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Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology

Edited by Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin

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Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology

Later years are changing under the impact of demographic, social and cultural shifts. No longer confined to the sphere of social welfare, they are now studied within a wider cultural framework that encompasses new experiences and new modes of being. Drawing on influences from the arts and humanities, and deploying diverse methodologies—visual, literary, spatial—and theoretical perspectives, Cultural Gerontology has brought new aspects of later life into view. This major new publication draws together these currents, including sections on Theory and Methods; Embodiment; Identities and Social Relationships; Consumption and Leisure; and Time and Space. Based on specially commissioned chapters by leading international authors, the *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology* will provide concise authoritative reviews of the key debates and themes shaping this exciting new field.

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Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin



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The field of cultural gerontology

An introduction

Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin

Cultural gerontology has emerged in the last decade as one of the most lively and insightful areas of academic analysis. Drawing together work across the humanities and social sciences, it has changed the ways in which we study later years, challenging old stereotypes and bringing new theories, new methodologies, and new forms of political and intellectual engagement to bear. In this Handbook we draw together work in this field, displaying the range and potentiality of the area, revealing its current vibrancy and future promise, with the aim of providing a position statement for the field.

Cultural gerontology has its roots in the wider phenomenon of the cultural turn, and in the opening section of this chapter we review the nature of the cultural turn in gerontology, where it came from and what are its principle themes, reflecting on the relationship between cultural gerontology and other key strands, such as critical gerontology. We then discuss some of the critiques that have been advanced in relation to the approach, both within gerontology and more widely. We then review the processes, practical and intellectual, underlying the formation of the *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*. Finally we ask what is currently missing from the approach, reviewing possible future directions and ways forward.

The cultural turn

The cultural turn came relatively late to gerontology, and it is only in the last decade or so that its influence has begun to be fully felt. Since then however it has provided the motive force behind some of the most stimulating work in the field. By common account, the cultural turn within the social sciences encompasses two interconnected elements: the theoretical-epistemological and the socio-historical (Nash 2001, Friedland and Mohr 2004). The first relates to the upsurge of new theorising broadly termed postmodern or poststructuralist that has disturbed assumptions made earlier about the social world and how it could be known and analysed. Drawing on a range of theorising, and involving both ontological and epistemological elements, it has presented a complex and at times discordant set of ideas; and indeed some have questioned its overall coherence (Roseneil 2012). Broadly uniting the area, however, is the sense of the centrality of meaning, in both the constitution and analysis of the social world. With this has gone a shift from a focus on structure—and with it the earlier grand narratives of social science

epitomised by Marxism—towards agency, with renewed interest in subjectivity, reflexivity and individuation (Giddens 1991).

In the context of ageing, an example of such approaches is research, drawing on feminist and queer theory, that has acted to destabilise and deconstruct definitions of age, challenging earlier modernist accounts based on medical or chronological definitions of age, and the explicit normativities contained within them, suggesting the ways in which the categories of age—like those of gender and sexuality—are subject to fluidity and cultural constitution.

The second element in the cultural turn—the historico-social—relates to the sense that under the condition of postmodernity—or late or second modernity; the terminology and exact definitions differ with different authors—the character of the social world has itself undergone a significant shift. An example of this in relation to ageing is what is termed the reconstitution of ageing thesis, a set of arguments that suggest that in late modern society, the experience of age has itself changed, becoming more diverse and less embedded in social structures, more influenced by cultural phenomena such as consumption (Blaikie 1999, Gilleard and Higgs 2000).

Cultural gerontology has also been shaped by factors distinctive to the field of ageing. Much of the impetus behind cultural gerontology has come from a desire to get away from the dominant account of ageing in academic studies that has focussed on problematic old age, emphasising frailty and its consequent social burdens. Cultural gerontology by contrast aims to produce a fuller and richer account of later years—as it is often termed in this literature—one that places the subjectivity of older people, the width and depth of their lives, at the forefront of analysis.

