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Journal of Aging Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jaging

The dog that didn't bark: The challenge of cross-cultural qualitative research on aging

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Comparative qualitative research

Cultural blindness

Life world

Methodology of reciprocal estrangement

Time agency

ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the problem of cultural proximity in qualitative cross-cultural research on aging, presenting insights into a methodology of systematic 'estrangement'. Based on interdisciplinary research on the social time orientations of elderly people in Germany, Hong Kong, and the US, we discuss the question of how shared identities and taken-for-granted assumptions may bias the findings in comparative aging studies. With Alfred Schütz's phenomenological concept of 'lifeworld' as a methodological device, we focus on the issue of the diverging 'systems of relevance' that each of the national project teams obviously referred to when gathering and interpreting the data. The paper suggests that, by way of organizing an interactive research setting that is open for the reciprocity of perspectives, one of the major problems for cross-cultural research on aging may be overcome or at least mitigated.

Inspector Gregory: "Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"

Sherlock Holmes: "To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

Inspector Gregory: "The dog did nothing in the night-time."

Sherlock Holmes: "That was the curious incident."

Arthur Conan Doyle, *Silver Blaze* (1892)

Introduction: the challenge of cross-cultural qualitative research on aging

Though aging may be said to be, in times of rising longevity and increasing old-age ratios, a thoroughly transnational phenomenon at least in the OECD world (The World Bank, 2016; Vanhuyse & Goerres, 2012), research on aging continues to be largely a national industry. If cross-national comparative research on 'aging societies' has admittedly become somewhat more popular in the last decade or so, most of it consists of quantitative studies based on official statistics or international survey data (e.g. (Börsch-Supan, Kneip, Litwin, Myck, & Weber, 2015; OECD, 2016)). In contrast, qualitative cross-cultural research in

the field of aging is conspicuously rare. However, with all the advanced industrial societies being confronted with arguably the same challenges of demographic aging, the question whether people in different societies handle these challenges differently is of obvious relevance. In order to understand the complex social dynamics of demographic change, it is particularly important to be context-specific and to investigate the singularity of aging in the varying socio-cultural settings of different nations.

The apparent reluctance of the social sciences, and of gerontology in particular, to engage in qualitative cross-cultural research comes as no surprise, as this type of research presents a series of problems that indeed are quite difficult to solve. The most prominent may be said to be the linguistic problem (Mangen, 1999): every act of translating qualitative empirical data into another language poses severe limits to a research design based on 'comparative hermeneutics'. But language as such is only the most obvious part of the structural difficulty of doing justice to and coming to terms with the different cultural contexts of qualitative data. The fundamental question in cross-cultural research is how to identify what is a cultural specificity (Jowell, 1998): How can we detect the specific features of the cultural context, commonly

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2018.02.001>

Received 14 February 2018; Accepted 17 February 2018

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thought of as being identical to the ‘national’ setting, of the phenomenon we are investigating?

So far, gerontological literature has not contributed too much to the process of elucidating this question. Only very rarely has the methodology of cross-cultural research been an issue for comparative gerontology at all, a notable exception being the instructive paper by Paula Gardner, Katagiri, Parsons, Lee, and Thevannoors (Gardner, Katagiri, Parsons, Lee, & Thevannoors, 2012).¹ Going beyond the more descriptive style of that paper and its focus on the operative process of cross-national cooperative research, however, in what follows we address the methodological problem of cross-cultural qualitative research on aging from a more substantial, theoretically grounded perspective. Our particular focus will be on a structural problem in comparative qualitative research: the problem of cultural proximity or social embeddedness. Put in the simplest way, the problem refers to the fact that researchers and the subjects (or objects) of their research both belong to the same socio-cultural context, thus sharing the same ‘tacit knowledge’. This shared cultural belonging may effectively bias the process of research, be it with regard to the collection of data or to their interpretation. The question for cross-cultural qualitative research is how to identify and systematically acknowledge the specificities of the respective cultural context that both interviewers and interviewees are part of and bound to.

The interdisciplinary and international research project “Aging as Future”² confronted us with this fundamental methodological problem right from the start – even if it took us some time to really get into the matter and to explicitly account for its scope and significance. The project addresses the question of how elderly people spend and manage their time in the light of contradicting time frames. After having left paid employment, on the one hand, and facing the finitude of life, on the other, they are simultaneously confronted with a sense of both, everyday time abundance and biographical time shortage. Searching for different patterns and strategies deployed by elderly people in differing cultural contexts (Germany, Hong Kong, and the United States)³ when dealing with this everyday-time/life-time tension, we gradually became aware of the ‘cultural blindness’ with which we dealt with our respective material at the three research sites. In a reflexive and interactive process of ‘othering’, we eventually realized that we were just taking for granted the cultural frames of the respective societal settings in which each of us were operating. We eventually came to paraphrase the methodological question lying at the heart of our joint experience as ‘the-dog-that-didn’t-bark’ problem – a problem which we argue should be dealt with by systematically and interactively ‘estranging’ one’s own position as qualitative researcher.

