

Global Gerontology: The Frog Candy of the Future

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Frog candy is anything new and exotic and slightly strange that has taken on the aura of “cool” and desirable. At least that’s what I’ve decided. And a quick Google search will confirm that frog candy has become ubiquitous. In that sense global gerontology is the frog candy of the second decade of 21st century aging. If you aren’t “global” in today’s gerontology, you aren’t on the cutting edge. Follow me, now:

Aging is a universal human trait and a very personal experience. The modern science of gerontology reveals that many of the physical and psychological manifestations of aging (graying and thinning hair, wrinkled skin, slowing metabolism and weight gain, loss of reproductive ability and vigor, altered gait, loss of functional movement abilities, and gradual loss of mental acuity) are universal in the species, or nearly so. Of course, each set of changes proceeds at different rates in different human beings. Some remain healthy, vigorous, and alert well past the ages where others become frail and confused.

Not so universal are the social and cultural arrangements that often accompany old age; in fact, these tend to vary by country and tribe, sometimes producing unique family and community roles, views, and expectations of elders. These cultural variations, coupled with economic, educational, and demographic differences among the nations of the world produce significantly different *ageways* (expectations and realities for older people).

The study of aging in specific nations and cultural groups and the comparison of how aging can differ from society to society has grown dramatically in recent years and has come to be called *global aging* and now is a recognized body of knowledge and field of study.

The comparative study of aging in different cultures has long been the province of anthropologists. Early scholars like Leo Simmons, Ethel Shanas, Margaret Clark, Erdman Palmore, and others were not all anthropologists but did employ social scientific methods to understand how aging worked in countries outside the U.S. and how that compared with the American version. We learned from Shanas, for example, that English and Danish families were quite similar to their American cousins in their patterns of social integration and intergenerational contact, while Palmore found Japanese culture much more reverential than ours toward what they called the “honorable elders.”

Later came a flood of sociologists, social workers, psychologists, political scientists, public health researchers, and others who explored various aspects of aging in a wide variety of international settings—and are continuing to do so. Simultaneously, an even larger number of international students and scholars have been arriving in the U.S. to study aging here and learn how to transport the methods learned back to their home countries to do gerontology there.

Now, it is impossible to know the full extent of *global gerontology* underway, but it is not fanciful to speculate that South Africans are studying older volunteers in Sweden, and

Vietnamese are exploring pension systems in Canada, while Chinese biologists are carrying out post-doctoral gene studies in Greece. It is not just—or even mainly—an American enterprise anymore.

If we want to participate fully in gerontology, we need to do three things: 1) incorporate global aging into all our gerontological curricula; 2) recruit international students and scholars for our graduate programs in gerontology; and 3) get serious about taking our programs of research—and ourselves—to what the American comedian Robert Klein used to call “foreign lands.” Global gerontology is hot and soon will get a lot hotter. If a frog had a sweet tooth, global gerontology would be frog candy.