Chapter 26

Ageism in a Cross-Cultural Perspective: Reflections from the Research Field

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26.1 Introduction

There has been a long-standing interest in researching ageing from a cross-cultural perspective. The recognition of the societal and cultural dimensions of ageing has spurred interest in research that explicitly focuses on highlighting the meaning of context for the process and experience of ageing. Moreover, the acknowledgment of previously limited views of ageing has opened new directions in ageing research. In 1986, when the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* was established, its editors stipulated that research on non-Western settings would be favoured in the journal, which corresponded with “a need for a scholarly journal devoted to worldwide variation in the aging experience” (Beall et al. 1986).

This trend has also been visible in studies that aim to define and measure ageism in objective ways in different parts of the world. For example, in North America, measurement scales that assess the scope and prevalence of ageism in everyday life include the Ageism Survey (see McGuire et al. 2008; Palmore 2004) and the Relating to Older People Evaluation questionnaire (see Allen et al. 2008; Cherry and Palmore 2008). In Europe, the European Social Survey (ESS) has been widely applied to investigate ageist attitudes, the prevalence of age discrimination at national levels, and to offer cross-country comparisons (see Swift et al. 2018;

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Chap. 27, in this volume). Accordingly, there is growing recognition that ageism needs to be understood in relation to the various spaces in which it occurs (McHugh 2003). For example, different welfare and cultural norms tend to affect the ways in which people relate to this phenomenon (Radl 2012; Trusínová 2014; van den Heuvel and van Santvoort 2011).

Schoenberg and Lewis (2005) discussed the phenomenon of cross-cultural ageism to emphasize that a cross-national perspective in the study of ageism makes an important contribution to understanding the ways in which local contexts shape and influence ageism. Such a perspective, however, does not need to entail an essentialist view of culture; rather, it encourages reflection upon various norms, practices, and meaning-making processes embedded in particular socio-cultural settings and their influence on ageism and ageist practices. In this chapter, we follow this line of argument and develop it further by discussing the complexity of exploring diverse ageist practices as performed in different parts of the world and reflecting at the same time upon the researchers' socio-cultural backgrounds, through which their experiences of fieldwork and research on various enactments of ageism are filtered. The key tenet of our argument is that these two dimensions interact during the fieldwork to create unique frameworks that researchers apply in their studies and which in effect lead to various understandings of ageism.

26.2 Ageism—From Global to Local Phenomena and Back

“Every age is problematic, or rather, having an age is a danger” (Gullette 2004, p. 181). This statement, made by renowned cultural critic Margaret Gullette, accentuates the prevalence of age ideology in current socio-economic and cultural contexts. Ageism is a multidimensional phenomenon that goes beyond discriminatory practices or events. It is predicated upon the understanding of age as an important signifier of classes of people (Bytheway 1995) that effectively creates ranks of more and less desired ages. It is a form of social oppression and inequality that often goes unnoticed when people are involved in their business as usual. As emphasized in the chapter on gendered ageism, ageism is also a form of social practice that is used to achieve not only age-specific goals, such as favouring some age groups at the expense of other groups, but also to accomplish other important objectives, such as fulfilling organizational visions or work-related tasks (Llewellyn 2015; Wilińska and Henning 2011). Because of this, ageism becomes a difficult phenomenon to research. Like any other form of social inequality, ageism not only exists in direct discriminatory and exclusionary actions, but, more often, it can be found in numerous taken for granted meanings and practices that are ordinarily considered natural. The popularity and social acceptance of widely used anti-ageing products (Vincent 2006, 2007) and age-related jokes on birthday cards (Ellis and Morrison 2005) are only two examples of practices that very often receive little if any recognition as harmful and demeaning to particular age groups.

26.3 Ageism in West and East

Ageism as a societal structure that is enacted in social relationships and practices has been mainly associated with Western cultures that have been extensively criticized for their overarching focus on and desire for everlasting youth which devalues ageing and old age (Gullette 2004). Studies that explicitly aim at comparing enactments of ageism in Western and Eastern cultures usually employ either attitudes surveys or media analysis.

