

WELLSO 2016 - III International Scientific Symposium on Lifelong Wellbeing in the World

Basic Trends of Studying Aging in Global Sociology

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Abstract

<http://dx.doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2017.01.63>

The given paper presents the comparative analysis of 94 reports which were announced at the XVIII World Congress of Sociology held in Yokohama, Japan in July, 2014. All reports considered the questions of aging, subjective well-being of older people, economic aspects of population aging and other questions concerning this area.

The aim of the paper is to define the main tendencies in studying aging questions that interest the world sociology under the growth of life expectancy, population aging, i.e. increasing cohort of older people in relation to youth and those in midlife in the structure of population, taking into account the current economic crisis and cutting budgets income basis.

The results are grouped according to the following criteria with their detailed characteristics:

- 1) the level of social and economic development of the societies which have become the objects of research: welfare states, developing countries and undeveloped countries;
- 2) the cultural peculiarities. Due to the analysis in different countries the close traditional attitude to the perceiving the aging, the intergenerational relations give more common ground to the scope of research, as for Japan and China than for Japan and the European countries in terms of the level of social welfare;
- 3) the scope of studies.

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Keywords: Ageing population; ageism; later life; subjective wellbeing of older people.

1. Introduction

Population aging is one of the main challenges for mankind nowadays. To reveal the main tendencies and challenges for global sociology in studying issues of aging we have carried out the comparative analysis of the reports which were presented at the XVIII ISA World Congress of Sociology held in Japan in 2014. According to the goal we have differentiated the most significant

criteria. They are the following: level of social and economic development of the studied societies, their cultural characteristic features, the most widespread challenges in studying aging. Grouping reports according to specified criteria allow us to define dependences between a level of development, and cultural features, and those problems which were allocated by researchers in relation to each of the studied societies, and key findings. The comparative analysis was the main method of research.

2. Methods and Results

To succeed the aims of the study we carried out a comparative analysis of the reports presented at the XVIII World Congress of Sociology in Japan in 2014.

2.1. Grouping research into societies according to the level of social and economic development

Grouping the objects of the research into welfare states, developing countries and underdeveloped countries, i.e. the societies which studied the issues of aging means that the groups differ from each other according to the following characteristics:

Welfare states. Welfare states are characterized by population aging, the high per capita income, the developed elderly welfare system and social support for elderly people. 72 reports were dedicated to these societies, 77% from the total amount of the analyzed reports. Such prevalence is explained by the fact that the sociology is mostly developed as science in the countries which are welfare states if not elsewhere. Owing to the highest level of life expectancy the aging issues are more relevant in these countries than in the rest of the world.

Developing countries. The feature of population aging either can be in the society as in China, or cannot be. Per capita income is lower, than in welfare states, the elderly welfare system and institutional care service of older people are less developed. 21 reports considered the issues of aging in these countries.

Underdeveloped countries. Population aging is not a problem in these countries because of the high birth rate, low life expectancy and the low per capita income. The elderly welfare system and social support have been almost undeveloped. Primarily these are the countries of the African continent and some regions of Asia. We distinguish this group in order to opposite it to the first two analyzed as only one report concerns the African continent and it was carried out in Oxford (Hoffman, 2014).

In economically and socially developed countries which we name welfare states, a number of the interconnected factors defining research interest are observed. The life expectancy growth, i.e. the longer, than earlier period of living of so-called the third age, is combined with the population aging. It means that increasing cohort of older people in the structure of the population in relation to youth and those in midlife aggravates situation with the current economic crisis and cutting budgets income basis.

The Japanese experience shows that people initially expect to live longer when the life expectancy grows and consequently they distribute their forces and their activity. Therefore today's 70-80 -year old people are physically and socially and psychologically younger than the predecessors (Koyano et al., 2014). This poses the questions of developing educational programs for people of the third age and even age-friendly urban environment as the other researchers believe.

