

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 Karen O. Mason
PAA President in 1997**

Interviewed by the PAA History Committee in Boston, May 2014



Dr. Karen O. Mason retired in 2004 from her position as Director of the Gender and Development Program at The World Bank in Washington, DC. From then until 2012 she was an adjunct senior fellow at the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawaii. She received her Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Chicago in 1970 and subsequently rose from Assistant Professor to full Professor of Sociology at the University of Michigan, where she was also Associate Director of the Population Studies Center. In 1991 she left Michigan to assume the Directorship of the Population Studies Program at the University of Hawaii and she also served as director of the Program on Population at the East-West Center in Hawaii.

Dr. Mason was interviewed by the PAA History Committee (led by Dennis Hodgson) in Boston in 2014, but due to technical difficulties with the interview, she subsequently provided the committee with written comments that follow from the questions in the interview. These comments follow:

My Career in Demography

Karen Oppenheim Mason

11 June 2014

My career in demography resulted from drift rather than a master plan. I grew up in New York in a poor family that valued education highly and worked my way through private high school (the public alternative was a scary institution in the middle of Harlem where girls were said to carry switch blades in their stocking tops and Saran Wrap to use for condoms). Because a former student from my school went to Reed College and wrote glowing letters back to his home-room teacher, who read them aloud to us, I decided to go to Reed. The high school counselor said I would never get into Reed because it was a science school and I was bad at science, but I persisted and won a large scholarship that enabled me to attend.

Reed changed my life. No, demography was never mentioned, but a sociology class taught by John Pock [http://www.reed.edu/reed_magazine/june2012/articles/features/pok.html], who spawned a Reed Mafia of demographers, taught me that it was possible to think rigorously and analytically about social issues, rather than morally, which was the way in which discussions of social phenomena were conducted at my high school.

I had no idea what I wanted to do after graduating from Reed, except I enjoyed sociology and knew that if I ended my education with a BA, I would be qualified to work as a secretary and not much else. Also, because 99% of all Reed graduates attended graduate school in the arts and sciences at that time, the best course seemed to be to...attend graduate school. I ended up at the University of Chicago because Pock said there were only two places worth going, Chicago and Columbia—and having grown up around the corner from Columbia, I knew I did not want to go there.

My exposure to demography at Chicago was minimal. When I first arrived in Chicago, I was vacuumed up by a former Reedie, Bill Hodge, then a young assistant professor and researcher at NORC (he'd vacuumed up several other Reedies who landed at Chicago a year or two before me, including Paul Siegel, David Elesh and my future ex-husband, Bill Mason). Hodge preached quantitative, empirical approaches to sociology as the only route that was worth taking. Ideas were a dime a dozen, he said, and if you couldn't study them rigorously, you'd be up the creek, professionally and intellectually. So I ignored ideas outside of statistics and mathematics (at which I did not excel) and spent a lot of time working as Hodge's research assistant. The most exciting course I took at Chicago was a huge survey methods course taught by Jim Davis, who became my second mentor and taught me the guts of quantitative analysis as well as how to write. Yes, I took a demography course at Chicago, but it was terrible. And indeed, as Hodge gleefully told me, I actually flunked the only demography question on my qualifying examination (he was amused, but passed me nonetheless).

When I was close to completing my PhD in 1968, sociology was highly regionalized. So having attended a mid-western school, I got my first job in the mid-west, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It was there that I experienced my first serious encounter with demography and slid into working in the field. The Wisconsin sociology department, which was one of the largest in the country, was divided into three or four camps, among them the social psychologists, the

Marxists, and the demographers. I started attending the demographers' weekly seminars and decided that this was the home for me. The demographers were quantitative, non-ideological and into empirical research, and if their research had practical value, so much the better. All of this appealed to me greatly. I also realized that there was grant money available in demography, which also appealed to me given the emphasis at Wisconsin and other elite departments on publishing.

My substantive interest from the start had been family issues, and although I had read Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, given to me in grad school by my then boy-friend, Don Treiman, and although I had spent a summer working for Alice Rossi, a feminist sociologist at Chicago, I had only the beginnings of an interest in gender issues. This changed radically at Wisconsin, thanks to a group of female graduate students who came to me and asked me to teach a seminar on gender issues. What, me? was my response, I don't know anything about this field. Don't worry, they said, we'll tell you what to read. So thanks to these students, my interest in the family broadened to include gender equality and my consciousness as a feminist rose.

