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Review Article

Reviewing Human Longevity through the Lens of Cultural Anthropology

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ABSTRACT

Human longevity is an emerging area of interdisciplinary research, and socio-cultural anthropology provides important insights into the complex relationship between cultural practices, social structures and long lifespans. This review examines anthropological perspectives on longevity through analysis of relevant published literature. It highlights current understanding of how factors like cultural beliefs, social practices, dietary patterns, community structures and spiritual systems influence ageing across populations. Key findings reveal that longevity promoting factors include robust social networks and inter-generational relationships, traditional diets embedded within cultural food systems, integration of physical activity into meaningful daily activities, positive cultural attitudes towards ageing and spiritual beliefs that provide life purpose and resilience. Theoretical frameworks including the biocultural approach, social capital theory, practice theory, kinship theory etc. provide valuable perspectives for understanding human longevity in the socio-cultural context. However, processes like modernisation and globalisation can threaten traditional longevity promoting practices through dietary transitions, social network disruption and environmental degradation. The review also identifies some gaps and limitations in longevity research and also proposes future research directions. The findings can contribute to developing culturally sensitive interventions for healthy ageing and age-friendly community designs that use anthropological insights.

KEYWORDS

• Anthropology • Ageing • Socio-Cultural • Network • Diet • Activity

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INTRODUCTION

Human longevity can be briefly defined as the ability to live a long life beyond the average life expectancy. Studies on the subject have traditionally been dominated by biomedicine, and demographic processes, focusing primarily on genetics, physiology and statistics regarding mortality and morbidity. However, the remarkable variation in longevity patterns between different human populations has increasingly drawn attention to the role of socio-cultural factors in determining lifespan and quality of ageing.[16] The discipline of socio-cultural anthropology, with its emphasis on holistic understanding of human societies and its commitment to ethnographic methodology can offer important perspectives on the relations between society, culture and longevity. The expanding link between socio-cultural anthropology and human longevity can bridge the gap between biological and social sciences. This interdisciplinary approach recognises that ageing and longevity are not merely biological processes, but are also dependent on cultural meanings, social practices and environmental contexts.[21]

Anthropological attention has been drawn to the emergence of 'blue zones', regions with exceptionally high concentrations of centenarians.[4,28] These areas, including Okinawa in Japan, Icaria in Greece, Sardinia in Italy, Nicoya in Costa Rica and Loma Linda in the USA demonstrate remarkable longevity patterns that cannot be explained by genetics alone. Some common socio-cultural characteristics they share include strong social networks, plant-based diets, regular physical activity integrated into daily activities and cultural practices that provide meaning and purpose in life.

Contemporary anthropological research on longevity has been influenced by several theoretical frameworks, including the biocultural approach, which examines the dynamic interaction between biological and social factors in human adaptation.[32] Also, the concept of 'successful ageing', has been critically examined from anthropological perspectives, revealing how notions of successful ageing are culturally constructed and vary significantly across societies.[31]

OBJECTIVES

- To provide a comprehensive analysis of how socio-cultural anthropology contributes to the study of human longevity.
- To evaluate some theoretical frameworks employed in anthropological longevity studies.
- To identify some research gaps and propose directions for future research.

METHODS

This review employed a systematic search for relevant recent published literature using databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, PubMed, Anthropology Plus, etc. Some terms used in the search included combinations of 'anthropology', 'longevity', 'ageing', 'culture', 'health','society','ethnography', etc. Data extraction focussed on research objectives, theoretical frameworks, methodologies, study populations and key findings. A thematic analysis identified patterns across qualitative studies while preserving cultural context and specificity.

RESULTS

Some key theoretical frameworks have been applied in human longevity research to provide conceptual tools for understanding the relationship between society, culture and ageing. The biocultural approach mentioned earlier has been quite influential, emphasizing on the dynamic interaction between biology and culture in human adaptation, thus forming a part of the larger discussion on 'nature vs nurture'. It recognises that human ageing occurs within specific cultural contexts that shape both biological processes and influence social responses to ageing. How different cultures construct meanings around ageing and death can be understood through symbolic anthropology. Some studies have demonstrated how cultural symbols and narratives about ageing influence individual experiences while growing older[6]. Medical technologies can also become lodged within cultural systems of meaning about long lifespan and quality of life.[17]

Drawing from Pierre Bourdieu's work, the practice theory framework has been applied in analyzing how daily and habitual behaviours

contribute to longevity outcomes. For instance, it has been used to examine how embodied practices in Indian ashrams contribute to successful ageing.[19] 'Political economy of health' perspectives have emerged as important frameworks in examining longevity disparities, as they look into how broader economic and political structures access longevity promoting resources and opportunities.[8] It can be used for analysing how processes like globalisation and modernisation can affect human longevity in developing societies.