Cultural gerontology also represents an attempt to redress the neglect of age specifically within sociological analysis, which traditionally avoided the topic, handing it over to the discursive constructions of medicine, social work and public policy. The cultural turn in gerontology can thus be interpreted as an attempt to provide what has long been missing, in the form of an adequate sociology of old age.

We can ask at this point what is implied by culture here. Despite the currency of the term, it is noticeable that few writers in the area attempt a definition, and where they do it is often not as helpful as might be expected. This is because the driving force behind cultural gerontology is not debates about the meaning of culture, so much as concerns centred on the field and how it can be analysed. 'Cultural' is used in this context in varying and sometimes conflicting ways, so that its meaning, application and significance are contested. In the context of cultural gerontology, it is, therefore, perhaps best to see it as a tendency, a broad movement of ideas and theories focussed around meaning, that have together created a new field, encompassing work across the social science/humanities divide.

The arrival of the humanities

Until recently the arts and humanities were not greatly interested in the subject of age. Old age was seen at best as marginal and uninteresting, and at worst dull and depressing. In this the humanities reflected the wider ageism of the academy and society generally. More recently, however, in response to demographic shifts and the growing cultural visibility of older people, there has been a flowering of work that has explored the experience of old age in films, novels, poetry, biography, and art. As a result the humanities have increasingly turned their academic gaze towards the area, bringing new approaches, influenced by psychoanalytic, linguistic, poststructuralist, and other literary theories. Some of the most influential writers in cultural gerontology, such as Margaret Gullette, Tom Cole and Kathy Woodward, indeed come from this humanities background (Gullette 2015). These shifts have produced a wealth of new subject areas, including

literature (Gullette 1988, Zeilig 2011, Worsfold 2011, Falcus 2015), autobiography (Thompson 2000, Ray 2000, Bornat 2011, 2015), theatre (Basting 2009, Mangan 2013, Bernard and Munro 2015), film (Chivers 2003, 2011, Wearing 2007, 2013, Robinson *et al.* 2007, Cohen-Shalev 2012, Swinnen 2013, 2015), painting (Meagher 2014, 2015), music (Jennings and Gardner 2012, Bennett 2013, Jennings 2015), as well as the concept of late style in relation to creativity (Amigoni and McMullen 2015). This has gone with a revived historiography of age that draws on wider cultural sources (Cole 1992, Katz 1996, Thane 2000, 2005, Botelho and Thane 2001, Kampf *et al.* 2012, Kampf 2015), and new philosophical explorations (Small 2007, Baars 2012).

Central themes

In the Handbook we have grouped the chapters into five broad sections: theory and methods; embodiment; identities and social relationships; consumption and leisure; and time and space. These, however, are not mutually excluding; indeed it is one of the features of the field that its central themes overlap and interpenetrate, crossing boundaries, both disciplinary and theoretical. In this brief overview we will reflect on some of the central features of the field.

The first feature to note is the active engagement with theory. Mainstream social gerontology has often been criticised for being atheoretical (Birren and Bengtson 1988). Cultural gerontology by contrast is marked by active engagement with social theory, as is illustrated in the work of influential writers in the field, such as Stephen Katz, Barbara Marshall, Toni Calasanti, Chris Phillipson, Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs (Katz 2015, Marshall 2015, Calasanti and King 2015, Phillipson 2015, Gilleard and Higgs 2015). Writers from the arts and humanities have been similarly influenced by the turn to theory that took place in their fields in the late twentieth century.

