Unique as well as universal—complexities of comparative ageing research

Clemens Tesch-Römer ·
Hans-Joachim von Kondratowitz

Published online: 16 May 2007
© Springer-Verlag 2007

In our paper “Comparative Ageing Research: A Flourishing Field in Need of Theoretical Cultivation” we argued that comparing societies and cultures in respect to ageing processes is an indispensable, yet not fully realized endeavour of social and behavioural ageing research. Three outstanding scientists—Svein Olav Daatland, Rocio Fernandez-Ballesteros, and Marja Jylhä—have commented on our paper. Although agreeing with us that there is an urgent need to push theoretical ideas in comparative ageing research, they also raised objections to some of our arguments and posed questions, which seemingly were not treated in the article. We are pleased that our diagnosis regarding the current state of comparative ageing research is shared by our distinguished colleagues and see our expectations fulfilled that putting forward a distinct case may initiate a lively dialogue. Although we can follow some of the arguments of our colleagues, we disagree with others, however. In the following, we would like to point out strengths and, what we feel to be, shortcomings of their comments.

Are universal standards of comparisons possible?

In referring to the “cultural or linguistic” turn in social science, Marja Jylhä challenges the possibility of comparing cultures. In a similar vein, Svein Olav Daatland calls for a culturalist approach, contrasting it with a variable oriented, structuralist approach. The profound consequences of such a perspective is made clear in Jylhä’s own words: a “radically cultural position might lead to a situation where all cross-cultural comparisons are irrelevant and impossible”. It is

important that Jylhä distinguishes between two arguments, namely, that cross-cultural comparisons are both “irrelevant” and “impossible” from a radically culturalist position. Indeed, this differentiation points to an inherent methodical ambivalence in several approaches of a radical culturalism. Criticizing a cross-cultural comparison as being impossible puts the intellectual emphasis on the difficulty to conduct cultural analyses in an epistemologically consistent way, thereby reflecting on insoluble aporia in its construction. Characterizing a comparison as irrelevant aims at a completely different intellectual operation. Here, the adequacy of setting a comparative agenda is doubted (regardless of epistemological questions) which will concentrate on generalising treats while ignoring the “really important” essential qualities of differences. Hence, our plea for reminding all of us to keep an eye also on a standard of comparison valid in all cultures and societies might be unattainable. Although we have pointed out that there is a deep rift between emic and etic approaches in studying cultures, it seems that we probably jumped too readily to the conclusion that a combination of emic and etic perspectives is productive.

What are then the arguments for such a radical cultural position—and are they valid? Some authors of the cultural position argue that in order to understand and then to intellectually reflect the dimensions of culture it is necessary to be deeply embedded in the norms, habits, and language of a given culture (Pike 1967). The emic perspective is the view of the “normal” member of a given culture. Members of a culture are “born into” it—and learn the culturally relevant categories by participating in a series of events, which they at first do not comprehend and in which they gradually learn to act as full members of a culture. Hence, by experiencing contrastive situations or by receiving instructions, potential members of a culture learn to make responses to certain events, which are considered appropriate by full

C. Tesch-Römer (✉) · H.-J. von Kondratowitz
German Centre of Gerontology, Berlin, Germany
URL: www.dza.de

members of the community. A classic example for the emic perspective have been the Inuit with their allegedly large variety of words for “snow”, even if some researchers have voiced their doubts about the adequacy of this linguistic discovery (Dorais 1990). But one could say: “*Si non e vero, e ben trovato*” (even if it is not true, it is well invented). Therefore, regardless of its anthropological legitimacy the point made here is a convincing demonstration of these culturalist effects in an emic vein.

In contrast, the etic perspective refers to an outside observer’s view of a culture. The etic view is characterized not by a within cultural, but by a cross-cultural character. In comparing cultures the etic view abstracts general concepts, criteria or classificatory systems. These standards of comparisons are the creation of the observer, conceptual tools ready to be applied to data from different cultures. Hence, the etic view approaches a given culture with concepts prepared in advance. Etic criteria are absolute and measurable as such, without reference to the system, which they are applied to. Examples for etic criteria of describing a culture might be numbers (e.g., size of a population, proportion of old persons), space (e.g., extent of a territory), or time (e.g., temporal distance between generations).

