

# Possibilities of population thinking: Histories and futures of Population Geography through reflections on 50 years of the Royal Geographical Society (with Institute of British Geographers) Population Geography Research Group

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## Abstract

Reflecting critically on 50 years of the Royal Geographical Society (with Institute of British Geographers) (RGS-IBG) Population Geography Research Group (PopGRG), and drawing on interviews with leading population geographers of the British Isles, this paper identifies defining features of Population Geography that attest to its longevity: personal connections and material production; fluidity and adaptability over time and through interdisciplinary contexts; and utility, vitality and relevance of the subdiscipline. We argue that continuation of care, material production and nimbleness can sustain the subdiscipline in the context of ongoing neoliberalisation across Higher Education. To remain vital, Population Geography must also decolonise and promote 'population thinking' to more boldly and critically attend to contemporary global challenges.

## KEYWORDS

decolonising geography, interdisciplinarity, material production, Population Geography, population thinking

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic brought attention to the core interest of Population Geography, of how to understand and manage life and death of populations. This presents an opportune moment to reflect on how Population Geography is situated to respond to major global issues, in its substantive foci, methodological and theoretical development and institutional operation. This is the purpose of this paper.

Self-reflection is not new to contemporary Population Geography, nor to the wider discipline. There have been numerous, influential reviews of the subdiscipline (including Barcus & Halfacree, 2018; Botterill &

Philo, 2023; Buyuklieva et al., 2021; Findlay & Boyle, 2007; Finney, 2021; Graham & Boyle, 2001; Philo, 2005; Smith, 2018, 2019; Tyner, 2014; White & Jackson, 1995). However, this paper is distinctive in several ways: it draws on the voices and reflections of prominent Population Geography scholars; it attends to the role of institutional bodies in shaping (sub)disciplines and knowledge production; and it is the result of a collective reflection and writing initiative. Specifically, this paper is a product of the 'Archiving Project' of the Royal Geographical Society (with Institute of British Geographers) (RGS-IBG) Population Geography Research Group (PopGRG) on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the PopGRG.

Details can be found on the website of the RGS-IBG Population Geography Research Group: [populationgeographies.com](http://populationgeographies.com)

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The intention of this paper is to stimulate debate about the character, relevance and direction of Population Geography. However, the nature of its inception via a project of the RGS-IBG Population Geography Research Group with data from Geographers immersed in the British academy, lends it a particular orientation that foregrounds the perspectives and experiences from this part of the globe. It is beyond the scope of this article to make critique against comparable organisations and networks in other nations and regions yet it is our hope that, rather than obscuring alternative histories (and futures), this paper acts as a point of departure towards more collaborative, globally-oriented narratives around the evolution and future of Population Geography.

After outlining the methodology of the project, four themes are drawn out to structure this paper: the personal and material production of Population Geography; fluidity and adaptability of Population Geography; decolonising Population Geography; and vitality and utility in Population Geography. We conclude by reflecting on what would constitute a critical Population Geography that would draw on the strengths of the subdiscipline and address concerns raised by this project. In doing so we begin to articulate the qualities of 'population thinking'. We argue that retention of the caring and collegiate character of the subdiscipline, continued attention to material production of Population Geography, and further evolution of the nimbleness and fluidity in the foci and approaches of Population Geography are important for sustaining the subdiscipline and its supporting institutional structures, in the context of ongoing neoliberalisation across (UK) Higher Education. However, to remain vital, it is imperative to decolonise Population Geography and to more boldly and critically attend to contemporary global challenges.

## 2 | METHODOLOGY: THE POPGRG ARCHIVING PROJECT

The data for this paper were collected through interviews with prominent, experienced academics with past connections to the RGS-IBG Population Geography Research Group (PopGRG) supplemented by review and analysis of material from the RGS-IBG archives (London) and (historical) publication of Research Group Reports in the RGS-IBG journal *Area*. Fourteen interviews were undertaken between autumn 2019 and summer 2020, all of which are drawn on in this paper. All of the authors undertook interviews based on an interview schedule that was collectively developed that posed questions about personal involvement in the Research Group, what constitutes Population Geography, and the future of the Research Group. Some interviews were conducted in-person and some online. Lasting on average 1–1.5 hours, all were recorded and transcribed. The project was undertaken with ethical approval from the University of St Andrews. We have anonymised the participants in this paper.

