25 Recapitulation

Ageing research on highways and byways of methodology

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This publication's authors set for themselves the task of introducing the reader to the multiplicity of research methods on old age, as well as presenting reflections on their applications and practical implications. The authors have shared their own experience of using two research paradigms – the quantitative and qualitative – with an inclination toward seeking ways of employing them simultaneously, rather than viewing them as being in conflict with each other.

As part of their thought centered around those two main paradigms, the authors have shared their experience and reflections on the following specific techniques, approaches and tools in research on the phenomenon of ageing:

- desk research;
- evidence-based practice;
- experimentation;
- life-story interviews;
- longitudinal studies, cross-sectional studies and within-person change studies (e.g., data sources, trend study, cohort study and panel study, separating the influence of cohort, age and period effects);
- material culture studies and science and technology studies (STS);
- National Transfer Accounts (NTA);
- observation;
- participatory action research (PAR);
- participatory peer research (PPR);
- population health intervention research (PHIR);
- qualitative cross-national comparisons;
- the qualitative narrative gerontological approach (QNGA);
- quantitative-qualitative interviews;
- self-reported scales;
- semi-structured interviews;
- social marketing tools;
- structured interviews.

The techniques noted above have been discussed in relation to the literature on the subject and with an indication of practical challenges that arise during their application within research.

There are several general conclusions regarding the methodology of research on old age that emerge from the considerations presented in this book. A researcher who wants to

undertake studies of old age in a serious manner should take into account the following threads for reflection.

- 1 *Flexibility and an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach to ageing research.* Study of the different phenomena associated with ageing requires engagement of the conceptual apparatuses of various disciplines; one should thus develop an awareness not only of the interdisciplinary approach to research on old age, but also of the transdisciplinary context of such research. Various approaches and analyses can be combined, which creates the possibility of studying a complex problem from different perspectives. Ageing and gerontology are complex and contested fields of study and practice, and therefore seem well-suited to interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches. Such approaches recognize the value of disciplinary insights, even as they build on, integrate and transcend disciplinary perspectives and conventional assumptions about how research and research education should be framed and undertaken. The book has presented tools particular to sociology, economics, legal sciences and philosophy as examples of the transdisciplinary specificity of gerontological research.
- 2 *Embedding research in existing theoretical systems.* It is necessary to embed research assumptions in knowledge, theoretical concepts and existing theoretical systems. We definitely recommend that ageing research be conducted with sufficient theoretical background and with regard for current social, political, religious, ideological and economic circumstances, which aims at eliminating methodological pitfalls. In addition, using insights from the existing pool of knowledge can facilitate the development and enrichment of research, as well as verifying its currency. Ignorance and balancing the open doors of knowledge should be avoided.
- 3 *Ethical reflection in research.* Ethical thought must be incorporated into the design and implementation of research. The researcher should competently anticipate the effects of individual research steps in the context of their axiological references. The fundamental human rights of older adults should be always protected in every research procedure.
- 4 *The use of many different research methods and paradigms.* The greater the variety of research techniques used in research, the more fully the trends and realities of the studied persons will be captured. It is thus important to develop a range of valid and reliable tools to research and address ageing. Because every phenomenon associated with ageing is complex and multidimensional, it is advisable not to limit yourself to just a single research paradigm. In particular, we encourage you to carry out research in teams that include experts in qualitative and quantitative research, thereby facilitating the creation of mixed models for research. The catalog of possible methods is open, and combining them in innovative ways can yield surprising results that more effectively present the reality of older people.
- 5 *The researcher as an important factor in the research conducted.* It is important to realize that the researcher is involved as a human being in the relationship with the respondent. It is not possible to reduce the researcher to some pure, objective consciousness devoid of prejudices, worries, emotions, sympathy and antipathy – especially when sensitive issues are being studied. The so-called “human factor” should be taken into account on the side of both the researcher and the respondent. An important element that can complement the primary study may be knowledge gained by a researcher about the situation taken from sources other than the interview itself; we call this backstage knowledge.

