

## Notes from the Field: Doing Research on Life Narratives and Wisdom-Fostering Life Events among Turkish Septuagenarians+

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### Abstract

This short piece which is written in the format of the notes from the field discusses plans to do life narratives and wisdom research among Turkish older adults. The starting point was a brief literature review of gerontology-related research in Turkey which will not be presented here due to space limitations. Secondly, the site and accordingly the sample of the anthropological study had to be decided. Thirdly, international gerontology-related research was reviewed to decide on theoretical discussions, methodology and conceptual tools to analyze the data. The notes conclude with a proposal for research in gero-narratology which is proposed to be the study of the structural and authorship properties of older adults' narratives.

### Keywords:

Life narratives • wisdom research • wisdom-fostering life events • anthropo-gerontology • gero-narratology

## Sahadan Notlar: Türkiyeli 70 Yaş ve Üstü Yaşlılarla Yaşam Anlatıları ve Bilgelik Kazandıran Yaşam Olayları Araştırması Yapmak

### Özet

Alandan notlar formatında yazılmış bu kısa yazı, Türkiyeli yaşlılarla yaşam anlatıları ve bilgelik araştırmaları yapma planlarını tartışmaktadır. Başlangıç noktası, Türkiye'de gerontolojiyle ilgili araştırmaların kaynak taramasıydı; ancak bu tarama, yer darlığı nedeniyle burada paylaşılmayacak. İkinci olarak, antropoloji çalışmasının yeri ve buna bağlı olarak örnekleme konusunda bir karara varılmalıydı. Üçüncü olarak, gerontolojiyle ilgili uluslararası araştırmalar, kuramsal tartışmalar, yöntembilim ve verileri çözümlmek için gerekli kavramsal araçlara karar vermek üzere gözden geçirildi. Notlar, yaşlıların anlatılarındaki yapısal özellikleri ve yazarlık özelliklerini çalışan bir alan olması öne sürülen gero-anlatıbilim ya da yaşlı anlatıbilimi alanında bir araştırma önerisiyle noktalanıyor.

### Anahtar Kelimeler:

Yaşam anlatıları • bilgelik araştırmaları • bilgelik kazandıran yaşam olayları • antropo-gerontoloji • gero-anlatıbilim

## **Introduction: From Anthropology to Gero-Narratolog**

After our anthropological field work on identity construction of Bartın city, we came across a particular set of narratives that drew our attention: These were captain narratives by septuagenarians and octogenarians. We submitted a paper on their narratives and noticed that what they told us is in fact just a piece of a greater picture: That was the life narratives and wisdom narratives. This was how our interest in what we call as gero-narratology (i.e. the study of the structural and authorship properties of older adults' narratives) started.

As a first step for our next research program, we reviewed gerontology research conducted in Turkey and that is how we came across 'Senex'. In the first and second issues of 'Senex' we read gero-research from different perspectives. We noted Arun's (2017) warning against studies that homogenize older adults, and studies that consider old age and older adults as a problem. In contrast to this negative view, we consider old age as a time of reflection and wisdom. We think we will have lots of things to learn from old people. Our belief has been reinforced by our anthropological field work with septuagenarian and octogenarian captains as explained above.

We have read some other works published on 'Turkish Journal of Geriatrics'. We noticed, as explained by Özkul & Kalaycı (2015) that most of the gero-research is on health and medicine fields. Özkul & Kalaycı's (2015) article was very useful to survey the current state of gero-research. Among a limited number of articles from non-health field, we found Öztürk, Çelik & Tapur's (2017) article especially interesting; however unlike the first impression, it was far from our research topic, as they investigated how people can live long lives (in fact it is

about what centenarians think is behind their longevity).

## **Methodology Options**

Then we moved to the problem of methodology. What kind of a methodology could we use? For such a topic, we agreed that a qualitative method would be more appropriate as it involves narratives rather than attitudes or behaviors that can be researched through standardized questionnaires. We decided to mobilize a semi-structured interview format which would keep us guided without any forced choices common in structured interviews, and at the same time allow us to be flexible about the way or order we would ask our questions.

OK, it would be qualitative, but what kind of questions should we ask? Our topic was clear: Life narratives and wisdom narratives. But how we articulate the topic and translate it to everyday conversations would be pivotal for reliability and validity of our research. Reviewing the relevant international literature, we listed 6 methodological options:

M1: We could directly ask them: "Tell me your life story" as in Carr, Kimberley & Biggs (2013), and Karlsson et al. (2014). We could ask their life story "in the predefined areas from childhood, adult life, to present life and include significant persons, places and events in their stories, as well as their thoughts on the future." (Karlsson et al., 2014, p.2793). But this appears to be too generic. As a response we could receive lots of irrelevant or almost irrelevant information.

M2: We could ask particular questions about what they regret in life etc. as in Torges, Steward & Duncan (2009). But this focuses on only negative side of life experiences. We prefer a more balanced approach.

M3: We could ask their priorities in best and worst times of life in various life areas such as job, career, education, family/livelihood, health, better life, relationships etc. through standardized scales as in Møller et al. (2008). Although this may be helpful for life narratives, it doesn't provide information about wisdom.

M4: We could do as in the case of M3 (Møller et al., 2008), but additionally classify the best and worst life events in a table as done by Møller & Theuns (2013) in their Table 5. This could be used for comparison. Nevertheless, same comment was applicable as of M3.

