Editorial

Aging at 30,000 Feet: The Global Reach of Social Gerontology

Is it my imagination or are flight attendants getting older? Observational data based on many trips abroad, almost all in the service of gerontology, tell me that the answer is yes. However, an understanding of societal demographic transitions tells me another story, one of population aging writ small: fewer entry-level flight attendants in a contracting airline industry, increasing the proportion of veteran flight attendants on duty. These are the thoughts that enter my mind on long flights while I sift through PDFs of The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Social Sciences (JG:SS) submissions on my iPad. Welcome to high-altitude gerontology!

Also on my mind both in the air and on the ground is the growing international presence of social gerontology and what that means for paper submissions to this flagship journal. Academic conferences and scientific collaborations, directly and indirectly related to social gerontology, now span the globe. The United States, and even more broadly the “West,” can no longer be said to have hegemony over knowledge building in this area of inquiry. As the premier journal of the field, JG:SS bears a serious responsibility to be a fair gatekeeper to international scientific publication, and, I would argue, is exceptionally well-positioned to promote multinational representation in the gerontological sciences. This is because social science has internationalism “in its bones.” Institutional arrangements, social structures, and cultural rhythms of societies form the very basis, the fundamental building blocks, of social gerontology. There is no subarea of the discipline of gerontology that is as well-suited to broaden its scientific base through international diversity.

My impression is that the international presence in JG:SS is healthy and the number of international submissions is growing. To empirically satisfy my curiosity about the matter, I examined the percent of submissions, invited revisions, and publications from the various regions of the world between 2009 and 2011. I sought to answer four questions: From what areas of the world are submitted manuscripts originating? Has there been a change in the sources of manuscripts? Do revision and publication rates of international (meaning non-U.S.) articles match their submission rates? Which regions are lagging and which are excelling in terms of successfully navigating the peer-review process?

The managing editor and I analyzed submissions, revisions, and publications based on the world region of the first-author’s institutional affiliation. Regions were broken down as follows: Latin America, the Far East (including Australia, and India), the Near East and Africa, Southern and Eastern Europe, Western Europe, Canada, and the United States.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of submitted manuscripts for the 3 years of interest (up to September for 2011) by regional source. One can clearly see a relative decline in submissions from the United States, steadily going down from 68% in 2009, to 60% in 2009, and 57% in 2010. European submissions—from each of the two regions—seem to be responsible for the relative U.S. decline, with other regions holding steady. Notable by their near absence are manuscripts from Latin-American countries.

How do manuscripts fare after being reviewed? Figure 2 shows that among those manuscripts submitted after receiving a “revise and resubmit,” a shrinking share are from the United States. Manuscripts from the United States, however, capture a greater share of articles as “revisions” than they did among initial submissions. Most of the international growth in revisions appears to be coming from Western Europe, a region that has steadily increased its representation among manuscripts invited for resubmission.

Finally, the regional breakdown for papers accepted for publication is shown in Figure 3. Again we see a reduction in the representation of articles from the United States. The largest growth comes from Western European countries that more than tripled their proportionate representation in the journal’s pages. It is important to note that manuscripts from the United States have greater success in being published in JG:SS compared with their baseline submission and resubmission rates.

To conclude from these data, the international reach of JG:SS has clearly grown over the past 3 years with a decreasing U.S. presence and an increasing international one, mostly due to growth in European submissions and the strength of their positive dispositions. However, along the pipeline toward manuscript acceptance, the profile of papers becomes increasingly dominated by scholars from the United States. What are we to make of this? Perhaps, the best way to think about the issue (borrowing from life course theory) is that there are two time metrics in play, one having to do with historical change in the regional composition of papers and the other having to do with the progress of manuscripts through the peer-review process. So although historically JG:SS has raised its international profile, in terms of the requisites necessary to successfully get into print, American authors are still advantaged.

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One implication of these findings is that more needs to be done to attract high-quality manuscripts from outside the United States and provide international scholars the tools to succeed. Although seeking diversity for its own sake is a suspect goal, a journal devoted to social science ought to maximally embrace scholarship that illuminates diverse social conditions—whether that scholarship is comparative or focuses in depth on a particular nation, culture, or region. Given that international articles currently represent 43% of submissions but only 29% of publications, the first question is what are the typical limitations found in international submissions that do not make it through peer review and into print? The second is what strategies may be effective at attracting high-quality manuscripts from outside the United States and Western Europe to give the journal a more global presence?