Cross-cultural analysis reveals that there are notable variations in how societies define successful ageing, attribute meaning to the ageing process and structure social roles for older adults.[10,6] We can look into some examples. For instance, in Okinawa, Japan, the concept of 'Ikigai' (life purpose) emphasizes the importance of maintaining meaning and purpose throughout one's life.[34] This cultural framework encourages continued engagement and productivity well into old age, potentially thus contributing to the exceptional longevity observed in this population through multiple pathways such as reduced stress, maintenance of cognitive function and sustained social engagement. On the other side of the globe in Sardinia, Italy, the mountain communities maintain values that emphasize the wisdom and accumulated knowledge of elders, creating social expectations for continued contribution to community affairs and knowledge transmission.[26] This contrasts with modern ageist perspectives which equate ageing with decline and loss. Cultural models of successful ageing vary dramatically across societies. While biomedical models often emphasize maintenance of physical and cognitive function, many cultures define successful ageing in terms of spiritual development, wisdom acquisition or fulfilment of social roles[11]. Positive views on ageing may reduce psychological stress associated with ageing and promote continued engagement in health promoting behaviours.[20]

Another consistent finding in populations with a high percentage of long-living adults is the importance of robust social networks and community integration for healthy ageing. Some consistent characteristics of such societies are strong family ties, meaningful community participation and social structures that integrate elders with broader social systems.[5] Social capital theory is quite useful for understanding how social relationships contribute to longevity. Social integration can provide multiple forms of capital including emotional support, instrumental assistance and informational resources that can be a buffer against old age stress and also provide access to health promoting resources.[13] For instance in Sardinian communities, extended family systems provide multiple generations of support and shared responsibility for elder care.[28] Traditional shepherding communities maintain age-integrated work patterns that allow older adults to continue contributing according to their capabilities while receiving support from younger family members.

The convoy model of social relationships has been applied to understand how social networks evolve throughout life in different cultural contexts.[1] This framework examines how societal norms about reciprocity, kinship obligations and inter-generational relationships shape the development and maintenance of supportive social networks that contribute to longevity. Ethnographic studies shed light on specific mechanisms through which social networks contribute to longevity through collective activities like food preparation and sharing, participation in community ceremonies, informal networks of mutual assistance, etc. Some community based participatory studies have revealed the importance of age friendly community designs that facilitate social interaction and engagement. Facilities such as walkable neighborhoods, community gathering spaces and inter-generational activities appear to promote social integration and contribute to healthy ageing outcomes.[23]

The structure and quality of inter-generational relationships has emerged as a critical factor behind lengthy and healthy lifespans. Many studies have shown how different kinship systems, family structures and cultural norms about ageing influence the social position of elders and their access to support, resources and meaningful social roles.[22] Inter-generational relationships can contribute to longevity through both material and psychological means. Kinship theory can be used in longevity research to examine how different family systems create varying opportunities and obligations for inter-generational support. Traditional societies are

often characterised by extended family systems that provide multiple sources of support for elders while also creating meaningful roles for them in childcare, knowledge transmission and family decision-making.[10] In many Asian populations, cultural values of filial piety create strong inter-generational bonds and expectations for elder care that may contribute to longevity through reduced stress, improved healthcare access and social integration.[14] However, such systems are not immune to the pressures of modernisation.

The role of elders in knowledge transmission and the psychological well-being and social integration that comes along with it can be viewed from the lens of cultural transmission theory. In many cultures, elders serve as repositories of a vast body of knowledge ranging from ecology and traditions to healing practices and historical memory which are essential for community survival and identity.[2] These roles provide continued purpose and meaning while ensuring elders remain as valued community members.

Community dietary patterns and food cultures can contribute to longevity through both nutritional and social pathways. Some common patterns include emphasis on plant-based foods, moderate caloric intake and culture specific preparation and consumption practices that are integrated with broader social and symbolic systems.[33] Longevity research from the perspective of nutritional anthropology examines how traditional dietary practices reflect broader cultural values and environmental adaptations. Once again we can refer to the blue zones as examples. The traditional Okinawan diet is characterised by high consumption of vegetables, tofu, legumes, small amounts of fish, etc. exemplifies dietary patterns associated with exceptional longevity.[34] Such dietary patterns are embedded within broader cultural systems that incorporate food related rituals, seasonal eating patterns and cultural values emphasizing moderation. In the well known Mediterranean diet of Sardinia, the emphasis is on locally produced foods including wild greens, legumes, whole grains and sheep's milk products. But these food habits exist within social contexts that emphasize shared meals, seasonal celebrations and food related community activities.[26]

The symbolic anthropology of food reveals how dietary practices carry cultural meanings that extend far beyond nutrition. Seasonal eating patterns link communities to environmental cycles, food sharing practices reinforce social bonds and traditional preparation methods maintain community knowledge and identity.[24] Food system resilience has also emerged as an important theme in studies on human longevity. Communities that maintain local food systems demonstrate greater dietary stability and access to diverse, nutrient-rich foods compared to communities dependent on global food systems.[29]

Several studies have found that high levels of physical activity can be linked to long lifespans. But in many societies, they are found integrated into meaningful daily activities rather than being pursued as formal exercise. This suggests that the social and cultural context of physical activity may be as important as the activity itself for promoting longevity.[12] Ecological anthropology approaches to longevity examine how traditional subsistence practices provide regular physical activity that continues throughout life. In Sardinian mountain communities, traditional pastoralism requires sustained physical activity including walking long distances over challenging terrain, which provides cardiovascular benefits while maintaining social and economic roles.[26] Similarly in Nicoya (Costa Rica) and Okinawa, traditional agricultural practices involve regular physical labor that contributes to musculoskeletal and cardiovascular wellness while also augmenting family and community food security.[30] The satisfaction from such activities may also provide psychological benefits.