The body and embodiment have been central to cultural gerontology, reflecting wider intellectual influences (Turner 1991, Shilling 2012). Social gerontology, however, was initially reluctant to engage with this territory, regarding it as potentially retrogressive, threatening to reduce old age to physiological and medical processes, sidelining the significance of social and cultural forces in the constitution of age. More recently, however, with the cultural turn there has been a flowering of work exploring the complex nature of embodiment in old age (Öberg 1996, Gilleard and Higgs 2013, Tulle 2015). The body in later years is increasingly treated as a site of governance, whether in the form of bio-power exercised by professionals such as doctors and social workers, or in the form of Foucauldian technologies of the self (Foucault 1988), through which the bodies of older people are disciplined, made subject to regimes of fitness and health. Responsibility for ageing well has become a new moral imperative, with, as Katz (2001) argues, ageing well increasingly understood as ageing without appearing to do so, producing a proliferation of anti-ageing techniques in the form of the commercialised culture of cosmetics, hair dyes, and slimming and exercise regimes (Furman 1997, Coupland 2003, Calasanti 2007, Hurd Clarke 2011, Ward and Holland 2011, Ellison 2014, Hurd Clarke and Bennett 2015, Carroll and Bartlett 2015).

The field is also marked by the focus on subjectivity and identity, which in turn reflects the shift in analysis from structural aggregate forms of sociality towards a more fluid conception of 'being in society' (Rojek and Turner 2000). With this has gone a new emphasis on the views, experiences and subjectivities of older people, previously obscured by the dominance of more 'scientific' approaches and by the objectifying practices of policy makers, opening up work exploring the subjectivities of older people through film, literature, autobiography, and art. Work in cultural gerontology attempts to recover the individuality of older lives, through autobiography or narrative (Thompson 2000, Ray 2000, Bornat 2015), through ethnographic techniques (Degnen 2015) or other methodologies that place the voices and visions of older people centre

stage (Richards *et al.* 2012, Martin 2015). Work within psychology has similarly explored the social construction of identity in age (Biggs 1997, Gergen 2002). Such work emphasises the range and variety of older people's experiences and views, reiterating the point that people in later years—contrary to the stereotype—are more, rather than less, diverse than the young.

The emphasis on agency has also reinforced an understanding of society as malleable, constituted in and through cultural practices and discourses capable of being made and remade through changing lifestyles. The emphasis on discourse, rooted in the linguistic turn, which was the precursor and major contributor to the cultural one, has encouraged analysts to see ageing as a discursive construction created in and through culture, though as we shall note one that for most in the field retains its concrete physiological base.

The cultural turn has also brought new interest in diversity, exemplified in work around gender, 'race', sexuality, ethnicity and disability. In relation to age this has produced a range of work unpacking the gendered nature of old age and its cultural diversity (Arber and Ginn 1991, Thompson 1994, 2006, Calasanti and Slevin 2001, Krekula 2007, Torres 2015, Hearn and Wray 2015, Calasanti and King 2015, Chan and Ma 2015). Work around sexualities is also increasingly prominent, once again challenging the implicit normativities of earlier work (Hearn 1995, Gott 2005, Sandberg 2011, 2015, Suen 2015). Diversity has also been explored through work on sub-groups such as older punks (Bennett and Hodkinson 2012, Bennett 2013, 2015) or alternative women (Holland 2004).

With the shift from production to consumption within late modernity has gone a new emphasis on lifestyle as the locus of identity, including in later years. Work has explored the role of consumption goods (Jones *et al.* 2008, 2009, Moody and Sood 2010), of dress and fashion (Fairhurst 1998, Twigg 2013, 2015, Twigg and Majima 2014), of hair and appearance (Furman 1997, Ward and Holland 2011, Ward 2015, Hurd Clarke and Bennett 2015) and of music (Bennett 2013, Jennings 2015). Activities such as gardening (Bhatti 2006, Milligan and Bingley 2015), volunteering (Warburton 2015), sport (Tulle 2008, Phoenix and Griffin 2015) and caring for grandchildren (Arber and Timonen 2015) become increasingly important in older people's lives, which are also shaped by cultures of widowhood (Martin-Matthews 2015), retirement (Vickerstaff 2015), and money (Price 2015).

The expansion of consumption culture has created a new arena within which subjectivities are being forged. This is explored in work on the grey market (Moody and Sood 2010), travel (Hyde 2015) and material goods generally (Ekerdt 2009, 2015). This links to debates about the baby boomers and claims that they represent a distinctive consumption generation—or at least those with the purchasing power—that are rewriting the scripts of old age (Gilleard and Higgs 2000). It has been suggested that older people are now increasingly integrated with the mainstream through shared lifestyle, so that later years now form part of an extended arc of middle life that endures until the interruption of serious ill health (Öberg and Tornstam 1999, 2001).

