: But the topic was covered?

THORNTON: The topic was there, yes.

HARDEE: So you graduated with a degree in sociology?

THORNTON: Yes, a degree in sociology.

HARDEE: And did you go directly to graduate school, or did you do something in between?

THORNTON: I graduated with my undergraduate degree in the spring of 1968. I had applied to graduate schools and was accepted and received a fellowship from the University of Michigan. But 1968 happened to be the year that Lyndon Johnson decided that the country should be drafting college grads for the Vietnam War--not sending them off to more school and more college deferment.

HODGSON: That was one year before they came up with the lottery.

THORNTON: Was it? '68 was one year before?

HODGSON: Yeah. '69 is when they came up with, you're going to be subject to the draft for one year on the basis of your birthday.

THORNTON: Right, right.

HODGSON: So you got in there.

THORNTON: So I was going to be drafted, but ended up going to officer candidate school in the Coast Guard. I spent a beautiful fall in Yorktown, Virginia. The activities were a little rigorous and not quite what I was used to. After four months of Coast Guard training, they assigned me to go to Long Beach, California to be a training officer over Coast Guard reserve units on the West Coast. I assigned people to training programs and went out and inspected units, making sure shoes were shined and clothes were ship-shape. I did that for three years. I also took the opportunity to spend lots of evenings in the University of Southern California Library researching the Vietnam War.

HARDEE: Oh, interesting.

THORNTON: I discovered that we shouldn't have been in Vietnam. But there I was in the military. So I said to myself, the best thing for me to do is to be a good, obedient, mouth-shut guy, so it went fine.

HODGSON: Okay.

THORNTON: I got out four months early. The Coast Guard made a snafu, in that they *thought* they were starting a big new program. They recruited a large group of new junior officers to handle it. That new program, however, didn't come through, so they were left with a surplus of junior officers and let some folks out early.

HODGSON: That was nice of them.

THORNTON: I volunteered and was released early and then started back at the University of Michigan in the fall of 1971.

HODGSON: So initially, did you spend like a semester, after you graduated—

THORNTON: I spent the summer semester in 1968 at Michigan,

HODGSON: The summer semester.

HARDEE: Before you went into the [military]—okay.

HODGSON: Gotcha. So they were pretty fast catching you.

THORNTON: They were very fast.

HODGSON: I mean the draft.

HARDEE: Wow, they were.

THORNTON: Oh, yeah. I went and talked to the Draft Board the summer of 1968, and they assured me that my draft notice was coming.

HODGSON: I remember that. 1-S to 1-A.

HARDEE: Wow. But Michigan held your place.

THORNTON: They held my place. Michigan, wonderful training program.

HARDEE: So when did demography enter your lexicon?

THORNTON: When I applied to graduate schools, I applied to sociology departments. I received a National Science Foundation fellowship, so I didn't need financial help. But I received a letter from either Dudley Duncan or Ron Freedman, saying, we think you might be a good candidate for being a student at our center. It was the Population Study Center.

HARDEE: It was the Population Study Center, yeah.

THORNTON: I still didn't know what population studies meant. Demography is a very vague word, an ever-expanding word. But anyway, I went to PSC. They treated me very nice. I took courses and people started calling me a demographer. It sounded good, and people had smiles on their faces when they said that. So I became a demographer.

HODGSON: Now, the Center back then was still internationally focused on Taiwan, or was it more broad by that time?

THORNTON: Then it was very much funded by the Ford Foundation and focused on international fertility and family planning. Ron Freedman and Al Hermalin were studying Taiwan. David Goldberg was studying Turkey and Mexico. John Knodel joined fairly quickly with his research interests in Thailand.

HARDEE: You hadn't had any international experience then, so how did you shift to international work?

THORNTON: I took Ron Freedman's course as a graduate student and received his international focus, but did not devote much time to international things as a student. When I arrived at Michigan as a graduate student, my interests were almost entirely domestic. You know those maps that the Census Bureau used to put out? I don't know whether they still do, but these nice maps—

HARDEE: Yes.

HODGSON: Color coded.

THORNTON: Color coded with all the counties.

HODGSON: They were beautiful.

THORNTON: I put one above my desk that had the three-thousand-and-some counties in the U.S. on it. Some of them had gained population, and some of them had lost population. I was going to explain that map as a research project. I knew Dudley Duncan's work on population distribution and urbanization, but did not know that he had long moved on from that sort of research. I was a naive undergraduate and didn't know that. Also, Ren Farley was doing population distribution and urbanization research at Michigan. So population distribution is what I went to Michigan to study.

