Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology

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Publication details
Julia Twigg
Published online on: 25 Jun 2015

How to cite :- Julia Twigg. 25 Jun 2015, Dress and age from: Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology Routledge
Accessed on: 27 Sep 2023

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Dress and age

Julia Twigg

Dress has been a neglected topic in gerontology, which has tended to focus on areas such as dependency and frailty, and the social welfare approaches to these. Dress suffers—particularly under its guise as ‘fashion’—from being seen as lightweight and frivolous, something distant from the lives and interests of older people or the assumptions of those who study them. But dress in fact encapsulates a number of key debates within cultural gerontology: the complex interplay of the biological and the cultural in ageing; the changing definition and location of old age; the emergence of the Third Age; and the significance of fields such as consumption in shaping, defining and enabling its performance. The analysis of dress thus contributes to the wider project of cultural gerontology, helping to shift the debate away from the narrow focus that has often marked mainstream gerontology, towards a fuller, more plural account of later years, and one that explores the everyday embodied lives of older people.

Traditions of analysis

Clothing has predominantly been analysed within the tradition of fashion studies (Steele 1997, Braham 1997, Breward 2003, Welters and Lillethun 2011). This literature, however, rarely addresses old age. The values of the fashion world are strongly youth oriented, and fashion studies—and indeed the related field of cultural studies—have reflected these values in their own analyses, which have largely effaced age. Work on fashion has also analysed it in terms of material production (Jones 2006). Fine and Leopold (1993) present this global industry as the Fashion System, the nexus of commercial, design and media influences that together provide the principal source of changing aesthetic judgements about clothing, determining the choices available in the market. The bulk of commercial production in this system—which might better be termed the garment industry—takes the form of relatively stable ‘unfashionable’ items. The dress of many older people, especially older men, is largely sourced from this sector.

More fruitful for the analysis of age and dress has been the large body of work drawing on social anthropological and sociological approaches, particularly those that focus on the lived reality of dress (Miller 1987, 2005, Entwistle 2000, Guy et al. 2001, Clarke and Miller 2002, Weber and Mitchell 2004, Crane and Bovone 2006, Woodward 2007). Dress is understood to denote the assemblage of clothes and other items into looks; and the term is wider than either...
‘fashion’, with its connotations of repeated systematic change and of fashionability, or ‘clothing’, with its more limited meaning. Here dress is recognised as part of the everyday deployment of material artefacts in the process of ongoing meaning making (Miller 1987). Such approaches link well to the growing perception of consumption as a continuing process, not confined to the moment of purchase but extending over time through the appropriation and use of objects. The ways in which clothes continue to operate in a wardrobe exemplifies this. Weber and Mitchell (2004) have shown how what they term ‘dress stories’ can be central to how we narrate our lives, with items of dress—what we wore when—acting as potent memory objects linking us to the past in direct material ways. Such techniques are particularly useful in exploring age and the passage of time, and they link to the renewed interest in narrative and biography in cultural gerontology (Kenyon and Randall 1999, Ray 2000, Bornat 2002), allowing people to reflect on moments and changes in their own lives and the location of these in distinctive historical periods exemplified in dress. Recently they have also been used fruitfully in work with people with dementia (Kontos 2004, Twigg and Buse 2013, Buse and Twigg 2014).

Gender

Dress is a highly gendered field. For some analysts, indeed, gender is the key to how fashion operates (Wilson 1985, Davis 1992, Tseëlon 1995); and it is certainly the case that gender differentiation is one of the most marked features of dress codes cross-culturally. In the West fashion has long been constituted as a feminised field, intimately linked with, and expressed through, the lives of women, who typically shop more frequently for clothes, spend more money on them and engage more fully with the topic through the media. Second wave feminism was ambivalent about—even hostile to—fashion, but the rise of post-modern feminism shifted the debate towards seeing dress, and related areas of appearance and body management, as an inevitable aspect of social life, a form of expressivity and one linked to a distinctive women’s culture (Wilson 1985, Dyhouse 2010). Reflecting this, most current and past work on dress focuses on the lives of women; and this is true also of the small body of work that addresses age (Gibson 2000, 2013, Fairhirst 1998, Hutchinson et al. 2008, Hurd Clarke et al. 2009, Twigg 2013). Interest in dress by men has been negatively coded in recent Western culture, though this is beginning to change with the emergence of metrosexual man and the rise of forms of consumption aimed at this group; and these influences have begun to impact on older men, particularly affluent Third Agers. As a group, however, they remain largely divorced from the world of fashion. The lack of work on older men and dress also reflects a wider neglect of men and masculinity in gerontology generally.

