

THE QUALITATIVE TURN IN GERONTOLOGY: CULTURAL, INTERACTIONAL AND CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVES

Impulse lecture by
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In my talk:

- I will fast-forward and zoom in on the premises, practices, logic and potential data sets of qualitative and cultural gerontology. The key message put across is that understanding the complexities and dynamics of ageing and ageing societies is crucially enriched through qualitative inquiry”.

(Nikander 2019 on the Short Course Module III description)



The readings for the module:

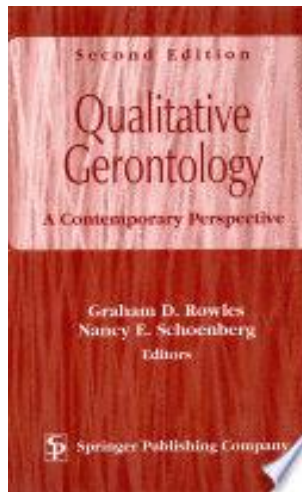
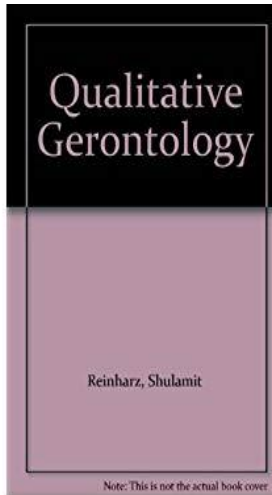
Holstein, J.A. & Gubrium, J.F. (2007). Constructionist perspectives on the Life Course. *Sociology Compass* 1, 335-352.

Marshall, V.W., Martin-Matthews, A. & McMullin J.A. (2016). The Interpretive Perspective on Aging. In V. L. Bengtson & R. A. Settersten (Eds.), *Handbook of Theories of Aging* (3rd ed., pp. 381-400).

Romaioli, D. & Contarello, A. (2019). “I’m too Old for...” Looking into self-sabotage rhetoric and its counter-narratives in an Italian setting. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 48, 25-32.

The roots of qual. gerontology

- Can be traced to the mid-1900, 1970s and 1980s
- Since then new traditions of qualitative gerontological inquiry have appeared, while the range of data has enriched.
- NOT isolated: Qualitative gerontology reflects the more general and broader evolution of qualitative inquiry across disciplines, the methodological trends, new interest & data possibilities.
 - The qualitative turn
 - The discursive/narrative/linguistic/cultural turn



Seven key thesis on qualitative/cultural gerontology

THESIS # 1

- The **key premise** of qualitative inquiry in gerontology emphasizes and foregrounds meaning making, language use, people's voices and ageing experiences, stories and narratives, agency
- Focus on cultural, situational and institutional (micro) contexts and the interpretative practices of people. Everyday theories.
- Qualitative research allows scholars to learn about the voices of (marginalized) persons, understand the thoughts, processes, and challenges that people engage with in their everyday lives.
- Challenges existing normative theory, by underlining heterogeneity, and develops new theory
- A bottom-up approach: how is age mobilized, used and made sense of in everyday and institutional contexts.



