Environmental contexts now play an increasing part in understanding the life course. Exploring place and space, with their associated opportunities and constraints for adults as they age, has become a major focus of scientific study (Rowles and Bernard, 2013; Scheidt and Schwarz, 2013). Social and material environments are typically considered in terms of what they allow older people to do and be: the extent to which they inhibit or promote independence, adaptation, and, if necessary, relocation (Golant, 2011). Prominent in this trend has been attention to urban versus rural surroundings, not least the impact of declining urban centres and the rise of suburban life (Scharf et al., 2002), or the pronounced ageing of areas close to major urban centres (Masuda and Garvin, 2008). Urban areas may be thought of as problematic, even dangerous, places for older people to live, yet problems arise in rural areas too. Gerontologists point to the weakness of public infrastructures in the countryside, at times threatening the sustainability of rural communities; it is not the case, as policy-makers sometimes assume, that older people in rural settings will unproblematically be cared for without public support (Wenger, 2001). Both cities and countrysides are changing, stimulating the need for new urban and rural ethnographies, which can embrace the complexity and diversity of older people and their lives (Phillipson and Scharf, 2005). Yet as far as their impacts on ageing are concerned, urban and rural environments may not always be as different as is popularly assumed. On the one hand, towns and the countryside each tend to be understood in terms of strong cultural images presenting them as specific and separate (Halfacree, 2007). On the other, it is not obvious that everyday social practices are always different in these contrasting settings. Underlying all these concerns are hesitations about contrasting the urban with the rural that go back to the foundations of the field.

**Origins of the field: cultural gerontology in early urban and rural studies**

Since the early twentieth century, cultural influences and resources have been central to analyses of how people age in both urban and rural contexts. Though they have not always been conceptualised overtly in terms of cultural gerontology, they continue to contribute to our understanding. Influential texts in the emerging field of social gerontology in the UK can be seen in retrospect as illuminating the role of cultural factors in shaping life-courses, and connecting
these to experiences of space and place. Sheldon’s (1948) urban study *Social Medicine* argued that older people in Wolverhampton, England, seemed ‘ostensibly’ to be living alone but in reality inhabited rich and supportive cultural settings, remaining in such ‘close and regular contact’ with children that in crises they effectively functioned as a unit (p. 140). Similar details in *Family and Kinship in East London* by Young and Willmott (1962) exhibit the significance of cultural contexts in enabling individuals to cope with the demands of everyday life. Townsend’s (1963) *The Family Life of Old People* also stressed interdependency, exploring cultural resources surrounding three-generational urban family patterns and the ways they were creatively adapted, responding to pressures surrounding industrial work and everyday life. Culturally-derived ideas about duty and reciprocity were adapted inventively so that individuals could give each other independence and support. Townsend (1963) observes, ‘Evidence of the way people’s lives were bound up with those of close relatives was so often forthcoming . . . that one is forced to reconsider what is meant by old people “living alone”’ (p. 60). Not least, there were ‘almost as many old people helping others as were themselves being helped during the weekly round’ (Townsend, 1963, p. 63).

In contemporary gerontological terms, this shows older people using local cultural resources to support the types of meaning they want to give their lives. At the time of first publication, such material might be obscured by over-rigid interpretation of formats such as ‘norm-following’, or dismissed as ‘local colour’; explicit attention to space and place was rare. Yet Young and Willmott (1962) offer graphic reports of cultural habits, styles of interaction, or culturally-endorsed expectations, conscious of how seemingly trivial behaviours can form tactics for survival—as in their account of families who ‘sit jawing, and get amused with the children when all of them get together, play cards, and listen to the wireless’ (p. 49). They are sensitive to cultural change; like Sheldon, they note men’s increasing contributions to housework (Young and Willmott, 1962, p. 27; cf. Townsend, 1963, p. 233). Thane (1998, p. 181) underlines the radical implications of this work: by stressing the ubiquity of mutual concern and support, these studies showed human beings in modern economies resisting becoming ‘rational’ agents ‘unconcerned about the welfare of others’.

