This chapter explores the importance of inter-connections between the ‘global’ and the ‘local’ in re-shaping later life. Older people experience a range of global, national, regional and local forces that influence the construction of later life. These introduce both continuities and discontinuities in old age, reflected in a widening of pathways and options that might be constructed through the life course. Globalization provides a fresh way of thinking about the environment in which ageing takes place and the relationships and lifestyles characteristic of this period in the life course. To examine this view the chapter will be divided into three main sections: first, a definition of globalization will be provided along with a summary of its implications for everyday life; second, links between the ‘global’ and ‘local’ dimensions of ageing will be examined through the perspective of understanding the role of place and urban development; third, specific examples will be used to illustrate changing constructions of age through the interaction between global and local networks.

Understanding global and local relationships

The structure and organization of social relationships has been profoundly affected by the range of processes associated with globalization. This was an early insight from theorists such as Giddens (1991), who argued that globalization was best understood in terms of ties that draw together institutions separated across time and space. Thus: ‘Globalization concerns the intersection of presence and absence, the interlacing of social events and social relations “at distance” with local contextualities’ (Giddens, 1991: 21). This chapter explores some of the implications of this interweaving of the ‘global and the local’ for daily life in older age, showing how relationships supporting later life are increasingly embedded in mechanisms, actors and institutions which traverse nation states. Held and colleagues (1999: 49) highlight the extent to which, ‘transnational networks and relations have developed across all areas of human activity. . . . Far from this being a world of “discrete civilizations” or simply an interconnected order of states, it has become a fundamentally interconnected global order, marked by intense patterns of exchange as well as by clear patterns of power, hierarchy and unevenness’.

For older people, in common with many other social groups, globalization presents a complex mixture of opportunities, challenges and risks. On the one hand, it opens up the possibility
of new forms of consumption and broader social networks, developed through cultural activities, travel, shopping and material possessions (Gilleard and Higgs, 2011). On the other hand, globalization has increased ‘the scale and velocity of risk’ (Kaldor and Stiglitz, 2013: 2), with problems in one part of the world rapidly crossing borders and spreading through different parts of the social system. Such was the impact of the subprime mortgage crisis in the US, which moved with considerable speed across the Atlantic, affecting a broad range of institutions—notably those finance- and welfare-related— influencing the lives of older people (Castells et al., 2012, Phillipson, 2013).

The interweaving of the ‘global and the local’ contributes to various types of social and cultural change. Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst (2005: 3) argue that ‘the local is not transcended by globalisation, but rather that the local is to be understood through global relationships’. Following Robertson (1992), the authors note the extent to which globalization produces new forms of localization involving the reconstruction of ‘home’, ‘community’ and ‘locality’, the impact of which may be especially significant given the importance of local ties for the quality of daily life in old age (Scharf et al., 2003).

Globalization also introduces greater complexity at a local level through the growth of the transnational ties that evolve from diverse forms of migration, these influencing the growth of communities with both global and local affiliations. Levitt (2001: 4) suggests that the rise of what has been termed ‘transnational communities’ reflects ‘how ordinary people are incorporated into the countries that receive them while remaining active in the places they come from’. A number of studies have suggested that older migrants’ relationship to ‘locality’ must be understood in relation to such ties and practices, in that they often stay ‘connected with’ (and are simultaneously influenced by) more than one culture and place at a time (Silverstein and Attias-Donfut, 2010). This also features in the lives of non-migrants (old as well as young), for example through extensive use of social media to communicate with and maintain contact with relations overseas.

As this last point would suggest, globalization may be seen as contributing to the development of more dynamic forms of movement in old age. Globalization has influenced the development of mobile forms of ageing, reflecting social differentiation and more varied lifestyles in new cohorts of older people. These locations and attachments are reflected in specialist retirement communities, co-housing developments, ‘second homes’ and recreational vehicles, as well as the range of journeys undertaken by older migrants relocating within and across continents to maintain contact with and to support kin. Such movement indicates the extent to which the meaning of old age is being reconstructed through a diffuse range of spaces and an ever-expanding mix of communities and environments. This can be illustrated by examining three aspects of the interweaving between global and local ties: first, globalization and the cultural context of ageing; second, the relationship between globalization and urbanization; third, the influence of migration and transnational communities. These dimensions—themselves strongly inter-related—highlight the range of forces contributing to the cultural and social construction of later life.