When it came time to write a dissertation prospectus, I found that I couldn't think of anything to do with that map. A lot of people have done lots with census maps like that, but it wasn't clear what I was going to do with it. So I had to look for something else.

At my very first PAA meeting, Paul Glick gave a very nice paper on changing family demography. There weren't very many sessions on that topic, but it captured my attention. Then, when I figured out that I wasn't going to research population distribution for my dissertation, I thought: How about the relationship between marital stability and childbearing? People get a divorce or a spouse dies, so fertility is interrupted. So what is the effect of marital dissolution on fertility? Also, what's the influence of marital satisfaction on childbearing? And, what about causation in the opposite direction—the effect of fertility patterns on divorce?

HODGSON: And this came from a PAA session with Paul Glick.

THORNTON: Yes.

HODGSON: So there wasn't anybody at Michigan who was really into this family—

HARDEE: Family studies?

THORNTON: Not an emphasis at the Population Studies Center.

HODGSON: Okay.

THORNTON: The Center faculty looked at me a little strangely when I announced my new interest, like what are you doing. But they were very supportive and helped me work through this new topic.

HODGSON: Because that's really become central to your work.

THORNTON: Yeah. That was life-changing. That was a very big shift for me.

HODGSON: But still related back to your growing up years, the family structure.

THORNTON: Yes. It turns out that there were quite a few of us young folks getting into studying family demography at the same time.

HODGSON: We're going to be interviewing one tomorrow, too, Andy Cherlin.

THORNTON: Yes. We have very similar interests.

HARDEE: We'll just cancel his interview. That's fine. [laughter]

THORNTON: Andy and I often attended the same meetings, the same family conferences. There were also Linda Waite, Fran Goldscheider, Frank Furstenberg, and others. It was a wonderful and exciting cohort. When I moved into family demography, I didn't know other people were jumping in at the same time. It's a little bit like naming children. A lot of people say, I'm coming up with a unique name, and five years later, when that "uniquely-named" child arrives in kindergarten, he or she finds quite a few other people with the same name.

HODGSON: That's funny.

THORNTON: And that's sort of the way it turned out with family demography, which delighted me. The family quickly became an important area in demography.

HODGSON: I think Andy had Valerie Oppenheimer in grad school.

THORNTON: Yes.

HODGSON: I guess she was one of the big names in family demography at that time.

THORNTON: Yes.

HODGSON: Lot of women, work and fertility, those types of issues.

THORNTON: Yeah.

HODGSON: So he had somebody at grad school. And you did it all on your own on the basis of interest.

THORNTON: Not on my own. Al Hermalin agreed to chair my committee. Ren Farley and David Goldberg were also on it, and Jim Morgan was the outside committee member.

HARDEE: And your bio says you're a social demographer. Can you talk about what a social demographer is, compared to a demographer?

THORNTON: I'm a social demographer? Well, I'm a sociologist.

HARDEE: And a demographer.

THORNTON: And a demographer. So that puts them together.

HARDEE: Okay.

THORNTON: I'm constantly inclined to come up with sociological theories that explain things.

HARDEE: Would you say you use more sociology in your work, or demography, or is it hard to split them apart?

THORNTON: I don't really split them apart. My career has had a lot of interactions with other disciplines as well. I worked with Deborah Freedman, an economist, and Tom Fricke, an anthropologist.

HARDEE: Were there any other grad students at Michigan at the time who influenced your career or what you studied?

THORNTON: Well, Linda Waite was there at the same time. I'm not sure we influenced each other. I'd like to see the title of her dissertation. I'm not sure if it was a family demography dissertation or more of a fertility dissertation, but, in either case, she very quickly became a family demographer, and an outstanding one.

HARDEE: And what do you consider your current interests in demography, social demography, or the current focus of your work?

THORNTON: The current focus? Let me tell you the pathway to where I am now.

HARDEE: Yeah, yeah.

THORNTON: I had done all my graduate work at the Population Study Center and the Sociology Department at Michigan. As a student, I knew there was a unit across campus called the Institute for

Social Research [ISR], but I knew little about it. Howard Schuman and Leslie Kish were sociologists at ISR, but there was not a strong demographic presence at that time.

