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The Challenge of Cultural Gerontology

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Over the last decade, Cultural Gerontology has emerged as one of the most vibrant elements of writing about age (Twigg, J., & Martin, W. (Eds.) (2015). The Routledge handbook of cultural gerontology. London: Routledge). Reflecting the wider Cultural Turn, it has expanded the field of gerontology beyond all recognition. No longer confined to frailty, or the dominance of medical and social welfare perspectives, cultural gerontology addresses the nature and experience of later years in the widest sense. In this review, we will explore how the Cultural Turn, which occurred across the social sciences and humanities in the late 20th century, came to influence age studies. We will analyze the impulses that led to the emergence of the field and the forces that have inhibited or delayed its development. We will explore how cultural gerontology has recast aging studies, widening its theoretical and substantive scope, taking it into new territory intellectually and politically, presenting this in terms of 4 broad themes that characterize the work: subjectivity and identity; the body and embodiment; representation and the visual; and time and space. Finally, we will briefly address whether there are problems in the approach.

Key words: Arts and humanities, Identity, Body, Representation, Time, Space, Postmodernism, Poststructuralism

What Is Cultural Gerontology and Where Has It Come From?

A primary influence has been intellectual shifts in mainstream social science, allied to developments in the arts and humanities. By common consent, there are two broad elements to the cultural turn (Friedland & Mohr, 2004; Nash, 2001). The first is epistemological, reflecting the impact of theorizing that has its roots in poststructuralism and allied developments in feminism, queer theory, and postmodernism generally (Roseneil, 2012). This theorizing is complex and diverse, involving both epistemological and ontological elements. Central to it, however, is the recognition of the way culture is constitutive of social relations and identities. Society can be seen as discursively constituted as a web of signs, so that the central focus of analysis becomes the interpretation and deconstruction of these. This has gone with a shift away from structure—especially structure as expressed in deterministic models of society or grand narratives such as Marxism—toward agency in which themes of identity, reflexivity, and individuation are prominent (Giddens, 1991). The second element is historico-social, involving the assertion that significant shift has occurred in the nature of society that means culture now plays an unprecedented role in the constitution of social identities and realities.

These two impulses—epistemological and historico-social—are reflected in age studies. The epistemological turn can be illustrated in work, informed by feminism and queer theory, that has aimed to disturb and destabilize our

understanding of old age and the role of biology and chronology in defining it. We will explore this further when we look at debates around embodiment, subjectivity, and identity. The historico-cultural element can be seen in debates around the "reconstitution of ageing" thesis that suggest that the nature of age has shifted with changing demographics and the rise of consumption culture, redefining the experience and representation of later years (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000, 2013).

It is worth noting that, despite the centrality of culture to the field, no simple or satisfactory definition emerges from this literature. Culture is used in varying, and sometimes contradictory, ways (Bonnell & Hunt, 1999). Some writers attempt to provide a definition, but most do not; and where they do, it is often not as helpful as might be expected. This is because the central driver for this theorizing comes not from debates around the definition of culture, but either from content-specific arguments concerning changes in the nature of society, often under the influence of theories about consumption or the media, or from new theorizing in relation to epistemology. Cultural is better understood here as a set of influences, containing contradictory definitions and theoretical approaches, while still sharing certain broad impulses or family resemblances. The element that unites the field however is concern with meaning, and the sense that the social world is constituted by such meanings. It is important to note, however, that many of the themes or theoretical positions that underlie the Cultural Turn have long been present in the work of classical theorists of sociology (Shilling, 2012; Turner, 1991). And for disciplines like social anthropology, culture has always been a central focus of analysis.

In relation to gerontology, there is however, an additional dynamic in the field that is distinctive to the area. Cultural gerontology specifically emerged out of a desire to escape the dominant paradigm that presented later years within a social welfare and public policy framework that emphasized frailty and burden. It aims instead to present a fuller and richer account, that locates older people and their subjectivity at the heart of the analysis, expanding old age—or "later years" as it is often termed in this literature—to encompass unproblematic old age. Such approaches have often adopted a life course perspective, aiming to reconnect older people with the younger mainstream, emphasizing continuity rather than division. Such impulses themselves reflect social change, with increasing numbers of older people living longer, healthier and—for some, more affluent—lives.