Much of the new cultural work explores the nature of late middle and early old age. Indeed part of the impetus behind the development of the field has come from a realisation that the nature of later years is changing, with the extension of the life course and the opening out of the Third Age as a new cultural space. The focus on the Third Age has, however, been criticised for privileging the experiences of a select group of older people, those with income and health; for presenting an aspirational account of their lives, influenced by the commercialised worlds of the media and consumption; and for implicitly endorsing the neo-liberal restructuring of the welfare state by its emphasis on choice and autonomy. Jönson (2012) raises the question of the degree to which this account of the 'new old' in fact represents the ageism of the middle

aged, keen to mark themselves off from the truly old, asserting a different present and future for themselves.

It is sometimes assumed that cultural approaches are confined to these earlier stages of age; and they have certainly been the main focus of analysis. However one of the challenges of the cultural approach is to show how it applies also to the oldest old and older people receiving care and support. Work in this mode in relation to dementia has begun on narrative (Kontos 2015), hair and appearance (Ward and Holland 2011, Ward and Campbell 2013), and dress (Twigg and Buse 2013, Buse and Twigg 2014). Chapters in the Handbook address the fourth age (Lloyd 2015), falls (Katz 2015), care (Fine 2015), loneliness (Victor and Sullivan 2015), suffering (de Medeiros and Black 2015) and death (Kirkman 2015).

One of the most significant features of late or postmodernity has been the rise of the visual and the virtual. Through technological innovation, visual imagery is now omnipresent in our lives, to some extent replacing the dominance of the word that marked the earlier stages of modernity. This shift has exposed the ways in which age is itself a visual phenomenon, a process whereby older people are caught in and defined by their appearance. This is particularly marked for women. As Woodward (1999) has commented, older women are both invisible—in that they are not seen—and hypervisible—in that they are all that is seen. Cultural gerontology has increasingly explored the visual constitution of age through work on fine art, film, photographic representation, advertising and cartoons, and through the use of visual methodologies (Martin 2015). Sources of imagery have been explored in relation, for example, to soap opera stars and celebrities (Harrington and Brothers 2010, Fairclough-Isaacs 2015), advertisements (Williams *et al.* 2007, Lee *et al.* 2007, Ylänné 2012, 2015) and magazines (Lewis *et al.* 2011). The new emphasis on the visual has also refreshed and extended the methods used in gerontology (Black 2009, Reynolds 2010, Martin 2012, Richards *et al.* 2012, Phoenix 2012).

Finally, changes consequent on the digital revolution have also altered our understandings of time and space, which have become disembedded (Baars 2015, Grenier 2015). Globalisation, at both the economic and cultural levels, has presented new possibilities in terms of travel, family reconstitution, sources of care (Phillipson 2013, 2015), of late and lifestyle migrations (O'Reilly 2000, Katz 2005, Ramji 2006, O'Reilly and Benson 2015) and the use of social media and digital technologies (Buse 2010, Joyce *et al.* 2015, Jones 2015). With this have come new forms of uncertainty and risk (Giddens 1991, Kaldor and Stiglitz 2013). Global events at a distance now rapidly impact on the localities of older people, drawing them into global financial and welfare structures (Phillipson, 2015). The division between rural and urban has become more complex (Edmondson and Scharf 2015). Within cultural gerontology there is renewed interest in the analysis of space and place, especially through work on the cultural meaning of home (Peace 2015), and of significant spaces within the home, such as kitchens and bathrooms (Twigg 2000, Angus *et al.* 2005). The changing significances of public space for older people have also been explored (Rowles and Bernard 2013, Holland 2015).