There followed a process of collective analysis and writing to develop the content for this paper. In phase 1, the authors immersed themselves in the interview material and took part in a virtual

'focussed writing' retreat with the aim of independently articulating key themes from the data. In phase 2, the authors came together having read each other's writing to agree core themes for analysis and writing. Each author then took the lead in developing sections of the writing and took part in a second virtual writing retreat. In phase 3, the sections were brought together, edited and revised with input from all authors and taking into account invited commentaries from speakers at the PopGRG 50th Anniversary Celebration (2021). This was an online event held in November 2021 that reflected on the last 50 years of Population Geography and considered the future of the subdiscipline.<sup>1</sup>

By using data from (past) members of PopGRG, and reflecting on the role of that organisation, we do not conceive of the Research Group and its activities as Population Geography. However, in the context of UK and Ireland-based Geographies of population, the Group, as this paper discusses, has been central to the establishment of the subdiscipline. Population Geography, in the UK and most certainly internationally, has always been far more than PopGRG yet our reflections from this project point to the centrality of organising structures, personal relations, material representations and records in the shaping of disciplines and thus of knowledge. Taking PopGRG as a lens on (UK) Population Geography offers a unique perspective on its evolution that is attentive to situated structures and relationships. This perspective enables a recognition of the continuously evolving and sometimes precarious scaffolding of academic thought and activity and may offer other groups and organisations a useful approach for critical reflection.

## 3 | THE PERSONAL AND MATERIAL PRODUCTION OF POPULATION GEOGRAPHY

The Population Geography Research Group (PopGRG) is the oldest of the Research Groups of The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers, RGS-IBG), the UK's learned body and professional society for Geographers, founded in 1830. Though the precise genesis is difficult to pinpoint, it is thought that PopGRG has its official origins in an inaugural meeting in 1971, although the archives at the RGS headquarters and study group reports in *Area* contain information relating to the activity of the Study Group in the 1960s, as this memo notes:

*Although this group has been in existence as a study group of the Institute since 1968 (and had a less formal structure since 1963), there had been no register of member's research activities in that time. However, steps have now been taken to remedy this deficiency, and a very incomplete register of interests of the group's members (over 220) has been compiled (W. T. S. Gould (ed.), Population Geography Study Group: Register of member's interests, September, 1976, mimeo)*

<sup>1</sup>Details can be found at Population Geography – promoting population geography, supporting population geographers (populationgeographies.com).

One of the key features of the Population Geography Research Group, as identified by the interviewees, has been its personal closeness and intellectual proximity, particularly in terms of emotional support, knowing and caring for others. Several interviewees recalled the early years of the Group, fondly reflecting on the friendliness and collegiality and the informal, organic quality of the activities of the group. A number of interviewees felt this culture of friendliness to be a distinctive feature of PopGRG when they were involved in the 1970s and 1980s. Throughout the history of the Group, we see similar narratives on its friendliness and the routes to involvement via personal connections including the nurturing of early career scholars (PhD students and Early Career Researchers) and what we might call an active intergenerational engagement within PopGRG activities. This includes mentoring and support for taking part in event organisation, publishing projects and Committee membership.

*I think you know the friendliness of the group comes across, for me, time and time again. And I mean I've been involved in a number of other study groups and ... not as intensively maybe ... or over such a long-term as the population study groups, so maybe this is not a fair comparison, but I just don't recall the other study groups that I was involved in being such a sort of friendly and collaborative and active group.*

*population geographers differed ... in that they for some reason were kind of softer, much less macho ... very little bullying ... yeah, that's my memory, just being honest about it*

Craggs and Mahony (2014: 415) argue that conferences act as 'key sites for the construction and performance of disciplinary identities' and this can be applied to Population Geography. The relationships that formed the basis for PopGRG were fostered at meetings and events, and cultivated intangible, affective interactions that stimulated innovative methods and created dynamic knowledges of populations. Indeed, throughout the 50-year history of the group, events—as part of the (RGS-)IBG conferences, stand-alone workshops and conferences, bilateral events, and international conferences—have been a central part of the Research Group's activities. Furthermore, a culture of material production of records from the meetings was established:

*You know we were all kind of ... regarded ourselves as good mates and good chums and so on, and we worked very productively together on a range of different topics and themes and conferences and workshops and publications and so on.*

*I think the group has been quite successful in turning good paper sessions into edited books from time to time. [Colleague] was expert in putting together an edited*

*collection! His strategy when attending a conference was to spot a book opportunity at the conference. He would have a quiet word at the bar with the selected chapter authors. And so the book would be born [...] But that was also often on the mind of people who were organising regional or these bilateral international meetings, they would have in mind the edited collection and get people to sign up to write papers that became chapters.*

For events in the early years the interviewees gave a sense of the spontaneity of organisation of events as members felt "well it's about time I (or someone else) organised a conference or a workshop". From the mid-1990s a shift is evident to a more strategic approach in recognition that conferences 'provide a visibility that is crucial to the construction of knowledge and power' (Craggs & Mahony, 2014: 414). One interviewee reflects: "the IBG itself, through the study group's Groups Committee of the Council, began to try to get groups to be more regimented and have a strategy." In this respect, the events that the Research Group organised from the turn of the 21st century were more explicitly about the advertising and promotion of a group identity. The following interviewees remember the first International Conference on Population Geographies (ICPG) in 2002, as part of a wider strategy for promoting Population Geography internationally:

*So that [International Conference on Population Geographies (ICPG) 2001], I think that changed the game really in terms of the research group, it internationalised it. And then there's obviously I think ... you know there's been numerous research projects that have spun off ... spun off that, international research projects, and there's also been I think increasing collaboration with North American scholars.*

*[The ICPG and International Conference on Migration and Mobilities (iMigMob)] I mean they were ... I think probably the best thing that the pop geog invented or participated in, in terms of conferences because of their multi-national scope, their medium size was ideal*

Beyond conferences, there were different objects, technologies and infrastructures that changed the meaning and composition of 'population geographies'. The establishment of the *International Journal of Population Geography* in 1995, a landmark in the story of the subdiscipline with an ongoing legacy as *Population, Space and Place*, highlighted the 'patterned networks of diverse (not simply human) materials' (Law, 1992: 380) making up the subdiscipline. The significance of this journal in the history and future of Population Geography is discussed more extensively in Botterill and Philo's (2023) 'love letter' to PSP. The sentiment was shared by all interviewees who reflected on the authors, texts, ordering practices and organisations involved in the journal as multiple agents in the maintenance of the subdiscipline, with *Population, Space and Place* identified as important both as an outlet and as a means of strategic positioning.

*It was one of the big constraints on population geography that we had nowhere to publish, you know there wasn't a specialist journal. For population geography to move forward, one of the things that I felt the study group could do was .... to establish the International Journal of Population Geography*

*Making sure that you publish in journals where other people read your work is important. I mean that was one of the good things about changing the International Journal of Population Geography into Population, Space and Place. You know it kind of de-geographised it and it gave the impression of breadth just in the name, and I'm sure that that made it more easily accessible to other people.*

In this sense, the 'de-geographising' and the assembling of new entities into this now prominent journal *Population, Space and Place* produced the collection of matter and energy that can be described as a new 'collective' of population geographies (after Guattari, 1995). Rather than describing only a social group with similar elements, this collective production included 'different types of forces woven together because they [we]re different' (Latour, 2005: 74). The journal, alongside RGS-IBG infrastructures, meetings and events created a sense of being in-common, sense of aliveness that exceeded a singular identity (Thrift, 2004). This collective production was set within two key contexts. First, the wider debate within Population Geography from the 1980s which focused on issues surrounding the sub-disciplinary identity and vitality. Second, the neoliberalisation of higher education in the UK, particularly in reference to audit exercises (Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) which became the Research Excellent Framework), which drove an environment of accountability.

Population Geography, through personal connections, material production and, in most recent decades, strategic activities, consolidated its energy. This no doubt sustained the subdiscipline but it also, inevitably, acted as a means through which the sub-disciplinary boundaries were policed. This would occur in several ways. First, there is little record of academics who were, for various reasons, unable to attend events. In the *Area* Research Group Reports we see a mention that 'Egon Weber (Ernst-Moritz-Arndt Universität, Greifswald, DDR) who was due to present a paper on population change in East Germany had his exit visa withdrawn in mid-December 1981' (Woods, 1983: 365). This is raised in the report as a political point, but it also highlights the functioning of nonhuman materialities such as visa systems, access to funds and caring infrastructures that influenced the production of certain 'population geographies' at the expense of excluding some actors. Second, we do not know what went on in the events, what the performances of knowledge or receptions to ideas were. We are only including the voices of those who were on the inside of the practices of population geographies—those who were voted in, asked to take part, who were tapped at the conference bar as opposed to those who were

excluded by such practices. These processes of inclusion/exclusion are, of course, not unique to (Population) Geography and remain a challenge for the academy as a whole, as we touch on below in our consideration of decolonising Population Geography.

To summarise, the interviews revealed that the emergence of the PopGRG and coalescence of UK-based Population Geography in the early 1970s was the organic result of personal collectives, and early work was reliant upon personal networks and individuals' initiation of activities. The notion of being an 'accidental population geographer' was apparent in a number of interviews, which reflected the emergent nature of materialities, combination of elements and senses without a single 'author' producing friendly atmospheres and affective forces that moved the group forward. The work of the Research Group and Population Geography more generally has, since the 1990s particularly, seen increasing efforts towards strategy and formalisation of practices, in a context of neoliberalising UK Higher Education. In support of more general calls for an ethics of care in the academy, we argue that the 'friendliness' of Population Geography has persisted and should be fostered as an important facet of kindness in the academy and an important stance of resistance to neoliberal processes (Adams-Hutcheson & Johnston, 2019; Dorling, 2019; Hawkins, 2019). While personal connections are important in this regard, the somewhat parochial perspective of Population Geography that has become embedded (discussed further below) is a barrier to decolonising the subdiscipline and to its visibility and vitality. Central to most of the interview narratives was a sense of the importance of key events, activities and publications as markers of the work of Population Geography and vital materialisms (Bennett, 2010), convivial atmospheres and affective entanglements that maintained that work. Material production - through participation in the RGS-IBG Annual Conference, bespoke conferences, edited book projects, the establishment of the *International Journal of Population Geography* (now *Population Space and Place*) - has been central to the momentum of PopGRG and, more broadly, Population Geography with roots in the British Isles.