The perspective of environmental justice can also be applied in longevity research. Clean air and water, exposure to pristine natural environments and traditional dwelling construction practices that promote healthy living conditions are important but often overlooked contributors to longevity around the world.[3] Processes like modernisation and urbanisation lead to environmental degradation in many ways, and produce many threats to human health. Loss of agricultural land, air and water pollution and climate change may lead to shortening of lifespans across the globe.

Throughout the world, many in the elderly age group maintain strong spiritual or religious traditions that provide frameworks for understanding life's purpose, coping with adversity and maintaining hope and resilience throughout life.[25] Medical anthropological research on spirituality and health reveals multiple pathways through which spiritual beliefs contribute to longevity. These include stress reduction through prayer and meditation, social support by religious communities, health-promoting behaviours encouraged by religious teachings and psychological benefits from hope and meaning-making.[18] Ethnographic work on adherents of the Seven-Day Adventist church in Loma Linda, USA, demonstrate how religious beliefs can promote longevity through dietary restrictions, social support and lifestyle practices that emphasize physical and spiritual health.[9]

Cultural beliefs about ageing, death and spiritual development and their influence on individual responses to ageing can be studied from the perspective of psychological anthropology. Communities with positive views about ageing, like taking of old age as a time for wisdom acquisition and spiritual growth may promote better adaptation to age related changes and maintenance of psychological well being.[6] 'Spiritual capital', which includes not only individual beliefs but also community spiritual resources and traditions that provide support during life transitions and crises is also important.

Contemporary anthropological research has been giving increasing attention to the impact of modernisation, globalisation and rapid cultural change on communities around the globe. Many such changes also have a negative impact on human lifespan. The changes include disruption of traditional dietary practices, weakening of social networks, environmental degradation, loss of knowledge systems and shifts in attitudes towards ageing. Globalisation theory can examine how global economic and cultural processes impact human longevity. The nutritional transition associated with globalization often involves shifts from traditional diets to processed foods high in sugar, fat and salt, contributing to increased rates of chronic diseases and reduced lifespans.[27]

Studies of rapidly changing communities reveal adoption of western lifestyle patterns, reduced physical activity and weakening of traditional social structures. Large scale migration of youths to urban areas often leaves older adults with reduced family support. Traditional knowledge systems are also on the verge of being lost due to a significant reduction in inter-generational transmission. However, there is also the case for cultural resilience, which has positioned itself as an important concept for understanding how communities can maintain longevity promoting practices despite external pressures for change. Successful adaptation to modernisation while preserving core cultural values and practices can help in achieving optimal life expectancy by combining traditional wisdom with contemporary resources.

DISCUSSION

This review has shown that socio-cultural anthropology offers many perspectives for understanding human longevity that extend far beyond biological determinants. Theoretical contributions like the biocultural approach have proven valuable in demonstrating how ageing processes are also shaped by cultural contexts, challenging biomedical models. Social capital theory, practice theory, kinship theory, etc have also illuminated specific mechanisms through which cultural practices become embodied in ageing outcomes.

However, cross cultural examination also reveals some contradictions. For instance, some studies document negative impacts of excessive family obligations on the elderly, particularly women who experience caregiving burdens.[22] Certain conservative societies may combine social integration with intense social monitoring and conformity pressures that might in turn increase stress and negatively impact health outcomes among people. Regarding dietary behaviour, there is no solid guarantee that plant based diets will be solely associated with longevity. Dietary diversity and cultural contextual appropriateness may be more important than specific micronutrient compositions.[33] Gender differences in longevity patterns also exist, despite notions that women generally live longer than men. Research in some pastoral communities has found male longevity to be more prominent, due to continued physical activity and social status throughout old age.[26] Such contradictions highlight the complexity

of culture- longevity relationships and suggest that universal prescriptions for healthy ageing may fall short.

Several limitations also emerge from available literature. Geographic bias towards certain well studied populations (the blue zones in particular), limited longitudinal data and methodological issues in validating age claims in traditional societies with limited tangible records represent some concerns. Also, many populations around the globe, especially in developing countries In Asia, Africa and the Americas remain understudied. Attempting to procure accurate data from rapidly changing communities is a challenge too.

Multi-sited ethnography has emerged as an important approach to examine longevity across different contexts while maintaining depth and sensitivity. It allows researchers to look into how similar cultural practices operate in different environmental and social contexts while identifying universal and culture specific factors in promotion of long lifespans. Also, community-based participatory research methods have proven valuable for longevity research by engaging community members as research partners rather than subjects. It ensures cultural appropriateness of research methods while also building local capacity for health promotion and other benefits[15].

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