On the first view, these two perspectives seem to be incompatible. However, we would argue, that both perspectives are “ideal types”—and in reality, both perspectives are intertwined and ought to be in direct exchange. Let us start with the “emic perspective”. In its extreme, this perspective calls for an isolated culture, far away and over the hills. Its members have never seen a culture except the one they are living in. European medieval life which has been predominantly rural and in which the majority of peasants and craftsmen never crossed over the narrow borders of their village and small towns might have been such a cultural setting. But today’s reality in a world of globalising social relations must be described as a mixture of cultures. Through travelling, migration, and mass media, modern societies are not characterized by a “pure” monoculture, but by the coexistence, cooperation or conflict between various cultures. Hence, the opportunities (and capacities) for cross-cultural comparisons, which exist for indigenous members of a given culture, should not be underestimated.

On the other hand, there are many processes and events in the life course which happen in all cultures: being born, growing up, becoming a parent, ageing, and dying are the characteristics of humankind. Hence, even the assumption that the experience of these events and transitions are fundamentally dissimilar in different cultures presupposes that they (or something comparable) happen at all. Therefore, even the very idea to locally construct meaning of concepts or to locally understand rules for behaviour presupposes conditions, which allow the understanding even of cultures, which seem inaccessible at a first glance. Taking over the emic

perspective as an outsider might be based on anthropological, biologically “hard-wired” constants like facial expressions of emotions or the preparedness for communication, preconditions which nevertheless receive meaningful interpretations within the context of specific cultures and societies.

Future cross-cultural comparative research in the field of ageing will have to deal with our controversy in a much more intense way if we are going to internationalise our research efforts by considering and integrating more global and diverse social environments. It has been therefore quite remarkable that this debate about “universalising” and “particularising” tendencies in comparative cultural research has intensified among the culturalists themselves, this time in connection with the debate about the position of “postcolonial studies”. Here Stuart Hall, certainly one of the leading representatives of a distinct culturalist position, has been in disagreement with some feminist researchers as Ella Shohat and Anne McClintock (see for this discussion Hall 1996). While these feminists complained about “ahistoric and universalising displacements” and depoliticising effects by working with the category of the “postcolonial”, Hall insisted on the legitimacy of complementing and integrating different research strategies in the analysis of postcolonial social settings (Hall 1996). In what way such controversies will materialise for the field of comparative ageing research is hardly discussed yet in gerontology and its long-term repercussions remain to be seen.

Hence, we would like to repeat our argument, that etic and emic perspectives are able to support each other. Already Pike (1967) stated (referring to the analyses of languages) that only native speakers are competent judges of emic descriptions, while investigators from the outside apply scientific methods in the analysis of a culture, producing etic descriptions which are falsifiable and reproducible. When constructing a “universal standard of comparisons” from an etic perspective, it is necessary to consult the emic perspective in order to understand what this standard of comparison means in a specific culture. We agree with Marja Jylhä, that emic interpretations of etic findings are based quite often on anecdotal information, only. More elaborate ethnographic studies are required—and these would substantively increase the knowledge gained from studies conducted with the etic perspective.

Comparative research: guided by hypotheses or generating hypotheses?

Svein Olav Daatland discusses another aspect of our paper: the proposal of the following four steps for theoretically driven comparative ageing research. After formulating research questions (step 1), levels of analyses should be specified (step 2), for instance, society (macro-level),

organisations (meso-level) or individuals (micro-level). Then, mechanisms have to be explicated which connect levels, e.g. pathways of societal influence on individuals (step 3), and finally, testable hypotheses should be specified (step 4). Although Daatland agrees in general with the need for theoretically based comparative ageing research, in his view the fourth step (formulating hypotheses) calls for a specific, variable-oriented research and, hence, is not always appropriate. Instead, he suggests using (large-scale quantitative) cross-cultural research in an exploratory manner and (qualitative) case-oriented analysis for “final insight and understanding”. In sum, Daatland argues that comparative research should not always be guided by a priori hypotheses but rather be used to generate hypotheses. In order to strengthen this viewpoint he referred to Eric Allardt’s well-known recommendations about concentrating first on an exploratory phase of quantitative analysis and then let it follow by a qualitative case-oriented analysis (instead of doing it the other way around).