Thus, a number of economic and other institutional problems occur: the state budgeting against the crisis is reduced, but medical and social care expenses grow. Three reports are devoted to these questions specifically. The comparative study of the United Kingdom and Japan revealed the intergenerational conflict concerning community resources allocation. The youth considers actual pensioners as egoists, and the state support as unfairly redistributed in their favor (Price et al., 2014). This is not the only research accusing the Baby boomers' generation of having provided for a splendid old age owing to the youth (we are referring here only to welfare states). The Korean researchers, while developing the model of pension reform, believe that generational cleavages were stronger than the class cleavages of labor-capital or insider-outsider (Kim, & Ahn, 2014).

Ten reports, here the greatest number, were dedicated to the necessity of pension reform in developed countries, and to the reforms of the government aged care and elderly care as well.

These questions are raised in developing countries either. The researcher from Argentina assumes that the elderly welfare system and health care system should be ready for the challenges of the contemporary society: population ageing, changes in family structure when families stop growing and supporting their elderly members. He suggests building the situation development model and the demographic profile of the population (Sacco, 2014).

2.2. Grouping research on culture types

We group the reports according to the cultural peculiarities of societies:

Western countries (56 reports): the weakened intergenerational communications, a major role of age-friendly communities.

East and Southeast Asia countries (29 reports). There are strong intergenerational communications in the majority of the countries whose societies have been analyzed; Confucian traditions of the respectful attitude towards old seniors are kept. Such countries as Japan, several works are devoted to its society, and South Korea are welfare states by social and economic criterion, but they belong to the Asian countries according to the culture.

Latin America countries (6 reports). In general the theme of the reports devoted to this region does not possess cultural specificity and follows the western countries sociology. Researchers realize that those problems which their northern neighbors and other societies face are in for them as well. They have already marked now that the patriarchal families which earlier supported the elderly relatives are receding into the past. It is necessary both to develop the state guardianship system and to support noncommercial organizations willing to care for seniors.

Other cultural zones, for example the Middle East or Africa have not been included in the analysis due to the total absence of the reports devoted to aging problems in these societies. At the same time, if Africa is presented on the congress scantily and mainly by the reports from the Republic of South Africa, then the Middle East is presented rather widely.

The Scientists from Iran, Pakistan as well as researchers from other countries studying this region are interested in issues of migration, marginalization, religious traditions, etc., but not aging. It can be for its cultural and social peculiarities (population aging processes does not occupy this region). We did not analyze Israeli society according to its cultural differences from the other countries of the region.

Anyway it demands the additional analysis. As for the Russian society, the report of Yulia Zelikova, a researcher from Higher School of Economics, is devoted to the designated subject (Zelikova, 2014).

How do cultural differences affect the scope of the studies? It is notably seen if compare reports from the western and Asian countries. The one and the other emphasize the importance of elderly people inclusiveness into personal relationships. But if the researchers from the western societies where intergenerational relations are weaker focus on the age-friendly communities and even age-friendly cities, and draw a straight-line relationship between social exclusion/inclusion in later life of the elderly and their mental and physical health, then in the Asian countries the personal relations mean the relations with relatives primarily. Life satisfaction among the elderly is directly connected with close inter-generational relations and traditions of cohabitation (Hsiao, 2014). On the other hand, the researchers mark that social changes lead to culture changes in these region either, in particular they weaken the tradition to support elderly relatives. Thus, one-child policy had great influence in Chinese society (Silverstein, 2014).

The feature of the western sociology is ageism. Researchers consider it as a new form of discrimination on the basis of age (Van Dyk, 2014).

Indeed, partly this tradition of thinking is to find discrimination in society, and then to fight against it in every possible way. At the same time, there are also objective aspects of what is called an ageism, for instance, the preference for young people at employment. An intriguing research was conducted with the Canadian elderly men whose average age was 74 years (Hurd, 2014). The respondents did not recognize that they were exposed to discrimination on the basis of age, but assumed that women can feel ageism. They even sounded such indirect features of ageism as preference of society for young people, disassociating themselves from the elderly through expressions like "those old folks" and so forth. The western civilization too strongly cultivates "youth" to be absolutely free from discrimination of an old age. Confucian traditions of Asia protect from it stronger that was also noted in reports.

