

Comparisons, cultures, contexts

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The article by Clemens Tesch-Römer and Hans-Joachim von Kondratowitz is an educated and timely contribution to the discussion on the comparative ageing research. The authors really hit upon the right thing, explicating the rather weak theoretical thinking and analyzing the crucial steps of comparative research. The paper is rich and inspiring, and hopefully invites many colleagues to continue the discussion. My comments will offer no solutions to the problems posed in the article, rather, my few remarks are likely to add to the complexity of these questions.

In this paper, “comparative” refers to comparisons between countries or cultures. Comparisons, however, are a standard method in social science, and there are few empirical studies that do not include comparisons between age groups, genders, rural and urban environments etc. To what extent and how, then, are comparisons between countries or cultures different from these, or is there any fundamental difference at all? Researchers in gender studies have criticized the non-reflective use of gender, or sex, as a technical, seemingly neutral category, that neglects the substantial qualitative differences between being a man and being a woman. It may not be unfair to say that the same criticism applies also to many comparisons between countries. Tesch-Römer and von Kondratowitz point out that it is often unclear whether the name of the country represents a geographically confined state with specific legal structure, a nation, a society, or a culture. In comparative studies, these choices are almost never explicitly discussed. If “country” is a relevant denominator in studies where common legislative and societal structures are important, such as in studies

of health and social services, it may not be as relevant in studies that focus on values or subjective experiences; these may vary according to area or sub-culture group more than from one country to another. The notion of “culture”, then, can refer to practices of thought, interpretations and beliefs in a working place or care unit as well as in a country or in a religious group. Apparently, it should be the nature of the research question and the object of the study that is important when the level of comparisons is decided, and this choice is not always easy.

The cultural or linguistic turn in social science, particularly sociology (Hall 1997), has contributed to the understanding of “culture” as something that not only influences the thoughts and behaviors of people living in it, but is also continuously modified and reconstructed by these people. This line of thinking also draws our attention to the cultural contextuality not only of the phenomena that our concepts describe, but also of these concepts themselves. From this perspective, it would be hard to imagine a “standard of comparison which is valid in all cultures and societies” (Tesch-Römer and von Kondratowitz 2006, p. 164). A radically “cultural” position may lead to a situation where all cross-cultural comparisons are irrelevant and impossible. In a less-extreme form the challenge of cultural studies invites researchers to reflective thinking and careful consideration on their concepts and basic assumptions.

In the paper, the authors present a detailed and useful discussion about different types of equivalency. They describe how the problems of transferring a question from one context to another reach far beyond translating the words in the questionnaire from one language to another. The linguists make a difference between denotation, referring to the literal meaning of a word, and connotation, referring to a deeper cultural meaning of the word. These may include dimensions such as the contexts where the

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word is used, the “color” of the word, the values attached to it. The differences between connotations are obviously not found in a dictionary, and often there are no direct ways to ascertain whether the meanings of the word adequately translate from one culture to another. One personal experience comes from a comparative analysis on the frequency of loneliness in the baseline data of the European Longitudinal Study on Ageing (Heikkinen et al. 1983; Ferrucci et al. 1995). We found a gradient of decreasing frequency of loneliness from southern Europe to northern Europe, from rural Greece to the city of Tampere in Finland, a gradient that was exactly opposite to the gradient showing the proportion of people living alone (Jylhä and Jokela 1990). The elaboration of the data using other available indicators did not explain this gradient. We suggested that the differences should be understood as being genuinely cultural, reflecting characteristics of “individualistic” and “familistic” cultures, and the different expectations of old people toward their families. The systematic gradient speaks for the influence of society-level factors, but, after all, we could not be sure whether the wording of the question, “Do you feel lonely often, sometimes, or never”, sounds the same to an older Greek and to an older Finn.

Sometimes the problems of comparability or equivalence do not concern a variable as such but the specific use of the variable. ADL measures where people are asked whether they are able to perform different tasks of everyday life without difficulty or at least without help provide an example. As it is known that factors related to cultural communication influence answers to these questions (Tesch and von Kondratowitz use the CLESA project as an example) it is clear that ADL indicators do not measure the biological state of the human organism in an equivalent way. Still, they do predict mortality in each individual country where data are available, and with good reason they are considered robust, valid and comparable measures of the ability or disability to carry out the tasks of everyday life, and the need of help in a given physical, social and cultural environment.

Tesch-Römer and von Kondratowitz observe that it is not unusual to use ‘emic’ explanations to interpret the find-

ings of ‘etic’ analyses. It is worth noticing that often (Minicuci et al. 2004; Jylhä and Jokela 1990 can be used as examples also here) these emic interpretations are based on more or less anecdotal information, and remain somewhat speculative; probably nowhere have these hypothetical interpretations been tested in a further study. This is understandable, of course, both for practical reasons and because the researchers in large population studies seldom are inclined to move into cultural studies requiring very different skills and approaches. But this also makes clear how much we would benefit from qualitative, ethnographic comparisons on ageing and old age. Tesch-Römer and von Kondratowitz remind us of the importance of clearly defined concepts and a priori, falsifiable hypotheses, too often neglected in comparative surveys. Ethnographic studies could provide somewhat different, complementary perspectives. For instance, a comparative cultural ethnography focusing on the construction of old age, that is, on definitions, signs and practices in everyday life than make a person “old” in different countries and cultures. This understanding, again, could provide the basis for more valid and relevant concepts for large-scale comparative population studies.

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