REVIEW

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Rural and urban perspectives on growing old: developing a new research agenda

Abstract Urban and rural themes have played an important part in European gerontological research. This paper analyses current issues in the field of urban and rural studies as applied to understanding old age. Both dimensions are being affected by population movements of different kinds, driven to a significant degree by globalisation in its various forms. The paper summarises trends underpinning rural and urban living and evidence regarding the impact of change in these areas on daily life in old age. The article considers a number of research agendas which would advance rural and urban studies of ageing, these combining developments in geography and urban studies with those in critical gerontology. The paper argues that a revitalised rural and urban gerontology will bring forward major new themes and issues for social gerontology in the 21st century.

Keywords Rural gerontology · Urban studies · Globalisation · City life

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine current ideas about rural and urban living within gerontological research[1]. Both dimensions have a distinguished pedigree in the field of ageing studies[2]. Classic studies in the British context, such as those of Sheldon (1948), Townsend (1957) and Isaacs et al. (1972), can be read as studies about growing old within urban society, with a particular emphasis in all three on the continued importance of family and community ties. In the US, the potential problems faced by older people residing in inner city areas was a topic of interest as early as the 1960s (Lowenthal and Berkman 1967), with researchers such as Clark (1971) highlighting problems of social interaction and limited social ties in deprived urban areas. Birren's (1969) essay published in *The Gerontologist* was important in providing a provisional statement regarding the position of older people in cities, making a strong case in the process for involving older people in their planning and design. Issues facing rural-dwelling elderly have again been the subject of long-standing interest by researchers in ageing, reflected in studies by Blume (1969) and Rosenmayr (1982) in work on older people in rural areas in Germany, Cribier's (1973) pioneering research on urbanites with second homes in the French countryside, and Wenger's (1984) extensive research on social networks among older people in rural communities in North Wales. There is also a strong American tradition of rural gerontology, illustrated in collections such as those by Youmans (1967), Coward and Lee (1985), Rowles et al. (1988), and Coward and Krout (1998).

There are, however, a number of reasons for thinking that work exploring the rural/urban dimension of ageing might expand at a significant rate over the next few years. First, the environmental context of ageing, and issues relating to place and location in particular,

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[1]This paper focuses entirely on issues facing older people in the context of the European countryside and cities; a focus on how older people are being affected by the rapid urbanisation (and the corresponding depletion of rural populations) in Asia and Africa is urgently required

[2]For a helpful review of the urban–rural distinction, drawing mainly on the US literature, see Golant (2003)

has itself resurfaced as a major theme within gerontology (Kendig 2003; Wahl and Weisman 2003; Wahl et al. 2003). Drawing on classic studies from Rosow (1967), Rowles (1978), Lawton (1980) and others, the mission of environmental gerontology has been viewed as understanding a number of key tasks facing older adults in diverse physical and ecological settings. These include: 'preserving as-independent-as-possible everyday life in the face of physical and mental impairments by using environmental resources outside the home environment ('aging in place'), initiating processes of relocation if desired or necessary, and adapting to new living environment settings (such as nursing homes or other planned housing) after relocation' (Wahl and Lang 2003, p. 7). Second, environmental experiences are themselves being reshaped in different ways by processes associated with globalisation, notably through accelerated rates of migration and mobility across the globe (Urry 2000). Third, the demographic dimension to problems facing declining urban centres and unchecked suburban development is now being acknowledged in research and policy discussions (Scharf et al. 2002; Riseborough and Jenkins 2004). Resolving the different problems facing rural as well as urban areas is increasingly viewed as central to research and policy development within gerontology.

This paper provides a review of some of the key changes affecting rural and urban environments and the likely challenges these will pose for research in gerontology. We begin, first of all, with an assessment of current issues in rural gerontology, developing in the process a research agenda for future work on this topic.

Developing rural gerontology

This section of the paper considers both present limitations in research in rural gerontology and a number of questions which might be addressed to take the debate forwards. It is further argued that the somewhat disparate nature of existing research into aspects of rural ageing might be responsible for generating contradictory research findings. This research may also be fostering a number of myths in relation to the experience of ageing in rural areas (see Wenger 2001). The focus here is primarily European, but some of the points made may well be relevant to studies undertaken in other advanced industrial nations.