2.3. Grouping research according to the scope of study

According to the scope of the research we have united the presented reports in the following groups: Aging economic aspects (13 reports). The issues of life expectancy growth, population aging are addressed in the first place, that inevitably leads to the reforms of pension system towards the working age increasing, to retirement payment reducing when increasing medical and elderly care expenses.

Elderly welfare system (14 reports). Besides the issues of reforming and developing the system of the Institutional care service, one of the alternate solution of the problem of increasing specific share of elderly people in population structure and necessity to care of them is the model in which non-governmental organizations will fill in the gaps of age care services left by the state system of guardianship. In our opinion, the idea stated in the report of Zhou Y. is a very important observation (Zhou, 2014). It is said in the report that traditionally care services treat the elderly as targeted objects. But the elderly have selfness. They are actors as well, that is why it is necessary to start interacting with them and not to affect.

Relations between generations (12 reports). Having excluded the aspects which were mentioned in the article earlier a number of reports underlines still important role of older people in transferring cultural experience and behavior models between generations.

Subjective wellbeing (3 reports). In particular, on the example of the Chinese society it is established that the subjective sense of wellbeing in old age depends on the following factors: having a spouse, constant good relations with other relatives and friends, full recreational activity, a satisfactory health condition, constant physical activity, satisfaction with the current economic and social situation, and being optimistic to the future. The results also assume that the stimulating factors such as social and economic status and quality of social communications greatly influence the level of subjectively perceived wellbeing of elderly people (Xu, 2014).

Subjective experience of aging (5 reports): Here are both subjective emotional stress for body changes, and specifically female experience of age matching, a mode of dressing, and influence of cultural distinctions on the process of aging.

The importance of communities and personal relationships for older people (5 reports): The common feature of these reports is the statement that social participation, for example, as a part of social groups, is a key to a healthy and active aging.

Immigrants at advanced age (3 reports). All the reports consider the issues of economic and social situation of elderly immigrants.

Ageism – discrimination on the basis of age (5 reports).

Health issues (6 reports). Here we group reports that consider various aspects from methodological difficulties of studying weak-mindedness to studying the health dynamics before and after retirement.

Modern Communication Technologies and their impact on the life of the elderly (4 reports). The reports present the multifactorial influence of using the Internet on elderly people. It differs according to the nature of social relations. Research in this field has contradictory results. The authors revealed such a tendency: when older people were socially isolated by using the Internet they started communicating with friends and family despite their considerable geographical distance. At the same time, cyber communities adversely affect the others, for instance, the isolation from the outside world, reduction of using social and physical space (Jones, 2014). Digital divide is unequal usage of the Internet becomes a new factor of a social inequality (Kania-Lundholm, & Torres, 2014). Though the use of the Telecare and other ambient assisted living (AAL) technologies considerably expands the opportunities of older people from communicating to linking to emergency care services on the Internet.

3. Conclusions

To sum up, the analysis of subject and the main conclusions of the reports announced at the XVIII World Congress of Sociology have revealed that as a research problem – the subject of population aging including such aspects as rendering the state support to elderly people, participating public organizations in it, the importance of the intergenerational relations, horizontal communication within various communities, necessity to change urban environment according to aging population

requirements and a number of aspects of a problem are the central issues the world sociology focused on.

To conclude, we should pay attention to one case presenting in numerous reports. Today the later life differs from that the previous generations lived. Older people continue being active actors of the social relations, and wish to define conditions of the existence by themselves. Nevertheless, owing to the deficiency of community resources one cannot ignore the possible intergenerational conflict concerning distributing social investments and goods in the near future, it is necessary to develop the state policy based on the balance of interests.

Acknowledgements

This work was performed by the authors in collaboration with Tomsk Polytechnic University within the project in Evaluation and enhancement of social, economic and emotional wellbeing of older adults under the Agreement No.14.Z50.31.0029.

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