Aging under Caribbean Skies

Provided they have the right partners, family and friends, most scientists are not confronted with the work-life balance dilemma. Science encompasses all facets of daily life and, therefore, does not leave us detached from our research after working hours. Gerontology is a most telling example in this respect because it is perhaps the only scientific discipline where the object and subject of research are identical. Conducting gerontological research makes it easier for me to cope with my own aging process and it also preoccupies me when being confronted with the elderly in other countries. Thus, during a recent bicycle tour through Cuba, I tried to gather personal, rather than official, information on the role and fate of the elderly, and I would like to share some of my subjective impressions with the readers of Gerontology.

Life expectancy in 2015 is high in Cuba, i.e. 80.7 years for women and 76.6 years for men. This by far exceeds the mean life expectancy before the Cuban Revolution in 1959. Now, 18.3% of the 11.1 million Cubans are over the age of 60, and this figure will rise to 30% by 2030, which will result in Cuba having the oldest population in the Americas. This is due to a reduction in mortality and a reduced fertility rate, combined with good medical care, free of charge, as well as large-scale emigration of young people in recent decades. From a gerontological viewpoint, it is of special interest that Cuba harbours a very high number of centenarians. Unfortunately, this positive fact is increasingly countered by the obesity epidemic that now has also reached Cuba.

The official retirement age in Cuba is 65 years for men and 60 years for women. The monthly pension amounts to only about CUC 250 (EUR/USD 10) per month, i.e. a sum that does not suffice to secure all living costs. This means that most elderly citizens can be rated as being poor (‘aging meets poverty’), but they do not seem to be unhappy (fig. 1) and have developed an admirable capacity to improvise and survive under difficult circumstances. Basic expenses, such as food, can be defrayed by paying a symbolic sum (e.g. approximately EUR/USD 1 per month) via coupons valid in so-called ‘bodegas’. Costs for clothing, toilet articles, electricity and water are not included in this basic spectrum of benefits for pensioners.

Elderly Cubans try to overcome these hardships by using different strategies. For most of them, the family remains ‘the first resource and the last refuge’ [1]. Based on...
this resort, and taking into account the insufficient pensions, many of the elderly either try to go on working in their old professions, such as physicians and teachers, or they creatively invent new professions, such as selling newspapers, sunflower seeds, etc., or supervising children, parked cars or bicycles. Another, albeit small, group survives as beggars, a group that does not officially exist in Cuba. Finally, the elderly without familial support or those requiring special care can resort to nursing homes, which I had no chance to visit, where the pension of the clients is withheld in compensation for basic care.

A small fraction of the elderly, especially in the cities, take advantage of meeting places, mostly frequented by single individuals, where they have the opportunity to socialize as well as get food three times per day upon paying about 10% of their pension.

What is the present impact of the Cuban Revolution on the situation and personal outlook on life of elderly? The memories of the successful expulsion of the dictator Fulgencio Batista by the Revolution and repelling the CIA-backed invasion at the Bay of Pigs are permanently and ubiquitously present in the Cuban society as manifested in an amazing number of monuments and placards throughout the country (fig. 2). I was told that veterans who were involved in these battles and families of revolutionaries killed in action enjoy certain benefits. However, the problem is that the Revolution brought independence, but not freedom. It seems that most of present-day older citizens patiently accept the frustrating fact of rendering unfulfilled promises for a post-revolutionary betterment of life with astonishing resilience. This situation is, of course, further aggravated by the above-mentioned implosion of communism in the Soviet Union and East Bloc and the American embargo, which will hopefully soon be lifted. In contrast, young Cubans seem to have lost all emotional ties to the Revolution that took place more than 55 years ago. They strive to go beyond the age of the ‘famous old men’ with their undoubtful merits, such as Fidel and Raoul Castro, Che Guevara and – in the cultural scene – the Buena Vista Social Club.

In spite of all these hardships, the elderly seem to be well integrated, not only in their families, but also in Cuban society as a whole and participate in many activities, especially musical performances, in line with the Cuban proverb ‘there is more time than life’. They seem to look forward to societal and economic changes for their progeny in their beautiful and potentially affluent country under the blue Caribbean skies.

But now to some issues concerning our journal!

First of all, the impact factor of Gerontology has risen to over 3.0, and I would like to thank all the members of our crew who have made this step possible. Let’s try to further improve this performance in 2016!

Gerontology receives many more manuscripts than we can accommodate, and a fair and fast evaluation, including an efficient triage system, is therefore of utmost importance. Herein, the wording of the Abstract and the last paragraphs of the Discussion play an important role. In
In many instances, these parts of the manuscripts are too vague and the authors do not dare to stick out their necks by putting forward firm statements about the possible relevance of their findings, but rather end these passages by stating that 'more work has to be performed'. Of course, this is always the case because a scientific question can very rarely, if ever, be completely answered. In our conversations with the authors, we should insist on improving this situation.

With the beginning of 2016, we welcome two new Editorial Board Members: Dr. Michael Schwenk (Stuttgart, Germany) will join the Technological Section, while Dr. C. Ryne Estabrook (Chicago, Ill., USA) will fill the newly established position of a ‘Statistical Consultant’. We are presently looking for a second expert in this field.

Günter Lepperdinger, who for the last 2 years has been graciously standing in for me whenever necessary, will resume the official position of the journal’s Managing Editor.

Finally, I would like to thank all Section Editors and Members of our Editorial Board for their input and help, Ms. Christine Süss for running the Editorial Office with calm efficiency, and Thomas Nold and his team at Karger for their excellent cooperation.

G. Wick, Innsbruck

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