Four reasons might be advanced for developing rural dimensions in gerontology. First, as is true for urban areas, rural areas throughout Europe are experiencing considerable change. This arises not only from the impact of processes of globalisation which have had a highly differentiated impact on rural communities (Terluin 2003), but also from continuing demographic shifts. While some rural areas continue to attract population through inward migration, others are prone to significant depopulation. By 2025, Eurostat (1999) predicts that predominantly rural regions such as Mecklenburg-Vor-pommern in Germany, Dorset in England, La Rioja in Spain and Liguria in Italy will have more than 35% of their populations aged 60 and over. Past migration processes also mean that the population profile of particular types of geographic area within such regions is likely to change quite significantly in the years ahead. For example, the process of suburbanisation since the 1960s will lead to a substantial ageing of rural areas close to the edge of Europe's major towns and cities. In the German context, this phenomenon has been referred to as a process of 'ageing into the countryside' (Bucher et al. 1998).

Second, and related to the above, rural areas are changing in terms of their social infrastructure. For older people, the presence of local facilities such as a shop, a post office or public transport is regarded as an important feature of the local community. However, while thriving rural communities might be able to sustain such facilities, the lack of spending power in declining communities makes these services rather more difficult to maintain. In England, for example, 42% of rural parishes had no shop in 1997, 43% had no post office, and 75% lacked a daily bus service (Countryside Agency 1999, p. 26). This touches on important questions concerning the sustainability of rural communities, and is reflected in the development of a range of rural policies at regional, national and European levels (e.g. the EU LEADER programme; see Österreichisches Institut für Raumplanung 2003, and Ray 2001).

Third, the budgetary pressures faced by all European nations since the middle of the 1970s have led to a restructuring of social policy and an increasingly explicit emphasis in health and social care policies on support provided by individuals and their families. In rural areas, where health and social care provision has traditionally been weakest, older people may become even more vulnerable to the absence or gradual loss of what might be regarded as essential services. Again, England serves to provide an illustration of this problem. In 1997, 91% of rural parishes had no day care for older people, and 80% had no residential care (Countryside Agency 1999, p. 27). Underlying existing shortcomings in rural service provision is a widely held assumption that older people in the countryside are securely embedded within supportive social networks and that demand for formal services is lower (Wenger 2001).

Fourth, the lack of a sufficiently well-developed empirical base in rural ageing offers ample scope to develop new research. This is important, because the absence of recent research on aspects of rural ageing has meant that gerontology inevitably relies upon findings arising from disparate, and often non-comparable, past studies of ageing in rural areas. Reliance in rural studies on data generated almost 20 years ago tends to reinforce the impression that rural areas have remained unchanged during the ensuing period.

Given the need to understand how these general changes impact upon older people in rural areas, the development of a new research agenda on rural ageing faces two key challenges: first, that of coping with

'rurality', and second, coping with urban–rural difference. The first issue concerns an obvious, yet fundamental difficulty associated with the theorisation of rural change. This is associated with the concept of 'rurality' or of 'the rural' itself. While use of the term 'rural' suggests the possibility of generalisation, social geographers would tend to warn against over-generalised interpretations of rurality (Pratt 1996). Instead, they stress the importance of cross-national differences in use of such terms as rural and rurality (Hoggart et al. 1995). Rurality in Europe was and still is nation-specific, reflecting contrasting processes of rural economic, social and cultural development (Scharf et al. 2005). What is rural in a nation such as The Netherlands, with its highly urbanised population, consequently differs from that of rural Poland, where a significant proportion of the population continues to live in the countryside and agriculture is still an important sector for local rural income (Scharf et al. 2005). Despite the ongoing contraction of distances between the rural fringe and population centres, some areas of Europe continue to be relatively remote. In *The Age of Capital*, the historian Eric Hobsbawm (1962) made the point that it was only relatively recently that the state reached the outer reaches of some nations. The example he cites is of the Polish census of 1931, where the inhabitants of one particularly remote area failed to understand a question about their nationality, answering simply 'we are from hereabouts' or 'we are locals' (p. 177). While few rural areas in contemporary Europe are quite so removed from the mainstream of society, remoteness does allow traditional attitudes and behaviours to persist.