#### 4 | FLUIDITY AND ADAPTABILITY OF POPULATION GEOGRAPHY

The Population Geographers who were interviewed held various ideas about the boundaries and limits of the (sub) discipline. The focus of Population Geography was described, first and foremost, in terms of its subject, the population. In relation to scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s some interviewees spoke about the disciplinary identity being based on foundations such as 'concern with population data' or 'understanding of the public'. 'Population' was placed as an external nameable entity, something that can be examined as a set of operable, measurable objects. With substantial focus on demography, this period of scholarship, to quote one interviewee, was 'more interested in population studies than the geography bit of it'.

This early focus produced a lot of valuable descriptive, quantitative work. At that time 'the practice of population geography

[led] to people accepting space as something which ... is just a container into which data drops'. In Population Geography, population was considered as 'the mass of human beings', so the discipline was pre-occupied with the issues of how population 'is collectively identified ... how it's counted, how it's measured, how its characteristics are delimited'. The preoccupation with empirical measurement and 'more practical kind of central elements' led to the treatment of population as an object of representation, that can be delineated and separated from other areas of social and political concern. The focus on 'population mapping' seen as 'quite clearly geography' contributed to what some viewed as a rather 'insular' external perception of the subdiscipline. Nevertheless, the work was high quality and regarded – by those within and those without – as very relevant for, and engaged with, government and policy:

*Population geography scholarship, so it had the reputation at least in the early noughties of being methodologically really ... really strong, really robust. whether that was hardcore quant going way back to the sixties and seventies, I don't know whether it was mixed efforts, the ethnographies, you know they were strong ... I mean methodologically these guys knew what they were doing... there was also a sense that the group was policy savvy, that they were connected even to you know a lot of applied type of ... particularly with the Government, particularly the ONS [Office for National Statistics] ... the word on the street was you know that's kind of what the group did.*

The cultural turn in the 1990s unsettled the meaning of Population Geography, destabilising the assumptions about substance, unity of the population, the limits and boundaries between the assumed population categories. Within the subdiscipline, the cultural turn raised broader questions about 'how we as geographers inhabit, reproduce and change the world' and reconsider the 'context of our knowledge, the context of our action and the context of a social structure in which we are engaged'. Recognition emerged of the unstable identities and nonhuman actors co-producing the seemingly coherent human lives. By the early 1990s Population Geographers realised that they 'could use their skills to look at bigger political questions' and open up the scope of their research by exploring multiple forces producing heterogeneous 'populations'.

*And a lot of population geography at the time [1980/90s] was quite ... quite demographic in orientation or ... you know ... more positivist or quantitative in orientation and there were some people in the group who were keen to kind of reach out and to engage more with more of the kind of new concepts and current thinking theoretically in human geography.*

*It didn't do social theory, according to you know other groups, who did social theory... And I thought that was*

*unhelpful and unproductive, it's not particularly on the population geography group, it's the group structure in general ... it all got very tribal.*

These developments challenged the meaning of population that relied on the drawing of the boundary around human populations. While Population Geography still has attachment to 'a kind of heritage of its traditional identity', it broadened its analysis to include the possibilities of life and death beyond those that can be observed or experienced by the populations (beyond 'old-fashioned demography' in the words of one interviewee). The apparent stability of Population Geography belies its multiple character: '[there are] three sort of areas [migration, mortality and fertility], they were sort of very independent and what we were trying to achieve was to try to integrate them more... it is still interesting how coherent population geography can be because of those three elements are sort of loose [... they consider] the person who's doing the moving or is living a life'.

Contemporary research within the subdiscipline goes beyond the study of spatial distribution of bodies and beyond measurement, estimates and analysis of populations at the general, biopolitical level which, as Foucault (1976) claimed, define the subject of the 'population' and are used for its technological and political management. In addition to its 'traditional' focus, population geographers are increasingly concerned with the different living matter, biological processes (such as viruses affecting living beings) and broader questions of 'life' which involves 'doing...different things *other than* population geography' (emphasis added). In this context, population is no longer considered only as a self-constituted, coherent entity that depends on the existence of permanent, identifiable boundaries between different population categories. Recent interest in the politics of difference destabilised traditional understandings of population and challenged 'the old division of population geography' focusing on distinctive groups of people. In particular, increased interest in diverse (technological, imaginative, emotional) mobilities has brought attention to the interconnected combination of elements 'that really matters to real lived life'. The focus of population research is now not only to identify the appearance (measured, mappable) and the boundaries around different categories of populations but to follow the multiple foldings and movements that derange such categorisations (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988).