Globalization and the cultural context of ageing

Taking the first of the above themes, the influence of globalization is especially important for understanding the cultural context through which ageing is constructed. Torres (2006: 232) makes the point that the various components (e.g. ethnic, social, religious) of which identity is comprised have traditionally been located with the framework of the nation-state. She notes that ‘in this version of reality, culture is conceived to be a point of reference that is essentially
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territorial—one that “belongs” to a particular society. Cultural values are consequently assumed to be taught through the submersion into the specific localities that socialization entails’. Torres however emphasizes the extent to which developments such as transnational communities provide a contrasting perspective: the idea of culture as ‘locally learned’ and territorially defined is challenged by the dispersed and diffuse set of relationships and institutions associated with globalization.

A number of changes follow from the above, and these are having a direct influence on the lives of older people. Ageing in western societies, over the course of the twentieth century, was formed around national institutions such as the welfare state, these providing a distinctive shape and associated meanings to the final phase of the life course (Phillipson, 2013). This process was disrupted from the 1990s onwards, with a combination of more intense processes of globalization and accelerated international migration. Narratives of older migrants provide a contrast with conventional representations of the life course, with key life events such as marriage, having children and establishing a home often occurring in a less predictable order as compared with non-migrants. Albrow (1996: 151) underlined the significance of these changes with his assertion that ‘under globalized conditions it becomes less easy for individuals to affirm their identity within the strict confines of nation, gender, age or any other categorical distinction’.

A major issue for gerontology concerns how to reconcile ‘diverse and contradictory transnational and personal identities and risks’ (Beck, 2000: 169) with theoretical models that assume stability rather than disruption: homogeneity rather than hybridity. A transformed cultural context is influencing a move from a linear life course towards one in which events influencing later life are scattered across a broad spectrum of time, space and chronological age (Baars, 2012). Two consequences follow from such changes. The first is increased variability in respect of images and definitions of ageing: what it means to grow old, when old age begins and normative behaviour in later life are likely to demonstrate greater differences within any one society than has historically been the case. Torres (2006: 238) summarizes the change here in terms of the way in which ‘constructions of old age are challenged by the unsettling of the relationship between cultural values and the national locality to which these relate’. Assumptions regarding cultural homogeneity within nationally bounded spaces are undermined by globalization, this leading to an extension of social and cultural differences within ageing populations’. A second aspect is the emergence of more complex definitions of what constitutes ‘home’. Waite and Aigner (2012: 124) illustrate this point in relation to African migration to the UK: ‘Migrants are . . . commonly observed to experience simultaneity in their feelings of belonging to different places . . . as a result of being “here and there” and “straddling worlds”’ (see, further, Phillipson and Ahmed, 2004). Torres (2006: 236), in her research on Iranian immigrants in Sweden, refers to the way in which ‘being-in-between’ cultures can challenge the traditional ways in which ageing is understood. The idea of ‘home’ therefore becomes a more fluid construction, shifting meaning across different cultural settings and boundaries.

Building on the above examples, globalization, along with social changes affecting family life, gender relationships and work and retirement, has contributed to a loosening in the traditional navigation points running through the life course. In this context, one might argue that ageing is now expressed through more varied cultural relationships and values: hence the striking heterogeneity of older people in the twenty-first century.

But it is important to situate the changes discussed within the context of where people experience growing old—which for the majority is within urban environments, which are the focus for many of the changes associated with globalization. Following this overview, the next section provides a closer examination of the relationship between the global and the local, examined through research on older people living in urban environments.
Globalization, place and the city