Cultural gerontology as an academic field

Though cultural gerontology has become an increasingly popular term, it overlaps with others, such as humanistic gerontology and critical gerontology. Humanistic gerontology—the term used by Cole and Ray (2010)—shares many of the same concerns with meaning and subjectivity as cultural gerontology, though with a particularly strong emphasis on the role of the arts and humanities.

Critical gerontology has a longer history of use. It shares with cultural gerontology a concern with deconstructing the definitions and understandings of age, critiquing theoretical self understandings of gerontology dominated by idealised concepts of natural science as representative of 'objective' knowledge (Lynott and Lynott 2002, Ray 2008, Baars 2012). But drawing on the Frankfurt School, it emphasises political economy—in the UK indeed the approach is often termed the Political Economy School—exposing and critiquing the political and economic structures that shape the experience of age, largely in disadvantageous ways (Townsend 1986, Phillipson and Walker 1986, Estes and Binney 1989, Arber and Ginn 1991). There is thus significant overlap with cultural gerontology, particularly at the level of theorising, though less in subject matter, for the political economy of ageing that underpins critical gerontology remains rooted in economic and political structures, whereas cultural gerontology extends into areas of culture not addressed by this. Work in critical gerontology is also marked by its political commitment. We shall return below to the question of whether cultural gerontology implies any erosion of this.

At a more concrete level the academic field has also been shaped by a series of international conferences that took place under the title of cultural gerontology in the 1990s and 2000s and that continue today. It is evidence of the vibrancy of the field that these conferences maintained themselves without any formal organisation, simply relying on the willingness of a new group of academics to take the next one on. The early conferences, held in Copenhagen, Berlin, Visby, Tampere and Milton Keynes (UK) had a Nordic and northern European character, reflecting the strength of social science in relation to age in those countries (Andersson 2002). Later conferences in Lleida and Maastricht brought stronger literary and performative emphases. The 2014 conference in Galway, which was the largest so far, adopted a broad approach that encompassed the arts and humanities, as well as the social sciences. It saw the conference become a constituent part of the European Network of Aging Studies. As yet there has not been a cultural gerontology conference in North America, though the conferences have always attracted strong representation from there.

Critiques

Are there problems or limitations associated with the approach? First we should note a general set of intellectual problems associated with the wider cultural turn. These focus primarily on the radical epistemology that underlies poststructuralist theorising, though they extend also to the sense that the cultural turn threatens to dissolve everything into discourse, with a consequent loss of a sense of the social and its underlying reality (Rojek and Turner 2000). David Harvey (1990) was early in his critique of these tendencies from a Marxist perspective. Critics from this tradition attack what they see as the postmodern world of smoke and mirrors that hides the real bases of exploitation. It is also worth noting that the cultural turn has only occurred in some of the social sciences: disciplines such as economics, or to lesser degree psychology, have remained relatively indifferent.

There are also, however, criticisms distinctive to the field of gerontology. We have noted how cultural gerontology is in part constituted around a specific set of assertions about the nature of society under conditions of late or postmodernity, in which cultural fields such as consumption and the media are accorded central significance. There are parallels here with the way in which academic fields such as cultural criminology have been constituted around the impact of media and consumption, in conjunction with the desire to decentre policy related analysis (Ferrell *et al.* 2015). But this focus on consumption and the media in the lives of older people can be questioned. It is one thing to point to the impact of such areas of life, another to establish their pre-dominance in the lives of older people. Cultural gerontology can be criticised for exaggerating

the impact of these, leading the field into an overly modish analysis that reflects aspects of wider popular culture but that neglects the major structural forces that continue to shape the lives of older people. In practice, as we shall see through the chapters of the book, structural issues remain prominent.

Much work around consumption has suffered from theoretical weakness with regard to its theory of action, with its emphasis on voluntarism, and on an active, expressive, choosing subject motivated by concern with personal identity expressed through lifestyle (Warde 2005). As a result, cultural analyses of consumption have often been marked by a celebrationist tone in which consumption is uncritically identified with freedom and empowerment. In general cultural gerontology has avoided this trap; and work on consumption among older people has not adopted a celebrationist tone. Rather it has persistently emphasised the ambiguity of cultural formations, pointing to ways in which consumption both enlarges the expressive capabilities of older people's lives and locks them into new disciplinary discourses. Older people, like everyone else, are caught in webs of cultural meanings, so that while they are able to express agency and resist dominant cultural norms, they are at the same time formed by them.