In an overview of quantitative studies examining differences in attitudes towards older people in Western and Eastern countries, North and Fiske (2015) demonstrated that their results contradict many common assumptions about East and West. For example, the most commonly held assumption about those differences is that Eastern countries and cultures are more respectful of older people. North and Fiske (2015) challenged this claim by establishing a link between level of ageism and population ageing rate and suggesting that many Eastern countries experience high rates of population ageing and, therefore, increasing levels of ageism. They emphasized a need for more context-sensitive research that is also conducted within similar cultures and geographical regions.

Ageism may be a worldwide phenomenon but its particularities attest to the importance of recognizing the interaction between situational contexts and ageist practices. For example, methodological reflections on the ways in which the ESS is used in Europe to study ageism confirms that levels of sensitivity to the experience of ageism vary from country to country making it difficult to reach rigorous conclusions (Trusinová 2014). There seems to be a clear difference in the experience of direct age discrimination between Northwest and Southeast Europe, which, among other things, can be related to the differences in social arrangement systems following diverse welfare state traditions (van den Heuvel and van Santvoort 2011).

Research results from studies examining ageism in the media also confirm the importance of context when discussing this phenomenon. For example, a comparative study of TV advertisements in Taiwan and the UK has shown that although ageism is widely spread in both countries, its forms and contents differ due to various cultural and traditional norms (Chen 2015). Whereas in the UK ageism is mostly visible in unrealistic images of active and healthy older people, in Taiwan the same phenomenon is reflected in advertisements that mainly focus on ill health and the vulnerability of older people. Lien et al. (2009) and Raman et al. (2008) further demonstrated that, although the underrepresentation of older people in the media is widely spread around the world, the particularities of marginalization and stigmatization of older people in the media need to be contextualized.

26.4 Cross-Cultural Research Approaches to Ageism

Very often, cross-cultural comparisons of ageism are conducted from the perspective of difference (idiographic) and it is difference that is actively searched for. In contrast, Anbäcken and Nitta (2008) discussed the position of “similarities in differences and differences in similarities” (p. 172) as a more fruitful response to the challenges posed by cross-country comparisons. This position rejects the static view of culture and instead brings to the fore sensitivity to the context and the interlinked relations between particularities and universalities. It is a position that, for example, has enabled researchers to demonstrate that the perception of daily life among older people whose spouses were institutionalized in the Japanese and the Swedish contexts are similar. Moreover, it might be useful to highlight in-group varieties rather than only to delineate differences between countries (Anbäcken and Nitta 2008; Johansson et al. 2008). Such a position has the potential to creatively combine a search for differences and unique characteristics (idiographic perspective) with a search for similarities and discovering overarching patterns (nomothetic perspective) by demonstrating that differences and similarities can co-exist.

Not only does the perspective used to compare various contexts make a difference, but researchers themselves matter. Japanese gerontologist Koyano (1989) contended that many myths regarding ageing in Japan had been constructed by Western scholars who entered the country without fully understanding the particularities of everyday life and the ways in which older people would and would not interact with foreign researchers. For example, he found that rituals of respect which were praised by Western scholars very often concealed negative attitudes towards old age that were very difficult to discern, even by natives (Koyano 1989). This only strengthens the point about the complexity of revealing ageist practices, which, enmeshed in everyday doings, often go unnoticed. This difficulty not only exposes the conflict between insider (emic) and outsider (etic) perspectives that may substantially impinge on comparative research efforts in the field of ageing (Tesch-Römer and von Kondratowitz 2006), but also highlights the fact that regardless of the perspective, knowledge is hardly objective. On the contrary, it reveals its interdependency on the social reality in which it is produced (McCarthy 1996; Longino 1990).

Research on ageism conducted in unfamiliar socio-cultural settings is also challenging simply from the practical perspective of researchers travelling, living, and working abroad. The prospect of encountering new, unexpected scenes typical of all research fieldwork can be much higher in such situations. Furthermore, the process of negotiating one's own position in the field can be very demanding because even off-field negotiations are conducted outside the familiar context (Ortbals and Rincker 2009). These, combined with a range of theoretical and methodological perspectives, may be perceived as diverse “voices” pulling the researcher in different directions (Mallozzi 2009). This hidden or “shadow” side of fieldwork (Corin 2008) simultaneously influences our perception and is contingent upon our own stories and experiences in the fieldwork.