Midway through my dissertation work, a fellow graduate student, who was working at ISR in the Economic Behavior Program, told me that program was looking for somebody to help them with a project. Are you interested? I said, Well, not really. It's too early. And a couple months later, he came back and said, They're still looking. The group of economists at ISR had received a grant from NIH to study Dick Easterlin's hypothesis about relative income and fertility, and they wanted somebody who had done fertility research to work with them. I decided that the proposal looked interesting, and working on the project would be the same as having a two-year post doc. I said to myself, "Why not" and accepted the position.

In the beginning of my time at ISR, Ron Freedman, who I hadn't interacted with very much as a graduate student—in fact, very little other than his course—contacted me. Ron, Lolagene Coombs, and David Goldberg had done interviews with a group of women in Detroit who had just had a baby.

HODGSON: The Detroit Studies Project.

THORNTON: The Detroit Studies Project. The study had started in 1962 and the last interview with these women had been in 1966. Ron and his colleagues had let this Detroit panel lie fallow because they had gotten involved in Taiwan under a program funded by the Ford Foundation. Deborah Freedman, Ron's wife, was very interested in picking the Detroit study back up. So Ron and Deborah came to me and said, It would be nice to have a junior person work with us on it. How about you being that person? My wife and I thought about the offer extensively and decided, this is too good to pass up.

HODGSON: Now, was there a big policy concern at the time? If I remember, it was like '76, '77, when the total fertility rate had plummeted over a child. It was down to 1.8.

THORNTON: Right, right.

HODGSON: From way up.

THORNTON: From three and a half or something like that at its height.

HARDEE: Yeah, yeah.

HODGSON: And was that like a national concern that got you interested in fertility and what's happening to it in the U.S.?

THORNTON: I confess I was almost always driven by the scientific, substantive questions.

HODGSON: Gotcha. So it wasn't a concern about what's causing this dramatic decline.

THORNTON: Well, interest in that question, but not so much driven by the policy thing--whether we should be concerned about it or not, or how we should deal with it if we were concerned. The decision to work with Deborah and the Detroit study turned out to be a wonderful decision. I worked with that panel study until—well, the capstone book came out of that in 2007--so that's 30 years of dealing with that project. And that project was all about different aspects of family demography. Our capstone book was *Marriage and Cohabitation* that I co-authored with Bill Axinn and Yu Xie.

HODGSON: I find that interesting because when I look at what you've done in the context of family issues, so you have marital instability, and you've got a lot on divorce, you've got a lot on what normally we would think of as hot topics at the time. And yet you said you really didn't have a policy concern that drove your research as much more straight research. How do you reconcile the fact that in terms of your career, you happened to be looking at rather big issues and dramatic family changes. And admittedly, when you read your research, it's very objective and very well done in the context of not—it doesn't look like policy-driven research.

HARDEE: But it's very policy relevant.

HODGSON: But when you look at the progression of it over time, you say you were picking up on really big trends that did have an element of concern.

THORNTON: Yes. Exactly. So they were big trends, interesting trends, and policy related. I think I primarily was driven by them being huge trends that were changing the world in many ways.

HARDEE: Yeah. Absolutely.

THORNTON: I'm quite sure the policy part of that helped the funding stream. I think one of Jeff Evans' many contributions at NIH was helping to fund family demography. That would have been driven at least in part by the policy issues. So my guess is there wouldn't have been as much money to fund this kind of research without the policy things. It was on this Detroit project that I discovered the relevance of values, beliefs, and attitudes.

HARDEE: Right, right. Interesting.

THORNTON: It was an amazing discovery for me. When Ron Freedman, David Goldberg, and Lolagene Coombs designed the first questionnaire for the Detroit panel in 1962, they put some questions about attitudes, values, and beliefs in the questionnaire. And when Deborah and I designed our first interview with these women in 1977, we repeated those questions. We got the interviews in, entered the data, and ran out the distributions of everything. I compared the distributions of the 1977 items about gender role attitudes, attitudes about divorce, and attitudes about childlessness with the '62 data. And I thought, Oh, my goodness. This is a different world.

HARDEE: Wow.

THORNTON: At that moment, my career changed, too. I decided, This is too interesting not to study. So the first paper we wrote out of that data set was "Changing attitudes towards sex roles" ["Changes in the sex role attitudes of women, 1962-1977: Evidence from a panel study"—ed.] I think we call them gender roles now, but we called them sex roles back then. Then I wrote a paper on changing attitudes about separation and divorce from the data. It just seemed so natural. That experience got me into the whole cultural/ideational research area, which I'm continuing to work on now.