Concepts of rurality also reflect the place of 'rurality' and 'countryside' in national identities (Scharf et al. 2005). For instance, the 'rural idyll' is seen as a particularly (southern) English conception (Halfacree 1993). In The Netherlands the concept of 'countryside' is strongly connected with a man-made landscape and agricultural entrepreneurship, even though the economic importance of Dutch agriculture has strongly declined (De Klerk 1998). The nation-specificity of rural concepts in Europe also means that national minorities within European states have different conceptions of rurality (Hooson 1994). Concepts of rurality also change over time; sometimes rural is associated with backwardness and stagnation, sometimes with an Arcadia where people find harmony with nature and themselves (Williams 1973).

The argument here is not necessarily for a more precise definition of what is rural—that would be difficult to achieve. Rather, it is important for gerontologists to take a more critical look at what they mean when they describe their work as rural. The lack of clarity concerning definitions of rurality (Schulz-Nieswandt 2000, p. 22; Scharf et al. 2005) means that researchers seeking to report on data collected within the context of rural studies are often obliged to take for granted that the research group responsible for collecting the primary data had a robust means of distinguishing 'urban' from 'rural'. However, many 'rural' studies pay little attention to issues of definition or meaning. In this respect, gerontology should seek to build upon debates in social geography in relation to 'the rural' and 'rurality' (Pratt 1996; Woodward 1996; Phillips 1998; Scharf et al. 2003).

Another important issue affecting studies of rural ageing concerns the (sometimes implicit) comparisons which are drawn between the contrasting experiences of old age in rural and urban areas. Underlying such research is the basic assumption that in some way rural ageing can be said to differ from that in urban contexts. This idea has been the focus of a longstanding debate in German research on ageing in different types of community settings (Arbeitsgruppe Gesundheitsanalysen 1991; Garms-Homolová and Korte 1993; Schulz-Nieswandt 2000). In an early contribution to the debate, Hans-Peter Tews (1987) suggested that there were two types of explanation of differences in terms of the situation of older people in urban and rural areas. The first type of explanation suggested that rural areas were engaged in a process of catch-up with urban areas. Drawing on modernisation theory, Tews (1987) argued that rural areas might be somewhat 'delayed' in their socio-economic development, but that in time they would acquire modern, urban characteristics. Thus, the larger, multi-generational family structures which are more common in rural areas would gradually give way to the more urban nuclear family. Intergenerational relations would be marked by the same characteristics in each type of area. The second type of explanation suggested that, despite the ongoing process of modernisation, differences would remain between urban and rural areas. According to the so-called 'level hypothesis', there are some aspects of the situation in rural and urban areas which cannot be equalised. This type of explanation is particularly closely associated with differences between urban and rural areas in terms of infrastructural aspects, including housing conditions and service provision for older people.

While these dual explanations have been useful as a means of providing a conceptual framework for comparing rural with urban areas, they are marked by the basic weakness that they somehow identify urban areas as the model to which rural areas should aspire (Garms-Homolová and Korte 1993; Schulz-Nieswandt 2000; Schweppe 2000). As a result, similarities between key elements of the ageing process in urban and rural areas —for example, in relation to normative aspects of intergenerational relationships—tend to be underplayed. In reviewing research on aspects of urban and rural infrastructures and intergenerational relationships in the case of Germany, one of the important points made by Garms-Homolová and Korte (1993) was the marked absence of urban–rural differences. This point is backed up by a recent analysis of the German Ageing Survey (Brauer 2002). In this respect, it can be argued that such differences are often assumed and subsequently overplayed by social gerontologists.

There is obviously further scope for research which compares older people in urban and rural areas, especially where this draws attention to the differential distribution of goods and services. However, at another level, urban–rural comparisons may be less meaningful. This is especially the case where, drawing upon modernisation theory, the argument is developed that 'the urban' represents the 'destination' of 'the rural'.

Towards a new research agenda on rural ageing: developing a critical perspective

One of the major achievements of what has become known as 'critical gerontology' has been to raise awareness of the increasing heterogeneity of old age in advanced industrial societies (Phillipson 1998; Minkler and Estes 1999). Changing demographic and family structures, and variations in lifestyles and access to life chances, have served to differentiate the older population much more along the lines of the key social divisions identified within modern society. Thus, research based on the critical approach acknowledges the overriding influence of variables such as social class, gender, ethnicity, and health and disability on the experience of later life. Where the influence of environmental context has been addressed in such research, this has largely focused on urban settings (Phillipson 2001). Application of the critical gerontology perspective to rural gerontology could be made in a number of ways. First, it should be possible to interpret regional divisions—such as that based on the rural–urban continuum—in terms of the social division model. This would tend to draw attention to the way in which the lives of older people in rural areas are either advantaged or disadvantaged by prevailing socio-political and economic structures. In this context, it might also be useful to think of older people in rural areas as a minority group in contemporary society, and about the parallels between the experiences of rural elders and other types of minority.