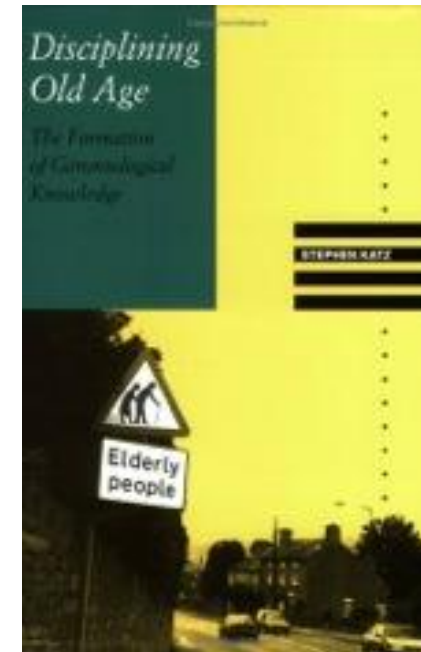
THESIS #2

- Broadly speaking, social constructionist theory and epistemology form the generic root, the background canvas, for qualitative gerontology
 - The centrality of language, discourse – mapping the heterogeneity and dynamics of ageing, discourse- counter discourses, meaning-making and local negotiation
 - Has opened up gerontology, as a discursive field to analytic inquiry
 - Introduces the need for reflection of how we participate in knowledge construction => challenges to normative theorizing.



‘There is no researchable, discussable old age in the manifold of reality unless categories of language inscribe it there.’

Nikander ITN Gothenburg, May 20-21.2019



The social constructionist stance :

- Differs from the more objectivist or nomothetic approach in that it does not take a meaningful life cycle, or a set of life stages for granted. Instead, examines how meanings are assembled and constructed in relation to the notion of a life course.
- Means the explorative and interpretative mapping of the heterogeneity of the dynamics and contradictory meanings of age in different settings.
- The life course taken as a cultural resource, a stock of cultural knowledge used, modified, challenged by people that are not “Cultural dopes”
- Treats the data as a cultural sample, not as a reflection of reality.
- E.g. baby-boomers turning 50, institutional decision making and age categories, local cultures and practices.

Interviews data as a cultural sample,

1. Interviewing is understood as an interactional event in which members draw on their cultural knowledge, including their knowledge about how members of categories routinely speak;
2. Questions are a central part of the data and cannot be viewed as neutral invitations to speak - rather, they shape how and as a member of which categories the respondents should speak;
3. Interview responses are treated as accounts more than reports - that is, they are understood as the work of accounting by a member of a category for activities attached to that category. This accounting work is the core of the analysis of data. In this accounting work, we look for the use of membership categorization devices by the interviewer and the respondent, and show how both are involved in the generation of versions of social reality built around categories and activities.

(Baker 1997, 131)

Nikander (2002: 29) claims that:

“the theoretical and analytic myopia of much lifespan and ageing research has, in practice, meant overlooking the interactional processes whereby age and its meanings are accomplished.”

- One central means of self-definition and self-and-other-categorisation throughout the life course.
- How, when, and to what result is age made relevant and mobilized in interaction?



Empirical work: Age in everyday or institutional interaction & in texts

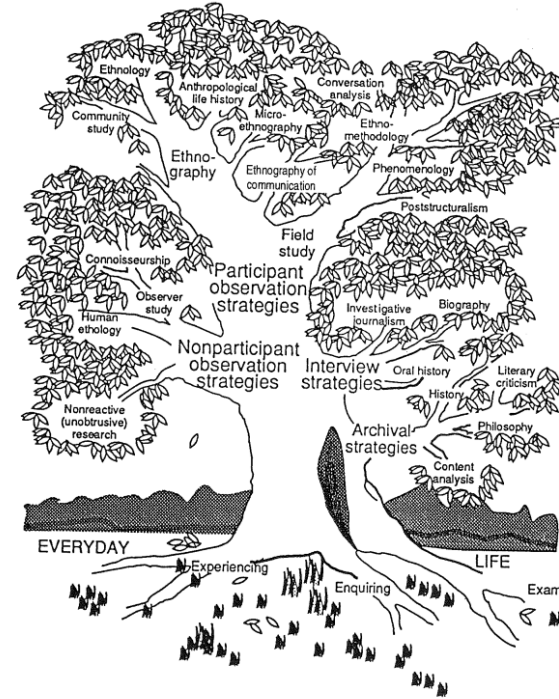
- Discursive production of frailty (e.g. Taylor 1994)
- The right timing of lifetime transitions (Ylänne & Nikander 2019)
- Intergenerational discourse (e.g. Coupland, Coupland and Grainger 1991)
- Infantilisation discourse (Hockey and James 1993, 2002)
- Identity functions of reminiscence (e.g. Buchanan and Middleton 1995)
- Meaning- making concerning health or medication (e.g. Jolanki 2000, Lumme-Sandt, Hervonen & Jylhä 2000)
- Age stereotypes and discourse of ageism (e.g. Andersson 2008; Bodily 1994; Bytheway 1995, 1997; Nilsson 2008)
- Age identity and age categorization in talk (e.g. Nikander 2000, 2002; Paoletti 1998)
- Institutional discourse (e.g. Cedersund & Olaison 2010; Gubrium & Holstein 2001; Coupland and Ylänne-McEwen 1993; Nikander 2003)
- Discourses of age in the media and texts (e.g. Harwood & Giles 1992, Nilsson 2008)
- Discursive/Textual production of gerontological knowledge (e.g. Green 1993; Hazan 1994; Katz 1996)