In the late 1970s/early 1980s, I recognized that there is a lot going on internationally and I ought to check that out. So I went to Ron Freedman and talked to him about how to get involved internationally-- where to go, what to do, and so forth. And sometime in that discussion, Ron said, We're doing this project in Taiwan. We've had a good time working together with you on the American material, Would you like to join us in Taiwan? So that's what took me to Taiwan.

HODGSON: Now, in that family planning literature, you had a tradition of KAP [Knowledge, Attitude, and Practice] studies, going back real early.

HARDEE: And the value of children.

HODGSON: Exactly. Admittedly, it was sort of mixed in with a policy orientation—you want to bring about fertility decline in Taiwan. You want to sort of track that stuff. And if you think in terms of developmental idealism, it seems that there is a connection there, that you came back to in the context of focusing on sort of family planning issues as one example of how this spreads across countries.

THORNTON: Yes, it was in my research in Taiwan where I discovered developmental idealism. It's obvious to me and I hope obvious to others that the international family planning program was an important example of developmental idealism being spread around the world. At the time of my Taiwan work, my vision wasn't broad enough to see that developmental idealism applied to lots of other things, but that recognition came later.

Our group (led by Hui-Sheng Lin and myself) wrote a book with the title of *Social Change and the Family in Taiwan* that came out in 1994. One of my jobs was to write a draft of the theory chapter. So I was writing theory, and the more I wrote, the more uncomfortable I got. There were two reasons for that discomfort: first, all of the theory was coming from the West. I thought there ought to be some Asia-specific theory. And worse than that, I knew that the theory did not explain what had happened in the West.

As a graduate student, I had learned about this amazing work being done in England by Peter Laslett, Alan Macfarlane, John Hajnal, and others there. They had discovered that what was believed for two hundred years about family change in England and other places—

HODGSON: Was not quite right.

THORNTON:—and it was not quite right by quite a ways. I thought, This is amazing. I can't keep going on in this way because I have a theory that's from the West, and I know that it doesn't apply to the West. So why am I applying it to Taiwan? At that moment, I thought, How could we have believed something so fundamentally wrong for two hundred years?

HARDEE: Wow.

THORNTON: How could that be? I thought, I ought to find out the answer. So that sent me off to the library where I read a bunch of old books and I discovered where those theories came from. They came from developmental models that said all societies go from not being developed to being developed. These development models, popular in the 1700s and 1800s, stated that all societies progressed from undeveloped to civilized and polished. All societies were on the same trajectory or pathway, but at different levels of development at any one time. These writers believed they knew who was on top of the developmental ladder at the time; that was England or France--depending on the writer. Various writers had different views for what society was at the lowest development level. Edward Tylor's version of it was that the bottom was represented by the aborigines in Australia, Robert Malthus said the lowest was the aborigines in Tierra del Fuego, and Thomas Jefferson said it was the aborigines in the Rocky Mountains of the U.S.

It was easy for writers who believed this model and believed that they had figured out how to place countries along this ladder from low to high development to believe that they could read and write

the history of the world using cross-sectional data. And, many of them did so. It was these histories that people like Laslett, Macfarlane, and Hajnal discovered in the 1960s to be flawed.

I discovered these things around 1990, '91, something like that, and started writing a book. I wrote the first half of it in my spare time, but this finally wore me out and I put this book aside. When I was elected president of PAA in 1999, I realized I had a presidential talk to give and decided to base my talk on this unfinished project. In the middle of talk preparation, I realized that I had to consider the role of these developmental ideas on fertility. That's when I went back and reread the international family planning literature and recognized the role of developmental idealism in the family planning movement. I also recognized the role of developmental idealism in the gender role revolution around the world and in the increase in age at marriage and rise in divorce. That's where the book *Reading History Sideways* came from.

HARDEE: Which is the one presidential talk that I remember the title of. Success.

HODGSON: Now, was demography perhaps somewhat responsible in the sense of we had demographic transition theory—

THORNTON: Yes.

HODGSON: —and we had the stages—

THORNTON: Yes.

HODGSON: —and we had a tradition going back to the '30s of placing societies on that continuum, and everyone is going to experience those changes. If you think about family planning—well, some might need help—

THORNTON: Exactly.