This early work shows significant tensions. It takes for granted that urban settings contrast with rural ones; yet, when Young and Willmott (1962) were working in Bethnal Green, echoing Gans’ (1962) references to ‘urban villagers’, they later described themselves as having discovered ‘a village in the middle of London’. They approved when people long resident in the same London district claimed to ‘know everyone’, and to be linked to neighbours through family or friendship in ways ‘rather different from the popular view of what a modern metropolis is like’. Rather than a ‘crowd of individuals—restless, lonely, rootless’, they discovered ‘an orderly community based on family and neighbourhood groupings’. This does not immediately discredit the conventional rural/urban distinction, for in other urban areas these authors studied, the new housing estates to which London’s East Enders were relocated, residents were indeed more isolated, their ‘busy sociable life . . . a memory’ (Young and Willmott, 1962, p. 132). But it underlines the fact that the presence or absence of open fields need not be crucial to the distinction between rural and urban contexts in which people age. Far more significant are the resources and relationships available to them, which can cut across the urban–rural distinction.

A seminal American study, earlier than the British urban work, was launched in Ireland in the 1930s. It was methodologically more self-aware, and specifically sought out cultural phenomena. Conducted by Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball, who had trained as urban sociologists, it stressed ‘the organization of habit’ that made social structures meaningful to individuals inhabiting them (Arensberg and Kimball, 1940/2001, p. 263). The intergenerational farming relationships they studied were deeply rational in instrumental terms, embodying an ‘absolute
coincidence of “social” and “economic” factors within single relationships’ (p. 60). But equally they were cultural and emotional relations to which individuals were deeply committed. Thus Arensberg and Kimball investigated not only the power of cultural practices, but their potential for deep ambiguity. Within the farm, absolute power was ceded to the man who owned it. In consequence, Ireland was ‘in some ways an old person’s country’ (p. 153). Older people were long-lived: they had ‘much to live for’, locally ‘honored’: ‘They have power’ (p. 162). This culture protected older people owning property, but relegated to obscurity those without. Sons and other male relatives were ‘subordinated’ to the parental couple on the farm until themselves well into middle age, forced to beg even for shillings to attend the occasional fair. ‘You can be a boy here forever as long as the old fellow is still alive’ (p. 55).

Urban/rural cultures of ageing: contrasts and conflations

Arensberg and Kimball (1940/2001) explicitly contrasted rural life in County Clare with the ‘urban’ practices of the town of Ennis, comparing economic habits rooted in agricultural practices with those associated with shops or factories, closer to bureaucratic structures of church and state. Golant’s (2003) review of work on the urban/rural distinction, however, underlines the ‘extraordinarily diverse array of settlements’ covered by the term ‘urban’: from declining large and small cities to thriving metropolitan areas, mosaics of ‘central business districts, inner cities, gentrified neighborhoods, and older and newer suburbs’ (p. 281). The simple urban/rural distinction elides such distinctions, and may embrace an array of (often unspoken) criteria, not all compatible. Similarly, the ‘rural’ encompasses retirement destinations, commuting suburbs, farming-dependent districts, regions of persistent poverty, and a host more. Golant points out that almost none of this research acknowledges that the interactions it traces may ‘be mainly attributed to a regional context effect’, not urban and rural contrasts as such (p. 283).

Lawton (1998) prefers to uphold the distinction, stressing different ways to experience and give meaning to place and space, or receive emotional and social support from family and friends. It is unclear if this escapes Golant’s strictures: Glasgow (2000, p. 616) indicates that rural and urban families support older people in comparable ways, disappointing ‘conventional’ expectations of stronger informal networks in the countryside. Gallagher (2008) found fewer cultural differences than expected between older people and their relations and neighbours in Dublin as compared to a remote rural area in Donegal. But Lawton also suggests classifying residential settings according to the impacts of public policy; health and social care, crucial for older people, are often less adequate in rural regions (Hardill and Dwyer, 2011).

Perhaps key features of older people’s experience of space and place depend both on resources affected by public policy and on interpersonal features such as permanence of residence—in whatever type of environment they occur. Platt (1971, p. 112) emphasises cultural features of Bethnal Green that might seem typically ‘rural’. People were mutually familiar, mutually connected; a specific culture prevailed, stressing realism and modesty: pretensions were hard to maintain. This recalls rural settings where the preservation of social order enlists the force of mockery and mutual surveillance more often than direct intervention (Edmondson, 2001). Moreover, where people have known each other all their lives, they can conceptualise the life course more longitudinally than individuals in more fluid settings. In rural areas all over Europe, older people may survey each other’s successes and failures with just the scepticism remarked on by Platt (1971) in London. Within hyper–modern economic relationships, acquaintance-time is briefer and conducted at a faster pace; the concept of the life course has been partly attenuated to that of the career, in itself a significant cultural shift. Hyper-modernity has been associated
with urban settings in the past, but tele-working and commuting are introducing it into the countryside too.

