

# How old are you? Uncovering the age of research participants when it is not obvious



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Background

How can global sociology help us to more adequately conceptualize age, counted in the number of years lived since birth, that has long been viewed as a universal marker of personhood and status? Age is an important construct in medical sociology because it helps us understand health outcomes and behaviours (Barrett & Michael, 2022). When investigating sexual and reproductive health issues, having reasonable knowledge of the age of the target population helps in classifying and identifying the study population (who should be included or excluded), predicting and/or explaining their behaviours. As a researcher, whose target populations are mostly adolescents and women, knowing the age of my study participants is important,

especially in studying issues about sexual and reproductive health.

In the general research process, knowing the age of research participants plays an important role in the ethical considerations for researchers. Including people below the age of 18 years in research is governed by strict ethical principles that seek to protect this group of people from any harm. It is therefore considered ethically right to seek the consent of a parent or guardian of study participants below the age of 18 years before seeking their assent to participate in a study. Going by this ethical principle, three actions are important: knowing the age of participants, seeking parental/guardian consent,

and seeking the assent of the person below the age of 18 years in the study.

In data analysis, having a sense of the age of study participants informs how data would be described, explained, and interpreted. For instance, adolescents are described as people between the ages of 10-19 and are further categorized into young adolescents (10-14 years) and older adolescents (15-19 years). In the global literature on adolescents, these are the categories that form the basis of most of the discussions on sexual and reproductive health. On the issue of child marriage, the definition is based on the age of one of the parties in the marriage. Hence,

knowing the age at first marriage of a participant plays a role in how the data would be interpreted with respect to existing literature.

## My Challenge as a Researcher

As a researcher, I have realized that knowing the age of research participants is not always easy. While the age of study participants is often measured as a continuous variable in chronological years (Johfre & Saperstein, 2023) this is not easy to pinpoint. In my interactions with my research participants, I have often observed that some did not know their age in years. This was common in communities with low education levels and low delivery of babies in health facilities. This was not

peculiar to older women; it included some young women as well. Most of these participants lived in rural communities without the requisite documentation facilities and therefore it was not surprising that they had no record of their date of birth to inform them about their ages.

What steps can researchers take to help these participants arrive at a reasonable estimate of their ages or age range? In this post, I share my experiences on how I navigated the challenge of calculating the ages of my research participants when it was obvious they did not know their ages in years. I discuss this by highlighting the various strategies I adopted to arrive at a reasonable estimate of their ages.



**Conducting an in-depth interview and being assisted by an interpreter.**

## **Finding the age of my study participants**

**During one of my fieldwork visits for a study that sought to investigate child marriage in Ghana, I was confronted with my participants' lack of precision regarding their age and its implications for my analysis. Knowing the age of the participants**

in this study was important because the study was interested in two main categories of women; women who married before the age of 18 years and were currently above the age of 18, and women who married before the age of 18 and were still below the age of 18 at the time of the fieldwork. Auntie Yaa, was a respondent who did not know either her current age or the age at which she got married. To have an idea of her age, I asked her to share some stories she was told about her birth by her parents. According to her, she was told that she was born at a time when Ghana was experiencing serious famine. This clue was very helpful to me because, in the history of Ghana, 1983 was the year the country experienced this kind of hardship;

thus, I could estimate Auntie Yaa's year of birth.

To help me know the reasonable age at which Auntie Yaa got married, I asked how long it took her to conceive her first child after she got married. According to her, she conceived immediately after she got married. Armed with this information, I asked for the age of her first child, and with this information, I got to know that she married before the age of 18 therefore per the study's objective, she was classified as a woman who got married before the age of 18 and was currently above the age of 18.

In some instances, my participants shared their age or showed evidence of their age as indicated on

official documents such as voters' ID cards or their maternity health book. In the case of Ruki, her maternity health book indicated that she was 17 years old, however, my interactions with her suggested that she was about 21 years old. How did I arrive at the age of 21? According to Ruki, she got married at the age of 14 and did not conceive until the fourth year of her marriage. At the time of the interview, she had a 3-year-old daughter and was one month pregnant with her second child. Going by Ruki's narrative, she should be 21 years, however, on her maternity health book for her second pregnancy, she was 17 years an indication that there were some inconsistencies in how old she was. Based on her narrative, she was

**classified as a woman who got married before the age of 18 and was currently above the age of 18.**



**Conducting an in-depth interview and being assisted by an interpreter.**

**On her part, Afia Atta did not know her age, however, she informed me that she was very young when some historical events took place in the country and recounted the various presidents who came to power and at what stage she was in life for each**

one of them. For instance, she noted that she gave birth to her first child, during the first coup d'état by Fl. Lt. Rawlings. This suggested that her first child was born in the year 1979. Although Afia Atta had no knowledge of her age, and even that of her children, such clues together with other biographical information gathered from her made it possible to put her in an age category based on the objectives of the research.

## Conclusion

What constitutes global sociology has been described in different ways by various scholars. One that stands out for me is the perspective that doing global sociology means doing comparative sociology. Doing comparative

sociology may stem from comparing the past and the present or comparing societies and cultures within and across societies and countries. Global sociology offers an opportunity to compare local case studies in different countries (either south-south or north-south) to identify universality and diversity in each social phenomenon. The basis for these comparisons makes a difference in the knowledge that is produced. Global sociology researchers must take into consideration the historical and social context of their study subjects (Akiwowo, 1988; Field & Syrett, 2020).

For instance, due to colonialism and modernity, age is measured chronologically in most societies

in the global south and has become the basis of categorization to the neglect of other indigenous ways of categorizing people in terms of age sets or generations (Field & Syrett, 2020). This notwithstanding, we still have societies, where chronological age is not so important and therefore members of the society do not know their chronological age. We must make room for other age categories. Allowing my interlocutors to share their stories to inform or help identify their age set/ generations provides a better understanding of their age given their social context.

In most cases, to get around participants not knowing their age, relying on qualitative measures is

very useful. Allowing participants to share their life stories by relating them to specific events in their personal life or in the wider society as well as probing further helped me to have a sense of their age range and not their specific age from their date of birth. Using this strategy reduced possible errors that could have been made because I did not know their ages or even relied solely on what has been documented as seen in Ruki's narrative. Clearly, the institutional record of her age was not in sync with her narrative, therefore casting doubts about her documented age. This points out a limitation in the reliance on chronological age as the sole indicator of age in most research because, in some social contexts,

there may be misrepresentation.

Relying on age categorization or groupings guided by the objective of one's study could help reduce such misrepresentations. When researching a population or a group that may not know their age either because of low levels of education or poor record keeping, it is important to validate responses by asking probing questions to unearth the truth about their responses.

Finally, I recommend that researchers should be guided by the objectives of their study as well as the social context of their interlocutors to determine whether knowing the chronological age or age categorization of their participants will be the best option for achieving the goals of

their research.

*Cite this article as: Gyan, S. E. (2024, August 26). How old are you? Uncovering the age of research participants when it is not obvious. Global Qualitative Sociology Network. <https://global-qualitative-sociology.net/2024/08/26/how-old-are-you/>*

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