HODGSON: —to move them along this progression. And how I think about that, I think of Kingsley Davis in 1948, *Human Society*, and a real structural functional way of analyzing change. It seems to give

us still today some insight as to worldwide regularities and patterns of change. So I don't think we've totally given up on it, but it does introduce a set of kind of knotty issues—

THORNTON: It does.

HODGSON: —about what's really going on here and why this belief in the inevitability of particular changes. Have you arrived at any conclusions—and this is a biggie because you started out early on in '91. I just read your really big article in that new journal, *Sociology of Development*.

THORNTON: Oh.

HODGSON: Yeah. Which brings me up-to-date in terms of what's going on there.

THORNTON: Yes. That's as up-to-date as I am.

HODGSON: And I was just curious because I remember your PAA address, at least in the *Demography* version of it, there was one paragraph where you said, I wanted to say explicitly that this was an illegitimate way of analyzing change. But I didn't do it. I became more modest.

THORNTON: Yes. That's right.

HODGSON: So that stuck with me. Okay. Does anything cause you to reassess perceptions about what this might all be about?

THORNTON: You're very perceptive and have a good memory on that article. On the one hand, thinking everybody goes through the same stages of development and that where you start really doesn't matter is totally problematic. But one of my colleagues, Yu Xie, said to me, it's problematic, but what if you don't have anything else? I thought, Well, maybe if you don't have anything else, and you've got that, and you're very upfront on what you're doing, maybe that's better than nothing. I'm not sure I am really convinced of that, but that's where that little shift came from. Yu Xie convinced me it's an assumption. He is a very sophisticated methodologist, a person I've loved working with. He said, I deal

with assumptions all the time. Just make that assumption very clear and make clear that lots of times, that assumption sends us down the wrong pathway. Yes, you were very perceptive in noticing that shift.

HODGSON: Now —

THORNTON: Oh, go ahead.

HODGSON: I was going to ask you if you could tell us like the few people that you might identify as being ones that you've closely worked with over time. I'm just thinking of the ones that sort of you felt a real resonance that you're working on the same wavelength and you enjoyed.

THORNTON: I have been delighted at the collaborations I've been able to have. They've been spectacular. I will always feel grateful that Ron and Deborah Freedman invited me to work with them on the Detroit project. We don't have very good ideas on where the paths we didn't take would have led.

HARDEE: Right, right.

THORNTON: I have no idea where an alternative path would have led, but it would have been different. The Freedmans introduced me to the Detroit panel study, and this led me to do panel analyses, which I hadn't done before. I also discovered event history analysis. This all came out of that collaboration. They were spectacular.

HODGSON: They were big.

THORNTON: Yes. And Ron, a giant in the field, turned the project over to Deborah and me. If we asked him for advice, he was happy to give it. But he turned it over to us.

HARDEE: Wow.

THORNTON: Also, the women participating in the Detroit panel study had just had a baby when they were first interviewed in 1962. This led me to think it would be nice to interview these babies, who were 18 in 1980.

HODGSON: Wow.

HARDEE: Wow.

THORNTON: So that turned out to be a good idea—you don't need very many good ideas.

HODGSON: No.

THORNTON: That was one good idea that I had. It was a good idea joining with the Freedmans to reinterview the Detroit women, and it was another good idea making the project intergenerational. That turned out to be very good.

HODGSON: That's where we see so much change, particularly in family trends.

THORNTON: Yes, exactly. Across generations. And Duane Alwin taught me how to use LISREL in analyzing our Detroit data. We wrote a paper analyzing changing sex role attitudes and put the analysis in the LISREL format. That was a great learning experience and we wrote other papers as well. My Taiwan colleagues were also significant. Ron Freedman had done a really nice job of being a true collaborator with his Taiwanese colleagues. And I got to inherit that good will and good relationships with wonderful people, great colleagues, including Hui-Sheng Lin, Ming-Cheng Chang, and Te-Hsiung Sun. Tom Fricke introduced me to Nepal. That was very nice. Tom took me for what he calls "a walk" up in the Himalaya.

HARDEE: How many days was that?

THORNTON: I was in Nepal for about a month. I went with Tom up to a village under a snow peak and then came back with a Nepali guide. And Tom stayed. That was a mind-boggling experience. That introduced me to anthropology. My first project at ISR had introduced me to economics, and Tom introduced me to anthropology and these amazing Nepalis.