According to our interviewees, introduction of such fluid thinking within the subdiscipline meant re-definition of its fields of research and the interconnections between them. As one interviewee explains, 'the issues or the topics that we're interested in has changed, it's less now about mapping and more about trying to explain things and what's the experience of people and the experience of places...'. An increasing preoccupation with life mobilities and changing life course, research on 'qualitative difference' produced by and within populations, fluid 'relationship[s] between human populations and animal populations' have contributed to reconfiguration of the subdiscipline towards broader life courses. As one interviewer insists, 'more critical versions of



population geography' have to raise questions 'about whether population geography should also sometimes wonder about non-human populations'. Re-evaluation of the internal boundaries within Population Geography push it closer towards what Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 48) term 'the science of multiplicities', which prioritises fluidity, variations of 'populations' and 'different multiple ways of defining a space and a place'.

There was a sense in the interviews that the fundamental questions and subject of Population Geography – people, place, movement, life, death, relations, time – lend an ability to adapt to paradigmatic shifts yet, at the same time, bring a risk of fragmentation within the subdiscipline. The agility of the subdiscipline was, nevertheless, viewed as a strength; being a 'very open subdiscipline' positions Population Geography to be able to 'redefine things'. As interviewees reflected 'we don't want to accept a narrow population geography, we need to engage across geography' and make connections "... into economics, into sociology, into psychology, I mean into history"

## 5 | DECOLONISING POPULATION GEOGRAPHY

In reflecting on Population Geography, interviewees were asked to consider how the subdiscipline – in its focus, subscribers, structures – represents its subject: populations. An overwhelming majority saw diversifying the research group and its research agenda as a key imperative and considered the history of the group as largely white, Anglo-European and male with the 'voices of men all the time being documented in minutes'. Only in recent years, as is the case for Geography and the academy more generally, has self reflection turned to institutional systemic marginalisations along lines of difference including race, religion, sexual orientation, disability, class, gender and their intersections. While female representation in Population Geography research has improved, there are notable lacks in the representation of, and research about, other aspects of diversity. As one interviewee noted 'population geography is still very much white'. Reflecting Geography more widely, there remains a whiteness to the subdiscipline that most felt needed directly challenging. Despite significant changes and efforts in addition to internationalise the Research Group, it still has some way to go in both acknowledging its colonial heritage and progressing decolonial agendas and practices that are currently driving change in Geography more broadly (Esson et al., 2017; Noxolo, 2017).

The imperialist roots of Geography as a wider discipline similarly underpin Population Geography with a lingering influence that has driven the geography and politics of research agendas and the membership of the Research Group. This was identified in a range of ways by interviewees. First, the roots of Population Geography as a British project were raised. For early incarnations of the group "a lot of the work was UK based" and heavily oriented to studies of Britain (particularly England and Wales) or Western Europe. Early Population Geography scholars developed work 'largely on a geographic basis rather than so much methodologically or ideologically'.

The rootedness of the Research Group to British contexts meant that some core members of PopGRG who were writing on population in other parts of the world became less involved with the activities of the Research Group and disengaged from the label of 'Population Geography'. Writing from the perspective of Irish Population Geography, one interviewee remarks on how the Britishness of Population Geography reflects a coloniality that is still implicit in how Population Geography is understood:

*If you look at the history of population geography and ... in a British context, I suppose you have to look at, you know, is it to a certain extent kind of colonial or postcolonial roots, you know. And I suppose there would have been a sense that ... population geography in Britain was population geography you know, as I suppose a discipline in terms of research... ... when you do population geography based in Britain, you don't have to say it's based in Britain, it's just population geography.*

Deeper engagements with European and American partners in the 1990s and 2000s through bi-lateral meetings did lead to a more international outlook of British Population Geography and this included international meetings discussed earlier. The ICPG has been a key event to try and expand the global reach of Population Geography, yet these events have largely been located in settler-colonial spaces including the US, Australia and Hong Kong. Several interviewees connected the 'parochial' histories of the PopGRG to its institutional home – the RGS-IBG – making an incisive critique about the colonial footing of the RGS-IBG. Concern was also expressed about an increasingly 'inward look', that is "a feature of this era's population geography that is perhaps narrower than in the past."

