

DEMOGRAPHIC DESTINIES

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

**John R. Weeks, Chair and PAA Historian
Win Brown
Karen Hardee
Dennis Hodgson
Emily Merchant**

**Interview with Robert Moffitt
PAA President in 2014**

**Interviewed by Win Brown, Dennis Hodgson, John Weeks,
Karen Hardee, and Emily Merchant
at the J.W. Marriott Hotel, Austin, Texas**

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WEEKS: I'm John Weeks and I am the PAA Historian and Chair of the PAA History Committee and with us today are all of our committee members. I'll introduce them in terms of longevity on the committee: Dennis Hodgson, Karen Hardee, Emily Merchant, and Win Brown. And, of course, our purpose here today is to continue the PAA Oral History Project, which got started actually way back with our first PAA Historian, Anders Lunde, and then carried on with Jean van der Tak, our second Historian, and I've been the Historian for, believe it or not, 25 years now and trying to get to caught up over time.

But it is our pleasure to be able every year to interview one or two of the past PAA Presidents; and today we are very honored to have you, Robert Moffitt, be with us.

MOFFITT: If I may quickly add something, I would like to express my gratitude to you all for this job you're doing. When I was PAA President, I was a big supporter of this project. It's a great endeavor. I wish more associations did this. PAA is a distinguished organization with a distinguished history, so I think it's just an outstanding effort. Thank you all.

WEEKS: Thank you.

BROWN: Thank you.

WEEKS: Win, over to you.

BROWN: Good, great. Well, thank you so much again for being here, Robert. And we all have the materials. We have your CV, and a lot of us have some of your articles. I thought to get us started, I'm looking at the very top of your CV and I see that you went to Rice for your undergraduate years and then, of course, you got your Master's and your PhD from Brown later on. And I wonder if you could walk us through your sort of scholastic history, starting with Rice and talk about the events or the classes or the teachers who kind of helped you get on this journey to where you are now.

MOFFITT: Sure. I'd be happy to. I was born and raised in Houston, Texas. I went locally to college and I came from a rather low income family and the attraction of Rice University at that time was that it was very low tuition, and that's the reason I went there. Rice happens to have a very excellent reputation in math and sciences and that was also what I was interested in. When I was in high school, I was a math guy and I won several awards in Houston for math. So it was a fortuitous choice that they had low tuition as well as being academically high in quality.

I could tell you some other stories about Rice. They actually had zero tuition for many years. The founder, William Marsh Rice, declared in his will that no tuition could ever be charged for Rice University. The University took it to court and were able to start charging tuition, but it stayed low. I think now it's up to the usual high, extraordinary levels. In any case, I went to Rice and I was a mathematics major, which you may not know is a very common starting point for many economists because economics has a very strong mathematical content. But, like most people, I found math -- at least at very high levels -- to be rather difficult. I took an economics course out of curiosity. You have to understand, this was the 1960s and I'm very much a child of the 1960s. The social movements, the political movements--I was part of that and I believed in those movements, and doing something socially useful was what it was all about to me.

I took one economics course, just introductory economics, and I was awed by the capability of using my mathematical ability and all my technical skills towards something that was relevant to the real world. Many, many other students made exactly that same transition. So I immediately switched into economics and out of mathematics, and I took just the usual set of economics courses. I did take some sociology courses at the time. I actually can't say if the

Sociology Department at Rice had a lot of demographers or has them now. I haven't checked lately. If there were any, I did not have any contact with them. But there were some left-wing sociologists in their department and I, being of that orientation, took all those courses and very much enjoyed them.

I graduated from Rice and I decided I wanted to be an academic and went to graduate school in economics, to Brown University. And to be perfectly honest, it was not the best choice for me. Like a lot of undergraduates, I wasn't really given much guidance about departments and how they differ, and we know that they differ a lot. The Economics Department at Brown was very theoretical and mathematical, and here I was a guy interested in social policy and empirical work and the real world. There were almost no faculty there who specialized in that. So it was a rather frustrating time.

I'm very happy that I learned a lot of technical skills and hard-core economics there. I'm grateful for what I got. I didn't understand when I was a graduate student there was this other building across campus called Maxcy Hall, which is where the Sociology Department was, and how distinguished the demographers were over there. I later came back to Brown, and I did make that discovery then; but as a graduate student, I didn't.

My interests as a graduate student went directly toward the issues of poverty and disadvantage and the welfare system in the United States. As you can tell from my CV and work, that has been theme I keep coming back to, whether it's economics or demography. So that takes me up to the graduate program in economics. Would you like me to continue?

BROWN: Well, let me jump in. I'd like to take you back to something you mentioned earlier and you mentioned that you were from a low income background. So I heard that and then I heard that you were sort of a child of the 1960s and all that was going on in our

culture and our country then. What was more important to kind of set you on that pathway where you were passionate about lower income, you're passionate about advantage and lack thereof in our country? Was it your household/parents coupled with the 1960s or --

MOFFITT: I would say probably the culture of the 1960s. My family was not extremely low income. They were a lower middle class family. My mother didn't have a high school degree. She dropped out in the Depression to help the family income by working. My father did get a high school degree, but he never went to college. He took some part-time night courses. He ended up being an accountant. But my parents put a high value on education, and they pushed me in that direction.

I don't look back on it as a lost opportunity but, in fact, I applied to a number of universities around the country out of high school and I got into some very good ones. But they didn't give me financial aid, so I couldn't go. As I said before, that's why I went to Rice. So that's a perspective that undoubtedly contributes to my intellectual development.