As we returned from that village, we walked down a river valley where the people were mostly Buddhists, and their prayer flags were out. The trees were blooming, the sun was out, and the snow-

capped peaks were lit up. I'll never forget that. And being a former farm-boy, I knew that these people were farming land they shouldn't be farming.

HODGSON: The sides of mountains.

HARDEE: The sides of the mountains, yeah, the terraces, yeah.

THORNTON: And they weren't gentle mountains. They were very very steep.

HARDEE: Yeah, yeah.

THORNTON: That was a marvelous experience with Tom. Bill Axinn joined us on that project as a graduate student, and he kept doing research in Nepal. I later worked with Bill, Dirgha Ghimire, and Prem Bhandari on their Chitwan Valley Family Study. Keera Allendorf and Nathalie Williams have been important recent collaborators on my Nepali research.

Another very important colleague has been Yu Xie. I began collaborating on research with him on our marriage and cohabitation project (including the book). Then, he became an important collaborator on developmental idealism.

I have also had the pleasure of collaborating with many other wonderful colleagues. The list of collaborators is very long, and these people are shown on my CV. Also, of importance are members of the research and administrative staff at the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center, with Linda Young DeMarco, Judy Baughn, and Don Camburn being especially important across many years.

THORNTON: When I was finishing my book on developmental idealism (*Reading History Sideways*), I thought I was done with this particular topic.

HODGSON: And then everybody started writing to you, saying, We want to work with you on this in X country and Y country.

THORNTON: I said to myself at the end of the book, I can document developmental idealism in the writings of the United Nations, the Chinese Communist Party, the international population movement,

and other places; it's all pretty clear. That's what I had done in the book. Then, I thought, but I don't know what individual people around the world think. That guy on a farm in Nepal, does he know about development and does he have beliefs about how to get it? And, what about folks in China, and shopkeepers in Argentina. So at the end of that book, I laid out a brief research agenda and decided that I should start it.

I was delighted when several people came to me and said, Yeah, let's start. My first reaction was, I have some other things I have to finish up before I start this. They said, we're ready. So I said, if you're ready, I'd better be ready too. The first invitation came from Bill Axinn, and the first project we did on developmental idealism was in Nepal.

Then Kathryn Yount at Emory came to me and said, developmental idealism is a huge issue in the Middle East. It's part of the tension there. It's part of the conflict. She said, Let's do something in Egypt, and we did.

A former graduate student, Georgina Binstock, said, Argentina would be an interesting place to study developmental idealism. So we did some focus groups in Argentina and later did a survey.

Then, I started giving talks on developmental idealism based on these materials. At the end of these talks, I'd say, If you have interest in joining on this kind of research, let me know. And people started stepping forward. Early on in this process was Yu Xie, who I have collaborated with on three developmental idealism data collections in China, Jalal Abassi-Shavazi, who I have collaborated with on a data collection in Iran, and Mansoor Moaddel, who I have collaborated with to collect data in several countries in the Middle East.

HODGSON: So you have a small army now.

THORNTON: It has absolutely required collaboration of others. I was not going to be able to go to Iran on my own and study developmental idealism, or Turkey or Nepal. People stepped forward. And I said, Yeah, let's do it. Let's try it. We've now done something in 19 or 20 countries.

It's turned out to be absolutely delightful. It's been exciting. I've enjoyed it all. And one of the great things about it was that I got to meet many new and wonderful people. A partial listing of project collaborators is on my developmental idealism website: <https://developmentalidealism.org/people/>.

HODGSON: And we probably should say something —

HARDEE: I know, I know. Okay. But I do have to ask this question because you have so many important things that you've worked on. What would you say is your favorite or most influential publication?

HODGSON: You can name two if —

HARDEE: We've already heard three, the family—you don't have to answer that question.

THORNTON: Well, at the time, each one of them was the most important.

HARDEE: It's like asking which is your favorite child. It's okay. Yeah. Well, let's switch to PAA.

You've talked about the first meeting that you went to and the influential paper. What are you seeing as the changes in PAA over the years that you've been attending?

HODGSON: It's been a long time.

HARDEE: It's been a long time.

THORNTON: Yeah, it has. That's a little scary, too. I first went in 1972—I think we met in Toronto that year.

HODGSON: Yeah. I remember that.

THORNTON: It would be nice to see that program. I think that program would have been dominated by international family planning.

HARDEE: Oh, interesting.