The interweaving of the global and the local can be further illustrated by examining the relationship between globalization and urban development. Population ageing and urbanization are two of the most significant social transformations of the twenty-first century (Burdett and Sudjic, 2008). By 2030, the major urban areas of the developed world will have 25 per cent or more of their populations aged 60 and over. Urban environments, through their social and cultural diversity, provide a powerful lens for viewing the interrelationship between globalization, cultural change and local social networks. Rykwert (2000: 8) suggests that ‘globalization is the most powerful of the economic forces operating in the city of the present and of the immediate future’. Sassen (1998: 161) points to the ‘concentration of diversity [and] multiplicity of cultures’ within western cities. However, she also notes that ‘the speed of internet communication, and the rapid transmission of images and digital information, and instantaneous communication between people anywhere in a variety of digital forms and media, have served to further break down cultural and—to a certain extent—social boundaries’ (Sassen, 1998: 161). Soja and Kanai (2008: 54) view contemporary urbanization as not just an adjunct to the globalization process but also ‘its primary driving force, stimulating innovation, creativity and economic growth while at the same time intensifying social and economic inequalities’. They conclude that ‘not only is urbanization increasingly reaching everywhere, everywhere is increasingly reaching into the city, contributing to a major reconfiguration of the social and spatial structures of urbanism and creating the most economically and culturally heterogeneous cities the world has ever known’.

Globalization accelerates population mobility while retaining the importance of locality and attachment to neighbourhoods. This ‘attachment’ or ‘investment’ (Massey, 1984) has a number of dimensions. Rubinstein and Parmelee (1992: 139–40) make the point that attachment to place can help keep the past alive, position the self within the life course, and maintain continuity during periods of change, fostering inclusion and integration in later life. However, these researchers also observe that place attachment may be weakened or undermined in certain circumstances. This may be the case, for example, in inner-city areas characterized by rapid population turnover and physical deterioration of buildings and infrastructure, where people may feel marginalized and alienated by changes in the communities in which they have ‘aged in place’. As a consequence, local social change and its impact at a neighbourhood level may result in mechanisms of exclusion for older people (Scharf et al., 2003, Phillipson, 2007).

Zukin (2010: 9) highlights the cultural divisions created through what she refers to as ‘re-urbanization’, a process associated with changes that loosen the grip of old industries and their ways of life and expand the space taken up by white-collar men and women and their preoccupation with shopping and other kinds of consumption; bringing new residents, their tastes, and their concerns into the city’s mix; and creating not just an economic division but a cultural barrier between rich and poor, young and old’. In response, she makes the case for recovering the ‘authenticity’ of the city through re-claiming rights gained through long-term residence, use and habit that are often undermined through forms of social and cultural capital that dominate particular areas of the city (see further Hatherley, 2012). This last observation points to the tension between, on the one hand, global cities as spaces of consumption and production that favour the cultural capital associated with wealthy elites and professionals, and on the other the needs of groups such as those ‘ageing in place’, women living alone, and the homeless (see for example Klinenburg, 2002, Newman, 2003, Portacolone, 2011).

But the case can also be made for acknowledging the extent to which the various forms of capital brought together within the city can be used to help fulfil the potential of longer lives. Davis (2002: 101) makes the point here that:
cities have incredible, if largely untapped, capacities for the efficient use of scarce natural resources. Above all they have the potential to counterpose public affluence (great libraries, parks, museums and so on) as a real alternative to privatized consumerism, and thus cut through the apparent contradiction between improving standards of living and accepting the limits imposed by eco-systems and finite natural resources.

Reinforcing this point, Smith (2009) points to the cultural and social diversity associated with urban living, with cities able to develop spaces and lifestyles associated with different lifestyle choices and generational groups. Bonvalet and Ogg (2011) explore the latter in their examination of residential preferences among the baby boom generation (those born between 1945 and 1955). They highlight the experiences of those who moved to cities when starting their careers in their twenties. Among this group are the ‘pioneers’ of gentrification within inner-cities; they benefited from the rise in property values and from investment in urban regeneration. Some in this group are likely to have ‘second homes’ in another country or in the UK, with dividing time between ‘the city’ and ‘the country’ becoming a preferred strategy to leaving the urban environment altogether (see also Leach et al., 2013).

