

Cross-Cultural Psychogerontology

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Definition

Cross-Cultural Psychogerontology deals with universals and differences in psychological aspects of aging across cultures.

Overview

Population aging is a phenomenon that affects most parts of the world. According to recent data from the World Population Prospects (United Nations 2017), the number of older persons—those aged 60+—has reached 962 million worldwide and is expected to climb to 2.1 billion in 2050. In spite of these general world trends, life expectancies differ still largely and aging remains a highly diverse experience across the world. Whilst universal developmental tasks are markers for older

age in all societies (e.g. becoming a grandparent), expectations with regard to typical life trajectories and the timing of transitions vary. This “social clock” (Neugarten et al. 1965) or “cultural chrononormativity of aging” (Brinkmann and Musaeus 2018) is also expressed in legal regulations and policies (e.g. availability and timing of retirement schemes). Normative and non-normative life events and their interpretation as on-time or off-time might thus be defined very differently depending on the cultural (and historical) context (see also Baltes et al. 1980; Wrosch and Heckhausen 2005).

This leads to one of the central questions of cross-cultural aging research: Are aging processes universals across cultures and societies in the Western and Eastern, Northern and Southern parts of the world—or do aging processes differ between cultures and societies? If culture-specific differences are found, age seems to be at least partly a social construction and social age might hence be a more appropriate indicator than chronological age here. Given cultural and societal differences, an important task of cross-cultural psychogerontology is the identification of underlying cultural and societal factors (e.g. Bleidorn et al. 2016). The knowledge of these factors might give insight into age as social construction—and possibly also indications for potential societal interventions (Kemper et al. 2016).

Early life-course theories defined specific developmental tasks based on biological factors and social expectations (see Erikson 1968), and the consideration of historical and socio-cultural context is a principle of life-span psychology (Baltes et al. 1980). It is therefore astounding that only recent research has systematically addressed cross-cultural differences in aging, whereas most theories stem from a Western perspective.

Cross-cultural psychogerontology starts from the theoretical assumption that individual development over the life span takes place in social contexts that differ in their emphasis of

individuals' embeddedness into social groups and societal context, often operationalized as collectivist vs. individualist cultures (Kanagawa et al. 2001; Mayer et al. 2012; Triandis 2001). In individualist, mostly Western cultures developmental pathways of independence are emphasized, stressing autonomy, personal choice and self-fulfillment, whereas in collectivist, mostly Eastern cultures, interdependence is emphasized, highlighting obligations towards others and social harmony (Greenfield et al. 2003; Rothbaum et al. 2000). Thus, culture assumes the role of a "canalizer" that provides constraints which guide human development in a certain direction, however without exactly determining development (Valsiner 1996). Hence, both universals and differences in psychological aspects of aging might be observed across cultures.

Key Research Findings

Views on aging

Views on aging have a double impact on individual development over the life span: they might bias behavior toward older people through stereotypes, prejudice or ageism (Chasteen et al. 2015), and they can influence older adults' self-concepts through internalization and self-stereotyping (Kornadt and Rothermund 2015). It has been argued that in traditional and Eastern societies more favorable views toward older adults and aging might be prevalent, for instance due to Confucian values of filial piety, a concept that refers to life-long mutual obligations and respect toward elder family members, typical for East Asian cultures such as China, Korea and Japan (Hwang, 1999). A meta-analysis by North and Fiske (2015) including 37 papers and 23 countries, however, challenges this assumption: contrary to expectations, participants in Northern American and anglophone countries were found to show generally less negative attitudes toward older adults, whereas most negative views were documented for East Asians. Europeans were most negative in the West and East Asians more negative than South-East Asians. The speed of population ageing

was related with ageism on aggregate level. Nonetheless, it might be important to look at different areas of development here. For instance, Löckenhoff and colleagues (2009) found in their college student sample from 26 countries more negative ratings with regard to age-related changes in attractiveness, everyday tasks and new learning—all related to biologically based processes, whereas expectations of increases with age were found for general knowledge, wisdom, and respect—hence more culturally based aspects. Culture-level indicators and perceptions of aging were weakly linked in physical and cognitive areas, but more strongly related regarding socioemotional aspects and societal views.

Cognitive processes

It has been argued that—in line with the distinction between mechanics and pragmatics (Baltes 1993) of cognitive functioning, the lifelong accumulation of cultural knowledge would lead to larger cross-cultural differences in the pragmatics of cognition with age. Park et al. (1999) have developed a framework model suggesting that different age trajectories might also be task-specific. Whereas effortful and controlled tasks that are highly resource demanding would show smaller cultural differences in older age due to universal biologically based decline, older adults would profit from their lifelong cultural experiences in tasks that involve automatically activated processes which reduce the cognitive effort needed to carry out a specific task. Accordingly, older adults from Eastern vs. Western contexts differed more strongly compared to younger individuals with regard to recall of material that belongs to taxonomic categories (e.g. grouping animals with similar characteristics). The use of such categories is more common in Western compared to Eastern contexts and as categorical information can help to recall information, Westerners who employ this strategy automatically might need less cognitive resources compared to Easterners who are less experienced in the use of categorical information (see Fang et al. 2017). Culture-

specifics of neurocognitive aging have also been demonstrated in cross-cultural neuroimaging studies where for instance East-West differences in older adults' activation of object processing areas were found (Park and Gutchess 2006).