After three years at Wisconsin I married Bill Mason and we moved to the Triangle Area in North Carolina where he secured a position at Duke and I was hired by the Research Triangle Institute in a two-person population program (I became the third person). I was told when I joined RTI that they wanted contracts, not grants, so they could get the fixed fee that came with contracts. Luckily, the Center for Population Research at NICHD at the time offered contracts for basic research, and I was fortunate to get a contract to conduct a study of women's labor force participation and fertility in the Triangle Area. The survey was not all that wonderful, but it cemented my status as a demographer who specialized in gender-related demographic issues.

I also had my first international experience while at RTI, a trip to India to evaluate a family planning program in the Punjab, which I found fascinating. This did not immediately lead to international research, but peaked my interest in what was happening to women and families in other parts of the world.

Bill and I moved to the University of Michigan in 1973 where I was affiliated with the Population Studies Center as well as the sociology department. I continued teaching graduate seminars focused on gender issues as well as undergraduate courses on the family. My primary research was domestically focused (see my vita).

In the 1980s, my exposure to international work was increased by several years as a proposal reviewer for the Rockefeller Foundation's grant program on women's status and fertility run by a former student, Mary Kritz. To start with, Mary asked me to outline the theoretical connections between women's status and fertility or mortality, which resulted in several influential papers that did not contain a shred of quantitative analysis (*pace* Bill Hodge!). As a reviewer for the Rockefeller grant program I learned about many excellent researchers from developing countries. But although the program funded some worthwhile projects, none of them seemed adequate to answer the question of whether raising women's status invariably lowered their fertility, which was the reigning hypothesis at the time. So my long-term friend, former Michigan grad student and fellow proposal reviewer, Herb Smith, and I decided we would organize a comparative study of women's status and fertility. We recruited three investigators from the Rockefeller

program to join us—Shireen Jejeebhoy from India, Zeba Sathar from Pakistan, and Lin Lean Lim from Malaysia—as well as a former Michigan student, Napaporn Chayovan from Thailand and a researcher from the Philippines, Corazon Raymundo, whom I had met while on sabbatical at the East-West Center in Honolulu. This became the major empirical project of my career.

What was my contribution to the field? I believe I played an important role in enhancing attention to gender inequality as a phenomenon relevant to demographic change. I was not alone in this, of course, having walked in a path established by Harriet Presser, Ruth Dixon-Mueller, Valerie Oppenheimer and other early pioneers of gender-focused demography. But tackling gender issues with quantitative rigor—and transporting concepts from sociology and feminist studies to the study of demographic issues—was probably my strongest contribution to the field. Indeed, my credentials as a gender expert and a quantitative researcher landed me my final job as Director of Gender and Development at the World Bank where I was able to make a contribution to the work being done by the Bank to enhance women’s opportunities internationally. Although the struggle for gender equality continues unabated, my work at the Bank was satisfying finale to a career focused on gender equality and demography.

A Few Words on PAA & Demography

Karen Oppenheim Mason

19 June 2014

The first PAA meeting of which I was aware was held at the University of Chicago in 1965 where I was a grad student. I do not remember attending, but I do remember Beverley Duncan complaining about her assignment to assemble the packages of papers given to each and every registrant! This was possible only because the meetings were small, intimate affairs at which presumably everyone knew everyone else. I now wonder whether all presenters in those days actually finished their paper in time for the papers to be mimeographed and distributed (no computers or photocopying in those days).

The first meeting I remember attending was the 1969 Atlanta meeting. I have a vivid memory of standing at the back of the room where the rubber chicken dinner had been served in advance of the Presidential address (us poor folks were admitted after dessert so we could hear our president speak) and being blown away by Otis Dudley Duncan’s address (though I can no longer remember what he said!).