Cultural gerontologists studying inhabitants of urban versus rural contexts thus confront Rowles’s question of 1988: ‘What’s rural about rural ageing?’ Yet rural and urban communities are popularly considered to be different; many retirees continue to experience themselves as leaving city life for quite different settings (Gilleard and Higgs, 2000), laden with a variety of symbolisms. Commins’s (1986) work on ‘rural fundamentalism’ shows how national ideals across Europe and North America drew on the belief that rural life as such, including rural occupations, gave moral strength and purpose to the countries as well as the individuals concerned. Gibbons (1996) explores the political struggle to establish a dominant interpretation of the Irish countryside: as wild and unconventional, or as clerically chaste, according to the aspirations of the major political party of the time. Helsinger (1996) or Neal (2009) show how countrysides are endowed with virtues attributed to the nations concerned: ‘English’ stability, ‘German’ loyalty or ‘American’ freedom. Retiring to the countryside cannot always be free of such associations—despite the impact of agribusinesses on rural practices. Nor are countrysides as natural as they are thought to be, even by their inhabitants. They have been shaped by millennia of agriculture and centuries of power—just as the hills of Scotland were cropped bare by sheep as their human inhabitants were ‘cleared’ by landlords.

Thus, rural cultural settings are not as harmonious as they are represented—or as observers may wish to see them. Cloke and Little (1997, p.1) stress that ‘representations of rurality and rural life are replete’ with ‘devices of exclusion and marginalisation’ that classify as ‘other’ ‘all kinds of people’ in all kinds of countrysides. They analyse powerful discourses that create hidden and often oppressed rural ‘others’. As Commins (2004) stresses, quaint cottage frontages may occlude considerable rural poverty, not infrequently among older people. A growing body of work not only highlights the multiple risks of social exclusion for older rural dwellers but also challenges stereotypes associated with rural ageing (Skinner et al., 2013). Nonetheless, rural settings may include intergenerational practices that are highly significant for social order when considered on their own terms. Edmondson (2009, 2012a, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b) has studied older people living in the countryside in a range of European countries; they may be skilled in ‘wise’ cultural practices drawing on shared sources of insight into personal and interpersonal predicaments. These may be more effective than comparatively individualistic processes associated with ‘hyper-modern’ urban lifestyles.

**Moving to and from the countryside: cultural resources and practices**

The complexities of older people’s environments therefore continue to be explored empirically, highlighting practices, resources and relationships (Rowles and Bernard, 2013), highlighting attachment to place and the interpretation of everyday experience. Transactions between urban and rural settings can be traced in both directions. In France, where urban-rural networks had long been part of middle-class life, Cribier (1988) developed her work on second homes in the countryside, noting changes over time in older people’s willingness to move away from cities. Such willingness may be connected with older people’s capacities for agency when they arrive at their destinations; here cultural capacities, including possible cultural misunderstandings, have significant roles to play. Migrating older people can contribute markedly to their new environments, contributing to building local communities (Rozanova et al., 2008), or volunteering (Glasgow et al., 2013). The question remains as to what cultural resources they will be able to draw upon should they become more fragile. Ryan and colleagues (2012) explore how older people make creative use of their own ‘familiarity’ with place, activating long-term relationships.
built into the countryside. They may develop close relationships with care practitioners, choosing care-homes close to their own communities, and preserving familiarity with local settings.

Migration takes place both ways: cities have always attracted inflows from other, often rural, locations (Daatland and Biggs, 2004). Cultural transformations can result in these spaces, not only for older people but for those connected with them. Weicht (2010, p. 18) shows how migrant workers, employed to give daily care to older people in Austria, acquire attributed identities owing to ‘Moral, cultural and social considerations’ for their charges’ relations. To assuage families’ guilt, carers may be treated ‘as if’ they were family members or even ‘angels’ (p. 34).