- 6 *The specifics of the so-called “sensitive issue”.* Whether a topic is “sensitive” is determined not only by the nature of the research problem or the people participating in the research but also by relevant authorities and their views. Sensitive research need not be associated solely with qualitative methods and (above all) narrative interviewing; the study of sensitive issues can also be undertaken using quantitative methods.
- 7 *The role of technology and objects.* Not only older people can serve as the subjects of one’s research; material objects and technologies likewise add to our view of age(ing). As a result, it is no longer only interactions between human beings that are examined, and objects are no longer understood simply as parts of a purely physical environment. Awareness of such phenomena can aid in pinpointing the role that objects play in constituting old age; objects can co-constitute life in old age if they provide more than resources or functions for older adults. The same situation arises when using technical equipment, IT-supported techniques and social media, which can create many possibilities for changing power relations.
- 8 *Cross-national comparisons.* Thinking about research on old age in such a way that allows results to be compared between different populations in different countries is a huge challenge for those who design and execute studies, especially in international teams. Such circumstances reveal differences in approaches to methodology, in the understanding of theories and the correlation of data, and in addressing issues relating to validity, reliability and ethical considerations. Carrying out research involving rigorous cross-national comparison demands extensive language skills, cultural understanding, resources and time. To achieve the research aim, it is essential for a researcher to collect information about the relative effects of different actions on actual welfare outcomes in different countries. Building research projects whose results can be compared with those of other projects seems to be the greatest challenge facing researchers on ageing worldwide.
- 9 *Putting research solutions into practice.* Research should be designed with its application borne always in mind. Ageing interventions are complex; research in this field must help us both find new solutions to those challenges facing the ageing population and insure the viability of such solutions in different systems connected with older adults’ lives. Thus, research methods must evolve to better integrate different aspects of complexity: how will an intervention work? How can the intervention be implemented to produce the same results as in experimental contexts? In which conditions could the intervention be adapted? All of these questions allow us to define the conditions in which ageing interventions can be implemented, evaluated and transferred. Answering them involves considering new research methods that are more comprehensive and integrative of the real conditions in which research professionals work. Research on ageing needs to be followed up with interventions for enacting change in clinical practice. While many initiatives are currently being promoted by public organizations and associations, complementing them with appropriate research and evaluation would increase efficiency in the long term by building up the necessary evidence base.
- 10 *Engaging seniors in the research process.* Participatory peer research has undoubtedly helped in creating inclusive, equitable and responsive research. In addition, it serves to enact empowerment at the individual and community levels. One can positively state that the involvement of older people in ageing research is a necessity, not a nuisance. In this context, one should also take into account the possibilities and perspective of seniors with various challenges – for example, problems caused by conditions like

Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease or aphasia. Similar challenges might exist when interviewing older rural participants who are less articulate or who consider their experience as "too normal to be narrated". It is always important to be aware of the fact that the flow of information in a qualitative interview might not be as mutual as is assumed; a participant's sharing of his or her life story might be minimally responsive, fragmented and structurally shaped. Adapting recruitment strategies, modifying consent forms, adjusting the data collection process, developing more accurate tools to assess capacity and diversifying communication strategies are part of the strategies for achieving better research outcomes.

The broad context for organizing ageing research is learning how to honor the life experience of our elders. Instead of calling them "the elderly", it is better to address them as "older adults" or even "elders", which indicates those with wisdom. The most important component of life experience is the "ingenuity of ageing", which means the ageing experience of the aged.

Moreover, it is important to build bidirectional trust, which means enhancing trust by offering elders ownership of research. Instead of framing elders as passive subjects for research, we advocate a co-creation methodology. While acknowledging both traditional models – the medical and social dimensions of ageing – we embrace the "Cultural Model of Ageing" as a means of capturing how older people tackle their own ageing issues.

The final and most important remark is about enhancing the role of older adults as active participants in the research process, which is essential for the future development of more participatory methods for our common issue: ageing. We must expand roles for those who are the co-creators of our super-ageing society, in which public and statutory authorities must work with older people in planning future services in order to insure that our communities will be fit for all ages.

In concluding, I would like to express the hope that this book will have provided true inspiration for readers to undertake further research on the phenomenon of ageing, and that the content of individual parts of this book will have been a source of new ideas regarding research on old age and of guidelines for developing increasingly reliable methodologies. Research on ageing is not only our passion, but also our future. Together with other researchers, we carry out such work not only as scientists, but also as persons who, like all human beings, will experience what it is to grow old.