The institutionalised colonial fragments discussed by interviewees and the perceived insularity of British Population Geography are potentially key barriers to widening the participation of population geographers and driving decolonial research agendas. As Jazeel (2017: 336) urges in a special issue connected to the RGS-IBG theme of 'Decolonising Geographical Knowledges', 'Decolonising geographical knowledge requires...us to think carefully about how to de-link the production of geographical knowledge from the hegemony of our disciplinary infrastructure. The RGS-IBG annual meeting is unequivocally part of that infrastructure'.

The embeddedness of Population Geography within a colonial, Euro-centric knowledge system, and the predominance of Western ontologies of 'population', were noted by some interviewees as a key barrier to diversifying population geography. This was seen through the way populations are categorised, as illustrated in the following remarks:

*The point is there's population as this object, how it is understood, how it is effectively managed, disciplined, how it becomes an object that's available for operations to be conducted upon it, which of course if a Foucauldian way of talking about it: the way in which it becomes something that can be operated upon for all kinds of reasons, for all kinds of*

purposes and in all kinds of times and places; and how, in the process of it being operated upon, the chances are it's going to be spatially manipulated, it's going to be partitioned in your mind, it's going to be partitioned on the ground, it's going to be partitioned in categories which appear in official documentation, it may well get segmented on the ground in all kinds of ways with real consequences, both positive for some peoples of a population and deleterious for others.

For this interviewee, moves towards a relational population geography (Barcus & Halfacree, 2018; Duffy & Stojanovic, 2018) are promising, as is work contesting the racialised bordering of population categories and theorising 'surplus populations' (McIntyre & Nast, 2011; Tyner, 2013). They argue, however, that anchoring population geography in 'bigger trajectories in the horizons of ... science, philosophy ... and not just Western science and philosophy' would be an exciting prospect. Through a critique of how some populations are not counted or recognised through traditional Population Geography approaches, the same interviewee suggests that 'accountability should nicely also go along with a notion of *recountability*, in other words, people should be able to *recount* their lives'. Drawing on Matthew Hannah's (2010) notion of 'statistical activism', the interviewee urges a more radical-critical Population Geography that is concerned with bridging statistical inquiry with the micro-politics of knowledge.

Growing recognition of unstable 'population' identities, creation of new solidarities and material formations such as this journal, *Population, Space and Place* (PSP), provided key mechanisms for broadening, internationalising and re-framing Population Geography. One interviewee noted: 'I think that PSP is taking a much broader view of what population geography is' while others reflect on the 'global reach' of PSP, noting key works in the journal written by non-European population geographers and papers addressing 'the politics of what kinds of knowledge are being produced'. For example, scholarship on the politics of counting, under- or dis-counting populations (Philo, 2002), the construction of categories of race and religion (Cranston, 2017; Howard & Hopkins, 2005), the politics of fertility (Underhill-Sem, 2002) and the political ecologies of indigenous resistance (Shrestha & Conway, 1996) include key critiques on the gendered Eurocentrism of population studies. PSP was also instrumental for diversifying scholarship on migration; one interviewee pointed to King (2012) as an example of this:

*[King's 2021 paper] sort of picks up the story more through the eyes of what I regard sort of iconic key population geographers who are not necessarily part of the British group, in fact you know they're very much not.*

This strategic approach of the journal, and prominent authors, was seen by interviewees to reflect the epistemological and methodological 'diversification of Geography' more broadly:

*I think it's changed by just becoming more diverse ...it's now a much broader group, I mean there are still the sort*

*of hardcore, if you can call them that, quantitative population geographers who are you know still doing fantastic work... But you know with the move towards studying you know particularly migration from a qualitative perspective and you know so much kind of cultural stuff and I suppose the whole sort of ethnicity angle has also mushroomed, the gender angle has mushroomed.*

Increasing interest in the politics of difference in geography raised important questions about diversity within Population Geography (and PopGRG). As this interviewee notes: 'it has been mainly dominated by white geographers...mainly old white men...there's been ... yeah, I guess a paucity of people from other communities ... if you think of the well-known Geographers who are of Asian heritage or African or Caribbean heritage, I mean there aren't that many of them... they haven't really come into the population study group very much, I mean even though they study population in some cases... it still continues to be a predominantly ethnically white community, which is strange given the nature of the population as a whole'. The poor representation of scholars of colour in PopGRG and research more broadly that identifies as Population Geography was seen to largely reflect endemic racial inequalities in the wider discipline. While several interviewees were unsure of how to address this, some identified key barriers to participation. For example, it was commented that scholars of colour are continually overlooked in publishing, with gaps in the citation of Black African, Black Caribbean and, in particular, Chinese scholars:

*The most blatant racism I see in academia is not citing Chinese references by Chinese scholars, of which there are millions!... China has this history of scholarship in geography that we completely ignore.*