Social relations

Socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al. 2003) posits that the size of social networks diminishes with age, whereas existing relations with close social partners are strengthened—a pattern that has been typically found in Western contexts. In the collectivist context of China, these associations between number of network partners (peripheral and close) and age were only found for participants who were low in interdependence, whereas larger social networks were found for older participants with medium or high levels of interdependence (see also Ajrouch et al. [2018] for Japan, Lebanon, Mexico, US). Different meanings of social relations could be at the core of such differences: Westerhof et al. (2000) report that US older adults described social relations more in their function for emotional regulation, whereas for Congolese elders, the meaning of social relations was more instrumental. Social relations might thus serve diverse goals (e.g. emotional vs. old-age security value of children, Kağıtçıbaşı 1982) and these could be satisfied by different strategies regarding social networks across age.

Subjective well-being

Regarding cross-cultural differences in subjective well-being, Karasawa et al. (2011) expected more positive age trajectories for Japanese compared to US elders in particular regarding eudaimonic aspects due to cultural values attributed to aging in line with Confucianism. They found that Japanese older adults scored higher on personal growth compared to younger counterparts, whereas the opposite age pattern was found in the US. Interestingly, purpose in life

showed decrease in both samples which the authors interpreted as difficulties to provide meaningful involvement opportunities for elders in technologically highly advanced societies. Hedonic aspects of well-being were reported to increase (positive emotions) respectively decrease (negative emotions) in both samples, whereas Fang et al. (2017) have referred to a decrease of negative affect in particular for US elder adults. This latter finding was again explained according to independent and interdependent orientations: whereas for Westerners positive emotions might be important enhancing their self-esteem in line with cultural values of independence and autonomy, for the more interdependently oriented Easterners it could be important to attend to both positive and negative information in order to establish harmonious social relations.

Preparing for old age

Preparing for anticipated changes in older age might help to tackle challenges related to aging and thus be beneficial for well-being later on. Kornadt and colleagues (2018) found differences in preparation for older age between adults in the US, Germany and China (Hong Kong). Participants from the US and Germany reported generally more preparation compared to participants from Hong Kong, but cross-cultural variation was also found depending on domains of preparation (such as health care, work, finances, social relations, end-of-life concerns). Apart from diverging welfare policies, these East-West differences were also in line with culture-specific expectations of passive vs. active age in Eastern compared to Western elders.

Informal care

In light of population aging, the issue of care is highly prominent as old age is still associated with a high probability of physical and functional impairments (Ferring 2010). Although family remains an important pillar in old age support provision all over the world,

cultural norms and expectations about responsibilities for care differ largely, and even among European countries policies and practices vary, with higher public care provisions in the North and more intense family care in the South (Dykstra 2017). Different care preferences and expectations for mutual support are related to cultural values and norms (for a summary see Albert et al. in press). According to the Confucian value of filial piety the eldest son and his wife are responsible for care of elder parents (Hwang 1999) and a high familism goes along with a preference for informal care also in Southern and middle America (Crist et al. 2009; Hwang 1999). However, due to social change traditional patterns can be adapted, as has been shown for urban contexts in China where daughters might take over care responsibilities as the traditionally rather preferred sons and their wives might not be available (for a summary see Pinguart et al. 2018).

Future Directions for Research

In this final section directions for further research will be discussed, emphasizing both new theoretical perspectives and methodological tools for enhancing cross-cultural psychogerontological research.

Theoretical perspectives

A simple transfer of Western based theories and concepts such as future time perspective might not hold in other contexts as cultural beliefs (such as spirituality or religion) might bias goals and behavior. For instance, cultures differ in how they structure the life course, how they see afterlife and their relations with ancestors (Arnett 2016). In addition, aspects of acculturation and multiculturalism should also be taken into account. For instance, one could ask how social networks and psychological aspects of aging are affected by migration from a more collectivist to

a more individualistic context (see also Burholt et al. 2017), or how biculturals deal with challenges of aging.

Methodological challenges

Studies on cross-cultural differences and culture-specifics in aging are often based on cross-sectional design of most studies. Differences between cultures could indicate cohort rather than age effects in light of societal change. As a consequence, more longitudinal and cohort-sequential studies might be conducted in cross-cultural psychogerontological research. Also, whereas most studies have focused on East-West comparisons—often US and European vs. East Asian samples, inclusion of further countries seems highly needed to gain a deeper insight into culture-specifics. At the same time, clustering countries as Eastern or Western seems too simplifying, as within these broad categories cultural contexts vary largely, thus a thorough description of cultural contexts is needed beyond dichotomies such as individualist-collectivist. Finally, culture-specific aging experiences might not be fully grasped by quantitative survey data and caution is needed when using Western based questionnaires without cultural adaptation.

Summary

The present entry focused on cultural similarities and differences with regard to aging. After describing typical developmental pathways of independence and interdependence that guide human development, selected research findings regarding views on aging, cognitive development, social relations, well-being, preparation for old age and care arrangements were described. Finally, new approaches and suggestions for future research were outlined such as a closer look at the culture-specific meaning of Western concepts that cannot be transferred into other cultural contexts without any changes.

Cross-References

Intergenerational family caregiving in welfare policy context, Filial piety and responsibilities among the Chinese, Successful aging 2.0, Geropsychology/psychogerontology, Life-span development, Self-perceptions of aging

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