Teaching Global Aging

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If you are reading this book review you are probably keenly aware of the changes that are coming to the global population. Population aging has brought about an exciting yet challenging opportunity for societies around the world. Every day, new publications become available that try to illustrate what this means to current and future societies and predict what this will mean to our world. This review takes a look at three recent books published on the topic of global aging.

Many, if not all, societies are or will shift to what is considered to be an aging society—one in which 10% of the population is over age 60 or 65 (depending on how the older population is defined in a country). The percentage of older people (aged 60 years or over) in the world is expected to increase from 11.7% in 2013 to 21.1% by 2050 (United Nations, 2013). This means that the number of older persons is expected to more than double, reaching over 2 billion in 2050, and will for the first time ever in 2047 exceed the total number of the world's children. Population aging is likely to have a very big impact on developing countries. Although about two-thirds of the world's older persons currently live in developing countries, this number is increasing much faster in those nations than in the developed countries. The United Nations (UN) projects that by 2050, nearly 80% of the world's older population will live in those less developed regions (United Nations, 2013). Rising life expectancy and declining fertility rates are two major reasons for the shift in the population structure. For example, in the next 40 years, life expectancy at age 60 is projected to increase by two years on average in less developed regions and three years in developed regions. Fertility rates are expected to decrease from 2.5 children per woman now to 2.2 or possibly 1.8 (depending on the projection variant) by 2050 (United Nations, 2013). While developing nations tend to have a higher fertility rate compared to developed nations, the total fertility rates in developed and developing countries are expected to eventually narrow the gap to only 0.4 children (United Nations, 2013). Two other factors that also have contributed to population aging, albeit on a smaller scale, are migration and decreased infant mortality.

The three books reviewed in this essay provide varied perspectives on what is currently happening and what is projected to happen to the global population if predicted trends stay on track. Terms like silver tsunami or gray population, which can be considered negative but are often seen in gerontological literature, do not express how societies can use the change in the population structure to influence the change in structures and systems. Most of the chapters in these three books look beyond the negative terms and focus on how countries are addressing these new challenges. I am approaching this book review with an education lens. Two of the three books are clearly advertised as textbooks for global aging courses, while the third book states it will be of interest to students (among others). Therefore, this review might be more helpful to university instructors compared to those who read the books for other purposes, such as researchers, practitioners or policy-makers. However,
I would not discourage these individuals from reading these books, since they do provide useful, current information about global aging issues.

Global Aging: Comparative Perspectives on Aging and the Life Course, by Suzanne R. Kunkel, J. Scott Brown, & Frank J. Whittington offers an interesting, easy-to-understand, and useful book for undergraduate global aging studies courses. The structure of the book is practical because it focuses on a global aging issue and then discusses it with examples from different countries. The book is easy to read and provides interesting international examples. I would like to have seen more comparisons across countries, but I recognize that many types of data are simply not available outside western countries and often are not comparable for developed and developing nations. The book does provide clear explanations of terms, especially in the early chapters that look more closely at definitions related to global aging. It offers several case studies that provide the reader a deeper look at specific aging issues within a country. While the book is well organized, I felt Chapter 9, which focused on families, caregiving and community support systems, could have been divided into two chapters. The end of the chapter connects family and caregiving issues to the topic of policy directions at the UN. While there is definitely a strong link between families and caregiving within UN aging activities, it is not the only issue. The book does provide a short historical context for the UN's focus on aging, ranging from the World Assembly in Vienna to the Madrid International Plan for Action on Ageing (MIPAA) and the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing. However, I felt the book would have been slightly improved if there were a separate chapter on UN activities, which would help highlight the importance of aging at the UN instead of tucking it into the families and caregiving chapter and briefly mentioning it in Chapter 1. The final chapter provides an excellent conclusion to the book and clearly states the recurring themes embedded throughout the book. Examples include: (a) Globalization is continuing and the gap between the haves and many of the have-not nations is shrinking; (b) Human health is improving and longevity is increasing; (c) Public opinion is becoming more positive toward older people; (d) The family is still the most important social setting for older people; (e) Work and productivity are universal human values; (f) Yet, retirement is becoming more common, even in developing countries; (g) Older people are becoming more involved in community affairs; (h) Most national governments are beginning to recognize their senior populations and enact policies to support them; and (i) Older people are actively driving much of that change (Kunkel, Brown, & Whittington, pp. 257–261). The list of Web Resources at the end of the book is extremely useful for teaching and learning purposes. This is a very good textbook for an undergraduate course, and, if supplemented with possibly one of the other reviewed books, for example, it could be used for a graduate-level course.