Interviewees also saw the Research Group as 'reflecting the middle-class profile' citing a key barrier in the recruitment of members through a small number of (Russell Group) British Universities:

*It used to be definitely a very small and kind of select group of universities that were more involved in it...but you know wouldn't it be interesting to think about what's going on in you know the newer universities?*

Influenced by broader shifts in the topographies of geographical knowledge, the scholars we interviewed highlighted another important thread in the development of Population Geography: questioning of the place and meaning of the subject (population) (Dewsbury, 2007). As discussed in the previous section, changes since the turn of the century led to the broadening of the scale and position/identity of Population Geography, which acknowledges a certain oriented locatedness (i.e., studies of British populations) while also highlighting its active involvement and possibilities for change (populations taking place in a wider, hybrid, scattered world). The

reconsideration of the border or limits of place itself in geography (Doel, 1999; Malpas, 2012) confounded clear-cut separations between the accepted binaries of place and placelessness, home/away within the subdiscipline (Shubin, 2015). Increasing focus on differential mobilities and (dis)placements has destabilised the 'place' of Population Geography (cf. Doel, 2020 on placement and displacement across borders) and broadened its scale beyond the accepted territories of analysis. As a reflection of this change, population geographers have attempted to 'give a focus at the national scale and the international scale'. As one interviewee asserted, 'there's far more research being done by British population geographers in other you know parts of the world. Yeah, it's become more international'.

Furthermore, the increasing attention to the places on the margins (place-bound as well as out of place experiences) and 'other' geographies (Philo, 1992) has raised questions about the place occupied by the population geographers themselves. As our interviewees reflected, during the early stages of the development of the PopGRG, it 'certainly wasn't a place where women were really very visible, there were some women certainly, women doing fantastic Population Geography'. Overall, 'geography was very male', so despite being present, women's voices that clearly belonged to Population Geography were often insecurely placed (often as a remainder rather than integral part) within the subdiscipline. Since that time, the place of women in the PopGRG and broader Population Geography has been transformed. With the increasing prominence of feminist geography since in the 1990s and increasing numbers of women attracted to broader geography programmes, came increasing inclusivity in the PopGRG and support for new ways of 'doing gender' (both in terms of methodological and theoretical work) within the subdiscipline. One interviewee comments, 'women became more involved in Population Geography ... it became a more welcoming place for women' both in terms of research subjects, collaborations, organisation and shaping of the subdiscipline.

In summary, the interview narratives reveal a tension between the increasing international connections in Population Geography, particularly via conferences, and the Anglo-centric orientation of PopGRG and UK-based Population Geography scholarship which has largely persisted since its origins half a century ago and has inevitably marginalised other epistemologies and other populations. The role of the RGS-IBG in reproducing an Anglo-centrism grounded in its colonial heritage was raised in the interviews. There was consensus among interviewees that the subdiscipline would benefit from greater interaction between UK and non-UK scholars; a greater engagement by UK and Anglo-oriented scholars with work from other parts of the world; greater engagement with, and recognition of, scholars of colour writing on population issues. Our participants emphasised that it is important to acknowledge that, along with the wider discipline, Population Geography, through its normative view of progress, has contributed to the erasure of other epistemologies, with Black, Latinx, Indigenous, queer and trans population geographies, for example, being somewhat sidelined. As we go on to discuss, self-critique is just the beginning of a wider effort to revitalise the

subdiscipline and urge population geographers to not only represent but embrace a more expansive view of population(s) and their place (s). The view of the interviewees was that Population Geography is well placed to do this, continuing its adaptation towards a more inclusive coalition: as one interviewee commented: "now I think [Population Geography and PopGRG] maybe has more of ... an outward looking approach ... It tries to liaise or make contact beyond academia or beyond population geographers".

## 6 | VITALITY, UTILITY AND RELEVANCE IN POPULATION GEOGRAPHY

Despite eloquent and abundant self-critique by our interviewees, the commitment and enthusiasm for Population Geography that has sustained it for decades permeated the narratives. Interviewees expressed a commitment to 'make sure [Population Geography] was a vibrant, sustainable subdiscipline.... that wasn't going to die away'. The belief in the continued relevance and strengths of Population Geography was evident:

*I mean for me, population geography is still vital, it's still vital because clearly how populations organise themselves or are organised, matters a great deal to the planet, you know whether that's cities, whether it's where old people live, whether it's inequalities, these are all you know, they all have elements at one level of the organisation of people, of populations.*

Interviewees spoke of many global challenges that are being addressed by population geographers including population health (viruses included), environmental change and justice, migration and development, re-bordering and problematising categories (such as gender and race). However, there was frustration among some interviewees that Population Geography voices are marginal to crucial contemporary concerns including the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change and Brexit. Participants commented that 'population geography maybe missed an opportunity around the Brexit debate... certainly in terms of providing evidence' and '[population geography's] not done as much as it could have done to engage with policy'. With respect to migration policy, one interviewee pertinently asked, 'where are population geographers in that debate?'