The Arrival of the Humanities

Until recently, the humanities have not been greatly engaged with the topic of age, reflecting the wider agism of literary and academic culture. But under the impact of the theoretical turn, particularly embodied in postmodern, poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theorizing, as well as by wider changes in society that have made age more visible culturally, they have extended their analytic gaze. Many of the key writers within cultural gerontology, such as Gullette and Woodward, emerged out of this humanities perspective. Cole and Ray (2010) indeed refer to the field as "humanistic gerontology."

Arts and humanities scholars have brought not just new subject areas but also new epistemologies and methodologies. There is now a wide range of work addressing literature and the constitution of age (Gullette, 1988; Worsfold, 2011; Zeilig, 2011), autobiography (Bornat, 2011; Ray, 2000; Thompson, 2000), theatre (Basting, 2009; Swinnen & Port, 2012; Swinnen & Stotesbury, 2012), film (Chivers, 2003, 2011; Cohen-Shalev, 2012; Swinnen, 2013; Wearing, 2007, 2013), painting (Meagher, 2014), music (Bennett, 2013; Jennings & Gardner, 2012), and philosophy (Baars, 2012; Small, 2007). These developments have been accompanied by a revived historiography of age (Botelho & Thane, 2001; Cole, 1992; Kampf, Marshall, & Petersen, 2012; Katz, 1996; Thane, 2000, 2005).

These shared processes across the humanities and the social sciences have created new academic forms in the guise of the transdisciplinarities that cross and transcend disciplinary divisions, creating areas of genuinely shared analysis. Academic fields such as gender and queer studies were pioneers of this. Age studies have the potential to be another.

U.S. and European Differences

It is worth noting at this point that there are differences between European and American versions of these developments. Cultural Gerontology was strongly influenced by Nordic and U.K. developments (Andersson, 2002). This European work tends to be more influenced by postmodern and poststructuralist theorizing and by intellectual developments in social science. These are present within American work, but less dominant. Within American work, the stronger influence has been from the humanities, particularly those that engage directly with the search for meaning, reflecting the stronger tradition within American work of regarding the humanities as focused on the moral and spiritual issue of how we should live our lives. As Cole and Ray, leading exponents of the tradition, comment:

> mainstream gerontology – with its highly technical and instrumental, avowedly objective, value neutral and specialised discourses – lacks an appropriate language for addressing the basic moral and spiritual issues of our ageing society ... and the fundamental questions of human existence... [around] what it means to be old. (2010, 1)

Though it is important not to overemphasis the difference, it does reflect the contrast between largely secularized Europe and the more religiously engaged culture of the United States. In essence, if we regard meaning as central to the enterprise of cultural gerontology, then the European tradition is more concerned with the analysis of meaning, and the American with the search for it.

Identities and Subjectivities

The Cultural Turn has been associated with renewed interest in identity and subjectivity that itself reflects a shift in analytic focus away from structural aggregate forms of sociality toward "being in society" (Rojek & Turner, 2000). The revaluation of agency has reemphasised the sense of society as something that is inherently plastic, capable of being made and remade through life style choices, values, judgments, changing definitions, and discourses (Nash, 2001), reinforcing the perception of critical social theory that the existing state of affairs does not exhaust all possibilities. With this comes a stronger sense of how social representations constitute and remake what they represent. Novels, art works, photographic projects do not just explore later years but have the capacity to shift how we understand, embody, and perform them. Cultural fields thus become central territory for the changing negotiation of age. In this context, 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 & Sood, 2010), travel (Hyde, 2015), clothing (Twigg, 2013), and material goods generally (Ekerdt, 2009).