Global Aging Issues and Policies: Understanding the Importance of Comprehending and Studying the Aging Process, edited by Yushi (Boni) Li offers interesting discussions on various topics in global aging. However, the organization of the book is a bit challenging for use as a textbook. The book provides discussions from a wide variety of countries. Each chapter offers interesting facts about the country discussed, and regional facts are provided for the continents at the beginning of each continental section. These are useful for students to easily compare countries discussed in the book. Unlike the text by Kunkel and her colleagues, each chapter of Li’s book looks at a global aging issue for one country instead of providing examples from multiple countries on one theme. It does not provide a basic introduction to population aging and the common terms often taught early on so that students understand what population aging means. Instead the book relies on the terms to appear in various chapters. The positive side of this approach is that terms are applied to a specific country and a specific topic. Each chapter that addresses a specific definition, or population aging terminology, often clearly provides a good definition and applies it to the country discussion. Some of the discussions, however, focus on the topic issue and do not offer a sufficient explanation of how it applies to the specific country. For example, Chapter 13 focuses on pain and the quality of life but does not explain their cultural role in the United Kingdom. Chapters are generally easy to read, but a few are somewhat internally repetitive. The topics covered are varied and mostly interesting. One good example is Chapter 8’s discussion of Austria and cross-border care providers (p. 161). Another is Chapter 14 which discusses resilience in aging gay men and lesbians, a topic often not discussed at length in the population aging literature. The book needed more balance in the style of writing across the chapters, however, because students of different levels may not be able to understand the chapters equally well (i.e., some chapters were too easy for graduate students, while others were too difficult for undergraduates). For example Chapter 6, which discussed aging Singaporeans, was too heavy on the discussion of the statistics, compared to the rest of the chapters that discussed statistics. Several editorial issues were found throughout the book, unlike the other two books reviewed. For example, on page 273 an in-text citation was provided, but the full citation was not included in the reference list. There also were several typographical errors which one would not expect in a book such as this. Finally, early on in the book, aging was called a “problem” (p. 34). I was
a little disappointed to see a global aging textbook discuss aging as a problem, given the advancement in how many gerontologists today look at aging as a challenge and opportunity. Overall, if you decided to use this book as a course textbook, I would consider supplementing it with additional reading to help fill in the gaps or to strengthen some of the discussions that were slightly lacking.

Global Ageing in the Twenty-First Century: Challenges, Opportunities and Implications, edited by Susan A. McDaniel and Zachary Zimmer, was not written as a textbook, unlike the other two reviewed books. It did not provide a basic introduction to population aging that students might find useful if they are just beginning to look at population aging, and it also is limited to just 3 themes: (a) healthy aging and health care; (b) aging workforce, retirement, and pensions; and (c) intergenerational relations. However, the book expands beyond the general global aging literature by providing research and theoretical discussions around processes that may affect population aging. For example, Chapter 9 discusses how, if people live longer and therefore work longer, population aging may not impact the workforce and pensions as severely as projected. In addition, older people might want more services instead of goods, effectively changing the type of workforce needed. In Chapter 8, the book addresses one of the myths of global aging, pointing out that healthy aging trajectories are not necessarily similar for all older people and can vary from country to country. Chapter 11 focuses on Information Technology (IT) and the aging IT worker. While I credit the editors for including a topic not often addressed in the global aging literature, I was disappointed because the authors did not attempt to provide any comparison between countries, although their research did extend beyond one country. Anyone interested in global aging issues certainly will want to know how an issue applies across countries when the data are available.

The final chapter provided a useful summary of each of the preceding chapters and described the editors’ outlook on global aging. Although the book provided interesting discussions about research on aging issues from a range of countries, such as Palestine, India, Taiwan, and Canada, this book was more research-focused compared to the other two and therefore could be useful as a supplemental text for a graduate-level course or upper-level undergraduate course.

Each of the books addressed several of the common topics often covered when studying global aging. This includes themes around increased mortality, decreased fertility, shift in dependency ratios, difference in population aging for developed versus developing nations, gender differences, marital status, living arrangements, family support, health, labor force participation and retirement age, and economic transfers and poverty. Some of the books go beyond this to discuss topics often not addressed, for example, the chapter on older gay men and lesbians in Li’s book. Of course there are also topics not mentioned in any of the books that can have a significant impact on population aging such as natural disasters. For example, if a major natural disaster occurred, not only could it change a country’s “population pyramid,” it also could have a significant impact on how that country responds and recovers from the disaster.

While I recognize that no one book can cover all dimensions of global aging, I find one dimension that is critical and often somewhat overlooked. When I teach global aging, I like students to see the overall picture of what is happening at a global level and then narrow it down to the region/country and local level. One way to do this is by beginning the discussion by looking at activities that occur at the UN. Each of these books addressed aging activities at the UN, but none provided a clear, succinct historical and description in one chapter of how the topic of aging has grown over the years at the UN. Kunkel, Brown, and Whittington came very close to this model, but their treatment of the UN was tied into another chapter theme. Many countries rely on the UN for several reasons, such as to provide information to justify programs or to seek guidance on how to address an issue. While this may not be as important for countries like the United States that have funding for research and have already created policies to support the older population, smaller and/or developing countries might seek guidance on such issues. Therefore, it is important for students (and others) to understand where countries may seek out information. Aging has not been a “hot” topic at the UN, but it is gaining momentum. Although MIPAA was the last major policy development that countries have attempted to use to address aging, a new momentum at the UN has led recently to the appointment by the Human Rights Council of the first Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons and supported strong support for a convention on the rights of older people.

Clearly, the global population is aging and we need to understand how to address this trend, since it will influence how we conduct future research, policy, and practice. Overall, each of these books contributes in its own way to the literature on global aging. While all covered the same general themes that are often discussed, and which are necessary if the book is to be used as a textbook in a global aging course, each one is structured differently and covers topics not discussed in all of the books.

If I were asked to recommend one of these books for a global aging course, because of the structure of the books and the material included, I would recommend the Kunkel, Brown, and Whittington book, especially for
undergraduates. Kunkel and her colleagues provide clear discussion of the general terms, while providing comparative examples and in-depth case studies. This book could be supplemented by one or both of the other two books depending on the instructor’s needs. As the population rapidly ages, we are learning about population aging at a rapid rate. I feel if any of these books is to be used as a textbook, an instructor should consider supplementing the reading with current reports.

Although my review of these three books has been from an educational point of view, overall, each of these books provides interesting information that anyone exploring global aging issues might find useful. Therefore, even if you are not considering these books for academic purposes, you might still find them, or at least parts of them, quite useful for practice, research, or policy purposes.

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