

Editorial Introduction: Beyond Sociodemographics

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“In the history of anthropology, what we find is that more and more traits that are thought to be innate – traits that are thought to be natural differences, because they've always been there – are more and more shown to be ephemeral, the results of social history.” (Marks “Interview”)

Coming from a cultural studies background, popular culture scholars likely all understand the constructed nature of sociodemographics as categories used for identification into particular identities and group memberships. Race and gender, for example, only appear to have a basis in human biology because of longstanding – and, paradoxically, always changing – sociocultural norms linking behavior and personality to visual and auditory characteristics that are influenced, to a degree, by genetics. In Eurocentric Western civilizations, to be a “woman” is to be “feminine” is to be more graceful, smaller physically, with more anatomical curves. Connecting a person’s visual and auditory nature to specific traits allows others to manage their expectations about how someone may act, thereby allowing that person to manage their anxiety about interacting with a complete stranger. See uncertainty reduction theory for more explanation of this aspect of interpersonal and, necessarily, intercultural communication. More insidiously, such categorization based on assumed characterizations furthers the maintenance of power imbalances through hierarchies that dictate who people are not based on the nature of their lives but the presumptions of their appearance.

Research from physical anthropology provides evidence to challenge the use of sociodemographics to categorize, understand, explain, predict, and, ultimately, control people. In a landmark study, Noah A. Rosenberg et al discuss how 93-95% of global genetic differences are found in within-population differences, with only 3-5% due to between-population differences. From this genetics analysis, it appears that more variability exists between individuals of a single population than individuals across different populations. Humans share 99.9% genetic material, so categorizations and hierarchies built on sociodemographics

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focus on miniscule variations (Rivera). Thus, much of our economic and political structures exaggerate that 0.1% to control what is appropriate/inappropriate and thus exert influence over people's identities and their lives. "So: we make sense of our place in the universe by classifying; our classifications are not necessarily derived from nature; and even when they are derived from nature, they encode cultural information." (Marks "Scientific and Folk") And, of course, the utility of sociodemographics is not a new argument: this tension can be seen in the 1962 debate between anthropologists Frank B. Livingstone and Theodosius Dobzhansky.

Sociodemographics, then, are increasingly challenged for their utility in understanding how our societies, cultures, and world are structured. Where they remain important, for the time being, is in empowering individuals who have been ascribed to specific categories to challenge the assumptions associated with their assigned sociodemographics. Especially for individuals of marginalized categories within an overall power hierarchy, speaking from a sociodemographic standpoint allows people to raise questions and oppositions to assumed behavior and personality characteristics. In recognizing the presence and impact of sociodemographics, individuals and the communities they form can challenge the stereotypical heuristics associated with the categories, thereby challenging the overall power hierarchies that further their marginalization.

At the same time, individuals can speak from their sociodemographic standpoint to downplay the importance of those categories to their lives while highlighting the importance of other categories or dimensions for how those aspects help them identify themselves, make sense of their worlds and others, and connect with others through a multiplicity of common grounds. Per anthropologist Jonathan Marks:

What is important? Whether you're an American or an Iraqi. Whether you're a Nazi, a Communist, a Democrat, or a Republican. An Oriole fan or a Yankee fan. Rich or poor. Us or them. These categories of history and of society, the categories of human invention, are far more important to our daily lives than the categories of natural variation in our species."
("Scientific and Folk")

This perspective echoes work by popular culture studies, especially fan scholars, who argue for the importance of people's fandoms to their everyday lives and identities. Newer ways of understanding people's identities, from their own perspectives, could result in different forms of categorization, but the hope would

be that such taxonomies would resist the power imbalances inherent in and perpetuated by sociodemographics.

All of this is to say that the special issue presented herein examines popular culture texts – both persons and creations – from an intersectionality perspective of racial/ethnicity and sexuality identities. Specifically, the popular culture scholars examine the experiences of queer Blacks largely existing within contemporary American society. Other identities are also explored, from the very material experiences of rappers to the fictional lives of vampires. In exploring these representations of intersectional identities, and the institutions in which these representations exist/resist, the articles provide readers with more insights into the continuing application of sociodemographics to structure our selves, our lives, our communities, and our world.

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