

Macro- and micro-perspectives

Herman Bouma

Associate editor 'Gerontechnology'
E: h.bouma@gerontechnology.info

H.Bouma. Macro- and micro-perspectives. Gerontechnology 2009; 8(1):1-2; doi: 10.4017/gt.2009.08.01.001.00. Macro-perspectives from statistics of substantial numbers of ageing people are the mainstream in gerontechnology as in other learned human studies. However, macro-conclusions tend to abstract and thus distance themselves from the down-to-earth experiences of real ageing people. Micro-perspectives from case studies of a limited number of people are the exception in research, because of limited or unknown generalisation of results. However, their attraction is the focus on concrete end results in the lives of at least a few real ageing people. The media rather than the scientists are clever at exploiting the micro-approach. The cleft between macro- and micro-views is not easy to bridge, but it is argued that in the scientific macro-approach, perspectives for real ageing people should always remain in focus.

Opportunities and problems of life may be approached systematically in two different ways. Take wealth and poverty as example. A macro-view takes a birds-eye view: it maps out average income, percentages of people below or above a certain daily or yearly income, gross national product per capita and how it grows or falls, percentages of people with and without work and with or without health insurance, and many other statistics that rank and compare regions, countries, continents, and developments over time. On the other hand a micro-view considers first of all the wealth or poverty in the daily lives of certain individual people, seeks examples from how certain rich people spend their money or how certain poor people survive a draught or flood, how individuals get water, food, health care, and education, if at all. Television and other media often take the micro-approach with the purpose to draw the watcher, listener, or reader into the scene emotionally. Macro-views sketch overall pictures whereas micro-views zoom in on experiences of a few selected individuals. So macro-discussions have been held on whether financial and economic aid to Africa has helped to diminish general poverty yes or no, whereas micro-views portray

how certain villagers get a water pump or a primary school, or how some lose their jobs because of subsidized imports from richer countries. Many problems in society can be discussed both macro and micro, but it is not easy to harmonize these into a single picture or a single approach.

Gerontechnology is no exception. Demographic data are macro, indicating the absolute and relative rise of older people in society or how for women and men average life expectancy is increasing in selected countries. Also, we count or calculate the average number (prevalence) of people with chronic diseases as a function of age as well as disease adjusted life years (DALY). We have data on the number and growth percentages of ageing people with Internet connection. Instead, the micro-view asks certain ageing individuals about their financial situation, their family and friends, their expectations and ambitions, their anxiety and their difficulty to adjust to the digital era. Both approaches have validity and give us part of the answers. However, it is difficult to get these combined into a single view on actual situations, the more so since individual differences increase with rising age.

This editorial is about a problem rather than about a solution. However, a few additional remarks seem in order. In my view, the basis is how technology can enable individual ageing persons, as many as possible, to live a life of one's own choice and feel better integrated with family and friends and other communities. This basis is a myriad of micro-views. The macro-view takes many or all of these micro-existences together, but in this necessarily overall approach, essentials of the micro-stories tend to get lost. So the resulting overall macro-picture is both valid and nevertheless devoid of certain essentials of the daily experiences of ageing people.

The minimum that we may ask is to be aware of the limitations of our approach. A macro-approach runs the risk of forgetting what it means for so many individual ageing people and their human environment. Every zoom-

ing-in on specific aspects of ageing people and their environment takes us a step closer to the micro-view. Realizing the restrictions of the mainstream macro-approach may make us think a little harder on what our findings mean for ever so many ageing people, such as by discussing not only central tendencies in the data, but statistical spread of our results as well and the possible consequences for people on the tails of the distribution. A micro-approach runs the risk of suggesting invalid generalisation. In our journal, case studies will not be accepted if generalized validity is out of reach. Only in one case we published an ego-document in micro-view¹. Nevertheless, case studies are well suited for user participation; they may go in depth and reveal aspects that tend to get lost in more general approaches. Consequently, case studies may act as indicators or pilots for research directed at generalization.

Reference

1. Platt FN. Falling in darkness. *Gerontechnology* 2006;5(4):237; doi: 10.4017/gt.2006.05.04.006.00
-

ERRATUM

F. Franchimon, A.H.J.A. Ament, C.E.E. Perrot, J. Knies, J.E.M.H. van Bronswijk. Preventing chronic lung disease in an aging society by improved building ventilation: An economic assessment. *Gerontechnology* 2008;7(4):374-387; doi 0.4017/gt.2008.07.04.025.0

Page 378, left column, last paragraph, first sentence states: "...to the national standard of 1.7 ACH or 25 l/s per person...". This should be "...to the national standard of 1.7 ACH or 7 l/s per person...".

The authors

doi 10.4017/gt.2009.08.01.007.00