26.5 Researchers Entering the Field of Ageism

In this chapter, we reflect upon examples of qualitative studies to highlight an important but often neglected dimension of research on ageism: the researchers themselves. We work from the perspective of knowledge as culture, where culture does not only entail a system of shared meanings, but rather emphasizes a range of cultural practices that form our reality (McCarthy 1996). We explore the position of researchers who, on the one hand, apply the privileged perspective of strangers to their fieldwork, and on the other hand, are deeply embedded in their own socio-cultural backgrounds, which affect their way of approaching later life and ageism (e.g., Anbäcken 2004; Anbäcken and Kinoshita 2008; Wilińska 2014).

The fieldwork situations analysed in the subsequent parts of this chapter are based on the three distinct voices of the researchers who authored this chapter. All excerpts are based on fieldnotes the authors took while conducting their studies. We discuss the presented fieldwork situations to highlight two issues: first, the complexity and variety of ageist practices; second, the active role researchers have in making sense of the social world. This means that in addition to analysing the empirical material, we critically look at the ways in which we approached that material in the past and the ways in which we could approach it currently. Following Mason's (2013) reasoning about "re-using" qualitative data, we reflexively engage with the empirical material from both a close and a far away perspective. In this way, we contextualize and recontextualize our data and ourselves to apply perspectives of time and space not only to ageism as a social phenomenon but also to research on ageism.

The three authors are women of different ages. We were born and brought up in different countries: Astrid is from Belgium; Els-Marie is from Sweden and Japan; and Monika is from Poland. We embarked on our academic journey researching ageism in different ways, although we all have an academic connection with Asia; Els-Marie also has a private connection to Japan. All three of us are qualitative researchers, although from different disciplinary positions. Our thinking and writing about ageism is affected by the various "voices" we hear during periods of fieldwork and while conducting interviews. We combined our experiences to offer a shared reflection on conducting cross-cultural research on ageism. The situations presented below attest to how our various backgrounds impacted our work, and emphasize the need to understand ageism as a socially, culturally, and politically embedded phenomenon that reveals itself variously, depending on the context.

26.6 The Pervasiveness of Ageism

Monika I see myself as an inequality researcher. The focus on ageism is important in my work, but I also work on wider issues to understand patterns of inequality and their persistence over time and space. My own life is also an important site of such

inquiries mainly due to my status as an Eastern European immigrant woman living in Western Europe. My thinking about inequalities always begins with a simple yet profound principle of sociological imagination as outlined by Mills (1959/2000), which aims at linking individual biographies with societal histories. As challenging as it is, this statement gains a whole new meaning in the context of cross-cultural research.

A few years after migrating to Sweden from Poland, I travelled back to my home country to conduct fieldwork at one of the many Universities of the Third Age (U3A). I was rather excited about the visit and its purpose. I recalled times when I was a student and could see U3A students coming for their afternoon sessions, which started just after our sessions ended. We not only shared the building but also the teaching staff. I had thought of the visit as a possibility to shed a positive light on old age and to demonstrate an example of activist initiative that goes against widely accepted ageist stereotypes.

During my visits, I was always treated in a very positive and friendly manner and I could feel that my visit and prospective study were welcome. I was also excited about conducting research in a familiar setting, in a well-known country. I was, however, considered a kind of hybrid person who was “one of us” in some sense and yet also “the other.” People often said to me, “You know how it is here,” but I also felt I was approached with caution and that little was revealed about the organization. It was within this context that I was told that if I wanted to learn more about old age, I should “walk the streets” rather than spend my time with the U3A, “because, although ageing does happen, it does not happen here.”

26.7 The Easiness of Ageism

Els-Marie My studies on ageing and care in Japan began in the early 1990s but did not specifically focus on ageism. To look at previous studies in the rear-view mirror through an ageism lens is not only a thrilling task, but it also provides methodologically unorthodox ways of studying a phenomenon that originally was not intended to be studied. The text below serves as a good example of both ageism and how the researcher as a tool is influenced by perhaps hidden ageist preconceptions.