**Ageing between the global and local**

Finally, the interweaving of the ‘global’ and the ‘local’ is most obviously reflected in the diversity of social networks within which old age is shaped and managed. Typically, older people’s networks have been examined within national borders with their need for care and support assessed within this context. But migrants bring important variations with responsibilities and resources that may stretch considerable physical distances (Buffel and Philipson, 2011). Labour and retired migrants often move between continents, maintaining economic and cultural as well as social ties across dispersed communities. One consequence of international migration is the rise of ‘global’ or ‘transnational’ families. Baldasser et al. (2007: 13) suggest that the concept of the transnational family ‘is intended to capture the growing awareness that members of families retain their sense of collectivity and kinship in spite of being spread across multiple nations’ (see also Bauer and Thompson, 2006). Hochschild (2000: 132) argues that ‘most writing on globalisation focuses on money, markets and labour flows, while giving scant attention to women, children and the care of one for the other.’ However, older people also experience international migration in a variety of ways: for example as first-generation migrants growing old in their second homeland (Burholt, 2004); as a group left behind and coping with the loss of a younger generation (Vullentari and King, 2008); or as one involved with the practices associated with transnational care-giving (Baldassar et al., 2007).

Migration as a force that links the global and the local influences the construction of neighbourhoods and communities in a variety of ways. Warnes (2010: 393) suggests that international retirement migrants ‘are fashioning new lifestyles, activities, roles, and patterns of social participation in what they themselves perceive as positive approaches to old age’. The implication of this is that particular localities may be transformed by particular cohorts of older people just as much as they are attractive to them—Karn’s (1977) study of the impact of migration of older people to the south-east coast of England was an early illustration.

Similarly, there is substantial evidence for the way in which labour and related migrants strive to create ‘a sense of home’ by producing and transforming their current place of residence through transnational belongings, ties and practices. By engaging in their communities, establishing communal places and making use of ethnic amenities, older migrants reconstruct and transform their neighbourhood into a transnational place. Lefebvre (1991) has suggested that
such productions of—potentially new—forms of social space can be seen as an integral part of group identity formation, which he considers as a fundamental right of all inhabitants of the city. This implies that transnational and local ties cannot be seen as mutually exclusive (Ehrkamp, 2005) but that new ‘places of belonging’ develop through the merging of the global and the local.

The complexities of the transnational attachments of older labour migrants have been illustrated by studies exploring questions relating to returns to countries of origin (Silvaira and Allebeck, 2001, Ramji, 2006, Barou, 2012). Ramji (2006), in a study of first-generation British Indians, found that the idea of returning home (for their retirement)—whether imaginary, anticipated or undertaken—was a key feature of this generation’s relationship to London and their place of origin, and highlighted the ambivalent nature of feelings of identity, home and place. The idea of returning ‘home’ (what Anwar (1975) described as ‘the myth of return’) has also been found to be of importance in how older Turkish migrants living in Germany and older Moroccan and Turkish migrants in Belgium give meaning to place (White, 1997, Buffel, 2012). Both studies show that older migrants express strong attachments and feelings of homesickness for their countries of origin, but their wish to return home may be unrealistic for both practical and emotional reasons (see further Barou, 2012). Alongside family- and health-care-related factors, opportunity to commute comfortably between both countries has been found to be important for remaining permanently in the host country (Buffel, 2012). Such ‘back and forth’ movements, as well as the transnational ties and exchanges, demonstrate the need for adopting a ‘geographically elastic’, rather than a ‘unitary’, conception of place in the study of migrant and other groups experiencing the interweaving of the global and the local (Phillipson and Ahmed, 2004).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has reviewed some of the complexities of the relationships arising from the interweaving of global and local ties and their implications for experiences in later life. Looking towards the future it seems inevitable that the processes described will loom even larger in the lives of older people—not least those moving in search of work, those seeking to return to their families, and those searching for a new lifestyle in retirement. The key factors driving the changes described include: first, the continued impact of globalization in shaping the fortunes of localities and neighbourhoods; second, the central role of migration in creating new forms of mobility across the life course—with varying consequences depending on the type of migration and on the resources of the communities involved; third, the impact of area change on different cohorts within the older population—with the rise of highly favoured (often gated) communities for some, and the experience of intensely deprived communities for others—especially in localities suffering the impact of de-industrialisation and population decline (Phillipson, 2007).

The interplay between these global and local forces will be a significant factor in shaping the fortunes of older people in the twenty-first century, leading to new forms of mobility and distinctive lifestyles in middle and later life. A rich research agenda for cultural gerontology will thus consist of deepening our understanding, on the one hand, of the role of globalization in shaping local social networks; and on the other the contribution of older people themselves in transforming the world that global change makes possible. This promises an exciting set of questions and issues to be explored in the years ahead.

**References**


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