Section II

Embodiment
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Embodiment

Introduction

Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin

In the past, social gerontology was reluctant to engage with the body, seeing it as a retrogressive topic that threatened to take the subject back to the biological determinism that had previously marked its treatment. Since then, however, there has been a flowering of work on the body and embodiment, to the extent indeed that these have become among the most characteristic themes of the new cultural gerontology. In her chapter, Emmanuelle Tulle explores the theoretical processes that have created this new interest in embodiment. She shows how a focus on embodiment foregrounds lived experiences of being old, opening up new questions of identity and subjectivity. As she notes, bodies bear messages about social location. Gender is one of the most marked: a feature explored further in chapters by Calasanti and King, and Hearn and Wray, in the section on ‘Identities and Social Relationships’. Laura Hurd Clarke and Erica Bennett explore embodiment through their analysis of the politics of appearance, examining the negative social consequences of looking older, and exploring how older men and women feel about the ageing process as it impacts on their appearance, demonstrating how these responses are shaped by dominant cultural norms and ideals, including ones actively promoted by the beauty industry in its attempt to co-opt older bodies into a commercialized culture of anti-ageing. Their chapter is notable for its systematic inclusion of material on difference in relation to sexuality, ethnicity and social class, something often missing in this field. Richard Ward focuses on a particular feature of appearance, that of hair, which, as he notes, has a malleability that gives it a distinctly expressive and discursive quality. He locates his analysis in the context of wider meanings of becoming old, made visible here in hair loss or greying. Ward’s chapter is significant because it shows how cultural approaches often associated with younger old people can be extended to frail, cognitively impaired ones also. Pia Kontos enhances the theme in relation to embodiment and dementia by highlighting the interconnections of dementia and the body with history, culture, power, and discourse that recasts dementia as an embodied experience. Julia Twigg in a parallel analysis focuses on clothing and dress, arguing that these encapsulate a number of key debates in cultural gerontology in relation to: the interplay between the biological and the cultural; the changing definition of age; and the significance of cultural phenomena such as consumption in shaping, defining and enabling its performance. With Stephen Katz’s chapter we move to a different analysis, one centred on a specific bodily event in the form of falls and their cultural meanings. Katz notes how falling is not an isolated event but a phenomenological
process that transforms the person into a ‘faller’. Through an active focus on falling, older people are increasingly made subject to governance and surveillance as risky bodies. Kelly Joyce, Meika Loe and Lauren Diamond-Brown turn to the role of science and technology in the constitution of older bodies, focusing in particular on pharmaceuticals and assistive technologies. They draw particular attention to questions of inequality, intersectionality and power in relation to gerontechnology, noting how intended users are often imagined narrowly, as white, middle class, predominantly male, heterosexuals with disposable income and a desire to defy age. Lastly, Kate de Medeiros and Helen Black explore the embodied experience of pain and suffering in old age and vividly illustrate how culture frames perceptions and experiences of pain and suffering in later life.