M5: We could use a mixed method including a standardized wisdom scale and an autobiographical task asking to narrate "wisdom-fostering life events" (Weststrate et al., 2018). We thought that a standardized scale would be too narrow for the narration of life experiences, but we viewed the autobiographical task as feasible and useful.

M6: We could ask questions about their current situation (e.g. daily activities, relationship with others etc.) as in Yamasaki & Sharf (2011). That could make sense together with other questions, so that we could know how older adults of high and low life satisfaction differ in their daily lives.

### **Proposal for Our Methodology**

Reviewing these 6 methodological options, we came up with our own methodology. We decided to ask the following questions:

Demographic Questions: Age, gender, marital status, income level, education level, number of children and grandchildren, details about children and grandchildren, number of relatives living nearby and their details, number of friends living nearby and details etc.

Q.1) When you compare your current self with your young ages, what are the differences in your thinking and behavior?

Q.2) We can ask whether they think life brought wisdom for them. How and why? If the response is positive we can ask them to give examples for such an event. (Typical answers would be "when I lost my wife, I started to think about my life and ..." or "when I was retired ...").

Theoretical Explanation: We expect older adults to have more cognitive flexibility as it is likely that they had experienced at least one 'life-changing' event. This can be connected to creativity research (cf. Blinded for review). We can check the relationship between these life-changing events and older adults' self-perceived creativity. Another possibility is that maybe creativity has nothing to do with age.

Q.3) We can ask a question about their daily activities.

Q.4) We can ask informal questions about how they interpret old age.

We will narrow down the sample, and the sample characteristics may bring additional questions. For example, we can focus on rural older adults or educated older adults or retired older adults or a particular generation. If we will do the research at a rural setting, then we can also ask how they moved to the village, and their impressions about the village.

### **For Data Analyses and Theoretical Background**

For data analyses and theoretical background, we searched the academic databases and decided that among hundreds of articles, the following were the most relevant for our research purposes: Abram et al., 2014; Baltes & Smith, 2008; Bluck & Habermas, 2000;

Bluck, Alea & Ali, 2014; Bohlmeijer et al., 2011; Cappeliez, Guindon, & Robitaille 2008; Grysman & Hudson, 2013; Guendouzi, Davis & Maclagan, 2015; Hartog, et al., 2017; Hooker & McAdams, 2003; McFadden, 2005; Medeiros, 2016, 2005; M. Pasupathi, E. Mansour & Brubaker, 2007; Pasupathi, Weeks & Rice, 2006; Stones & Gullifer, 2016; Weiss, 2014; Zeman & Zeman, 2015.

In addition to what we did so far, we can identify a set of cultural elements to interpret our future findings, considering Prof. İzzet Duyar's clear-cut delineation of how cultural differences may be influential over the experience and construction of old age (Duyar, 2008). Secondly, we will review a number of relevant books to improve our theoretical approach. In fact one of our initial source of inspiration was a book by a gero-narratologist: William L. Randall's (1995) 'The Stories We Are: An Essay on Self-Creation' (Toronto: University of Toronto Press). The book crisscrosses various fields such as psychology, sociology, literary studies and of course gerontology in its attempt to explain self-narration phenomenon and its relation to self-image among the older adults. We will read it again, but this time, even more carefully.

Two other books are noteworthy: Ferrari & Weststrate (2013) entitled 'The Scientific Study of Personal Wisdom: From Contemplative Traditions to Neuroscience' is a wonderful collection for our research. The book consists of 5 parts: Person-Based Wisdom; Wisdom in Everyday, Real-Life Contexts; Self-Transcendent and Contemplative Wisdom; The Transformative Potential of Wisdom Inquiry, and Conclusion. The first part includes an article on cognitive science of wisdom; while part 2 focuses on more social aspects of wisdom. The rest provides different perspectives on wisdom. Although this is not

specifically a gerontology book, a number of chapters portray wisdom by older adults. Finally, we have 'the Handbook of Psychology of Aging' edited by James E. Birren and K. Warner Schaie. This well-known book which made its 6th edition includes a chapter on 'Wisdom and Aging' as Chapter 20 of the book. Likewise the next chapter in the book entitled 'Autobiographical Memory and the Narrative Self over the Life Span' is particularly relevant for our research. We are planning to share our findings with 'Senex' and international gerontology communities. Thanks for reading...

### Notes

1 For some other recent socially-oriented works published on Turkish Journal of Geriatrics see Akpınar Söylemez et al. 2018; Bakırhan et al., 2017; Polat, Yalçınöz Baysal & Aktaş, 2017; Şahin & Erkal, 2018.

2 The demographic questions will be asked at the end of the interview in order not to interfere with the main topic.

3 In Turkish: Şimdiki halinizle gençlik halinizi karşılaştırdığınızda, o zamanki düşünme ve davranış biçiminizle şimdiki düşünme ve davranış biçiminiz arasında ne gibi benzerlikler ve farklar görüyorsunuz?

4 In Turkish: Hayatın size bilgelik kattığını düşünür müsünüz? Nasıl ve neden? Kattığını düşünüyorsanız, hayatınızdaki hangi olayların size bilgelik kattığını söyleyebilir misiniz? Nasıl ve neden?

5 In Turkish: Olağan bir günde neler yapıyorsunuz? Günlerinizi nasıl geçiriyorsunuz?

6 This book is available in Turkish (Randall, 2014).

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