As a high school student growing up in Texas, everybody in my community were hard core Republicans. They couldn't stand John F. Kennedy--he was anathema to them. Then I went to college and, like so many people, my views broadened out and I got interested in social and political issues. Rice University, even though it's in Houston, had the usual undergraduates. They were very liberal, although not entirely so, so I went in that direction, too. You know, the 1960s were a period of turmoil and a lot was going on politically and socially. I enlisted in Gene McCarthy's campaign in 1968 for President, went to rallies, and participated in a protest at the university because they wouldn't let [famous 1960s radical] Abbie Hoffman come and speak on campus. The President said no, so we held a rally to protest.

And then when I graduated, in May of 1970, the Cambodia incident occurred [when Nixon invaded Cambodia] as well as Kent State [when the Ohio State National Guard opened fire on student antiwar protesters and killed four of them] was just earlier, and all of us wore black armbands at graduation. We stood up, we turned around, we would not face the speaker and would only turn our backs on him. It was a unique time and, as you might suspect, you had to be there. But all of that colors my views on many things and that influence has stayed with me.

HODGSON: Can I ask one quick question? You talked about President Kennedy, but you didn't mention LBJ and you didn't mention the war on poverty. Now how aware were you in the context of high school/college of these kinds of social policy changes that became central to your career?

MOFFITT: I wasn't aware at all in high school. I wouldn't say I was particularly Republican myself. I heard these views of the adults around me, but I think as a high school student, I just wasn't aware. I just remember my freshman year at Rice and I started reading Time magazine. You know, back in those days, you watched the evening news on TV every night. That's where you got your information, CBS or NBC at 6:00 o'clock. And you read Time magazine or Newsweek, and that was it. And I hadn't ever heard of the New York Times back then and the Houston newspapers weren't very good.

I remember in my freshman year picking up an article in Newsweek talking about race relations and my eyes just opened up and I said, "Oh, I get it now. I get what's going on," and it was just a complete revelation. After that, I just followed through and followed the news and politics. But as a high school student, I would just say I didn't have any real consciousness of that.

BROWN: So, Robert, I wonder where did the math come from? Were you -- well, you mentioned that your father was an accountant. There's math in that one way or the other, but were you in a mathematical household? Was there some influence there that sort of turned into something that allowed you to really thrive mathematically or was that completely kind of a solo act, as it were?

MOFFITT: Well, I don't really know the answer to that myself. I know that my father did have quite an influence. He was an accountant and he would do arithmetic every evening. That was his hobby, and doing ledgers and accounting. We would walk around the house and he would just throw all these pieces of paper all over the place with little scribbles and additions and subtractions and math. He would just sit at the TV and have a pad and just do arithmetic while watching.

So I'm sure that was very much an influence. I now have a son, too. I didn't tell him to go into math or try to influence him whatsoever, but he's all math. I know that when he was taking courses in math in grade school, he would come home with his homework and I could help him with it. I would sit down and say, "Okay. Here, do it this way, do it that way. This part is interesting." I wasn't pushing it, but I think that influence was there. My brother, too, is very mathematical. We both were.

My father had never gone to college. He wanted us both to be engineers. He was an accountant for an oil company and, in that company, the high status people were the petroleum engineers, at least in terms of technical ability. And he did admire technical ability. He said, "I want you to be a petroleum engineer." He understood that math was important in that profession. Of course, then my brother and I went to college and we weren't at all interested in

petroleum engineering or any kind of engineering. We wanted to do academic scholarship. But I think my father was a major influence in our going in a mathematical direction.

BROWN: And then you went to college, and the economics course changed everything. Do you remember what the context was when you kind of -- you were on this math track and then you weren't. What was it about that particular course? And it was probably microeconomics because that's what we normally start with. What was it? Was it just brilliantly taught, or did something come alive in terms of the principles and --

MOFFITT: It was just what is called the "Principles" course—which is just the name for introductory economics. I know I am biased toward economics-- I mean, I'm an economist. I believe that economics provides powerful tools and frameworks and the training to understand many issues about society. It was the social aspect of it that appealed to me in that course. With the tools of economics, you understood what affected how much income people had, the determinants of poverty and disadvantage, income distribution, inequality, and you had tools for understanding how the distribution of income was changing over time and how it differed between men, women, and single mothers. It provided you with a framework. And it gave me ways to use my math to do those kind of analyses. The course was not particularly empirical and statistical--that all came much later. But there was data there, and that was my first exposure to data because there were numbers in our Principles textbook. We used, at that time, the most famous economics introductory textbook, that written by Paul Samuelson.

BROWN: Paul Samuelson.

MOFFITT: The famous Samuelson's textbook. He was an outstanding writer and expositor. A very unique guy. A Nobel Laureate and genius, but could also talk to a noneconomist and explain economic concepts in ways you could understand. But, again, it was

the social appeal to it that just really bowled me over. I said, "I'm going to be an economist and work on these issues." It was a transformative experience.

BROWN: And then you went that way. You went to Brown. You got your master's in economics. You weren't so keen on that; but you pick up a lot of skills, technical skills. You saw the building on the other side of the campus where all the demographers were. Tell us now about your PhD program because that seems to be something that really put you on the final pathway to what you did over your whole career.

MOFFITT: Well, as I said, I was interested in poverty and disadvantage and economics. The courses in my graduate time did not have a lot of content of those issues. In economics, as in most social science graduate programs, you do coursework in your first two years and then, in your third year, you go on to your dissertation. When I went on to my dissertation, I got very interested in a hypothesis which was called the "Mismatch Hypothesis." The "Mismatch Hypothesis" was that one of the problems with inner city African-American workers was that all the jobs had suburbanized and had moved out of the central cities where they were in the 1930s and 1940s. Starting in the 1950s, with the great suburbanization of the U.S. cities, a lot of the manufacturing jobs had moved out to the suburbs and to outlying areas where there was more land and companies could spread out and build larger and cheaper facilities.