Age ordering

Clothes, as Breward (2000) argues, are one of the ways in which social difference is made concrete and visible. We are accustomed to this in relation to the key identities of class, gender, race; but it is true of age also. Age indeed needs to be recognised as a key identity, though one that has been systematically neglected by social theorists. Clothes have a long history of being age ordered, understood here as the systematic patterning of cultural expectations according to an ordered and hierarchically arranged concept of age (Twigg 2013). Forms of dress are deemed appropriate—or, more significantly, inappropriate—for people as they age. Though always subject to historical specificity, there are common features to age related dress in the West. For women they focus on: more covered up clothing, with longer lengths and higher necks; less showy, fashionable or overtly sexy styles; and darker, lower toned colours. The meaning of these
partly rest on negative judgements about the body in age, which is perceived as a form of abjection, a falling away from the youthful ideal that is valorised and celebrated in surrounding visual culture, so that for an older woman to be socially acceptable, her body needs to be hidden. Old women wearing ultra-fashionable or sexually explicit dress have long been the mainstay of misogynistic imagery that draws on the Vanitas tradition in art (Tseëlon 1995), something that is still reflected in muted form in the British cultural trope of ‘mutton dressed as lamb’ (Fairhirst 1998). Pressure to tone down, to retreat from styles that make claims to social notice is part of this, expressing a wider cultural and sexual marginalisation.

This pattering illustrates the way dress is ideological (Barnard 1996), part of the process whereby social groups establish, sustain and reproduce positions of power, relations of domination and subordination, contributing to how inequality is made natural, proper and legitimate. Many of the features of age related dress—the low tones, the drab colours, the retreat from fashionability or display—act to make manifest and reinforce the marginalisation and denigration of the old. They underwrite at a visual level the structural exclusion imposed on older people, naturalising at the bodily level processes that are social and cultural. These processes mirror at a cultural level those earlier analysed by the political economy or critical gerontology school, at a social and economic one (Estes 1979, Phillipson and Walker 1986, Estes and Binney 1989, Arber and Ginn 1991). Indeed, the fashion world with its valorisation of youth can be seen as part of the wider culture, entrenching what Calasanti (2003) terms age relations in the form of ‘organised systems of inequality that privilege younger adults at the expense of older people’ (199).

**Have things changed?**

Recently there has been a growing sense that norms are changing, and that older people in the West need no longer tone down or retreat into invisibility in the way they did in the past. Such perceptions are widely current in the media, and caught by such phrases as ‘60 is the new 50’ or 40. It is often asserted that the baby boomer generation—itself a media dominated, fluid and intellectually incoherent term—will refuse to don the mantle of age, will continue to wear their jeans and pursue youthful, fashionable styles. At an academic level, these ideas are encapsulated in the reconstitution of ageing thesis that argues that a series of social, cultural and demographic shifts have together transformed the experience of later years in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, repositioning older people nearer the mainstream. Integrative structures such as consumption and lifestyle behaviour are seen to support a new version of the life course in which later years are part of an extended plateau of middle life, at least until serious ill health disturbs this (Gilleard and Higgs 2000, Öberg and Tornstam 1999, 2001). Such changes, it is suggested, are reflected in cultural fields such as dress.

Evidence from Twigg’s (2013) study supports both continuity and change in dress norms. All the women in her UK-based study were aware of the pressure to tone down; and most accepted and internalised the strictures of age ordering, particularly in relation to hiding the aged body; a finding reflected also in Hurd Clarke and colleague’s (2009) Canadian work. Narratives were marked by the need for older women to be ‘careful’ and to avoid styles no longer ‘appropriate’. For some, this was accompanied by a sense of regret at exile from an area of pleasure in their lives and sense of estrangement from the cultural practices of femininity. For them, femininity was linked to youthfulness—a connection deeply rooted in the values of the wider culture—and loss of its expression in dress a source of sadness. Some described the ‘changing room moment’ when they had looked at their reflection in the mirror and seen that a familiar and well-loved style no longer suited. Some had retreated from active engagement with dress, no longer finding
the pleasure in it they had in the past. Indeed, why engage with an area of life that offers diminishing returns?