Second, there is scope to develop key themes from critical gerontology within rural studies. Here the emphasis would be upon considering issues of difference within rural communities. There has been a tendency—necessitated in part by the scale of empirical studies undertaken on rural populations—to homogenise the older population, or to interpret it according to very general criteria (such as whether it consists of long-term residents or incomers). By contrast, issues which are very current in urban gerontology have been overlooked. These relate, for example, to themes such as self-identity, poverty, deprivation, gender and ethnicity. In this context, there is a need to develop an empirical base which allows gerontology to explore variations within and between different types of rural area (Schulz-Nieswandt 2000).

The development of a more critical approach might assist in challenging distorted views and myths in relation to rural ageing. For example, depending upon the topic under analysis, and the subjective interpretation of the researcher, older people living in rural areas are often regarded simplistically as being either 'favoured' or 'disadvantaged', either 'well-integrated' or 'socially isolated'. A good example of this comes from a German text on ageing policy which seeks to draw attention to the 'problem' of rural ageing (Ritter and Hohmeier 1999). Without reference to empirical evidence, it is suggested that 'The situation of the elderly in rural areas is also made more difficult by the weakening of family networks, because the stability of families is declining and the number of small families and single people is increasing' (p. 39). Other researchers have noted the often contradictory nature of research findings relating to rural ageing (e.g. Schweppe 2000; Wahl et al. 2000).

To conclude this section, one of the major challenges currently facing rural gerontology is to generate the empirical base which could serve to underpin the development of new and innovative approaches to studying the lives of older people in rural areas. Equally, we would point to the need for an enrichment of theoretical perspectives, with rural gerontology drawing closer links with developments in social geography on the one side, and critical gerontology on the other.

Developing urban gerontology

Urban themes and issues have also emerged as an important feature of research in gerontology. This emphasis on the urban itself reflects the interaction between the trend towards the spatial concentration of populations (with 60% of the world's population living in cities by 2030) and the impact upon cities of demographic ageing (Thorns 2002; Rodwin and Gusmano 2002). However, the 'turn' towards an urban focus is driven by the influence of at least three other factors. First, cities are themselves undergoing radical change, notably through the processes associated with globalisation, this leading to concentrated wealth and prominence for some urban centres while producing an acceleration in the decline of others (Sassen 2000a, 2001). Second, urban sociology as a discipline is going though a period of revitalisation, with new approaches to understanding issues such as the dynamics of urban poverty, social relations within neighbourhoods, and changing spatial relations between different class, gender, ethnic and age-based groups (LeGates and Stout 2003; Savage et al. 2003). This change within the discipline is presenting a number of issues and questions worthy of application to gerontology, suggesting in the process significant opportunities for interdisciplinary research. Third, as a number of recent studies suggest (Scharf et al. 2002; Newman 2003; Mumford and Power 2003), 'ageing in place' within cities—and especially deprived inner city areas—creates significant risks both for older people and those concerned with the delivery of services. This has contributed towards a tendency to see

urban environments as being unsupportive and potentially hostile to the needs of older people, a view reinforced by the limitations of urban planning and urban regeneration in responding to ageing populations (Riseborough and Jenkins 2004).

Focusing on the urban

We might note at the outset a paradox as regards the way in which we view the nature of city life. From one perspective, cities are viewed as engines of innovation and change. Peter Ackroyd (2001) cites a German proverb: 'City air makes you free'. He goes on to comment: 'In the city there seem avenues of endless possibility and innovation, since the city is always marked by the forces of change. That is why it can endlessly reinvent itself; a city that relies on its past or refuses to confront renewal is a city about to die'. Urban sociologists, when describing the city, point to Aristotle's view that 'A city is composed of different kinds of men (and women); similar people cannot bring a city into existence.'