These developments have produced a renewed emphasis on the lived experience of age - on old age from the perspective of older people themselves rather than the external, objectifying, and often denigrating, ones of dominant culture, epitomized in many policy making and medical accounts that present a homogenizing, stereotypical account. Work within cultural gerontology by contrast attempts to recover the individuality of older lives, through autobiography or narrative (Ray, 2000; Thompson, 2000) or through methodologies that place the voices and visions of older people centre stage (Richards, Warren, & Gott, 2012). Work within psychology has explored the social construction of identity in age (Biggs, 1997; Gergen & Gergen, 2002). Such work emphasizes 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 and not less diverse than the young.

The Cultural Turn has brought new interest in the politics of identity with an explosion of work around "race," gender, sexuality, and disability. This is reflected in work in relation to age unpacking the gendered nature of old age and its cultural and ethnic diversity (Arber & Ginn, 1991; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001, 2006; Krekula, 2007; Thompson, 1994, 2006). Work around sexualities has similarly challenged the implicit normativities of earlier accounts (Gott, 2005; Hearn, 1995). Diversity is also addressed through work on subgroups such as alternative women (Holland, 2004) or aging punks (Bennett, 2013; Bennett & Hodkinson, 2012).

Integrating age into debates around identity also provokes an understanding of aging as a process rather than a state, a structuring principle that operates throughout the life course. This in turn has freed age from some of its conceptual limitations, opening up more plural accounts of old age and its boundaries, allowing us to reflect on the ways the definitions of these vary in different cultural fields. In areas of consumption like high fashion, age sets in early; for certain categories of people—powerful, wealthy men—it sets in late.

Body and Embodiment

Over the last 20 years, a large literature has emerged across the humanities and significant parts of the social sciences addressing the body and embodiment (Shilling, 2012; Turner, 1991). Initially, social gerontology was reluctant to engage with this, regarding the body as a potentially retrogressive subject that threatened to undermine the gains of the Political Economy or Critical Gerontology schools that had emphasized the ways in which old age was socially rather than physiologically constituted. More recently, however, the complex interplay between the body and its social and cultural constitution in age has come to be recognized as one of the central themes of cultural gerontology (Gilleard & Higgs, 2013).

This has opened up new territory for empirical investigation in which the body is understood as a key site for the operation of new forms of governmentality. Increasingly, older people are drawn into what Foucault (1988) in his late work termed Technologies of the Self. Through this, the bodies of older people are disciplined and made subject to regimes of fitness and health in which responsibility for aging well becomes a moral imperative (Katz, 2001). Such pressures are illustrated in work on cosmetics and antiaging (Calasanti, 2007; Coupland, 2003), facial appearance (Ellison, 2014; Hurd Clarke, 2011), and hair (Furman, 1997; Ward & Holland, 2011).

There is also new emphasis on sexuality in later years, not only as a form of identity as noted earlier, but as an embodied practice and experience. The complex interplay between gender and sexuality, influenced by among others, the work of Judith Butler, has been explored by, for example, Krekula (2007), Sandberg (2011), and others. Katz and

Marshall (2003) have explored the commercially driven interests of consumer culture with its new requirements that men remain "forever functional."

The Visual

One of the significant features of postmodernity or late modernity has been the rise of the Visual, which has to some degree replaced the dominance of the Word that was central to the earlier emergence of modernity. Through technological advances, visual culture is now omnipresent in our lives, and its representations are a potent force shaping and reshaping how they are experienced, valued, and understood. A particularly significant element in this has been the rise of consumption culture with its presentation of an idealized visual realm of aspiration and desire which has in turn supported the new culture of body perfectionism. Both these impulses have affected older people, who are increasingly enjoined to age without appearing to do so (Katz, 2001).

Social gerontology has itself been influenced by these developments, with an increasing interest in visual representation and the use of visual methodologies to elicit insights into age and aging, uncovering insights into how micro processes of daily life are linked to wider sociocultural discourses. The new emphasis has also highlighted the role of alternate positive and negative images of aging (Martin, 2012) and of gendered images of aging. The gaze of youth impacts strongly, though not exclusively, on women. As a result, as Woodward (1991, 2006) noted, the older female body is both invisible—in that it is not seen—and hypervisible—in that it is all that is seen. Sources of imagery have been explored in relation for example to soap opera stars (Harrington & Brothers, 2010), advertisements (Lee, Carpenter, & Meyers, 2007; Williams, Ylänne, & Wadleigh, 2007; Ylänne, 2012), and magazines (Lewis, Medvedev, & Seponski, 2011). The new emphasis on the visual has also refreshed and extended the methods used in gerontology (Black, 2009; Martin, 2012; Phoenix, 2012; Reynolds, 2010; Richards et al., 2012).