And because of the weak transportation links and networks in most cities, inner-city African-American men could simply not get out to these jobs. I got very interested in that and it led to a very empirical dissertation. I gathered data on commuting patterns of African-Americans and on where the jobs were located in different cities around the United States. I greatly enjoyed it and I think I did a pretty good job with it. I found that there was some truth

to the hypothesis, but also that inner-city African Americans have a lot of other problems other than that one. It was by no means the major explanation for their low incomes and high unemployment rates, but it was a very useful exercise to me.

My only problem -- and we'll probably come back to it as we go a little bit further in my career -- was that I didn't have good supervision because the faculty at Brown were so theoretical. I didn't get good training on how to do empirical work or on statistical methods, much less on the issues themselves. I acquired many more skills after I left graduate school and I really flowered in statistical analysis later on.

My thesis adviser was an urban economist. In those days -- this is just a footnote about economics -- if you wanted to study poverty, you had to study urban economics. That's where poverty was located, it was thought—in the cities. So urban economics became your specialty because it was thought of as a problem of cities. Today, that's not true in economics any longer. Urban economics today is back to the basic issues of the spatial distributions of population and jobs and not poverty. Poverty has moved over to other fields.

In any case, I had a thesis adviser who I don't think had ever run a regression in his life. He was very much at an “urban policy” person, and he helped me on the policy side. But he wasn't able to really give me much supervision on the empirical side, how to deal with data, and how to do that kind of research.

BROWN: From your CV, it looks like you went from Brown to Mathematica at Princeton and you got involved in a negative income tax project? Can you talk about that?

MOFFITT: Absolutely, and that was really when things started to happen for my career. I went on the job market and, to be honest, the economics faculty at Brown didn't particularly like me because I wasn't doing their thing. I wasn't doing the math or the theory. I

was doing this other stuff. The problem was that I was doing the best on all the exams among the students, but they still didn't like what I was doing.

In fact, here is another story. They disliked me so much that I got a telephone call from the chairman of the department one day. He said, "I want you come in Saturday morning to the department. I want to talk to you." And I was like "Gosh, what is this about?" I was pretty intimidated and fearful. But I went in to the Department on a Saturday morning. The building is completely empty and dark. There was the chairman waiting for me, with his door open and the light on. He said, "I want you to change to the sociology department--you're not doing economics." I was shocked but said no—I wanted to be an economist. But it's an event I will always remember.

When I went out on the job market, I couldn't get a job. I didn't get any good recommendation letters. My dissertation was good but not good enough. I did not get a single job offer. But I lucked out because a late job announcement came out to work on so-called negative income tax experiments at a firm called Mathematica and I applied along with many other people. I had done a summer internship in Washington, and the economist who supervised me liked me a lot. He had a friend from grad school who was at Mathematica and called him up and said, "I strongly recommend Moffitt. He doesn't have a job. He's very much interested in your negative income tax experiment."

A negative income tax experiment, if you're not aware, is the economist's word for a guaranteed annual income welfare program. Today we would call that something related to a UBI, Universal Basic Income, or any kind of universal program. It was a very popular idea, even back then; and it is still around today.

There were a bunch of true experiments that had been run in the 1970s in several cities where they randomized a low-income population into an experimental group and a control group, and the experimental group got the guaranteed annual income program and the control group did not. One of the earliest big social experiments had just been completed and the staff were all analyzing the data. They hired me to work on the data, and that's really when I got started on work on welfare programs. I spent three or four years analyzing the data from that experiment.

I was also able to publish articles out of it with a lot of interesting results. I'm a very big proponent of the guaranteed annual income myself, but there are a lot of issues over how to design it, which I've studied for many years. I was just starting my career then, and it was just a perfect thing for me because of its policy relevance and because I could use my economics to study it. I acquired many new analysis skills at Mathematica -- if you haven't heard of it, it's a topnotch research firm that does outstanding and high quality program evaluations, generally for the federal government. I learned so much about policy evaluation methods, econometrics, and all kinds of important tools there.

It's also where I had my first exposure to demography. But it was a nonacademic job and I did eventually move to academics afterwards, but I learned a lot there. It was really a good fit for me, and it was luck that I got a good job there.

BROWN: I wanted to ask you about how you wrote your first paper, because it looks as if this was the period in which you started to write papers. How did you know how to write one? Because you said back at Brown you may not have gotten that kind of guidance and you probably weren't particularly productive in that sense then. Is this when that began to happen; and if so, how did you proceed?

MOFFITT: Well, it was a learning curve. I mean, I was always interested in academic publishing, even though I was in a nonacademic organization. A lot of the other researchers there did not regularly publish in economic journals. They produced government reports, and that's where it ended. But I really wanted to publish, and these guaranteed annual income experiments were of great interest to the academic community as well as to the government policy community. There were great publication opportunities there for interesting new results from experiments.

In fact, I remember there was a session at the American Economic Association meetings on these experiments in the early 1970s, and something like a thousand people came to the room. It was overflowing. People couldn't get in. It was just a really, really hot topic that everybody in the economics profession was talking about, and some very distinguished economists were also working on it and writing papers. So I started writing and I got some help from some other people at Mathematica. But to be honest, it was trial and error. I did the same thing everybody does. You read what's out there already and try to write a paper and model yourself on the articles that have already been published.