After a few days of participant observations at a Japanese municipal “home for the aged,” which at that time were for older persons with social rather than health care needs, I attended a meeting of the karaoke club. I was seated at the large rectangular table with ladies and gentlemen mostly dressed in brown and grey, with solemn faces, singing love songs: “You and I are Osaka sparrows... how far will we fly tonight?” It not only shook my image of older people, but evoked in me a strong feeling of existential closeness. I realized that they had once been my age, and the places they were singing of were “my” places too, as I was born in Japan and in the Osaka region (Anbäcken 1997, p. 1).

While my focus had been on the residents as a category of older people with certain care needs in a specific socio-cultural setting, they revealed themselves

behind their institutional identity as individuals of a particular time in Japanese history and with their own history. Those love songs were part of their life course. In retrospect, I feel that, with my preconceptions about ageing in Japan, I was the one with unconscious ageist views. My preconceptions, formed by an image of filial duty, had made me see older people as a category of care recipients, where care needs and care relations defined their life. Moreover, I risked making simplified “culturalist” assumptions in my field of study. This could possibly have blurred my views, colouring my analysis with unquestioned ageist views hidden within cultural explanations.

26.8 Ageism as Inequality Practices—Analytical Reflections

When Monika visited the University of the Third Age (U3A), she was in her early 30s. She assumed that the U3A members, people in their 60s, 70s, and 80s, would be sharing their stories of ageing and old age with her. It took time for her to understand that the U3A was, in fact, used by its members as a shield to protect them from negative images of old age and older people. The phrase, “There is no ageing here,” was, on the one hand, an enactment of ageism; on the other, it offered protection from the socio-cultural context that associated ageing with a time of decline, and withdrawal from public and social spaces. Els-Marie similarly began her studies with a search for differences. Her surprise at discovering similarities instead revealed to her that she had been seeing older people as a “category” with defined features, rather than as individuals.

When conducting research on ageism, we need to start hearing stories about researchers’ preconceived ideas about older people and ageing and how they might lead to discrimination. The examples above demonstrate that inequalities are perpetuated by every one of us. We as researchers might also be contributing to fuelling the inequality systems. Inequalities are not only about direct and obvious discriminatory acts, but also about “small things” that we do daily without thinking (Schwalbe 2008). In this context, it is possible to see how tempting and comfortable it can be to think about oneself as an exception, as one who can move beyond stereotypes and draw on the privileged position of a stranger. Neither researchers nor people in later life are immune to preconceptions. Cross-cultural studies only magnify this process.

Unfamiliar settings and people can help reveal hidden stereotypes and images that we use to make sense of situations, events, and processes. These stereotypes and images become anchors that we easily drop but struggle to pull up due to the comfort of illusory understanding they create. For example, it is much easier to accept that an older person of American origin living in Japan does not like sushi because she or he is not Japanese rather than to actively look for alternative explanations, such as that the person has a food allergy or is a vegetarian. In the field of ageing, this form of cultural determinism is often built on the understanding of cultures as static and older people as mere victims of their national cultures (Wilińska and Anbäcken 2013).

26.9 Ageism and Socio-political Structures

Els-Marie “What generates changes in policies for older people, and what conserves them?” was a question I posed in an attempt to write a policy ethnography study on how policies and institutional care pamphlets constructed the image of older persons and their families in Japan and Sweden (Anbäcken 2013, p. 256).

With regard to policies, it was clear (albeit from a very small sample) that both Japanese and Swedish texts from the early 21st century showed similar patterns of belittling older people in need of care and describing them as a social problem. This problematic view of old age is related to an image of older people ceasing to be productive—in both cases in industrialized countries where experience and wisdom are not much valued anymore. Even the traditional image of wisdom in older age in Japan was challenged after WWII when the welfare regime adopted a productivist view, emphasizing economic development over social distribution (Makita 2010, p. 82).

By the mid-20th century, Sweden had already developed a pension system, and old age homes were gradually being transformed in the direction of “home-like care and care at home” (Anbäcken 2013). The social democratic view slowly changed ageist views of “old people’s homes,” but the view that “those who have built our nation should be cared for” continued to bear hidden ageist views, as the message was that they (the elderly) were to be taken care of. The Japanese old-age care pamphlets depicted “cute,” smiling, animation-style grannies, often in three-generation settings. The Swedish pamphlets had realistic drawings of an elderly couple followed by a text describing care options. Could the Swedish pamphlet be described as less ageist than the Japanese, because it simply provided information on available services and how to obtain them? The Japanese brochures seemed to put forward a consumerist perspective by providing information about room sizes, number of staff, and frequency of baths. In contrast, the Swedish brochures tended to emphasize the care relation between older people and staff members; they were filled with images of affection and communication between the care home residents and care home staff.