Characteristics of urban lives such as those cited above may, however, be viewed negatively by older people who may see reinvention and the existence of dissimilar people as a potential threat. From another perspective, cities combine images of mobility with those of isolation and imprisonment. Ackroyd (2000) notes the extent to which metaphors of incarceration have persisted throughout the history of cities such as London. The image of confinement is still present in many urban areas, notably with the fear of entering particular neighbourhoods or the danger of moving around particular districts at certain times (Klinenberg 2002; Scharf et al. 2002). Also, the city may present physical and institutional barriers to groups such as those with a disability, limiting their participation in mainstream economic and social life (Gleeson 2001).

Beck (1998) views the modern city as characterised by an 'architecture of apartheid' organised around the needs of 'productive elites'. Echoing this point, Jerde (2001, p. 29) suggests that contemporary cities are 'inhabited by transients from all income levels' and that 'high-spending, short-term inhabitants are the vital users of cities today'. These comments suggest that cities face major contradictions in the 21st century: between the demands of a 'hyper-mobile' affluent minority on the one side, and the needs of those 'ageing-in-place' on the other—older people who may have invested a substantial part of their life in an urban space which may now appear operating beyond their control (Scharf et al. 2002).

Given such contradictions, three types of themes might be identified in relation to debates around ageing and urbanisation: first, understanding the impact of the urban environment on older people; second, globalisation and place; third, challenging anti-urbanism within gerontology.

The impact of the urban

The first theme addresses the issue of understanding with greater precision the different ways in which urban processes operate to include or exclude older people. Studies of older people in inner city areas have identified the way in which they can be affected by, for example, changes to the physical fabric of cities, the effect of population turnover and accelerating rates of crime (Hannan Foundation 2001; Phillipson et al. 2001; Scharf et al. 2002; Newman 2003). Nevertheless, while studies have documented some of the main trends, links with social and ecological processes remain unclear. Moreover, we might also consider the extent to which contemporary urbanisation creates pressures on older people to withdraw or 'disengage' from the mainstream of social life—with potentially devastating consequences. This point was highlighted by Eric Klinenberg (2002) in his study of the 1995 heat wave in Chicago which in one month killed around 600 people, three-quarters of whom were aged 65 and over. For a period in July, high humidity and ozone levels created the equivalent of a tropical environment in the city—with disastrous effects on everyday life.

In his study, Klinenberg examines several important questions raised by the effects of the heat wave. Why did so many older people die alone? Why was the overall death rate higher than meteorological models would predict? Why did some neighbourhoods and groups experience greater devastation than others? His approach to answering these questions draws upon the perspective of 'social epidemiology', analysing the characteristics of individuals and communities within the context of socio-economic, political and cultural relationships.

The conditions examined by the author indicate that new forms of vulnerability are appearing in urban environments. Among these might be listed: the isolation of poor senior citizens, particularly in areas affected by violence; the degradation of low-income housing; changes in the organisation and delivery of health and social care; and ecological changes driven by the expansion of suburbia on the one side, and the economic crisis experienced by cities built around traditional manufacturing industry on the other. The issue of violence in the city is accorded particular prominence in the study by Klinenberg (2002). Urban areas with high rates of violent crime are viewed as posing barriers to the mobility of their residents and, during the period covered by the heat wave, Chicago was indeed one of the most dangerous cities in the United States. The consequence for some groups of older people was a self-imposed form of house arrest (see Scharf et al. 2002 for similar findings in Britain), with individuals constructing their own form of gated community in the shape of make-shift home-security devices.

Restrictions on daily living were reinforced by deteriorating public space, a product of abandoned buildings, degraded infrastructure, and the loss of local

businesses. Such conditions became especially perilous for older people when declines in health and support networks have a mirror image in changes in the immediate locality. Newman (2003) illustrated this in her research on older people in inner-city New York, where she argues that, unlike younger people and families who move in and out of neighbourhoods, for older people 'the home place sets the tone for their daily lives' (p. 199). Both Newman and Klinenberg make the point that inner-city elderly residents are especially affected where there is a weakening in the stock of social capital—the bonds of reciprocity and trust formed among individuals and groups within localities (Putnam 2000; Phillipson et al. 2004).