But there was also clear evidence of change. Respondents in Twigg’s study felt that their lives were different from those of their mothers at their age, and that this was reflected in the sorts of clothes they wore, which were much more mainstream and youthful in feel. Many still followed fashion trends, though in a modest way. They were clear that they did not want to wear clothes that were ‘too young’ for them; but they also wanted to avoid ones that were ‘too old’, a finding also found in Klepp and Storm-Mathisen’s (2005) Norwegian work. They were keen to avoid the drab, frumpy dress they associated with age, epitomised for them in elastic waists, pleated skirts, chitzy prints. Above all they were determined to eschew Crimplene, a fabric that has taken on symbolic status for this generation as a marker of all that is drab and old in dress.

Design directors of major garment retailers concurred with these views. They were clear that the market had changed, and they reported that customers were looking for a younger, more ‘modern’ look that integrated them with the mainstream. This was also endorsed by fashion journalists, who similarly recognised that their readers had a different attitude, and were looking for a more youthful, up-beat presentation. Colour was significant in this context. Dress for older women has traditionally been described in terms of low, drab colours—the greys and beiges of old age. But ranges aimed at older women are now marked by a clear use of colour, so that older customers, including those in their seventies and eighties, are embracing colour in a way that they had not in the past. This supports the view that older women have become more confident about being visible, present in the public eye.

Moving younger

Across the fashion system there is a persistent language of ‘moving younger’ that reflects the processes of cultural change referred to above. Indeed, the prevalence of such language is itself evidence of the way in which later years are shifting their cultural meaning and location. But there are two other ways in which we can understand this language of ‘moving younger’. Clothes need to be seen as part of consumption culture, aspirational goods promoted in terms of a dream of an idealised self. That is the central dynamic that fuels the constant pursuit of goods, and this is particularly significant in the case of fashion, where retailers are selling into a saturated market. Just as that idealised self is slimmer, smarter, richer than the reality, so too is it younger. As a result retailers persistently present their goods as aimed at a younger market than is in fact the case: using young models to display their clothes; selecting promotional settings that emphasise youthful zest; weeding their ranges to lift the offer visually. This produces a dynamic whereby everyone—retailers and customers alike—are trying to ‘move younger’. What underlies these pressures, of course, is the systematic operation of ageism, in which dress is increasingly implicated in anti-ageing strategies.

The second, and different, way in which we can understand the language of ‘moving younger’ is in terms of the processes of fashion themselves, and in particular the dynamics of style diffusion. Since the time of Simmel, fashion has been analysed in terms of competitive emulation in which styles diffuse down the class hierarchy as they are successively adopted and abandoned by social elites as lower groups take them up (Simmel 1904, Bourdieu 1984, Steele 1997). More recently, with the wider democratisation of fashion and the rise of street styles, a more plural fashion system has developed in which the styles diffuse in more variable and complex ways. As part of this, Crane (2000) argues that youth has replaced class as the engine of fashion. By this interpretation, age ordering has not gone. It is still significant; it is just that it has taken on a new form. Rather than simply denoting social position as in the past, age is now caught up in the
dynamic of fashion itself. What we are observing is not that the dress of older people is moving younger, but that styles are diffusing older, as they pass from the centre of fashionability in the youth market to the periphery in the older one.

These changes in relation to the dress of older people are rooted in material developments in the Fashion System, notably the influx of cheap clothing that has resulted from the massive growth of production in the Far East and other low cost economies since the 1990s. This has intensified the fashion cycle, enabling a true democratisation of fashion in the sense of fast, cheap, fashion related styles available to the population as a whole. This includes older women, who have increasingly been drawn into the faster shopping cycle, to the extent indeed that women in the UK over 75 are now shopping for clothes as often as those 16–34 did in the early 1960s (Twigg and Majima 2014). In Twigg’s study, even working-class older women on low incomes (UK Pensioner Credit) were able to enjoy buying new clothes.

Retailers and marketers are aware of the potential of the grey market (Metz and Underwood 2005, Drolet et al. 2010). With declining numbers of young people—the traditional engine of fashion—they are keen to colonise the older market, significant sectors of which have relatively high disposable incomes. But they have not always been successful in doing so. A number of women in Twigg’s (2013) study fell into the category of ‘frustrated shoppers’, unable to find their lives reflected in the clothes that were on offer. Fashion journalists concurred with this judgement, believing that retailers were failing to imagine their older customers correctly. It is certainly the case that fashion is a highly youth oriented field, and designing for or selling to older people has little prestige.