Critics have accused the cultural turn of being theoretically incoherent, marked by intellectual eclecticism in which ideas are adopted uncritically. It is true that cultural gerontology has in general been characterised by an inclusive spirit, with a wish to encompass and embrace all approaches; and this can indeed hide what are real tensions and differences, particularly between the interpretive traditions of the humanities and the more empirically focussed social sciences. Not everyone agrees on what counts as evidence and analysis in this field.

This leads to a third area of critique. This concerns the character of cultural gerontology as a Western-dominated and arguably post-imperialist form of analysis. It is certainly the case that most of the work that has been done under this label focusses on the West (Lamb 2015); and in the section that follows we will note the difficulties we encountered in locating relevant work in non-Western contexts. The focus on consumption reinforces this bias. To this degree cultural gerontology does reflect the particular social and cultural experiences of the affluent West. There is, of course, nothing wrong with exploring such preoccupations. Such a focus fits well with culturally based arguments exploring the culturally located and situated. But their character, as local, distinctive and partial, needs to be acknowledged if we are to avoid the distortions associated with the old sociology of modernity, with its homogenising account in which the current circumstances of the developed West were presented as a universal situation.

Lastly, the turn to culture, with its emphasis on subjects such as appearance, consumption, and identity, can seem to present a de-politicised account that threatens to take us away from the nitty-gritty world of gerontology with its proper concerns with frailty, poverty and social exclusion. As we have noted, Marxist critics argue that an emphasis on discourse obscures the economic and social factors that materially shape the experiences and situations of old people. One of the gains of the Political Economy School in the UK and critical gerontology in the US has precisely been to expose the operation of such structural factors (Townsend 1986, Estes and Binney 1989, Arber and Ginn 1991). The lives of many older people contain suffering and constraint that is to a significant degree social and economic in origin, and this needs to be analysed and exposed.

But the perception of a depoliticised account is, we suggest, a mistake. In reality, the cultural turn allows us to deepen our engagement with the politics of age. Increasingly we understand the nature of political struggle as extending beyond the familiar territory of access to economic goods or structural positions, expressed in the conventional field of party politics, towards a wider focus on the politics of everyday life. The wider shift towards identity politics in the late twentieth century showed how politics are potentially present in every context, involving the

contestation of normalised identities and social relations in which one individual or group is subordinated to another, wherever these occur in the social field (Nash 2001). Such understandings that developed particularly in relation to new social movements apply also to age. The turn to culture allows us to understand and contextualise how such norms implicitly marginalise and render less visible the experience of age (Laws 1995, Laz 1998, 2003). Many of the most deeply felt assaults of ageism operate at the level of culture, as Gullette (1997, 2011), Woodward (1991, 1999), Bytheway (1995) and others have shown, through the pervasive culture of birthday cards, jokes, adverts, and fictional or media representations that teach people to fear ageing, to lose confidence and to retreat from cultural visibility. Here the body becomes a key site for the politics of age. As disability theorists have shown, some of the most profound forms of exclusion and assaults on self-worth are expressed at the level of the body (Morris 1992, Hughes 2000), and this is true also of age. To exclude these aspects is to miss a central part of the operation of ageism. This is not, of course, to deny the significance of more material or structural factors, or the need to engage politically with these. The turn to culture need not by its nature undermine structural understandings of power, inequality or oppression. Rather it adds new tools for their analysis.

Constructing the handbook

In constructing this volume we have adopted three broad approaches. The first has been to identify key writers and studies in the field. This is reflected in chapters either written by such authors or reviewing their work. Those familiar with the field will recognise that we have indeed secured contributions from many such. As we have pursued our research, we have come into contact with new authors whose work is clearly central to how this territory is developing; and we would have been delighted to have included contributions from them. But a Handbook, in the nature of things, aims at a moving target. Future—and other—versions will be able to encompass even more work in this field.