Looking back, I made a new discovery: that what I had earlier found to be positive about the kindness described in the Swedish brochures and negative about the seemingly materialistic view in the Japanese ones could itself be problematic. While the former used an idealized image of benevolent staff, the latter offered a more concrete description of the physical environment and daily routines that one could expect. The process of re-reading the empirical material through the lens of ageism led not only to new understandings but also to a greater awareness of my own assumptions.

26.10 Socio-political Embeddedness of Ageism—Analytical Reflections

Welfare and social policy discourses have been identified as important sites of ageism (Biggs 2001), clearly contributing to, if not shaping, intergenerational conflicts (Estes and Phillipson 2002), and invoking irrational fear of the ageing population (Vincent 1996). However, the reading of such policies and interpreting them in a cross-cultural context is far from easy. The example above demonstrates the way in which researchers' own backgrounds and socio-cultural reference points can interact with the analysed material, leading to interpretations that may be biased.

The use of animation in the eyes of Western culture is often perceived as childish, and, when applied to other than child-like situations, is read as patronizing and discriminatory. However, in Japan, with its long-standing tradition of manga, the reading of animation is different and does not always imply childish content. On the contrary, the art of manga has been used for centuries to narrate complex stories by engaging multimodal reading skills, and it remains one of the key hallmarks of Japanese culture (Ito 2005). Els-Marie's reflections on her interpretation of policy texts from two different countries demonstrate the continual homage we pay to our own socio-cultural background when researching ageism. In fact, on many occasions, we wish we could go beyond our socio-cultural background in order to be able to transcend taken for granted understandings that continually affect our research results and the concepts we selectively use to justify them.

The socio-political context gives meaning to social practices and it is via this context that some practices can be interpreted as ageist. For example, the use of manga itself cannot be seen as a sign of ageism in the example described above, but the focus on material aspects of care could be, as it indirectly implies that the material is what older people are interested in. Such an image reduces the view of care to the provision of goods rather than social relations—a reduction that is made more problematic by occurring in an environment that values the collective self over the individual self. Similarly, at the outset, the Swedish brochures seemed far from ageist. Yet given the cultural focus on the individual that characterizes the welfare state in Sweden, the predominance of staff in the images of care homes can also be seen as potentially ageist. In Sweden, a direct relationship between the individual and the state has traditionally been a unique characteristic of the welfare contract (Bergren and Trägårdh 2006), and by emphasizing the role of a mediator (care staff), the brochure imagery can be seen as implying a weakened position of older people.

26.11 Ageism Across the Life-Course

Astrid My interest in ageism began when I was working on a book I dedicated to my older students, which aimed to strengthen their confidence in the success of their studies and help them overcome stereotypes related to ageism (de Hontheim 2014). In addition to that, several of my research topics have focused on radical socio-cultural changes, such as pioneer evangelization in West Papua. When traditions are profoundly shaken, society seeks ways to mobilize creativity to build new references with the help of those who are considered knowledgeable and culturally wise. In West Papua, older people are traditionally designated to lead communities through times of change.

26.12 Honouring Older People and Discriminating Against Younger People

In West Papua, population movements are mostly caused by massive transmigration from overcrowded Indonesian islands such as Java and Sumatra, pushing the Asmat to the edge of their former territories. The Indonesian administration has been struggling with this cultural group, which they classify as “the least economically active in the country.” The majority of the 70,000 Asmat are hunter-gatherers and tradition constitutes the core of their daily life.

In the ritual house (jeuw), the centre for the community and political decision making, the only people authorized to speak are the elders, who are considered to be the tradition-holders or cultural specialists. They have the right to sit in the physical centre of the house, where the ancestors are thought to dwell. Guided or inspired by the ancestors, these cultural specialist elders protect the traditions and ensure that norms are respected, with an emphasis on appropriate social and ritual relationships.