Globalisation and a sense of place

The second theme raised by urban studies concerns the impact of globalisation on definitions and perceptions of place. Beck (2000, p. 11) has defined globalisation as 'denoting the process through which sovereign nation states are cross-crossed and undermined by transnational actors with varying prospects of power, orientations, identities and networks'. Part of what Bauman (1998) refers to as the 'human consequences of globalisation' concerns the resurgence of international migration in various forms and the maintenance of dense social ties across time and space. Following this, Sassen (2000b) has referred to the challenge of recovering the meaning of place in the context of global telecommunications and the intensifying of transnational and translocal dynamics. However, research on older people suggests that, globalising processes notwithstanding, the relationship between people and place is even more important at the beginning of the 21st century than it was a century or more ago. Older people ageing in place within cities may be the first in their families to achieve a sense of residential stability—living in the same house for three, four or even five decades (Phillipson et al. 2001). This in contrast to the 19th century/early 20th century when, as Charles Booth observed in his survey of the London poor, '... the people are always on the move; they shift from one part of it (London) to another "like fish in a sea" ... ' (cited in Davin 1996).

The paradox here is that globalisation produces both huge migrations and population displacements on the one side, but with increased numbers of people (older people especially) maintaining a strong sense of attachment to particular places on the other (Eade 1997; Phillipson et al. 2001). This sense of attachment to place, or 'investment' as Massey (1984) has termed it, has a number of dimensions. Gender interacting with age is one important element. Gerontologists have defined older women as often playing the role of 'kin-keepers', sustaining the family through not only care-work but also activities such as letter-writing, telephoning, and remembering birthdays. In fact, research also suggests that they may act as 'neighbourhood-keepers' as well, vigilant about the changing fortunes of the localities in which they have invested much of their lives (Phillipson et al. 1999). This may explain why women often express particular concern about what they see as the deterioration affecting localities. Campbell (1993) suggests that this should be placed in the context of the conflict between women and men for the control of local areas. Tensions generated by a more threatening environment on the street may be matched by a decline in women's physical capacity to deal with the hurdles generated in urban space, summarised by Klinenberg (2002, p. 55; see also Phillipson et al. 1999) as '... barriers to physical mobility ... such as crumbling sidewalks, and poor lighting; the psychological impact of living amidst signs of disorder; indifferent government agencies who neglect the local infrastructure; and the decrease of trusting and reciprocal relationships in areas with high levels of crime'.

Ethnicity will be another dimension interacting with globalisation and changing definitions of place. Older people from minority groups may be particularly vulnerable to the pressures of adapting to urban living (especially if themselves first-generation migrants from predominantly rural areas). They will almost certainly experience more acutely than most the housing pressures characteristic of urban areas in many European cities (Madanipour et al. 1998). The character of globalisation is thus likely not only to generate new challenges for urban areas but also to bring fresh social groups and issues for investigation for gerontological research.

The problem of anti-urbanism

The final theme concerns the need to overcome what might be regarded as an underlying strain of 'anti-urbanism' within gerontology. This has reinforced the view that urban environments are somehow less advantageous to older people—for example, when compared to retirement communities or to rural settings. However, the future of old age will, to a large extent, be dictated by society's capacity to make cities tolerable and enjoyable places in which to live. While cities may represent disabling and threatening environments at any age, people reaching advanced old age may feel an even greater sense of being trapped or disadvantaged by urban decay. Older people need therefore to be a central part of building a sustainable and inclusive urban environment (Scharf et al. 2002). Awareness of the speed of change affecting urban communities has generated new visions and ideas about the most appropriate way in which planning might develop. In the 1960s writers such as Jane Jacobs (1961), and later Richard Sennett (1996) were emphasising the need to maintain the diversity of city life. More recently in the UK, Richard Rogers and Anne Power (2001) have argued for a new approach to urban planning, one which promotes a sharing of spaces for the collective good, and which reverses the drift towards suburbanisation. These ideas urgently need to be placed within a gerontological context, and older people themselves should be given a stronger say about the

management of urban space and the process of urban regeneration (Hardill 2003).

Towards a new research agenda on urban ageing: developing a critical perspective

What kind of research agenda should be built in developing an urban dimension to gerontology? The first issue is that making the urban explicit in our research would at least be a valuable starting point. The point here is that most studies of older people are by accident or design studies which involve ageing in urban environments. However, the relationship between the two is rarely addressed through systematic investigation. Studies of poverty, loneliness, vulnerability to crime, housing, elder abuse and related areas are interesting topics in themselves but they often nest within urban settings which themselves will influence the development and trajectory of the issue under consideration.