The second approach has been to identify key topics or dimensions of life that are of central importance in that broadening of understanding that has been consequent on the cultural turn. As we have noted, later years are now understood in fuller, richer and more plural ways: chapters on gardening, hair, travel, music, and sexuality illustrate this. Indeed, once you begin to look at the lives of older people through this lens, a myriad of potential subjects come into view. Even in the fifty-nine chapters that constitute this Handbook we could not hope to cover all these, nor in many cases would we be able to identify appropriate authors. This is a protean area, and much of the research remains to be done.

Thirdly, we have attempted to reflect the range of new methods and analytic approaches that have entered the field as a consequence of the cultural turn. Many of these result from the different disciplines that now engage with the area. The arts and humanities in particular have brought new theorising, new analytic techniques—visual, linguistic, historical, literary—as well as wholly new topic areas, such as theatre, art, music, and film. In social sciences there has been a rediscovery of, or at least reemphasis on, qualitative approaches, such as ethnography, narrative, and visual methods. As a result ageing is now analysed in more plural and variable ways; and we have aimed to reflect this in the Handbook.

Future challenges and directions

As we have seen, cultural gerontology is a vibrant and growing field that is presenting new challenges for academic analysis. The potential range of subjects that can be explored within this

paradigm is broad, and new developments are emerging all the time. However, there are areas that need further elaboration. For example, cultural gerontology, with its focus on mediatization, consumption and individuation, has its roots in the experience of younger old age. Indeed making this stage of life academically visible has been one of its principal contributions. However, cultural approaches can also be deployed in relation to frailer and more disabled groups, as the chapters in the Handbook on subjects such as the fourth age, care and suffering show (Lloyd 2015, Fine 2015, de Medeiros 2015). These are fruitful developments, and their theories and methods could be translated further into exploring care homes and the oldest old as well as wider structural dimensions and organisations associated with paid work. Examples could include the everyday and cultural lifestyles of residents in care, the oldest old as well as elders who are far from affluent, many of whom live in poverty.

As we noted earlier, one of the limitations of current work in the field has been its focus on the developed West, and within that on the experiences of relatively affluent and often 'white' elders. Among social divisions, gender has received relatively extensive analysis; indeed, work on gender has in many ways led the field. This has, however, left 'race' and ethnicity relatively poorly addressed. Future work needs to explore the interconnections of ageing, race and ethnicity, understood as within, between and of Western, non-Western and transnational countries.

One potential barrier to the development of the field, however, is the pattern of funded research, which is heavily biased towards policy related subjects. This makes it harder to pursue work that aims to foreground the everyday lives of older people. Even where such lives are studied, they are often conceptualised through the prism of health and wellbeing, with cultural aspects of life, such as gardening, theatre and the arts, evaluated in relation to the extent that health and wellbeing are promoted.

Lastly, the move towards public engagement opens up new possibilities for social scientists and arts and humanities scholars collaborating in interdisciplinary research, engaging public audiences through the media of digital technologies, theatre, the arts, and visual and sensory exhibitions.

Conclusion

In this short introduction we have aimed to outline the main features of cultural gerontology, exploring where it has come from—what intellectual influences it has drawn on, what social and historical shifts it reflects. One of the great benefits of the approach has been the ways that it has linked age studies to wider academic concerns, particularly through its active engagement with theory, helping to reduce its intellectual isolation. The focus on the life course has also had the effect of integrating work on old age with earlier stages of life, helping to reduce the ways in which age is seen as different and isolated, undermining the processes whereby older people are homogenised, reduced to the single identity of 'old'. We believe that cultural gerontology has much to contribute to the field of age studies; widening the social gerontological imaginary, bringing new and creative methodologies to bear on the understanding of all dimensions of the lives of people in mid to later life. We hope that this Handbook will act as a catalyst for further work in the field.

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