A major part of traditional knowledge is transmitted through initiation, which is still intimately connected to headhunting, although it is symbolic nowadays. The elders’ responsibilities are of paramount importance, from training the young to giving gifts that signify young people’s entry into the community. In a society that imposes silence on the younger generation, control by older adults is the norm. Young people are considered to be foolish and are deprived of the right to speak. In this culture, young people are at the service of others. They always follow behind older people, for example during meal times or when strolling through the village. Older people have the right to use physical force in the teaching of the young.

In this context, human sciences researchers must manage deeply ingrained ageist structures directed against younger people. In this culture, young people are not considered to deserve the right to participate in research or to express their opinions.

26.13 Ageism as a Total Social Fact—Analytical Reflections

Although ageism may refer to any age group, the most common understanding is that it mainly affects older people. Astrid's example reemphasizes the point that the direction of ageism is context-bound. For the Asmat, it is old age that is privileged and carries numerous benefits in social position and status. Consequently, European researchers may find themselves reproducing Asmat adults' deeply ingrained ageism that affects young people in that society. Ageism as a social practice based on the differentiation of people according to their age may not only be expressed in a variety of ways, but may also refer to different age groups. To study ageism in diverse societies requires attentive observation of various age practices and their consequences for different groups within each society rather than for just one age group.

Astrid's fieldwork example demonstrates some of the most direct and visible forms of discrimination that can affect different age groups. Lack of a voice, lack of respect, and lack of one's own place are typical among the underprivileged in structures that privilege some groups over others and effectively discriminate to the point of symbolic and physical abuse. What is more, such practices are seen as necessary to maintaining and reproducing the social reality. Ageism could thus be considered a total social fact (Mauss 1923)—an expression of social mechanisms most essential to the perpetuation and reproduction of society. The division of society into age classes not only determines the social positions of people belonging to different age groups, but importantly it creates age-based systems of rights, obligations, and moral conduct.

26.14 Ageism in the Eye of the Beholder?

Monika *I travelled to Japan with the aim of researching care and the everyday life of older people in several Japanese towns and cities. It was an amazing journey that allowed me to get a glimpse into the social and cultural norms guiding everyday life in Japan. I lived and worked with Japanese colleagues, I read books written by Japanese authors, and I learned the basics of the Japanese language. This helped me make sense of what I observed and heard about old age. A number of study visits helped me learn about the various ways in which older people lived and were cared for. I had the privilege of speaking with several older women and learning about their everyday lives.*

I began to understand the significant role of technology in people's lives and learned about a number of innovative solutions that were designed with the purpose of increasing the safety and security of older people. During one of the visits in an assisted living facility for older people, I was introduced to a woman who proudly walked me through her apartment showing off her life story through pictures, objects, and various certificates. Prompted by the visit organizer, she also

demonstrated a number of safety alarms and technological devices that the apartment was equipped with. While we were taking another tour of the apartment, the visit organizer noticed an unopened box with a wearable alarm device that was to be used by residents at all times for the purpose of alerting staff to sudden weakness, illness, and so on. When asked why she was not using it, the woman said that she was not that old yet.

26.15 Is It Ageism or Not?—Analytical Reflections

Initially, the situation above seems far from exemplifying ageism. In Els-Marie's view, the alarm system was a sign of safety, a service from the welfare system that at a minimum level allowed this seemingly independent older woman to keep her autonomy and control when to call for help. Els-Marie interpreted the woman's choice as a sign of being autonomous and exercising the right to decide about her own life. Els-Marie situated that understanding of the situation in a research context which was rooted in the continuous study of change processes regarding ageing, care, and the welfare system in Japan (Anbäcken 1997, 2004, 2008).

According to Monika, with her understanding of social inequalities as accomplishments—as something that “doesn't just happen ... it happens because of how people think and act” (Schwalbe 2008, p. 38; see also Tilly 1999)—the situation revealed several dimensions that are relevant for researching ageism. First, there is the context of social policy, with its focus on improving the wellbeing of older people, which produces a certain image of the needs and wishes that an older person may have. Second, there is the reaction of an older person to a supposedly helpful device that in her eyes symbolizes old age—something negative that she does not want to identify herself with. Third, there is a researcher born in the early 1980s in Poland and brought up in the context of a deeply ingrained mistrust in things that come from the state, who interprets the situation as a clash between the overpowering state and a vulnerable individual.