The ‘dog-that-didn’t-bark’ problem: towards a methodology of reciprocal estrangement

In Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s short story “Silver Blaze”,⁴ master detective Sherlock Holmes is confronted with the mysterious disappearance of a famous racehorse (and the murder of the horse trainer)

¹ Of course, questions of research methodology in general and the ‘cultural bias’ of empirical research more specifically have been addressed extensively in the realm of anthropology, cultural studies or postcolonialism. Comparative gerontology, however, has not systematically taken account of this methodological discussion. Even in a periodical like the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, apart from being focused mostly on old age and aging across different cultures and much less on comparative studies, has been conspicuously abstinent over the years from debating issues of methodology.

² “Aging as Future” is an interdisciplinary project at the intersection of psychology, sociology, and psychogerontology funded by the German VolkswagenStiftung. For more detail, see <http://www.alternalszukunft.uni-jena.de/index.php>.

³ The selection of research sites followed the rationale of comparing old age-related agency in three highly developed countries all confronted with the challenge of population aging, but systematically differing in societal regulations and institutional infrastructures that may shape individual experiences of aging.

⁴ <http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/SilvBlaz.shtml>.

the night before a race. The fact that the dog meant to guard the precious horse did not bark that night leads Holmes to the conclusion that the robber (and murderer) was not a stranger to the animal, but someone the dog already knew and recognized – and who thus would not cause him to bark. In the story, mastermind Holmes draws a conclusion from a ‘negative fact’, from something that did *not* occur.

The curious incident of a *non-event* was something that, as we eventually noticed, did happen time and again in our own research process as well, systematically constraining it. In our case, at some point in our joint analysis of the empirical material, we came to collectively wonder why we ‘didn’t bark’ in the course of the interviews we had been conducting with older people: Why did we, as interviewers on the three different sites of investigation, not react to certain statements and remarks of our interviewees by digging deeper into the respective matter?

It took us some time to identify our recurring ‘non-response’ to the interviewees’ stories as a major methodological issue: as a problem of cultural affinity that certainly is not specific to cross-national research, but which is likely to become obvious only in a cross-cultural research setting. In the context of the qualitative subproject of “Aging as Future”, we conducted 30 problem-centered interviews (Witzel, 2000) with biographical narrative parts at each of the three sites of investigation: in Germany, Hong Kong, and the U.S. After the interview manual had been developed collectively at the first international project meeting, it was translated into German and Chinese, then pre-tested on the three sites and revised for the final version. All the interviews were then carried out by a native speaking researcher; methodologically this can be seen as the first, best way to prevent language-related communication problems with the interviewee and thus to optimize the quality of the data (Kruse & Schmieder, 2012).

In interpreting the empirical material, we started out with a deductive strategy. Based on a preliminary typology, developed by the German research team in a previous project (Münch, 2014), of different ‘time styles’ adopted by elderly people in managing their everyday life, we began asking if those same time styles possibly were apparent in other cultural contexts as well. Trying to code the Chinese and American interviews according to a ‘German’ code scheme, however, we collectively realized that a deductive approach to the interpretation of our data was pretty ineffective – an insight that we admittedly, as qualitative researchers, could and should have had in advance, but that we initially disregarded for the sake of finding a common ground for our transnational endeavor. What was positively salient, however, was that, when reading the partly translated interview material from the other sites of investigation in search for the time styles, we respectively had the experience of wondering about the ‘unconventional’ ways in which elderly people in other countries talked about passing their time. More specifically, we mutually were puzzled about what the interviewees said when it came to the question *with whom* they preferably were spending their time. This cross-cultural irritation made us create the category of ‘social time-orientation’, with which we then proceeded to analyze the interviews more closely.

We take the issue of social time-orientation in old age as an empirical illustration of the methodological problem of cultural blindness. Basically, we were not estranged by what our interlocutors were telling us: On each of the three sites of investigation, we did not critically question what elderly people were seemingly thinking to be a ‘usual’, ‘normal’, or even ‘natural’ way of spending time. It was only because of the cross-cultural ‘control’ exercised by the co-readers of the interviews conducted on the two other sites, respectively, that we could identify ‘strange’ habits we otherwise would not have become aware of at all. In that sense, it was striking for German or Chinese readers that U.S. elders, from among the entire range of activities they could choose, were preferably engaged in social volunteering – a fact that American interviewers seemed to treat as routine. The story of a German pensioner rushing through her later life in order to make up for the time lost on the way to retirement seemed perfectly plausible to the German

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