Criticism of normative theories, identifying blind spots

- Developmental models of the human lifespan are often built on a nomothetic narrative of individuals going through distinct stages of human maturation, facing specific crises and challenges, and either failing or succeeding in solving them. (e.g. Levinson et.al 1979 and developmental tasks).
- Qualitative analysis affords looking at how macro level structures and power discourses are mobilized, negotiated and enacted on the micro level.
- Adding time e.g. in qualitative longitudinal research designs, allows us to follow people as they move through lifetime transitions: an analytic hologram in which structural and agentic aspects of life merge and get resolved. E.g. decisions to retire on or off-time
- Focusing also on overlooked gendered aspects of ageing, and intersectionality (race, age, class, gender)

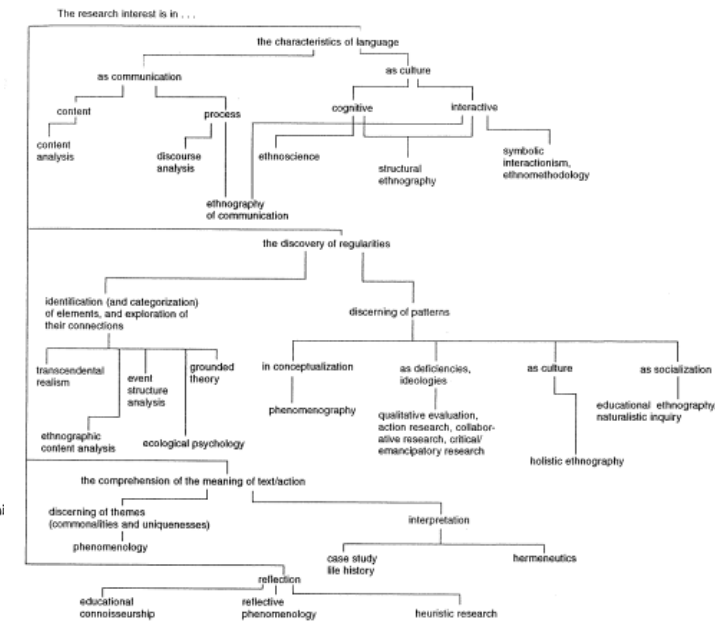
Thesis #3 Qualitative data generation methods and qualitative means of analysis are two different things

- **Data collection/generation:** Interviews, focus groups, field work, life stories, biographies, collection of documents, vignettes, video-recorded interaction, (social) media data etc.
- Means of analysis: Narrative/discursive analysis, grounded theory, QLA, conversation analysis, phenomenological analysis, visual analysis, mobile methods, etc.