Haraway (1991, p. 190) argued that “only partial perspective promises objective vision,” suggesting that the situated nature of our knowledge rather than being limiting is liberating. In their highly informative argument about the value of and need for comparative research on ageism, Tesch-Römer and von Kondratowitz (2006) privilege the role of theory in assuring a high quality of endeavours that could effectively push the field of ageing studies forward. However, to use a theory is to look at a phenomenon from a certain position, and that position has been developed in a certain context. There is a risk of transposing theories and concepts born in one setting to another. In the context of North-South power relations, this aspect of cross-cultural research on ageism becomes even more pronounced. As discussed above, Els-Marie and Monika each looked at the same situation and offered two different interpretations that were grounded in their personal histories as well as in the theoretical frames they chose.

26.16 Discussion: Establishing a “Sense of Touch” with the Field

Ageism is a global, socio-cultural practice that is deeply embedded in local contexts that not only filter its meaning but also give rise to unique enactments of ageism. In this chapter, our objective was to spotlight the active role of researchers, who become tools for transporting various meanings and enactments of ageism. This chapter is an attempt to tease out various entanglements of ageism, context, and researcher to accentuate the role of researchers in cross-cultural studies of ageism and to offer some “how to” recommendations in studies that research ageism from a cross-cultural perspective.

We began this chapter with a reference to the opening statement of the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*. We agree with the importance of demonstrating “worldwide variation in the aging experience” (Beall et al. 1986). Ageism is a diverse phenomenon including a large variety of practices that are deeply embedded in socio-cultural and political contexts. This means that cross-cultural research on ageism should aim at broadening and complicating our perspective on ageism rather than arriving at a unified picture. Longino (1990) contends that “[s]cientific inquiry is unlike portrait painting in two very important ways: it is social and it is complex, consisting of many activities carried out by different persons” (p. 19). The examples used in this chapter are not straightforward and are prone to a variety of interpretations. We purposefully selected them to demonstrate the complexity and sociality involved in researching ageism from a cross-cultural perspective. In many respects, what we propose here is a type of reflexive methodology (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009) that is needed in research on ageism to constantly remind ourselves of the relationship between the knower, the (un)known, and the context of knowing. This, in turn, may help us to rethink various theories and concepts that we apply in our studies. Globally practiced ageing research is often based on standards and theories born in Western countries (Aboderin and Hoffman 2015). The example of the Asmat and their understanding of old age as a time of increased social and political engagement reveals the extent to which such theories are ill-fitted to account for worldwide variations of ageing experiences and, by extension, ageism.

Our discussion is based on examples from qualitative studies that by their nature focus on situated meaning making. We find this dimension important not only for revealing the various enactments of ageism in everyday life, but also for highlighting the voices of people who confront ageism by interpreting and acting upon its meaning. However, the points we raise in the chapter are not limited to qualitative research. The active role of researchers who colour their research with their own understanding of age and ageism is visible in all types of studies. Further, as Jylhä (2007) contends, ethnographic comparisons may fruitfully inspire larger quantitative studies of ageing and ageism. For example, the idea that ageism is not only perpetrated against older people is just one such inspiration. This means that rather than locating our studies within specific age groups, we can move beyond

chronologically oriented studies to explore the ways in which a variety of age norms affect and/or are enacted among various groups (Bytheway 2005; Gullette 2004).

In the context of their discussion of a “joint participation model,” Kinoshita (Anbäcken and Kinoshita 2008, p. 8) emphasizes the necessity of establishing “a sense of touch in the field” that involves researchers visiting each other’s empirical fields and learning about the research contexts to create a common ground for forthcoming interpretations. Acknowledging the importance of such exchanges that merge emic and etic perspectives, in this chapter we extend the discussion by claiming that the “sense of touch” in cross-cultural research on ageism should not only be established within the socio-cultural context, but also in researchers’ own preconceptions and reasons for selecting certain concepts, theories, and methodologies. This constant dialogue is necessary to fully appreciate and benefit from the great privilege of participating in cross-cultural studies of ageing and ageism. Importantly, this dialogue needs to be firmly based on spatial and temporal considerations. It is not only about the question of where but also about the question of when. It is the socially, spatially, and temporally created contexts that make a difference to ageist practices and the research that examines them.

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