A lot of the papers I look back on now, were terribly, terribly written. They were incredibly dense and impossible to follow. Who can understand this, I think now, when I read them? Explain what you're doing, Dr. Moffitt! Naturally, some of them never got published. Thankfully, probably. But I learned. I got referee reports and editor comments like everyone else, and I got better at it. One thing that was really good at Mathematica that helped me there -- actually, I'd forgotten all about this--was that they had an editor--a professional editor. Her name was Louise. Louise would go over my papers and mark them up completely. I mean, marked up every sentence on every page in her red pencil. At first, you always react, "Come on. Let me

write my own paper." But as I got more of her instructions, I started to appreciate it and see the main message she was trying to convey about writing. To the extent I have any scholarly writing ability at all today, it's due to her. She taught me how to explain myself, how to speak in simple terms, how to explain what you're doing, how to use the right words. Most people don't get that and that was another piece of luck really. So anyway, that's a little bit on how I got started.

BROWN: I want to stay on that paper just a little bit longer. Those first few papers that I guess you don't want to read them anymore. But when you were first writing those papers, you mentioned you had your hands on a lot of data, really interesting new data. And I can imagine the kinds of data you were seeing.

At that point, did you realize that you were sort of veering into population science? Did you see yourself as a, you know, demographer? Were you doing the things that your demography peers, if you had them at that time, were doing; or did that come a little bit later on?

MOFFITT: Well, let me then tell you the story of demography at Mathematica. I didn't know anything about demography as a graduate student or when I started at Mathematica. But Mathematica was a for-profit research company, which means that you wrote proposals all the time. Actually, that was another great thing about working there--I learned how to write a proposal. There were many senior people around me who knew how to write a proposal and how to get funded, and who just wrote proposals all the time. And you worked collaboratively on proposals—it's your bread and butter. You almost didn't have time to actually do the research because you're always trying to fund your whole salary, basically, and most of it was federal government research. So I learned that skill.

But anyway, there was another economist there who was my same vintage who'd come to Mathematica. Barbara Devaney is her name. Barb is still a very active researcher. She

stayed at Mathematica after I left, but she came from the University of Michigan. Now, the University of Michigan, as you know, is a great social science university and has a very strong population program. Even though she was an economist, she had been completely involved in the population program there and [Past PAA President] Ron Lee was one of her advisors (he was at Michigan before Berkeley).

Anyway, she walked into my office one day and she plopped down a thick packet of paper on my desk. Of course, we didn't have computers, so everything was typed and then photocopied and was consequently on paper. It was an RFP, a Request for Proposals, which means, you probably know, an invitation to write a proposal for possible funding. She said, "Hey, Robert, there's this RFP from NIH on the Easterlin hypothesis." So I said, "Barb, I just have two questions for you. The first is: What is NIH? And number two is: what is the Easterlin hypothesis?" Then she explained it to me and I said, "Well, that sounds interesting," and I started learning more about the Easterlin hypothesis. And she started clueing me in on the world of demography and what was coming out at the time about the Easterlin hypothesis. [Past PAA President] Richard Easterlin was an economist, but he was speaking to demographers. His hypothesis, which was the so-called relative income hypothesis, had garnered a great deal of attention in demography because he was trying to explain the baby boom. His whole relative income hypothesis was that young men and women's decisions are very much influenced by what their income is relative to their parents. If you're doing very well relative to your parents, you have a very optimistic view of life. He thought that meant having more children because your incomes were so much higher than you expected them to be.

In fact, his hypothesis should be talked about more today because we're in the opposite situation now, where younger generations are not doing as well as their parents. I bet

you could probably explain a lot today with that hypothesis. But it was a great hypothesis because he was modifying an economist's view. The economist's view is that income is income, and that is all that matters. You're not comparing it to anything. Easterlin said, "No, no. It's your income relative to expectations." The hypothesis was of great interest to sociologists because the whole idea of it was similar to social norms. How do those norms get established that influence how you are making your decisions? What matters are your subjective perceptions of how well-off you are--it's entirely subjective. It's not just how much cash you have.

Anyway, it was very interesting, so Barb and I applied for a grant and wrote the proposal together, and we got one. I don't know how we got one because we were both novices. And we then did the work on it – which is when I started reading more about demography, and Barb helped me out by filling me in on it. I said this is really cool stuff. I was also interested in the methods because I'm an economist and economists get trained in methods pretty heavily, and I had strong methodological interests. I got the old Shryock and Siegel [Past PAA President Jacob Siegel] book on "Methods and Materials of Demography" and I read it from cover to cover. I said, "Man, this is great," all about life tables and everything else. I've never taken a course in population or demography in my life. Later on, I was lucky to work at several universities with great demographers at universities and to learn from them. But really, it was self-education in the beginning. Just my own reading. I was fascinated by it and that's what got me started.

BROWN: One more question from me, and then I'm sensing that colleagues will jump in. And I want to get -- I think we all want to get your bird's eye view of the field now and what the major changes are. We have time.

MOFFITT: Okay.

BROWN: But I'm still kind of looking at your CV. I see that you do make the move to the academic side and it looks like it happened at Penn at the Public Policy School, very briefly. And then you went -- I think there was a Rutgers stint shortly after there.