HODGSON: We wouldn't have had twenty-three simultaneous sessions going on.

THORNTON: That's true. So it was smaller and more focused. I don't think there was very much on mortality or on migration. I think that there would have been things on these issues, but not a lot.

HODGSON: Right. But the focus on family or family planning?

THORNTON: I think the main focus was on family planning. I think that the 1972 session where Paul Glick had a paper in a session on the family was the only one on the topic we now call family demography. And now, PAA is much bigger. The list of topics is much, much bigger. I think I would have had a little bit of a hard time in 1975, '6, '7, '8, saying that divorce was part of demography. I think some people would have defined it as being outside demography. But with Andy and Linda and—oh, I didn't mention Larry Bumpass and Jim Sweet before.

HODGSON: Frank Furstenberg?

THORNTON: Yeah. It all soon became part of PAA.

HODGSON: Right. And that's a good thing.

THORNTON: Yeah. From my point of view, really good. And studying school and mobility and occupational attainment, I don't think there was very much of that at PAA in 1972. But Dudley Duncan was doing it, and if he was doing it, it almost had to be part of PAA. I think the expansion of topics at PAA has been amazing, and I'm delighted. I like demography being a big tent.

HODGSON: So you're not worried about—I would say back then, most of the people attending a PAA meeting would have a definition of themselves as being a demographer. And I don't think that's true today. So you've got a lot of diversity. But you do probably have a lot more people, percentage-wise anyway, that have a discipline connection: I'm an economist, and I happen to be studying these things,

so I present—I'm a sociologist, and I happen to—is that something that is beneficial or something that's potentially problematic?

THORNTON: I think it's beneficial.

HODGSON: Okay.

THORNTON: I'm not coming up with downsides.

HODGSON: Okay.

THORNTON: I don't see downsides there. One thing that happens is, people say this is where good work gets done.

HARDEE: Yeah.

THORNTON: And good work that's related to our topics—we should be hearing about it. So we recruit some people exactly on that.

HODGSON: Right.

THORNTON: Interesting topics at PAA, and the presentations are quite uniformly good.

HARDEE: I've also heard people say, and the people who go to PAA are so nice.

THORNTON: Yeah. It's a great group.

HARDEE: A great group.

THORNTON: After you've been participating in PAA a while, you just go out and stand in the main hallway and meet your friends.

HARDEE: I know. That's right.

THORNTON: You don't get the feeling of anonymity.

HARDEE: Right. Exactly. Yeah. And what issues did you deal with as PAA president?

HODGSON: Yeah. What were the big concerns back then in 2001?

HARDEE: In 2001.

THORNTON: 2001.

HODGSON: Do you remember anything that was something that you had to cope with?

THORNTON: I don't remember any emergencies or anything like that.

HODGSON: Okay. No financial problems that seemed to be—

THORNTON: The organization in my opinion is run amazingly well. Stephanie Dudley was wonderful to work with. The program was a big thing to put together. That's the job of the president-elect and the vice president-elect. That was big. But, you know, we had people who were very helpful in terms of passing on knowledge. Stephanie was wonderful. I don't remember any big issues.

HARDEE: And what do you think are the big issues facing PAA today?

THORNTON: One of them has to be keeping the journal going well. I think *Demography* is one of our major contributions. When you have a potential conflict between printed material and the web, you must make sure you keep the journal vital. I do think that keeping up with costs is a problem. My first PAA didn't cost me \$250 for a hotel room.

HARDEE: Yeah. That's right.

THORNTON: I'm making more now than I did before, but \$250 on a hotel room seems pretty —

HODGSON: But what a hotel room.

THORNTON: You're right.

HARDEE: Well, what do you see as the important issues facing the discipline of demography today?

THORNTON: I think the funding climate, of course, is important—

HODGSON: Particularly today.

THORNTON: Yeah, particularly today. We've also had other times that have been tough. Being able to train demographers with training grants and that sort of thing is crucial. People going through population programs get stamped with the label "demographer." And they don't lose that, so it's an important part.

If people are worried about too many people coming in from other disciplines, the training programs at the demography centers are a counterbalance against that.