Time and Space

Although time and space have always been central themes of analysis, they have assumed new prominence in the wake of the social and technological developments associated with Late Modernity. In contemporary societies, there has been a move from the predominance of face-to-face relationships in which time and space are intrinsically linked, toward an increasing separation of the two, in which social relationships become disembedded and distanciated (Giddens, 1991). Critical changes to social relationships, social identities, and experiences of time and space have resulted from processes of globalization, migration, and mobilities. These changes have been deepened and extended by the rise of the internet and the use of digital technologies in a networked society (Castells, 1996, 2009).

As a result, diverse cultural possibilities and opportunities have opened up for people as they grow older, including wider social networks and new forms of consumption (Phillipson, 2013), such as late and lifestyle migrations (Katz, 2005; O'Reilly, 2000), and the use of social media and digital technologies (Buse, 2010). With this has come new forms of uncertainty and risk (Giddens, 1991; Kaldor & 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, 2013, 2015). Within cultural gerontology, there is renewed interest in the analysis of space and place, especially through work on the cultural and meaning of home and on the changing significances of public space (Angus, Kontos, Dyck, McKeever, & Poland, 2005; Rowles & Bernard, 2013; Twigg, 2000).

Limitations or Problems?

Are there, however, difficulties or limitations in the approach? There are a general set of intellectual problems associated with the wider cultural turn. These focus most strongly on the radical epistemology that underlies post-structuralist theorizing in particular, 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 & Turner, 2000).

There are also, however, criticisms distinctive to the field of gerontology. The shift toward culture, with its emphasis on subjects like appearance, consumption, identity, can seem to present a depoliticized account that takes us away from the knitty-gritty world of gerontology with its traditional concerns with frailty, poverty, and social exclusion. The emphasis on discourse can threaten to obscure the economic and social factors that materially shape the experiences and situations of old people. As the Political Economy School in the United Kingdom and the International Network for Critical Gerontology in the United States showed (Arber & Ginn, 1991; Estes & Binney, 1989; Townsend, 1986), such realities need to be analyzed, for the lives of many older people contain suffering and constraint, and this is to significant degree social and economic in origin.

But this perception of a depoliticized account is, we suggest, a mistake. The Cultural Turn in fact 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, toward a wider focus on the politics of everyday life. The shift toward identity politics in the late 20th century, that is closely linked with the Cultural Turn, has shown how politics are potentially present in every context, involving the contestation of normalized 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 developed in particular relation to new social movements, apply also to age. The turn to culture allows us to understand and contextualize how such norms implicitly marginalize and render less visible the experience of age (Laws, 1995; Laz, 1998, 2003). Many of the most deeply felt assaults of agism operate at the level of culture, as Gullette (1997, 2011), Woodward (1999, xvi), Bytheway (1995), and others have shown, through the pervasive culture of birthday cards, jokes, adverts, fictional or media representations that teach people to fear aging, 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 (Hughes, 2000; Morris, 1992), and this is true also of age. To exclude these aspects is to miss a central part of the operation of agism. This is not, of course, to deny the significance of more material or structural factors or the need to engage politically with these.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the Cultural Turn came relatively late to gerontology, and it is only in the last decade that its influence has been felt. In this brief review, there has not been space to reflect fully on the range and richness of current work nor has there been room to map out future directions for such work, as new themes present themselves, new ideas enter the field. What is clear however is that Cultural Gerontology as a broad approach has brought perspectives to the study of age that have widened and enriched the contexts within which we consider the lives of older people, refreshing the gerontological imaginary (Twigg & Martin, 2015).

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