So you turned that corner. You made that move. You got hired as a lecturer first. Tell us about that. That was the earliest pathway to --

MOFFITT: Yeah, sure. Well, early career development is all about personal connections. We are a networked world, you know. I got that job at Penn—but it was just a non-tenure-track, Lecturer position to come in and teach a single course one day a week--because of an economist at Mathematica. He was working on the guaranteed income experiments but he was a professor at Swarthmore, which is not too far away from the Mathematica office at Princeton, and he had a joint appointment at Penn and he knew I was interested in moving to academics and I was trying to publish and so on. And Penn had a public policy program and they just wanted someone to come in and teach that course for them. I still wasn't clued in on the great Pop Center there, which is separate. He said, "If you're interested, why don't you come and be a lecturer? Get some academic experience under your belt, some teaching experience and exposure, something you can put on your CV." So he was just the right person for me at the time. Robinson Hollister is his name. He's an economist, but he worked on poverty programs and was a very distinguished guy who's now long since retired.

You meet these people at certain times in your career and people help you along, and they do things for you. That's how I got my job at Mathematica and then I got the job at Penn the same way and then I got the job at Rutgers after that, which was my first real, full-time, permanent, tenure track job, which I got only because there was an economist there who worked on poverty and he knew some people at Mathematica. They said "Hire Moffitt."

Rutgers is where I got started as an academic, as an Assistant Professor of Economics. Like most assistant professors, I started working 24/7. I was there in the Department all the time and I worked on the computer into the wee hours. I started doing research and I was still working a little bit with Barbara Devaney on demography topics. I got very interested in economic models for fertility and, if you look at my CV, you'll see that some of my early work was on fertility and marriage, often combined it with my interest in poverty. Eventually I evolved and did research on a lot of different topics in economic demography. Now, I mostly just work on the relationship between welfare programs and marriage and single motherhood and things like that. It's kind of the niche that I'm really working in now. But you stumble into these things. After Rutgers, I was lucky enough to eventually return to my alma mater, to Brown, which is another story if you have time.

BROWN: Why don't we hear that story and then we'll open up because these stories are really fascinating.

MOFFITT: Well, the funny story about my return to Brown is that I did start publishing and I was fortunately getting a lot of articles published. They got quite a few citations and my reputation rapidly grew in those first early years. But at Brown, the economics department was still the old mathematical department-- a "No Policy, Please," "No Data, Please," "Nothing About the Real World, Please" kind of department. But the profession was rapidly changing and economics departments around the country were hiring and developing young people who did empirical, policy-oriented work, including work on the family and economic demography. Michigan, Wisconsin, Berkeley--all of those economics departments were doing it. So, the Brown faculty said, somewhat reluctantly, "Gee, I guess we better hire somebody who does this stuff" and they put out a job announcement and I applied along with

many other people, and then I got an interview and a flyout and, eventually, an offer. I guess the faculty must have said “Hmm...Moffitt’s turned out to be not so bad after all. He actually was able to get some stuff published!” and must have decided that I wasn’t so horrible to not be brought back. And so I went back, and I was the only one in the Department who did empirical, policy work. There was nobody else in the department who did anything like it. So that’s the story.

Then I helped build up the department more in that direction. And that's when I really met demographers over in the Population Studies and Training Center, PSTC. [Past PAA President] Sid Goldstein was still around then and then our current [PAA] President John Casterline was there. Fran Goldscheider was there. You know, lots of people who are no longer with us anymore, like Al Speare. There were a whole bunch of very distinguished demographers at Brown. I went over there all the time and became part of the Pop Center.

So that's the story at Brown and kind of where I really even further got deeper into demography and learned a lot from all the demographers over there.

BROWN: So is it fair to say that you brought data to Brown? Is that something that you could probably say that did happen?

MOFFITT: I would definitely say that. Brought data and social policy to the economics department. All the other faculty were only interested in economic growth or mathematical models of the economy or macroeconomics, inflation, unemployment. I built up databases. I modernized the computing facilities, brought in all the statistical software, and we started hiring other faculty in applied fields.

The graduate students got interested, too. It's just a popular topic for any economics student. I mean, what's not to like about using your tools for social policy? I even got some

demography students. A student named Michael Rendall, who's now at Maryland and the Director of their Pop Center, was my student. He came over from sociology and I supervised him and we wrote a couple of papers together, one of which is in *Demography* on single motherhood. Very excellent student then and now an excellent demographer. So, students were a part, too, of what I helped build at Brown.

Today the Brown economics department has, just like every other department, a lot of good people doing applied and policy work. Brown also has a very good Pop Center, and a lot of the economists at Brown today are associates of the Pop Center. It's really interdisciplinary. I guess I credit myself with getting the ball rolling.

BROWN: Which was not easy back then because as I -- unless I'm getting my timing wrong, when you started there, we were still using mainframes, weren't we?

MOFFITT: Absolutely.

BROWN: It wasn't easy work.

MOFFITT: No, no, there were no PCs. You just had mainframes. We had remote terminals that connected to the mainframe. Across campus, there was a computer center where all the mainframes were and where all the magnetic tapes were--reels containing data. You had to take your magnetic tape over there and they'd store it in the cabinet. When you were ready to work, you would send them a message, "Mount my tape, please," and wait half an hour for someone to mount it and attach it to your account. I was a Fortran programmer then. There weren't good software programs back then either, so I learned how to write my own original Fortran programs. And you had card decks and all of that, which seems so ancient today.

We also had algebraic computation machines, which were like huge adding machines. They were very large and you had to type into them and they would do some simple calculations

like a regression. But the PCs didn't come until later in the 1980s really. I helped set all that up and it was laborious, to say the least. It seems like another era now; but that's what we did.

BROWN: So one more question from me, and I'm hoping colleagues will jump in. I want to step back and look at the whole field now. Maybe we can start with PAA because that's this context. I don't know if -- I'm not sure if this is the best way to frame this, but maybe how has the field changed from your first PAA to today? Just thinking about what we've talked about.