PAA has undergone tremendous changes since that time. No more packages of papers assembled by the wives of distinguished professors to be handed out to the participants. Also, the year that Charlie Westoff was President (1975, in Seattle), the presidential address was finally separated from the over-priced hotel dinner and given its own time slot late Friday afternoon. Instead of the dinner, the association organized a trip to Blakely Island featuring a Native American salmon dinner and dance performance which was a huge success. The boat to Blakely Island had a cash bar and many of us imbibed enough to shed our green eyeshades and have a riotously convivial time.

Alas, the next year, the paid social event was a wine and charcuterie party on the Ile de St Helene (Montreal was the host city that year, not only to the PAA meetings but also to the Olympics).

The party cost what seemed at the time a small fortune (\$15), but with happy memories of Blakely Island, many hundreds of us ponied up for the event. It did not go off well. There was tons of mediocre Quebec wine available, but where was the charcuterie? Every 10 minutes or so, a waiter would whip out of the kitchen carrying a small tray of baloney and processed cheese slices, which the mob devoured in seconds. Only the large amounts of wine imbibed on empty stomachs prevented a riot. We later assumed that this party helped pay for the Olympics.

As I recall, the paid social events did not last long after the Montreal debacle. I believe there was a riverboat cruise in St Louis the following year, but attendance was poor. And by then, the meetings were becoming too large for paid social events to make much sense.

Without a doubt, the greatest change in PAA over the years I attended the meetings was the growth and diversification of the field and the meetings. With increasing attendance, the number of concurrent sessions rose, afternoon sessions were added to the worst-attended day of the meetings (step-child Saturdays), and eventually, poster sessions were added, all to accommodate the mounting number of papers submitted and the continued practice of universities to fund trips to professional meetings only if a paper was presented. PAA meetings are still small compared to the gigantic social science associations (ASA, APSA, AEA), but they were once considerably smaller.

PAA's growth not only presented an increased demand for paper slots—and the increased complexity of organizing the program—but also increased PAA's budget, which offered new opportunities. One of the major changes that occurred when I was on the Board of Directors, when Dick Easterlin was president, was the decision to form the Public Affairs Committee (as it was originally called) and hire a Washington representative to help promote funding for population research on the hill. This was a controversial decision. PAA had always been an inward-turning organization, focused on scientific purity, and some PAA members felt that it would soil this purity to engage in what cannot, legally, be called lobbying but smells a lot like it. I supported this change and the visits I paid to the hill during the year I was president convinced me that it was well worth the money spent by the association to ensure continued support for demographic data and research.

One of the greatest problems I faced as president of the association in 1997 was writing a presidential address while simultaneously organizing the meeting program. At the time, I was employed in an organization that offered little support for both activities, and the Princeton computer wizards had not yet invented the software designed to assist the program organization. So I was reduced to spending hours using Word Perfect to ensure that a given author did not appear on the program twice in the same time slot. It did not leave a lot of time for deep thinking about a presidential address.

The diversification of demography since I first entered the field is also evident. As noted earlier, for much of my career, fertility was the be-all and end-all topic in the field. This reflected the public hue and cry about the population “bomb,” the tremendous increase in the number of countries with official family planning programs, and the funding available from USAID, NICHD, NSF and other agencies to study the determinants of fertility and the impact of family

planning programs. For many demographers, the data collected through the USAID-supported World Fertility Survey (later, the Demographic and Health Surveys) were especially important.

Although there were always demographers interested in mortality, migration and a mysterious subfield called human ecology, there was very little attention to population aging and to an array of gender and family issues. Economic demography was also a dim glimmer on the horizon. I'm glad that attention to these areas has increased. Was it in part because of the threat of economists, who without much knowledge of traditional demography, were willing to apply their models to the study of almost anything, including marriage, fertility, the impact of family planning programs, population aging, mortality, the price of toothpaste, you name it? Or was it changing times and the demographic changes occurring, globally?

I left the field when I retired at the end of 2004 and no longer feel qualified to make wise pronouncements about the problems facing the field or its future (I doubt I ever was qualified...but when I was still reading the literature, I probably would have been foolish enough to say something). Demography has been a terrific home for me and I wish the field and the many young people in it the very best. Demography has helped improve the world, I believe, and there aren't too many academic disciplines that can say that.