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Anthropological demography in Europe Methodological lessons from a comparative ethnographic study in Athens and London

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Abstract

This paper offers a descriptive account of the methods used to conduct a comparative ethnographic study of below-replacement fertility in Athens, Greece and London, UK. It argues that in order for anthropology and demography to forge a closer relationship each discipline first needs to gain a deeper appreciation of the other's methodological perspectives. The following discussion presents the key anthropological approaches employed to realize a research project on low fertility in Europe, and provides justification for their use. While the practices described in this paper might be familiar to anthropologists and qualitative demographers, they are less well-known in the wider demographic community. Those convinced of the benefits of the ethnographic approach to the study of fertility are also invited to consider the specific obstacles encountered in the course of this enquiry. This paper reaches the following methodological conclusions: 1) Findings from two ethnographic studies of low fertility can be compared and generalised if such concepts as 'comparison' and 'generalisation' are understood in the anthropological sense. 2) Those investigating fertility in Europe must remain critical of their position relative to their study participants, even if they are undertaking research 'at home'. 3) Exploring attitudes towards reproduction and experiences of family-formation in an urban setting presents unique challenges as does 4) asking women about their childbearing beliefs and practices. 5) Analysing press perspectives on low fertility must involve treating media representations as 'discourse' and 6) qualitative studies are invaluable to the low fertility debate because of their thematic contributions.

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