We certainly agree that there should be various avenues for doing comparative ageing research. However, we do not believe that the current state of affairs is characterised by *too many* theoretically based comparative studies guided by a priori hypotheses and that there is an urgent need to supplement them by explorative, path-finding studies. On the contrary, in our view the current situation is characterised by too little theorizing in the field of comparative ageing research. Not rarely (we cited examples in our paper) cross-societal and cross-cultural studies report country differences in ageing process without even considering the reasons for selecting specific countries, the choice of levels of analysis, and the expectations about differences and similarities between the countries selected. Moreover, we think that it is difficult to halt our four-step processes at step three: after having specified research questions, levels of analyses, and a theoretical model connecting levels it would require almost unnatural effort to oppress hypotheses which would allow the further development of theoretical reasoning. Hence, we would argue that theoretically based comparative research ought to involve all four steps specified in our paper even if a realistic perspective on the research process must acknowledge the difficulty to implement such a strategic recommendation.

We would like to point out that a constructive combination of variable oriented and holistic approach as pointed out by Svein Olav Daatland is possible. Using different concepts, we think that the use of emic and etic perspectives in an empirical circle probably is highly productive. Earlier, we argued that emic and etic perspectives complement each other and, following Marja Jylhä, voted for elaborate ethnographic studies. Hence, one could argue that an empirical cycle is necessary in order to reach better insight into differences and similarities of ageing processes across societies and cultures. In our view, a cycle involves a

continuous movement between exploratory, hypothesis-generating studies and studies which are based on theories and aim to test hypotheses. Hence, although we still emphasize that there is a need for more studies driven by theory we certainly welcome the idea of combining them with exploratory, ethnographic research.

Neglecting methodology of comparative research?

Finally, Fernandez-Ballesteros pointed out the need to consider (and solve) methodological problems in comparative ageing research. In a way this leads back in a constructive way to Jylhä’s point of the alleged “impossibility” of cross-cultural comparative research work. Although Fernandez-Ballesteros realizes that our paper focuses on conceptual and theoretical questions, she demands methodological sophistication in comparative ageing research. Especially potential sources of bias are discussed in this comment. When using theories, constructs, instruments, and measures it is highly important to secure comparability between cultures, as there are “potential sources of bias that can render results non-comparable across cultures, countries, groups etc.”. Hence, Fernandez-Ballesteros argues that more emphasis should be given to develop and adapt adequate protocols for doing comparative ageing research.

We hardly disagree with the arguments forwarded by Fernandez-Ballesteros. As we did not plan to treat the methodological problems of comparative ageing research we only reserved a small section in our paper to this topic. However, we would emphasize again that methodological conscientiousness has to start with theoretical thinking. Without thorough theoretical foundation it is in our view futile to build adequate methods. The process of developing concepts, constructs, instruments, and items has to be guided by theory. In addition, we think that it is necessary to involve experts who have intimate knowledge about the cultures in questions. Even if ethnographic studies are not feasible, it seems useful to tap on the emic knowledge of the researchers working together in a comparative team. However, as we have pointed out, the process of “sharing minds” in cross-cultural discourse is time-consuming and effortful.

Outlook

What can be learned from this discussion about comparative ageing research? We think that a common theme runs through the remarks of our distinguished colleagues—and we have struggled with the same problem in our paper: while doing comparative research one has to pay attention to both unique features of a culture as well as universal aspects which might link different cultures and societies. As difficult as this might

be, it is worthwhile in our opinion and might help to fertilize and cultivate the field of comparative knowledge.

References

- Dorais LJ (1990) The Canadian Inuit and their language. In: Collis DRF (ed) Arctic languages. An awakening. United Nations, Unesco, Paris, pp 185–289
- Hall S (1996) When was ‘the Post-Colonial’? Thinking at the limits. In: Chambers I, Curti L (eds) The post-colonial question. Common skies, divided horizons. Routledge, London, pp 242–260
- Pike KL (1967) Language in relation to a unified theory of the structure of human behavior, 2nd edn. The Hague, Mouton