A number of interviewees felt the problem not to be with the foci or quality of work being undertaken in Population Geography but with how this is made visible to the wider discipline, academy, and to nonacademic fora. On policy, it can be said that a great deal of engagement happens including with governments (national and local), statistical agencies, think tanks, and the voluntary and community sector, but the contributions of Population Geographers are often not acknowledged and are rarely publicised. In terms of disciplinary positioning, one interviewee commented that '[we have] failed to make population geography interesting enough to be a core part of geography nationally'. There was a sense that 'population geography



has been overlooked, it still probably has that baggage...[of being] old-fashioned demography', and another interviewee noted that 'we do offer them more than that. We look at processes, and that's what some people outside population geography don't quite see'. In this context, the need to identify and incentivise routes for postgraduate and early career population geographers was raised:

*I think the career trajectory of population geographers needs to be looked at, particularly if we could learn anything from people who have rejected the title... or the descriptor, the identity, as well as those who have not. You know why do they now call themselves, well either a demographer or just a human geographer or social geographer, whatever?*

For academic career possibilities in Population Geography, not only does research need to remain and be seen as vital but so too does the pedagogy of Population Geography. One interviewee argued that 'if you have anything that's core in geography, one of the things would be a little bit of demography.... the other great thing about population geography, the numbers, is it's one of the things that translates between countries most easily'. The same might be said for the nonnumerical approaches and foci of population geography: concern with the patterns, processes and politics of life, death, movement and place at multiple scales is essentially relatable.

It is this premise that moved some interviewees to call for greater ambitions for Population Geography within the academy and beyond, for population geographers to 'reflect on these connections because I think there are quite a number of connections and perhaps they're not being made as strongly as they could be'. Moreover, a vision of Population Geography as a connecting field of enquiry was expressed:

*There is something in Population Geography going forward that rather than them perhaps just being population geographers for the sake of population geographers, is actually maybe positioning themselves more as a central cog for inter-disciplinary studies... you know you're already beginning to see it, you're already seeing it, you know some successes in terms of the health agenda, transport, in terms of even employment, labour economics, you know all of those things you begin to see population geographers having a role within.*

## 7 | CONCLUSION

The vision that emerges from our interviewees for future Population Geography is of a vital subdiscipline -concerned with fundamental questions and subjects of people, place, movement, life, death, relations, time - that is agile, relevant and critically engaged with social theory and global challenges. Population Geography is envisioned as a nexus - a 'central cog for interdisciplinary studies' -

with the ability to speak across research fields and methods to contribute to contemporary debates. It is, furthermore, a sub-discipline of friendliness and caring. We can term this characterisation of Population Geography - of doing and being population geography - as 'population thinking'.

A clear conclusion from this project is the evident desire for Population Geography to be more ambitious and proactive in scholarship on development, equality, family and climate, and in paying attention to more-than-human and more-than-rational processes transforming living matter, engaging boldly and critically so that 'population thinking' can infuse debate and practice. It seems, for Population Geography, content and culture are not the main barriers to this vision and the challenge lies in altering external perceptions of Population Geography's quality, creativity and relevance. A priority, then, may be to consider less what Population Geography is (as an entity described in terms of its essence) and more what Population Geography (as a process) can do (developing as a science of multiplicities), and the role of the RGS-IBG Population Geography Research Group, and other allied groups across the globe, in supporting that.

Our paper has stressed the importance of openness in defining 'populations', particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic that further blurred the boundaries between humans and non-humans (the coronavirus). This encounter with the unknown, the unexpected and the foreign in the pandemic, when population governance was amplified by differential affects (fear, anxiety, love), demonstrated that our knowledge of 'population' cannot be exhausted by a specific definition or topology of knowledge. The pandemic further contributed to the earlier discussions in the subdiscipline about the multiple and emergent character of population as 'a mixture in which natural, economic and cultural processes are inextricably bound together' (Žižek, 2020: 78). As the interviews suggest, a broadening of Population Geography can disrupt existing modes of knowledge production and encourage decolonisation of the subdiscipline.

There is always a danger with deliberately self-critical pieces such as this, that the criticism is too pointed and the recommendations overwhelming. So, we can take solace in one participant's comment that 'every now and again you need to reflect and maybe have another piece written on the nature of Population Geography or the nature of the study of population within geography, and how that links to other things, and big questions. Unless that's kind of refreshed every now and again, I think ... you are going to get... a bit stale ... or a bit divorced from the rest of human geography'. It is in this spirit that we hope this paper spurs the next phase in Population Geography's vibrant history.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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