Section III

Identities and social relationships
Identity has been one of the central themes of the cultural turn, whether through a focus on categories such as gender, ‘race’, ethnicity, class, sexuality, or through an exploration of the complex and fluid ways in which identity is experienced in post-, late- or high-modernity. In her chapter Barbara Marshall explores the shifting bases for identity formation in later life. Drawing on social theory, she outlines how traditional anchors of identity have eroded, to be replaced by ones that are more individualistic, embodied and consumption-based, and in which reflexivity and self-fashioning are central. In understanding questions of identity scholars increasingly deploy the concept of intersectionality. Toni Calasanti and Neal King note how jeopardy is not simply additive, but alters in complex ways that reflect the intersections between social and cultural categories. Central to their analysis is a concept of power. Categories such as gender, race or class do not simply describe differences but refer to power relations between subordinated and dominant groups; among these are groups constituted by age. Jeff Hearn and Sharon Wray address the contested territory of gender, reviewing the different ways in which gender and gendered relations have been theorized, outlining the implications of this for age studies. They reflect, in particular, on the way new theorizing within poststructuralist, discursive and deconstructive approaches has troubled what were traditionally perceived as fixed identities in relation to gender and age. Traditionally, sex and sexuality were not central topics in social gerontology. However under the impact of poststructuralist theorizing, especially that derived from Foucault, and reflecting cultural changes in the discursive constitution of older people in popular culture, the subject has increasingly come to be studied. Noting the long history of negative depictions of sexuality in old age, Linn Sandberg explores the significance of the emergence of a new cultural trope of ‘sexy seniors’, with its links to ideas of successful ageing in which remaining sexually active is part of a wider set of disciplinary practices aimed at creating healthy, responsible, successful (and gendered) subjects. Sandberg’s account focuses on heterosexuality, but in the following chapter Yiu-tung Suen reviews current understandings of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender ageing, highlighting the distinctive experiences of the current cohort of LGBT older people. In doing so he reflects on how work in this area does not just address identity and relationships but raises questions of how we understand the nature of ‘care’ in relation to these groups. Though gender and, to a lesser degree, sexuality are now recognized as central themes in cultural gerontology, Sandra Torres argues that ethnicity has not received the theoretical or empirical attention in
age studies that it deserves. In reviewing the emergence of ethno-gerontology, she highlights in particular the impact of globalization on international migration and the challenges this presents to our established understandings.

Turning to specific social relationships, Sara Arber, Virpi Timonen and Anne Martin-Matthews address two of the most distinctive social positionings of later years, those of widowhood and grandparenthood. Arber and Timonen emphasize how the doing of grandparenthood is in the process of changing dynamically as it is negotiated through different social and cultural locations. Grandparenthood is part of ‘doing family’. It often intersects with assumptions around intergenerational care and its role in supporting the labour market participation of younger women. But in doing so older people may find that these demands interact with new cultural expectations that older people will be active agers, either in the labour market themselves or pursuing the new individualistic and consumption oriented opportunities—and freedoms—of the Third Age. For Martin-Matthews widowhood needs to be understood as both a status and a process, though one that is refracted through culture; and she draws on this wider cultural context to explore how widows are represented in film, literature, visual imagery, personal narrative and social media. She notes how in many societies widows are required to don specific forms of dress, pointing up the wider significance of material culture in shaping the lives of older people. Widowhood is often associated with loneliness, an experience that is in turn thought to characterize old age. But Christina Victor and May Pat Sullivan in their chapter question this assumption, pulling apart the different strands of the condition and subjecting them to critical analysis. Michael Fine in his chapter on cultures of care shows how this classic territory for social gerontology is also amendable to cultural analysis. Liz Lloyd addresses the Fourth Age and the challenges to identity formation presented by this stage of life. The Fourth Age is marked by failing health in which individuals can come to see themselves, and be seen, in the new category of someone who is ‘frail’ or a ‘service user’. Lloyd draws on Archer’s work on reflexivity to explore the tensions presented by this last stage of life. Matthew Carroll and Helen Bartlett review the impact of the imperative of active ageing, with its embedded moral injunctions, across various western and non-western cultures. In doing so they re-iterate the diversity of the experiences and meanings of ageing.