Second, cities are of course undergoing radical change, and understanding the way in which this change will advantage as well as disadvantage older people is important to consider. Sassen (2000b) identifies the way in which large cities concentrate both the leading sectors of global capital and a growing share of disadvantaged populations. Cities, she argues, have become a strategic terrain for a series of conflicts and contradictions—among which we might argue that the management and support for vulnerable populations is one of the most acute. Furthermore, if North American cities are a guide, then major issues are being raised for the future of those who 'age in place' in urban centres instead of moving to the suburbs or to distant retirement communities. Mike Davis (2002) refers to the emergence of a 'post-urban metropolis' where traditional centre-place functions (culture and sports, government, shopping and administration) are radically dispersed among different centres. Along with this, and more ominously, he points to the emergence of 'dead cities' stripped of the functions and activities contributing to the maintenance of lively and diverse public spaces. Against this trend, Davis (2002, p. 101) makes the point 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 privatised consumerism, and thus cut through the apparent contradiction between improving standards of living and accepting the limits imposed by ecosystems and finite natural resources.

The research agenda here concerns the need to understand the potential of cities for improving the quality of life in old age. This will, however, require placing work in areas such as urban management and urban planning as much more significant elements in gerontological work than has hitherto been the case. Following this, we also need to develop a broader research agenda about the way in which neighbourhood change in urban areas can combat social exclusion or, expressed more positively, contribute to social inclusion in old age. Forrest and Kearns (2001) make the point that neighbours and neighbouring retain great importance for the poor and elderly, a finding which seems to hold in a variety of environmental and cultural contexts (Campbell and Lee 1992; Logan and Spitze 1994; Scharf et al. 2002; Thomése et al. 2003). At the same time, we remain relatively ignorant about influences on patterns of local interaction and possibilities for support within different types of neighbourhood. Bridge (2002) makes the point that the debate around social capital has re-emphasised the importance of locally based social networks (see also Phillipson et al. 2004). Also, research is urgently needed on questions regarding the mix of ties which can best support older people—especially those faced with the high degree of population turnover affecting many urban environments.

Finally, with respect to fresh research, we might also note the case for a new generation of 'urban ethnography' which can capture the experience of ageing within cities now subject to intense global change. Sassen (2000b, p. 146) has pointed to the need for detailed fieldwork as a 'necessary step in capturing many aspects of the urban condition', and this seems especially important in studying the impact of urban change on older people, and vice versa. Urban sociology was itself founded (through the work of the Chicago School from the 1920s onwards) upon detailed studies of experiences of urban life, focusing on the disadvantaged and insecure (Andersen's 1923 study *The Hobo* and Cressey's 1932 study *The Taxi-Hall Dancers* being two such examples). The use of ethnography in bringing to the surface the attitudes, motivations and experiences of older people 'ageing in place' offers scope for deepening our understanding about both the way in which cities change, and the contribution (positive as well as negative) they can make to influencing the quality of daily life in old age.

Conclusion

Studies on rural and urban issues represent significant areas for development within social gerontology. Despite the existence of a substantial research base in both areas, neither has fully succeeded in developing as a major aspect of work in the field of ageing. There are, however, good reasons for thinking that this will change over the next years. First, debates within urban and rural sociology—themselves drawing upon a wider range of theoretical discussions—are starting to recognise the importance of the demographic dimension to spatial change: social gerontology as a discipline has an important role in extending and developing this area of work. Second, globalisation, as already argued at a number of points in this paper, is transforming debates about the rural and the urban. Discussions around the issue of globalisation have emerged as an important strand within social gerontology (Baars et al. 2005), but the extent to which global change—notably, accelerated movements of

people, the growth of transnational communities, greater interdependency—is transforming urban and rural communities and the place of older people within them requires more intensive study than has hitherto been the case. Third, both the above points underline the need to expand the scope of work in the field of environmental gerontology, recognising the complexity of both urban and rural settings and the diversity of the older populations within each. The aim of this paper has been to indicate the substantial research agenda now emerging from different types of spatial change affecting communities across Europe. Recognition of this should form the basis for a number of collaborative research programmes in the years ahead.

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