HARDEE: When was your first PAA?

BROWN: And when was your first PAA and how did that happen? But PAA might be a good way to sort of take stock and monitor the major changes in our field. How would you comment on that? And then I think we can probably ask some more questions that are kind of from that bird's eye view.

MOFFITT: I think my first PAA was in the 1980s. I think it wasn't until I went to Brown and I met all the demographers there. Sid Goldstein had been President of PAA back in 1975 and was very well connected to it and so was Fran Goldscheider and John Casterline. Of course, PAA is a great organization and not only on scholarship; a great thing about PAA is its collegiality and the personal nature of it, which I've never found in any other association.

The field has definitely changed from my initial study of it. When I first got interested in demography back in the Mathematica years -- so that was the late 1970s -- even then, it was pretty much dominated by population control and family planning and related kind of issues. Those were important issues. But the social demography side was really in its infancy and the big change that I see, particularly from my perspective, is the growth of social demography. You come to the PAA this year and the number of sessions on that topic or something related to it is

tremendous. And, as a whole, the field of demography has broadened out away from those core issues of fertility, mortality, and migration.

You come to PAA today and you've got health and population health, for example. You've got applied demographers. You've got geographers. You've got survey issues and survey statisticians, although the Census Bureau has always been involved. You've got economists, of course, here. You've got anthropologists. It's a big tent and that's a nice thing about demography. Although I have to say that you've got to expect a little bit of tension between the traditionalists who say "this is what demography should be" and the younger people who say, "No. I want to do this. It's not quite the traditional stuff. I want to bring this in."

The big tent, with a lot of different disciplines represented at the PAA is, I think, very healthy. I also think that it's one reason for the vibrancy and intellectual excitement of demography. Four thousand submissions this year. It's amazing how many people come and many young demographers are interested in all different aspects of the field. This is why it is thriving and why the broadening out brings so many people to PAA. It's the reason that PAA has succeeded.

But demography has gone through a tremendous evolution. Even when I went to Johns Hopkins, it was still Johns Hopkins—a place excelling with demographers working on population control. It still has people like Stan Becker, a distinguished demographer who works on those issues. But [Past PAA President] Andy Cherlin is there, too, and he is representative of social demography—he is concerned with inequality, poverty, and marriage. The tremendous development has been very healthy, in my view.

WEEKS: Could we talk a little bit about that? Because one of the things that we, the committee, have realized over the years is that because demography is an interdisciplinary field

and there are very few departments of demography, the PAA does play a role in bringing demographers together and doing stuff for demographers that they can't get done anywhere else.

How do you feel about that?

MOFFITT: I absolutely agree. Demographers are scattered around in all kinds of organizations. If you talk about universities, typically in sociology departments; they are usually a minority -- maybe two or three -- and so there are not that many people to talk to if you're in a sociology department. At Johns Hopkins, there were a lot in our School of Public Health, so it has had a health-oriented social demography focus there. A lot of demographers work for the government and Census Bureau and NCHS and NIH and places like that, so they kind of all fit in.

Here at PAA, you can come and talk to people like you, with those who are interested in exactly the same things you are. Some of our large population centers have good training programs, so many of our young demographers have been trained very well; but then they go out from places where there are a lot of demographers and they get so much good interaction as graduate students but they go out to a place where they're the only person in their department.

I think the PAA is instrumental in serving this function, and probably more so than in some other associations and other disciplines, where it's a little bit more homogeneity and people are coming from places where they do have a lot of colleagues. So, I absolutely agree.

WEEKS: But now you talk about the fact that a lot of demographers are sociologists and certainly that's the case; but, indeed, if you look down the list of PAA Presidents, there have been, like you, a lot of economists. You were talking about Richard Easterlin and, you know, Sam Preston. I mean, we can go down the list and find a lot of economists.

MOFFITT: A lot.

WEEKS: How do you think that comes about, despite the seeming importance of sociology?

MOFFITT: That's a good question. And, more recently, Greg Duncan and David Lam, were PAA Presidents -- and you can count Ron Lee in that category.

To me, it's natural that, as an economist like myself interested in population issues, that demography is an intellectually appealing area to which you can add some economic tools. As to why they've so often been Presidents of PAA, I'm actually kind of surprised at that. It may be just a reflection of PAA's openness to all different kinds of intellectual perspectives.

I know many economists who happen to be not only outstanding researchers, but also pretty good administrators with strong organizational skills. I don't know if that's because of their training or just the kinds of people who come into economics. But, in fact, if you go to universities, you'll find that provosts and presidents and deans are packed with economists, for better or for worse. I'm not sure that's a positive thing, but I think that it's not surprising that economists can manage the financial affairs of the association pretty well and know how to balance a budget and things like that. But mostly I think it's just a natural intellectual congenial pairing and I'm happy that so many economists are coming to PAA and are appearing all over the program. Maybe some of them will be future Presidents.

BROWN: Can I jump in one more time?

HODGSON: Oh, sure.

BROWN: I wonder if you can imagine the most important research question in the field that, in your mind, has not been answered yet and you would be passionate about trying to answer it. What would that research question be that, of course, would involve, you know, demographers and people you've worked with? What would that research question be for a field?

A real enduring question. And how might you go about answering it? Would it mean a field trial? Would it mean doing -- working with the data we already have? But what is the research question that maybe you wish that's what everyone's talking about and trying to solve?