Wolcott 1992

Figure 1.2
Graphic Overview of Qualitative Research Types (Tesch, 1990)

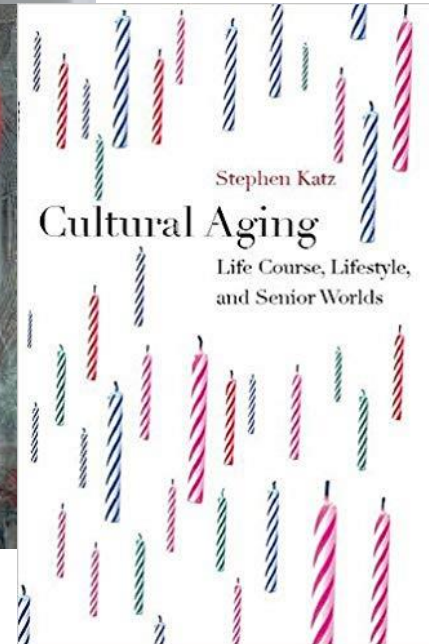
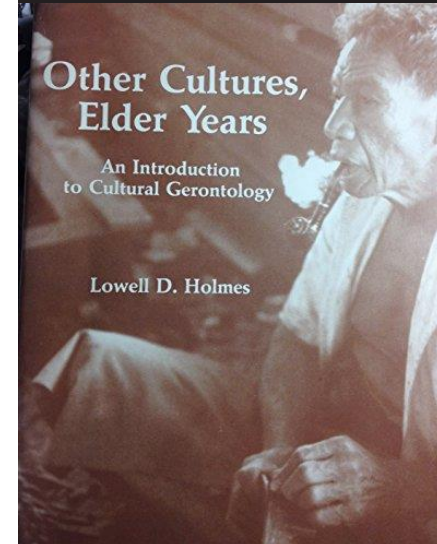
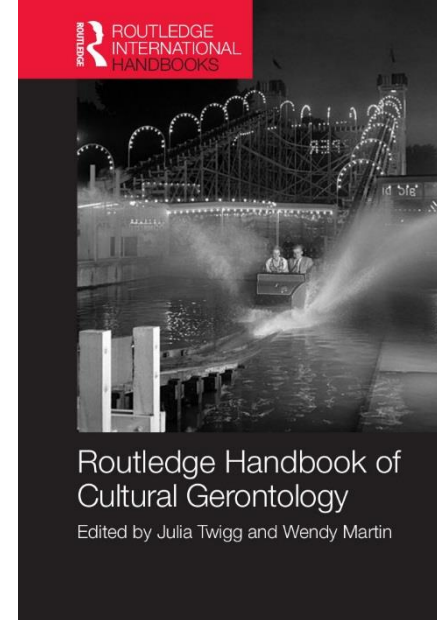


Thesis #4

- The qualitative toolkits and traditions in gerontology constantly expand, new analytic traditions develop and borrow from each other.

New paradigms emerge:

- Discursive gerontology
- Cultural gerontology
- Anthropological gerontology
- Environmental gerontology
- Feminist gerontology
- Narrative gerontology
- Queer gerontology etc.



Thesis #5

New potential data sets, and innovative pathways to insight enrich the field of qualitative & cultural gerontology and require new means of analysis.

- Visual & video methodologies
- On-line methods & netnography
- Big data: qualitative language-based & text-based data sets



Thesis# 6 From “Giving a voice to analytic rigour in analysis and reporting

- Capturing the qualitative complexity and diversity of ageing requires meticulous analytic rigour and e.g. the use of analytic software.
- Reporting, visualisations
- Quantification of qualitative data can help and work to convince the audience/policy makers.
- Research designs that combine different analytic stances and/or bring in temporal dynamics e.g. Mixed methods, qualitative longitudinal analysis can further enrich and deepen the qualitative take and results.
- MOREOVER:
- To what extent are thematic or content analysis really a means of analysis?
- Or are they rather the beginning phase of data management or description that is ideally followed by deeper and more detailed analysis of the qualitative data in question?

Thesis #7: The Future?

- Analytic, theoretical and methodological cross-fertilization and analytic pluralism needed to solve the complexities of ageing societies on a global scale
- Next challenge is to develop theories and approaches to tackle the increasingly globalised ageing world.

