Section I
Theory and methods
The handbook opens with two chapters from classic authors who have shaped our understandings of the field. Margaret Gullette, one of our foremost writers on age, pioneered work on later life within the humanities. A brave and persistent critic of ageism, in this chapter she has lost none of the passion that marked her earlier engagement with the ways we are ‘aged by culture’. Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs are two key theorists of the field, whose *Cultures of Ageing* in 2000 was a landmark text. Here they explore the roots of the cultural turn in the wider developments of social theory. Their analysis foregrounds the themes of risk, contingency, individualisation and reflexivity in such theorising, as well as social and cultural changes related to the desstandardisation of the life course, the rise of consumption and the emergence of life or identity politics. Most work within cultural gerontology—and indeed in the earlier tradition of social gerontology—is focussed on the developed West. However Sarah Lamb’s reflections on the contribution of anthropology remind us that this is not the whole story and that we need to think about the very different ways ageing is understood and experienced in other cultures. She uses perspectives from non-Western cultures to critique, or ‘queer’, the assumptions of the West around, for example, living independently, later years sexuality and its medicalisation through Viagra or interventions around the menopause, dementia and the meaning of personhood and different valuations of the transience of life. She notes how anthropologists are beginning to turn their theoretical and methodological lenses towards the West, a point developed more fully by Catherine Degnen in her chapter on ethnography, in which she explores a range of ethnographically informed work that has explored the lives of older people in the West. In line with the ethnographic tradition, these two authors emphasise the contexuality of meanings, a point reiterated by others in this volume. Cultural gerontology indeed seeks to identify and understand the specificities of cultural contexts, whether revealed in literature, historical analysis, art or ethnography. Antje Kampf brings a historical dimension to the analysis, exploring the ways in which historians, influenced by feminism and other theoretical developments in the social sciences, have brought into view the lives of groups previously hidden from history, such as older people. She engages with the complexity of sources and their interpretation, expanding on the distinctive problems and contributions that historians can make to the analysis of age. We then turn to a series of chapters—on literature, film, art and theatre—that focus on modes of representation, exploring how these both reflect the world and are active in shaping it. Sarah
Falcus’s chapter on literature explores the way in which age has emerged both as a subject in current writing, and a critical perspective from which to view literature. She notes the way in which narrative analysis has formed a bridge between gerontological and literary studies, a point also taken up by Joanna Bornat in her account of biographical methods. Aagie Swinnen continues these themes in her account of film studies, noting the recent growth of work that engages with the experience of later years. In doing this, however, she flags up the importance of mastering the specific conceptual and technical vocabulary of film analysis. Her chapter also discusses the—gendered—dynamics created by the ageing of film actors. This is taken up more strongly in Ros Jenning’s chapter on popular music, where she looks at, among other things, late performance styles. She notes how popular music is being shaped by the ageing of a specific cohort, who gave birth to pop and rock, but who are now themselves ageing. This sense of a significant cohort is something that has also been explored in the work of Gilleard and Higgs. Michelle Meagher notes the relative absence of diverse representations of age within the classic canon of Western fine art, linking this to society’s deep resistance to dealing with this stage of life, but she points to the emergence recently of work that has begun to present the older figure as an aesthetic object worthy of representation in its own right. Most artists working in this area are women, reiterating the role of feminism and of women in the new cultural exploration of age. Some of these artists use their practice to show up and explore the impossible cultural demands imposed on older women by a youth-focused visual culture, a point returned to in subsequent chapters in the section on embodiment. Miriam Bernard and Lucy Munro’s chapter addresses both the representation of older people in the theatre and their active involvement in performance; and indeed the idea of ageing as performative resonates through a number of chapters in the book. Bernard and Munro note the historical dominance of stereotypical images of old people in theatre, but they examine some of the ways in which older people are challenging this through active involvement in performance. Such interventions increasingly extend to people otherwise excluded from theatre, such as those with dementia; and the chapter discusses pioneering work in the use of theatre to enrich their lives. With Catherine Degnen’s chapter we turn more directly to questions of methodology, reminding ourselves of the importance of the specificity of context that ethnography so skilfully illuminates. Ethnographic methods are by their nature interactive, and Degnan notes the growing involvement of older people as co-researchers. In passing, however, she notes how age segregated Western society is, a point contrary to the assumption that is often made that age ordering in the West has declined. Wendy Martin explores the developments in visual methods in ageing research, with an increasing amount of visual research now focussing on embodiment, social identities and everyday life. Joanna Bornat’s chapter on biographical methods emphasises the importance of focussing on the individual older person and their life. Earlier work in age studies that did look at individuals tended to approach them through a generalised psychology of ageing, rather than reflexive and individual accounts of the self. Cultural gerontology, by contrast, with its emphasis on subjectivity and identity, foregrounds the perspectives of older people themselves, decentring dominant, often objectifying accounts. Oral history has a particularly significant role to play here, and Bornat notes the links between this approach and other forms of history that have also aimed to understand the lives of marginalised and oppressed groups.