HODGSON: That's true. I'm just thinking that back—I went to Cornell's Population Center. And we had a distinctive methodology as a discipline. We had, you know, life tables. We had a set of demographic techniques that were ours. And we had a set of data sources that were ours. You know, we could do this. We could make a life table from mortality data. Now, when I look today, I don't think we have that anymore. Most of what we do tends to be with a shared methodology that crosses sociology and economics. And we have a heavy reliance on survey data. We don't really have that much of a reliance on a distinctive set of data sources. And we don't really have a reliance on a distinctive set of methodologies. If people take those courses, they generally don't use them when they do their research. Is that a potential issue or not, in terms of the discipline, to lose their distinctiveness in terms of data sources and methodology?

THORNTON: I think one could say that there's two key components defining demography. One is that today's population size is the same as yesterday's, plus births, minus deaths, plus or minus net migration—that's a fundamental thing in demography.

HODGSON: Right.

THORNTON: And those processes aren't particularly—

HODGSON: Complicated.

THORNTON:—related substantively.

HODGSON: Right.

THORNTON: The theory of fertility is different than the theory of mortality and the theory of migration, but that population equation is one thing that holds demography together. I think the life table is the second thing that unifies demography. I think we've been successful in exporting the life table.

HODGSON: Okay.

THORNTON: So now, many people are using life tables. The hazard modeling that many are doing is just a multivariate life table. Most researchers today studying anything that's a transition across time are using some kind of a life table extension. For example, this is true of my colleagues who are studying the dissemination of United Nations human rights treaties around the world. The treaty is signed in New York and countries around the world are invited to ratify it. And, some ratify it the next day, and some never do.

HODGSON: You've got a life table!

THORNTON: You've got a life table. And these people don't identify with the field of demography. Life tables are just how you analyze these processes.

HODGSON: Now, is there something we forgot to ask you that you would like to be included in this?

THORNTON: Oh, a good question.

HODGSON: Because we have about two minutes left, right? Oh, we've got four minutes left. So we picked the questions, and that's not fair because you might have points that you would want to make.

THORNTON: You've done a very good job of asking me things that I think are highly relevant.

HODGSON: Any words of wisdom for our new entrants to the field today?

HARDEE: Yes, yes. Aspiring demographers.

HODGSON: We have a lot of young people who now are overwhelmingly female as opposed to what it used to be.

THORNTON: Yeah. The gender distribution has changed. What fraction female are we today?

HODGSON: I don't know—70 [percent]?

HARDEE: I'm not sure. Probably, yeah.

THORNTON: 70?

HODGSON: So, any words of wisdom for new entrants to this discipline who will be doing this in 2030, 2040, 2050, whatever this might be.

THORNTON: I tell graduate students and post docs—this might be worth saying—to pick things to study that you're passionate about.

HARDEE: Yes.

THORNTON: Do things that captivate you, that are enjoyable, that are fun. And if you do that, you're going to work all the time, but it won't seem like work.

HARDEE: Yeah. That's right.

HODGSON: And you pretty much followed that advice for yourself.

THORNTON: Yeah, even without knowing I was following it. I have followed what's interesting to me, for sure.

HODGSON: And what you're passionate about.

THORNTON: And what I'm passionate about, yeah. This has been a great field for me, because I have been able to do that. So when it came time to implement the developmental idealism agenda in the *Reading History Sideways* book, I was able to go out and do that.

HARDEE: Yeah.

THORNTON: And it was enormous fun creating that, pretty much from scratch.

HODGSON: Well, thanks. Thanks so much for sharing your thoughts with us.

HARDEE: Yeah. Oh, no. I have one last question.

HODGSON: Quick.

HARDEE: What does the population sign say now in your town from Idaho?

HODGSON: You left it at 534.

HARDEE: 534.

HODGSON: Is it still there? Does the town still exist? That is the question.

THORNTON: Well, there's a lot of people living within the boundaries of that town now. It's become sort of a bedroom community of the city of Boise.

HARDEE: Oh, interesting, interesting.

THORNTON: So I get back there. And my brother still farms there. He's a very good farmer, a very good person.

HODGSON: He's still doing beets, sugar beets and —

THORNTON: Yes.

HODGSON: Onions?

THORNTON: Not onions. Sugar beets. They've added mint. I think Kuna's population is probably around fifteen or twenty thousand. But, I don't remember that number being on a sign entering town.

HARDEE: They ran out of room. It's not big enough. They ran out of space. Oh, thank you so much. Thank you.

THORNTON: You're very welcome. It's been delightful.

HARDEE: Very interesting.

THORNTON: You've asked good questions. I've enjoyed the interaction. Thank you.

HODGSON: Thanks.

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