From my vantage point as editor, I offer three observations that strike me as particularly challenging for international authors and that may explain their lower rates of acceptance. These issues are by no means limited to any particular region of the world (including the United States), but they are particularly acute in manuscripts from developing nations that often lag in scientific infrastructure and training opportunities for its scholars. (a) The theoretical or conceptual framework of the study may be underdeveloped and neither linked to the research questions posed nor discussed in the conclusion section. The journal’s emphasis on advancing theory in social gerontology may be less familiar to international scholars. (b) The approach to data, method, and analysis may be less than “state of the art” for the discipline or incompletely described. For instance, articles taking a quantitative approach may ignore attrition bias in longitudinal analysis or not provide adequate detail about sample recruitment, measures, and variables. (c) English expression may be problematic, impeding communication about the purpose and relevance of even well-done research. It is unfair to ask potential referees to review manuscripts that are difficult to understand due to awkward syntax and language misuse; many times, these articles will be rejected without juried review.

Several initiatives are currently in progress at the JG:SS editorial office in an attempt to broaden the international scope of papers published in these pages. (a) Workshops on publishing in JG:SS aimed at international audiences most

![Figure 1. The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Social Sciences submissions by world region.](http://psychsocgerontology.oxfordjournals.org/)

![Figure 2. The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Social Sciences revisions by world region.](http://psychsocgerontology.oxfordjournals.org/)
likely to submit manuscripts have taken place in the U.K.,
the Netherlands, and Sweden. Workshops outline journal
requirements and priorities, and review common pitfalls to
avoid. These will be expanded to continents outside of Europe
in 2012–2013. (b) Papers presented at international confer-
ences (and increasingly at Gerontological Society of America
paper sessions that cater to international themes) have been
solicited for submission to JG:SS so as to attract the highest
quality manuscripts from the most diverse sources. (c) The
international representation of the JG:SS editorial board
as well as the reviewer pool has been increased, thereby
expanding and integrating scholarly networks connected to
JG:SS worldwide. (d) In an effort to reduce language barriers,
instructions for authors are now available in Spanish and
Mandarin.

Let me end by commenting on JG:SS’s image from outside
the United States. Based on anecdotal evidence gained
through several informal discussions with international
scholars, I understand that there was at one time the percep-
tion that JG:SS reviewers harbored biases against interna-
tional research, particularly research that did not explicitly
demonstrate its relevance to an American audience. From
my vantage point, I can safely say that this bias is held by
only a very small minority of reviewers. Yes, it is the case
that reviewers (sometimes quite usefully) ask international
authors to discuss the societal/cultural relevance of their
work and raise questions as to whether the results can be
generalized to other nations (albeit something not asked of
comparable authors analyzing American data). But let me
say in no uncertain terms that such requests ought to be over-
ruled by an editor when they are gratuitous, do not enhance
interpretation of findings, or are of little strategic advantage
to the main purpose of the investigation.

I hope by now you have come away with the message that
JG:SS is “world friendly” and planning to get friendlier.
Along these lines, I would like to give special thanks to
Stockholm’s Aging Research Center for offering JG:SS and
myself a “summer home” for the month of June over the
past 2 years and adding to the Journal’s international bona
fides. The journal’s sponsor may have “America” in its title,
but the science of gerontology knows no borders; aging is a
topic of concern to virtually all nations of the world.

As you might guess, visiting the far-flung destinations
that make up the scholarly community of social gerontology
can be exhausting. But lest you think that flying around the
globe does not provide personal benefits as well, I refer to
the time dilation aspect of Einstein’s theory of relativity
positing that time slows for people traveling at high speeds.
Based on the air miles listed on my frequent flyer statement
and figuring a speed of 550 mph, I have aged \(0.3364 \div 10\) of
a year less than had I stayed on the ground, proving
conclusively and perhaps paradoxically that gerontology
can indeed make one younger.

Merril Silverstein
Editor, Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences