



Introduction: Comparative Insights from the ASSA Project

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Abstract

This introduction provides a basic description of the Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing (ASSA) project, including the project's range of field sites, methods, and ethics. I compare this project with prior comparative studies in the anthropology of ageing. I also discuss certain other findings of the ASSA project as they relate to the ASSA researchers' re-conceptualisation of the smartphone and our work on mHealth. I then consider how an anthropological approach to comparison differs from that of other disciplines, partly through examining methods of comparison found within the articles in this Special Issue. In particular, I contrast the idea that anthropologists can compare data regarded as commensurable because of a standardisation in how they were collected, to a view that anthropologists mostly do not collect commensurable data at all; in which case, perhaps anthropologists are best at making comparison at the level of *implied causation*, sometimes developing a spectrum of field sites where implied causation can itself act as a parameter of difference.

Keywords: *Comparative anthropology; Ageing; Causation; Field sites; Qualitative research*

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Introduction

The five original-research articles included in this Special Issue are all derived from a project called the Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing (ASSA) that was carried out from 2017-2022. The project was based at the Department of Anthropology, University College London, and was funded by the European Research Council (ERC). The project consisted of eleven team members conducting 16-month ethnographies in ten field sites across nine countries. What was unique about this project that we think might be of general interest to researchers studying ageing?

In terms of age-focused research, the ASSA project was unusual in that it set out to study people precisely because they were not defined by age. The researchers involved all agreed to focus on those who did not define themselves as either young or old, though not excluding the latter. But that could mean very different things when our field sites included some of the world's youngest demographics in Uganda and some of the oldest in Japan. It is therefore not surprising that one of these papers, by Charlotte Hawkins and Laura Haapio-Kirk, is concerned with how exactly people use and are impacted by categories of age, comparing chronological, bureaucratic, experiential, and normative categories. The ASSA project was also unusual in approaching age through the study of smartphones. Until recently, mobile phones and social media were primarily studied as a youth technology to which parents needed to respond (e.g., boyd 2014; Livingstone and Blum-Ross 2020; Clark 2013). Indeed, it rather felt that 2017, the date when we began fieldwork, was around the first time that smartphones had become sufficiently ubiquitous for older people in many regions such that we could study them as a common technology in those regions. Yet, as Marilia Duque and Alfonso Otaegui indicate in their paper, older people may certainly struggle with what can easily become a new form of digital exclusion. A third distinct element of the ASSA project is that none of the researchers involved had previously studied ageing. Thus, our theoretical foundation lay not in ageing studies but in the tradition of digital anthropology (e.g., Miller and Horst 2021) and studies of material culture (e.g., Miller 2010).

Furthermore, there was a central challenge of the ASSA project, which this introduction will focus on – how to leverage 10 simultaneous ethnographies to extend the possibilities of comparative and cross-cultural research in light of these same new digital technologies. Of course, comparative research is nothing new within the anthropology of ageing. Perhaps the most obvious precedent was Project Age (Keith et al. 1994), which studied seven communities around the world using common hypotheses and methods, such as sampling and set tasks. As was common in many early comparative studies, Project Age emulated natural science to a certain degree with its ideals of sampling and statistics and data. In the past, for most social scientists to be properly comparative, data had to be deemed comparable because of some standardisation in the way it was obtained. These conditions would be still more important for comparative studies based in other disciplines, such as psychology, which often use written questionnaires (e.g., Gire 2019, 233). However, anthropologists have suggested that this approach to comparison becomes problematic when one takes into account cultural differences – e.g., the same questions can mean different things to different populations (Fry and Ikels 2011, 262-273). Despite claims that comparison is at the heart of anthropology – e.g., one of the standard anthropology textbooks defines anthropology as “the comparative study of cultural and social life” (Eriksen 2001, 4) – the most common genre of comparison remains post-hoc exercises constructed via an edited volume

that brings together studies from different regions around a common theme. A recent example would be Sarah Lamb's (2017) collection, *Successful Ageing as a Contemporary Obsession*. This volume has the virtue of demonstrating the global range of a phenomenon as well as comparing examples. Another common approach to comparison is between different populations within the same region (eg., Schröder-Butterfill et al. 2018 for the Indonesian context). Alternatively, an anthropologist might use their ethnography to challenge Western assumptions, just as Margaret Lock (1993) contrasted Japanese and North American views on menopause. Comparison is very often the basis of general discussions of ageing issues: Jay Sokolovsky (2020) provides several examples in his edited volume on the cultural contexts of ageing. Comparison may also be fundamental to the discussion of particular topics: Iza Kavedžija (2021) considers conviviality, care, and creativity in relation to well-being in a manner that might equally cast the net on Amazonian and London populations to provide a more comprehensive guide to the issues raised by these topics.

What made ASSA different from such precedents of comparative studies in anthropology? On the one hand, the project was quite conservative with regards to our methodology which consisted of each team member carrying out traditional 16-month ethnographies using participant observation. However, a main difference was that the simultaneity of these projects could be exploited through the use of new digital media. This meant that we were able to remain constantly in touch throughout our fieldwork. We did not have to rely on either pre-agreed standards or post-hoc juxtaposition. Every team member sent in a 5,000-word report each month, which we discussed collectively online during the fieldwork itself. This had three highly significant consequences. First, it meant that we could collectively change direction. For example, we started with the intention of facilitating mHealth (mobile health apps), but we soon found, in all our field sites, that older people make little use of these. Thus, by the end of our fieldwork, we had a completely different focus on how older people creatively adapt the apps they are comfortable with, such as WhatsApp, in order to be able to use them for health purposes (Hawkins, Awondo, and Miller, forthcoming). Second, our monthly practice of comparison prevented us from falling into the anthropologist's natural tendency to increasingly take their observations for granted as they become used to the ways of life they encounter in the field. We found that preventing this makes the work even more 'anthropological.' For example, when Duque found that retirees in São Paulo, Brazil, try to retain links with their former employment identity, this may have seemed like an obvious thing for them to do, except that she was immediately aware from her colleagues Garvey and Miller that, in Ireland, people often see retirement as a chance to start life afresh without retaining such connections. As a result, none of us could take what we saw as 'natural,' which meant that we were forced to consider a range of explanations for cultural differences while we were still in the field.

In this conclusion, I consider the consequences of our particular approach to comparative research. Primarily it leads to an investigation of the ways in which anthropological descriptions based on our ethnographic findings often use implied causation as explanation. Why use the term implied causation? We need to acknowledge that much of the time ethnographers do not spell out their claims to causation i.e., that the people we studied tend to these actions because of poverty, or because they are similar to the group living nearby. Instead, we just include a discussion of poverty or include a discussion of the people living nearby in a manner that suggests to the reader that this helps explain our observations. But my main concern in this essay is not to differentiate explicit from implied causation, but rather to suggest that the key to understanding comparative anthropology is that we need to focus on comparison at the level of causation, whether explicit or implicit, rather than at the level of data. It just happens that most claims to causation in anthropology are implied rather than explicit. I am suggesting that typically in anthropology we may not directly compare economic practices; instead, we suggest that two field sites in very different places are similar because of the impact of religion on economic practices, or we contrast these two field sites because in one case it seems to be religion and in the other case it is kinship that dominates economic practices. Examples will be given below that hopefully make this argument clearer.

The Context: Smartphones and Health

The ASSA project was conceived around the intersection of three domains. The first was to try and comprehensively theorise and re-imagine the smartphone. The second was to consider the insights that our ethnographies could bring to the contemporary study of ageing, building on earlier work concerned with ageing and the digital life course (e.g., Prendergast and Garattini 2015). The focus on ageing led to this Special Issue. The third was for each sub-project to include an applied element that could be of direct benefit to people's health (the results of which will be published in Hawkins, Awondo, and Miller, forthcoming). The ASSA project followed from a previous five-year study called "Why We Post," which examined the use and consequence of social media. That project was similarly structured and led by Miller. It produced 11 volumes that have reached over one million downloads. This earlier project emphasised the more traditional role of anthropology by applying cultural relativism to social media, as indicated by the title of the project's main comparative book, *How the World Changed Social Media* (Miller et al. 2016).

Social media is just one component of the smartphone that has had a vast impact on people's lives. As researchers, we wanted to re-think and to theorise the smartphone itself. The results of that task can be found in *The Global Smartphone* (Miller et al. 2021). There, we argue that the smartphone is not especially SMART, an acronym that refers to the way the smartphone, through algorithms and AI, can learn from its usage (Self-Monitoring, Analysis, and Reporting Technologies). Nor is it really a phone, as phone calls make up a very small part of how smartphones are used across our field sites. Instead, we proposed a theory of *the transportal home*, arguing that the smartphone is primarily a place within which people now live, comparable to, though different from, the physical domestic home. Our other key theoretical claims include the idea that the smartphone changes people's perspective on the world around them through *perpetual opportunism* because the smartphone is always with them, and people can constantly avail themselves of the opportunities it brings, such as taking and then immediately sharing photographs. We also claim the smartphone lies *beyond anthropomorphism* in that, while it looks nothing like a person, it has an unprecedented ability to act as an avatar, that is an expression of the character of its user, their relationships, and cultural values. We suggest that the smartphone also leads to a *death of proximity*, as people engage with those not present, as well as the already established death of distance (Cairncross 1997), reflecting its ability to bring people together. We suggest that most discourses around the smartphone – such as concerns about addiction to the technology and fake news – represent the exploitation of the smartphone to engage in moral debate rather than directly describing everyday smartphone usage. We also suggest the smartphone reverses the historical shift from the extended family to the nuclear family, as WhatsApp, WeChat, LINE, and other apps bring cousins and wider kin into more constant communication. Finally, the smartphone adds to the way social media have made the visual comparable to the oral and textual as a third mode of conversation. All of these and other theoretical arguments are detailed and defended within *The Global Smartphone* (Miller et al. 2021).

Our work in developing theory builds upon traditions in material-culture studies (Miller 2010) and digital anthropology (Geismar and Knox 2021). These differ in various respects from approaches such as Science and Technology Studies (STS), Internet studies, and other disciplinary studies. While technology remains an important concern for anthropology generally (e.g., Bruun et al. 2022), as anthropologists, we tend to place more emphasis on the social and cultural context than most technology-orientated studies; this means that, even if our topic of study is online, most of our ethnography – which we call *holistic contextualisation* – is about offline life. However, Duque and Otaegui's article in this issue about learning to use smartphones does consider the concern older people have with the precise technology.

More generally, material-culture studies have argued against any dualism between persons and things. Humanity does not exist outside of objectification or culture. As Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and many other anthropologists have indicated, humans are from infancy socialised into culture – including into

normative social relations – through practices orientated to the world around them. This continues into later life. As we learned in the ASSA project, there is a mutual relationship between a retired person crafting their lives and crafting their smartphones. While these processes are constrained by material conditions and the political economy, they exist equally within normative culture where everything people *do* and *are* will be appraised as appropriate or inappropriate by others. The rise of the digital expands the universe within which people become themselves. Contrary to popular discourse, digital technologies do not make people more mediated – for anthropologists, there never was a natural condition of humanity that was less mediated. Similarly, we argue that people are not becoming less authentic or less human (or, for that matter, more post-human) because of digital technologies. Rather, people are adapting and quickly transforming the new material and intangible worlds within which they live.

The other result of the ASSA project that may be of interest to people researching ageing (but which will not be discussed in this Special Issue) is our work on alternatives to conventional mHealth - (Hawkins, Awondo, and Miller, forthcoming). Duque and Otaegui, who write here about how older people struggle to use smartphones, contributed to the applied aspect of this research, which is to assist older people in using smartphones for health. Otaegui (forthcoming) worked with nurses in an oncology clinic in Santiago, Chile, while Duque published a manual of how WhatsApp can be adapted for health purposes in Brazil (Duque 2020). Other interventions range from Hawkins' contribution to the development of a tele-psychotherapeutic service for people helping relatives with mental-health issues in Uganda (Hawkins and Bwanika, forthcoming) to Miller working with Sheba Mohammad to develop a hypertension campaign in Trinidad based on a Facebook competition (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/chefituptt>), followed by a game called Trini Food Quiz which can be downloaded for free as a smartphone app. We call our approach *Smart from Below* because the emphasis is on the creativity and ingenuity of populations in adapting smartphones for health rather than top-down initiatives in mHealth.

Methods, Theory, and Ethics

The ASSA project was largely comprised of conventional 16-month ethnographies. The field sites mirrored the project's general desire to reflect global diversity but with specific choices determined by the interests and expertise of the ethnographers who carried out this work. Similarly, each ethnographer followed local perceptions of age or appropriate sites of encounter and there was no attempt to replicate these across the different field sites. The article by Duque and Otaegui is largely based on their experience holding classes for older people learning to use smartphones or WhatsApp. Compared to other disciplines that might have focused on the relationship between individuals and their smartphones, we emphasised *screen ecology* (Miller et al. 2021, 65-70), noting that something may not appear on a smartphone because it was instead being employed on one of the individual's other screens, such as a laptop, smart TV, or tablet. In short understanding the use of any one screen such as a smartphone must be understood in relation to the 'ecology' of all the other screens that are being used. We also emphasised an analogous *social ecology* (Miller et al. 2021, 70-75), noting that something may also not appear on a specific smartphone because it is present on the smartphone of a partner or their children. Similarly, we focused on what people *did* with their smartphones rather than what they *said* about them. We also found it much more productive to ask for stories around every single app on a person's smartphone rather than to discuss smartphones in general, and then to focus on tasks they used their smartphones to accomplish rather than just the apps, especially for older people. Our main fieldwork was completed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was declared in March 2020, but keeping in touch with these populations and their experiences of COVID-19 and the subsequent public-health measures implemented around the world helped us to further develop insights such as the fine line between care and surveillance (Miller 2023) – an issue we found particularly pertinent for older people.

Regarding age, we mainly followed the self-reporting of our research participants. If they suggested that they had anticipated feeling 'old' when they reached 70 or 80 but this had not happened, then we too did not regard them as 'old.' In some cases, retirement proved a useful proxy for our interests, and it is thus the subject of one of this issue's articles by Shireen Walton and Patrick Awondo, which juxtaposes retirement with a discussion of grandparenting. But, as these authors note, there were other ASSA field sites where most people had never engaged in formal work that implied the possibilities of retirement. Age always intersected with other parameters, such as ethnicity, class, and gender. As in conventional participant observation, we tended to hang out in places frequented by older people, ranging from a community centre for seniors in our Palestinian field site; meetings of a rotating credit scheme in Kampala, Uganda; care homes in Shanghai, China; to isolated dwellings in depopulated areas of rural Japan. Following the ethical guidelines dictated by University College London ethics committees we did not work with people who either we might regard as, or who might regard themselves, vulnerable, or where there could be any issue of providing informed consent to participate in our research. We did not see our work as gerontological studies since the focus was on people who do not define themselves as old. This did not preclude a wide chronological range; our general comparative book begins with insights from a 90-year-old Japanese woman whose life increasingly revolves around her smartphone. Indeed, a facility with the smartphone seems to have become a criterion that people use to legitimate their claims that they are not in fact 'old people.'

Comparative Insights

The individual articles included in this Special Issue speak for themselves regarding the topics we have chosen. But what transcends these topics is the wider aim of this issue to re-think comparison in anthropology. The ASSA monographs have mainly the same chapter headings, for example, in each book there are chapters on health and on everyday life. The content of these chapters, however, differs markedly across our field sites. We tried to balance our collaboration as a team with the individual researchers' interests and insights in much the same manner as how, when writing our monographs, we tried to ensure attention to each unique individual research participant while making more analytical generalisations about populations.

As noted earlier in this introduction, the natural sciences favour comparison based on the ideal of comparable data (i.e., comparing apples with apples, and never apples with oranges). Data is generally something that can be aggregated as well as compared, so the advantage of a global comparative project such as ours could have been that we thereby had more data from which to make such comparisons. We might then be expected to 'compare our data' across several field sites to give authority to any subsequent general claims. The problem is that none of this really accords with the way anthropologists see the world, and it could end up betraying that anthropological sensibility. Anthropologists tend to stress the opposite facets of their work: that both individuals and field sites are unique and not commensurate; and that, while we work with evidence, we do not objectify it as 'data.' The result is that anthropology is called a comparative discipline but our attitude to evidence is such that – by the canons of other disciplines – comparison is simply not possible because we are not systematic' nor are we basing our analyses on comparable data. This is especially true of the ASSA project in that our monographs are replete with highly individual stories from our research participants. These are used to caveat any generalisations, such as by Haapio-Kirk (In Press) on gender, Walton (2021) on ethnicity, or Hawkins (In Press) on the uses of phones as opposed to smartphones. We retain the humanism of our enquiry by using these stories to respect the uniqueness of each individual who can never be reduced to those generalities.

One of the commentators in the London workshop where we first delivered the papers included in this special issue described the their relationship to each other as "blind dating." Why on earth would Wang's Shanghai study be juxtaposed with Garvey's work in Dublin? At best, I feel these sites look like a one-night stand. Similarly, when the topic of life purpose was considered, there could hardly have been two more different field sites than those of Abed Rabho and de Vries in Al Quds (East Jerusalem)

and Miller in the Dublin region of Ireland, with the former as the most religious and the latter as the most secular of our field sites. And why was Hawkins' work in Uganda, the field site with the youngest population, combined with Haapio-Kirk's work in Japan, the field site with the oldest population? Why would we choose to make comparisons between the *least* comparable sites? Such 'blind dating' makes it clear that this is not comparison in the conventional sense that attempts to emulate the natural sciences. It is more than that. We do not see these juxtapositions of field sites as comparable data; to be honest, we do not even see our evidence as data.

It follows that we require an entirely different basis for any claims to comparison. Each article does this in a different manner. Duque and Otaegui adopt a more conventional additive perspective. Throughout their article, they juxtapose findings from their respective field sites in Brazil and Chile in a way that implies that combining the two makes it more plausible to apply their analysis to Latin American sites in general. They thereby imply that other regions could be included in their arguments, but only to the degree to which they are regarded as similar. A sense of Latin America as a region is held against claims that their evidence might implicate a psychological universal. A reader of this article might presume that older people struggle to learn to use smartphones simply because they are older. But, at one point, Duque and Otaegui discuss a critical difference between their studies and Wang's evidence from Shanghai where older people may be in the vanguard of smartphone use. The difference here is that older people in Shanghai think that smartphones are for 'them,' while those in Latin America still believe that this is a youth technology that is 'not for them.' This suggests that their evidence can neither be universal or psychological. This repudiation of psychological universals is an important component of anthropological analysis.

The situation is entirely different when Walton compares her field site in Milan, Italy, with that of Awondo's in Yaoundé, Cameroon. Each of these field sites provides evidence for what happens in retirement and grandparenting. But this is not comparable as data; it is simply very different. Instead, comparison tends to apply at the level of implied causation. To understand grandparenting in Milan, it is necessary to appreciate the traditional role of the *Nona*. While to understand grandparenting in Yaoundé, it is necessary to appreciate the sense of an intergenerational contract. These implied causations are very different. If, however, we move up to a still higher analytical level we could find that in these field sites grandparenting is understood as contractual as opposed to other field sites where it used as an expression of freedom (e.g., Miller 2022). At this level we can engage in fruitful comparison. We have shown that the form of grandparenting we have observed in our ethnographies may be partially a result of whether grandparenting has been used as an idiom of freedom or understood as contractual.

This argument can also be applied to the article by Garvey and Wang on placemaking. Their point of departure starts as contrast: older people in Shanghai have experienced an extraordinary 'upsizing' as their per capita living area is nine times larger in 2019 than it was in 1980, while older people in Ireland, if not downsizing, are at least moving to homes that are easier to maintain and more energy efficient. The units of comparison therefore have more to do with a person's motivation, their ties to kin and neighbourhood, or their values related to environmentalism and status. Despite the extreme differences between these field sites, we have plenty of evidence for comparison at the level of causation. A major part of our project concerns the impact of smartphones. In a paper about placemaking, this refers to the rise of the smartphone as a transpatial home, or the death of distance and proximity. At this level, the contextual differences may be caveats but they do not prevent generalisations about how smartphones have changed the lives of older people – including a capacity to craft their lives anew, which is equally clear in Dublin and Shanghai. The transcendent generality lies in observations of how the transpatial home is used to complement the physical domestic home, even if changes within the physical home are entirely different.

The idea of comparison at the level of implied causation becomes still more explicit when turning to the final two articles since they shift from this blind dating of two field sites towards an aspiration to use the entire range of ASSA field sites for their comparisons. A key concern for Hawkins and Haapio-Kirk is to consider the consequences of different types of age categories. Throughout their paper, this consideration changes depending on whether the categories come from the local bureaucracy as opposed to mere chronology, or whether they act as normative categories. Or, indeed, whether they are derived from influential academic categories such as those developed by Paul Higgs and Chris Gilleard (2017), who have written extensively about the concepts of the third age and fourth age (following Laslett 1987 and 1994). Hawkins and Haapio-Kirk's article in this issue shows how the way people experience 'ageing' can be impacted by a bureaucratically imposed label, or by an academically sourced label, or by the labels used by generations about other generations. People may feel old because of a form they have to fill out, the way they see themselves described in a publication, or the way young people refer to them. In short, the authors have presented a spectrum of causes as a sequential consideration of the different sources of the categories applied to ageing and compared field sites noting which of these categorisations has had more influence on how people experience ageing.

The same arguments apply to the article by Laila Abed Rabho, Maya de Vries, and Miller. What difference does it make if there exists a conventional term for 'life purpose,' such as in Japan? What are the implications of retaining an explicit set of normative views around life purpose that come with religious faith, as in ASSA's Palestinian site in Al Quds? The article also directly compares field sites based on the implied causation that emerges from people's concern with social reproduction as in Awondo's description of how people try to ensure cultural continuity after their death in Yaoundé by making sure that their children respect traditional rites for the ancestors, or with Hawkins' description of people's concern with their children's education in Kampala. Although the article is about life purpose, there is little point comparing life purpose *per se* if this represents religion in one case or the idea of a bucket list in another. By contrast, comparison based on these implied causations can be analytically productive.

In the two articles that include all the field sites, it is then possible to extend this argument by demonstrating comparison through constructing a spectrum of cases. For example, if we want to compare the situation of the religious to the secular, then the first task is to choose two field sites to anchor the endpoints. After that, it might be possible to situate other field sites between these two, and thereby strengthen the arguments about the consequences of religiosity. We can see how this works in Walton and Awondo's article; people in Milan who are retired are not as concerned with retaining linkages to their past employment as people are in Duque's field site of São Paulo. But, at the same time, they do not wish to repudiate that past to the same degree as people in Miller's Irish field site. By situating Milan mid-way between these two other field sites, we can develop our analysis of the legacy of work on retirement. A similar strategy could apply equally well to the degree of religiosity or of intergenerational conflict across the field sites – any of which may be causal with respect to our findings.

The advantage of taking our unit of comparison as implied causation is that we no longer betray the parochialism and relativism of the ethnography itself. As Wang describes, self-reformation in China remains something that can only be understood in terms of the particular history of this population of older Chinese. With this approach, the ethnography remains unsullied by the necessary abstraction posed by undertaking comparative analysis – a point that becomes even more important when we take the next step to further abstraction from comparison to theory, as I have tried to show elsewhere (Miller 2021). I argue that there can be a theory around retirement or around the smartphone as the transportal home that incorporates, rather than leaves behind, the parochial differences of the individual ethnographies.

To summarise the value of this discussion. The term *implied causation* has not been used here to make the case for some new form of comparison. It has been employed to make explicit and to examine the

logic of what most anthropologists mostly do when they write on the basis of ethnographic studies. The problem is that discussion of topics such as causation are dominated by the natural sciences or attempts to emulate science. Some anthropologists have preferred to follow the terminology of natural sciences and refer to their evidence as data. They then compare field sites on the basis of taking data from different places to be commensurate. This was the case with Project Age referred to at the start of this discussion. I do not wish to disparage such work. My aim is to clarify another way anthropologists, in particular, tend to undertake comparative studies. Our problem is that, on the one hand, we often want to repudiate the universalism found in disciplines such as psychology and yet also avoid the pure cultural relativism that merely asserts the uniqueness of individuals or regional cultural values. I have suggested that the method of comparison exemplified by the articles that make up this Special Issue are a means to resolve that dilemma. By comparing at the level of implied causation, we are able to explain and not just describe our findings. We do attribute cause. But we do so in a manner that does not betray our commitment to affirming cultural differences and the character of each ethnography. This approach to comparison has its own epistemological status, a claim to contribute to knowledge, but one that does not depend upon emulation of natural science. It may therefore be suited to anthropology and other qualitative approaches.

The articles included in this Special Issue are less concerned with these matters pertaining to the fundamental nature of the discipline of anthropology itself. The articles are more devoted to presenting a wide range of original insights – including implied causation – around some of the most significant issues within the anthropology of ageing. For a journal with the title *Anthropology & Aging*, the substantive articles that follow make a range of contributions that indicate how anthropological ethnography can contribute to our understanding of contemporary ageing. While I have made a general argument about how anthropologists tend to use implied causation in making comparisons, the real value comes from the way the authors of these articles have helped us to achieve a better understanding of significant topics such as how people are impacted by categories of ageing, their relationship to home and location, their sense of life purpose, changes in grandparenting and retirement, and their struggle to use their new smartphones. In each case, their contribution has been through a combination of implicit causation and explicit comparison.

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