Body and dress: adjusting the cut

So far we have treated clothing and age as cultural phenomena. But we need to recognise the ways in which the dress styles interact with the body and its changes. In age the body alters: waists thicken, stomachs expand, shoulders move forward, busts for women lower (Goldsberry et al. 1996). This means that designers have to adjust the cut of their clothes. A large scale study undertaken in the UK in the early twenty-first century, Size UK, charted these changes systematically, developing a specific model of the mature figure to help the fashion industry fit the older customer (Bougourd and Treleven 2010). Part of the skill is to accommodate these changes, so that the garment fits, but in ways that do not detract from its fashionability and that—ideally—subtly alter the presentation of the body, assisting the wearer to appear nearer the fashionable norm. Tailoring has long performed this function for men. In relation to age, this can mean adding details that adjust or ‘help’, for example shoulder pads in a blouse or jersey, which restore the body nearer the youthful norm. Some adjustments for the older body however reflect not so much physiological changes as the negative cultural evaluation of them—for example the practice of avoiding low necks, sleeveless dresses, short skirts, all of which expose the body. Designers aiming at the older market avoid them.

Adjusting the cut to make it fit better, or conform more closely to cultural perceptions of what is appropriate, can, however, have the effect of ‘ageing’ the garment, writing into its very structure information about the sort of body that will inhabit it. This is most clearly visible in ranges aimed at distinctly older women, where the cut is markedly different, with lower bust seams and undefined waists. Mainstream retailers face a difficult marketing task here of signalling that their clothes are relevant to this group, will fit their bodies and their requirements, while also avoiding the negative connotations of being aimed at an older market. Customers have themselves internalised ageist values, and many in pursuit of younger looks are reluctant to shop at outlets too openly aimed at the older market.
Disciplining the body in age: dress and governmentality

Clothes can also be understood as part of wider set of body practices or performances, in which dress can be understood in Entwistle’s (2000) terms as ‘situated body practice’, operating as part of the micro social order. We have already noted this in relation to questions of age ordering. But these disciplinary practices operate in two additional and distinctive ways in relation to age. The first concerns avoiding the dereliction of age. In general, being correctly dressed is a requirement for engaging successfully with the social world. Entwistle (2000) notes how unease and anxiety attach to failing to meet the standards required by the moral order of the social space. But in relation to older people, lapses of dress—gaping flies, hanging hems, visible stains from food or worse—are not just offenses against these, but pointers to a darker future of social exclusion and reclassification. The bodies of older people are thus judged more harshly than those of the young, and subject to tighter discipline if they are to avoid feared states of dereliction.

Older people are also subject to new performance norms in relation to fashionability and youthfulness. Over the last decade older people have increasingly been drawn into the orbit of fashion. This has largely been interpreted positively, representing a form of empowerment, a throwing off of the limitations and cultural constraints traditionally associated with age. Much has been made of the baby boomer generation’s determination to resist age related styles, and the negative messages that go with shabby, old fashioned, self-effacing dress. Like many cultural phenomena, however, these developments face two ways. New freedoms have brought new requirements. As older people are drawn more and more into the culture of consumption, so they are required to impose new forms of bodily discipline and self surveillance that show commitment to resisting age, through strenuous dieting, beauty practices or up-to-date clothes. Ageing well, as Katz (2001) and others have pointed out, is increasingly interpreted as ageing without appearing to do so; clothing and dress are increasingly implicated in this moral enterprise. As a result, older people can find themselves monitoring their dress to avoid out-of-date, unfashionable or ageing looks that signal moral failure in this new culture of positive ageing. Just as men, according to Katz and Marshall (2003), are required to be ‘forever functional’ in regard to sexuality, so women are increasingly under pressure to be ‘forever fashionable.’

Conclusion

Dress allows us to think about the day to day embodied lives of older people. It forms the vestimentary envelope that presents the body to the world. Bearing the imprint of culture, it displays the way ageing is both a bodily and a cultural matter. It allows us to pursue a material analysis in which physical objects of day to day life embody and act on the lives of older people, shaping their experiences, providing them with prompts with which to perform age. Changes in the dress code can therefore be used as a means of analysing change in the cultural location of older people. As we have seen, empirical work around dress does support the contention that the lives of older people have become more fully integrated with the mainstream, particularly for those who can be regarded as living in the Third Age, with consumption acting to support and enable this integration. Evidence also supports, however, some degree of continuity with the dress norms of the past, and the ways these embody the abiding presence of ageist meanings in culture.

References


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