

Introduction to the special issue on methodologies for diverse ageing populations

This special issue arises from some selected papers of a Gerontological conference organised by the Department of Social Work, National University of Singapore (NUS). The funding for the conference was derived from a research project funded by NUS ‘Studies on Singapore Gerontology’ (R132-000-035-112).

Gerontological research among diverse communities of older people has built momentum over the last few decades. Interdisciplinary and cross-national studies have expanded our knowledge of the ageing process and the experiences of older generations. The common theme for the conference was the wisdom gained by the various academic researchers following their experience in applying research methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, development of measures and theoretical frameworks in the gerontological arena.

The four authors who have contributed the articles are from the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Singapore. They have different disciplinary backgrounds such as sociology, social work and social policy. Each brings her special perspective into the paper together with the cultural, and national contextual differences. The richness of the data and methodologies adopted in the wide array of research studies that are reported have led to the compilation of scholarly articles that will capture the interest of any gerontologist interested in ageing research. They appeal to an international audience and will be relevant to both students as well as experienced researchers.

The aim of the collection of papers is (a) to discuss the challenges in undertaking research with and about older people and (b) to draw together the lessons that the authors have learnt from cross-cultural gerontological research. The former emphasises the fact that researching on older populations has distinctive ethical and methodological considerations that all social researchers need to be aware of. There is a growing body of literature on this subject as the global ageing phenomenon makes its way across developing and developed countries. What is different about the present special issue is that we have weaved into this discussion the cross-cultural discourse. The articles address issues that concern researching on older people in ‘other’ cultures, hence an additional layer of complexity and challenge prevails.

It would be interesting for readers to have a glimpse of the strengths of the authors who have contributed the articles. Professor Berit Ingersoll is American by nationality and cultural identity but she chose to understand the psychological wellbeing of Thai elderly from their perspective. She embarked on a challenging task of developing measures of psychological wellbeing of the Thai older persons within their cultural and environmental context. By tapping on the expert help of Thai social researchers for the language translation, she overcame the main hurdle that gerontological researchers face in conducting cross-national and cross-cultural research. Professor Iris Chi is originally from Hong Kong and her strength lies in her depth of understanding, and her wealth of research experience within the Chinese communities in many parts of the world. Currently, she resides in Southern California, and teaches graduate students about the challenges of researching cross-culturally. She speaks from her first-hand experience, thus her pearls of wisdom are valuable. Professor Liz Lloyd has a British background, and her strength lies in the subject of social policy. She brings her gerontological knowledge and her strengths in social policy and ethics into the arena of end-of-life issues. End-of-life care is a fast growing industry, wherein private and public agencies are seeking a slice of the pie. Professor Lloyd's sensitivity to the perspective of the dying individual, and the family, is evident in her treatment of the subject. Professor Kalyani Mehta is from Singapore – a multicultural society, made up mainly of immigrants. From her perspective, Singapore is a natural laboratory for cross-cultural gerontological research. She has conducted many research projects using focus group methodology, hence she shares the lessons she has learnt about the use of focus group methodology amongst older people in the Asian context.

The compilation of articles informs the reader of the need for greater dialogue between social gerontological researchers as the world gets smaller and cross-cultural research becomes more commonly applied. The increasing incidence of social researchers embarking on such research is also because of global migration. Global migration could be due to labour and financial prospects, or retirement planning, or 'forced' uprooting because parents feel obliged to accompany their adult children to foreign countries. Gerontological researchers have to refine their research designs, tools, measures and even skills in engaging respondents for the purpose of comprehending the changing environment in which we live. These four articles are a humble start towards this end.

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