Yet much discussion of urban spaces centres less on unintended cultural transactions than on efforts to change cities’ cultures overall, in the hope of enhancing inhabitants’ quality of life. The World Health Organization (2007) seeks to create ‘shared space’ between generations (much as Birren urged in 1969). The ‘age-friendly city’ movement’s ecological perspective urges that older people need ‘universal design, accessibility, healthy cities, livable communities, walkable communities, and aging in place’ (Plouffe and Kalache, 2010). Such considerations characterise a growing body of gerontological research (Liddle et al., 2014), but more information is needed about cultural specificities of how people really want and are able to inhabit particular types of residential community. Fairhurst and Slee (2012), for example, explore ‘culturally-led’ urban regeneration in Salford, England: a project in an ethnically-diverse, comparatively disadvantaged local community, where a disused church and churchyard are being rebuilt as a community and arts centre. The project both draws on diverse local cultures and transforms them, as local people collaborate, generating, it is hoped, their own senses of heritage, tradition and community. As Buffel et al. (2012) suggest, developing appropriate means through which increasingly diverse older populations can engage in co-creating and maintaining local environments is likely to become key in debates about age-friendly communities.

Also exploring culturally-rooted forms of agency in urban settings, Phillips and colleagues (2000) return to the sites of early gerontological work, exploring contemporary relationships in Bethnal Green and Woodford in London, and in Wolverhampton. Their mixed-methods study draws on novels or biographical memoirs to convey the flavour of lasting social practices that have helped individuals and families to confront the demands of urban life. While the cultural style of support from family members has changed over time, as relationships have become more egalitarian in tone, with clearer expectations of mutuality, they continue to form a network criss-crossing the physical environment with the potential of mutual aid.

Ageing and urban life

Notwithstanding misgivings associated with contrasting urban and rural ageing, an emerging body of work addresses the nature of daily life in various environmental contexts. Underpinning this development has been an explicit interest in capturing the experiences of marginalised older people inhabiting disadvantaged urban communities. This reflects a concern, especially since the late 1990s, that mainstream gerontology was failing to take adequate account of socio-spatial impacts of trends in urbanisation, demographic change, and the uneven distribution of material and social resources (Phillipson, 2007).

In this context, work undertaken by Scharf and colleagues in highly disadvantaged neighbourhoods of three English cities casts light on multiple risks of sociocultural exclusion faced by many older people ageing in urban environments (Scharf et al., 2005). This acts as a helpful counterbalance to studies emphasising the growing consumption power of ageing populations (Gilleard and Higgs, 2005). Introducing a multi-dimensional understanding of social exclusion in later life, and drawing on a range of qualitative and quantitative data, Scharf and colleagues...
Rural and urban ageing

(2005) noted, for example, the extent to which older people in socially-deprived urban communities were more prone than the general older population to experiences of poverty, loneliness and social isolation, criminal and anti-social behaviours, and a sense of neighbourhood detachment (Scharf et al., 2002). Marked contrasts characterise the daily lives of people ageing in poverty—cutting back on the very basics of life, including food, fuel, or the telephone, on occasion borrowing money—and those with more favourable material resources. Around half of older residents of the communities where Scharf and colleagues worked were living in poverty (Scharf et al., 2002), with those belonging to black and minority ethnic groups especially at risk, suggesting that daily life in marginalised urban environments necessitated a range of coping techniques by people who—through choice or lack of alternative options—were ‘ageing in place’. Rather than portraying older people as passive victims of interlocking processes of urban and socio-economic change, such work emphasises the multifarious contributions made by older residents to the sustainability of their urban communities (Buffel et al., 2012). In particular, this highlights sociocultural investment made over a considerable period of time by people who may have lived in the same urban neighbourhood for 40 years or more (Scharf et al., 2002).

Conclusion

Exploring the settings in which older people live allows us to understand more about these urban and rural environments themselves, and supplies tools for investigating the continual re-creation of later life (Edmondson, 2013a). The cases and approaches discussed here indicate the richness and diversity of the ways in which older people are affected by, create, and change the environmental expectations and practices that have such impacts on their lives. Cultural impacts do not take forms predictable in advance; relations between the life-courses of specific groups of older people and different aspects of urban or rural settings demand meticulous empirical exploration in connection with the material and historical settings shaping them.

Hareven (2000) reminds us that cultures do not just ‘act on’ people in processes such as urbanisation; in return, individuals, families and others also use and alter cultural resources. Such expectations and practices help them to exercise power and resist it, to confront obstacles or sometimes to create them, to make their lives meaningful both to themselves and to others. To understand these processes adequately, future research needs to confront the absorbing task of interrogating the components of ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ environments in detail.

References

Ricca Edmondson and Thomas Scharf