MOFFITT: Well, I'm not sure I could answer that for the field as a whole because there are so many areas that I don't know well enough to feel really qualified to give an answer to. I will say that, from my perspective of the kind of work I do, is that I still don't think we understand why so many low income women are not marrying the fathers of their children, despite all of the work that's been done on the issue. I still don't think we understand why the trends have been what they have been—why there was a huge increase in nonmarital child bearing in the 1970s and 1980s, a flattening out and declining after that, and then another huge increase in the 2000s, which has now fortunately plateaued out and started declining again.

I should say that the economists have no answers, because if you look at economic variables, it doesn't help much to get a good handle on the problem. And if you use Gary Becker, because he's the father of economics of the family and fertility, I don't think his framework has the answer either. His theories about the employment status of women affecting the division of labor in the household are important for middle class women, but I don't think that is what is going on for low income women, who have low employment rates, not high ones.

Demographers have been very successful at tracking it and including the role of cohabitation, and there has been a lot of good work done on the relationships between absent fathers and mothers. They do see each other and they do have interactions, and fathers are often involved with the children. But I think what we need -- and this may be heresy as an economist, and my economist colleagues would probably disbar me from the profession for saying this--but I really think we need a lot more ethnographies that go in on the ground level and find out what's

going on with low income men and women. There has been some work of that kind already and it has been very valuable. For example, Kathryn Edin has done much of the best work of that type. But when talking to a low income woman, coming from a disadvantaged family, what do they see to be the virtue of having children, and for that virtue to be so great that they are willing to go ahead and be a single mother with all the difficulties that come from that? Difficulties that are worse in a low income community where there are no resources to help you with raising that child, and where the welfare system is not helping you anymore either?

Maybe the answer is that the men are left out of the picture often in the research that's been done. Not entirely, for the best demography brings the men in. But, do the men want to get married? Why don't they want to get married? There's been some ethnographic work on that as well. But I don't see another regression to run that's going to answer this question, and I think going in on the ground level and getting some hypotheses generated would be my preference.

HODGSON: I've got sort of a "could be" question. More I'm asking about your reflections because you spent your entire career doing policy analysis and a real central concern is on understanding the fate of low income Americans. Now, what do we do with the findings of great policy researchers like yourself as a society? We've just gone through two years of a Trump administration and perhaps there will be six more and we don't seem to be using policy findings of such good research to set policies and programs to deal with these problems. Now, we seem to have fallen back a bit in terms of wanting to use empirically based data to set policies. What's your reflection on sort of the relevance of policy research in a political context, when those types of empirically based findings don't seem to be appreciated?

MOFFITT: That's an excellent question. In my reasonably long career, the success of using evidence in policy has gone up and gone down. It's gone through cycles and we're in a

bad cycle right now for sure. And not only is the current administration ignoring some valuable research, they're actually conducting distorted research. They're putting out fake news research, to be honest, which is completely bogus, to support their policies, including some written by economists. They've hired Trump-style economists to do studies that are purportedly good research but which are just complete nonsense, to be blunt about it.

So what do you do? Well, one thing is you wait. I was just a member of a committee of the National Academy of Sciences chaired by Greg Duncan and we just issued a report on how to reduce child poverty by 50 percent in ten years. There's a session this Friday morning where we'll be presenting our findings to the demographers describing how you can achieve that goal. It's generating a lot of discussion in Washington. *[Editor's note: Here is a link to a free PDF download of the report from the National Academies Press:*

<https://www.nap.edu/catalog/25246/a-roadmap-to-reducing-child-poverty/>

We've been asked to come talk to the House Democrats about our plans because we have 100 people running for President in the Democratic party and they all want to know how to have a platform on how to reduce poverty and address these social issues. They're all ears, and they're interested in evidence. They want to put out a plan that has strong academic and research evidence so they can go to the voters with some solid numbers and say, "Let's do this and it will reduce poverty exactly by this amount, and it will cost this." We researchers can give them those numbers.

We have been asked to come and talk to the Senate side too. What you do is you work with the people who, at any particular point in time, are interested in listening. A lot of us who work in the poverty area are also saying now that one thing you can do is go to the states, because there are a lot of state policymakers who are very interested and a lot of poverty

programs and social programs can be run at the state level. States have a lot of power to do things even without federal assistance. A local health program, neighborhood health programs, child support, social services, and a lot of other local programs are possible. At a lot of the poverty forums I go to, people say, "Let's all get in the state level and try to work there until there's a change in federal administration." But, again, there's an old saying that if you become a poverty researcher, if you weren't a natural pessimist to begin with, you become one very quickly because it's just such a tough job persuading politicians to recognize the facts and use the evidence and not exercise just their political biases. So it's hard to predict how efforts at the state level will come out.

Fortunately, as I said, there are a lot of politicians who are willing to do something. I was on the GPAC Committee here for PAA, which is our advocacy arm, and I've done a lot of advocacy work for the American Economic Association, too, where, for nine years, I was on their GPAC equivalent as a member or as a Chair. I've spent a lot of time walking the halls in Washington to find people who are willing to listen. You find people who are receptive, whether it's asking for funding or asking for support for social programs or whatever you're asking for. You go to the people who are willing to help-- and there are some--and you develop partnerships with them, and you develop relationships with the right congressmen and their staff and people in the administration. You have to work the hallways and compile a constituency. That's the way it has to work to be effective. It's hard work, very hard work; but I think that's the way you have to go, especially in tough times like today.

HODGSON: Great reflection.

BROWN: Robert, I feel like you're just warming up.

HARDEE: I know.

BROWN: This is so exciting. It's just gone 10:00. Let's get to our final questions. But, John, we do have a little bit more time...

WEEKS: We do because unfortunately Sara McLanahan, whom we were going to interview right after you, couldn't come. Her back went out on her.

MOFFITT: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. She would actually be good on many of the same substantive grounds I've talked about, too.

WEEKS: Exactly. You have a lot of overlap.

MOFFITT: Absolutely.

BROWN: But we're aware of your time. So why doesn't maybe each person ask their final question and then we'll wrap it up?

WEEKS: Sure.

HARDEE: Thank you so much. Wow, this has been so interesting. We all say this is our most--our funnest--event at PAA, to listen to the past Presidents. So thank you very much.

I want to get back to something you said about luck and how, you know, some of your early jobs, you know, and you finished your graduate degree and they said, "We're not quite sure what you're going to do." What advice do you give students now in planning for their careers, courses they should take, or it's all luck and just go with the flow?

MOFFITT: I just give students mature, sensible advice, which I didn't get as a graduate student (as I said, I got no good advice). For my graduate students -- first of all, most of them are still economists and so one thing I do is that I insist if they're doing something on anything family related, that they go over and attend seminars in demography. I want them to be exposed to the discipline and the intellectual framework and know what's going on there. I also give them a lot of career advice. Depending on whether they start nonacademic or academic, I

give them different advice. I give them advice on how to manage their research time and their other non-research time that they'll be obligated to spend no matter where they are. If they're academic, it will be teaching. If they're nonacademic, they will have obligations for their job, depending on what organization they're working for.

I give them a lot of advice on all the strategic aspects of being a researcher, getting tenure, how to publish, what journals to send their papers to, how to try to get exposure, how to travel to meetings, how to meet people, and how to push yourself a little bit. Because most graduate students don't understand how important it is. They think that if I just sit in my office and do my research and send it to the journals, that's all I need to do. No, no. You have to network. That's just a fact of life. After my students leave, I stay in contact with additional advice if requested. I am fortunate that I've had a lot of graduate students over my career and I follow their careers and keep up with what they're doing. They eventually don't need my advice anymore; but in their early careers, they do. I think it's very important to help your students along at all levels. And, of course, I give them comments on their work, too; but there are so many aspects to the profession of being a scholar that you don't get taught in a course.

HARDEE: Thank you.

MERCHANT: Thanks. So you talked a little bit earlier, you observed that the field of demography since you started kind of working in the field in the 1970s, has really broadened out -- I think that was the word you used was "broadened" -- from initial focus on family planning and population control into many other areas. And I was wondering if you could maybe tell us what you think some of factors were in that broadening, both internal and external to demography.

MOFFITT: I would probably say that most of them have been external. I would say that any social science -- and count economics and political science, sociology, demography -- should be responsive to what's going on in society. If the sciences didn't do that, it would not be a good thing. So I think that the broadening out I spoke of has just been mostly external forces—that is, all the issues that I talked about, all the subdisciplines and subtopics that I talked about, relate to important things that are going on out there in the world. It's good news that demographers are changing their research interests over time.

Take the submissions to the PAA meetings. As you may know, health is now number one in terms of number of submissions, speaking broadly. All kinds of submissions in that area-- child health, health of aging, health across the board. But what could be more important to society? Health, we now understand, is not just an outcome, it's also a determinant of all kinds of measures of success and well-being from childhood to adulthood to older ages. That wasn't understood 20 or 30 years ago. I guess one would also have to say that a bit of the growth of health and aging research is a result of funding in in those areas, and I'm not completely happy about the influence of that on the relative amount of work that's being done in different areas of demography. But health is just an inherently important issue. I would say that changes in research topics in demography are changing in response to external societal forces. In fact, if a discipline spent 20 or 30 years working on the same thing -- and I know that's an exaggeration—it would exhaust itself and it would be difficult to say anything new on the subject. I don't think anyone wants another Pop Council report on the causes and consequences of population growth, for example.

The demography profession, like every profession, is a profession of young researchers. They arrive, they are interested in something new and they say, "I'm not interested in doing

what's been done on old subjects. I want to do something really new and current." The discipline and the PAA just evolve. The Association's role is to have a meeting where they let the membership say what should be at the meetings. The PAA doesn't decide the topics. You want the membership to say, "Here is what we think is interesting now," and the Association has to provide the forum and the sessions and the right-sized rooms for the membership to talk about what they think is important. The PAA has to have an instrumental role that will accommodate and support whatever the profession wants to do.

WEEKS: Can I ask if there are any questions that we didn't ask you that you wanted to answer for us?

MOFFITT: Well, there's only one thing I did want to say, which I really didn't expect you to ask me about, which was that I found my opportunity to have been President of the PAA for one year to have been a great honor. I'm humbled by the other Presidents who have served before me--the giants of demography. I also wanted to say that, as PAA President, I felt a great sense of responsibility for this Association, with its distinguished history. I took the job as President very seriously although it was only for one year. A lot of the stuff you do as President is behind the scenes--you know, running the Association, balancing the budget, and making sure it's run by good staff. Although, when I was President, I had the misfortune of having Stephanie Dudley decide to retire and I had to replace her. It was a huge job, but maybe every President has something that comes up they have to deal with (after me, Steve Ruggles had to deal with shopping for a new meeting software system, a huge job). I luckily hired Danielle Staudt and I think she's doing a great job.

So I just wanted to state for the record that it was an honor and a great responsibility and privilege to be PAA President, and I was happy to do my bit along with all the others before me and since who have worked to make this Association continue to be a great Association.

WEEKS: Thank you very, very much. We really do appreciate your time and all of your work on behalf of the PAA.

MOFFITT: Okay. Thank you.

BROWN: Thank you very much.

HARDEE: Keep walking those halls of Congress.

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