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Addressing erasure, microfication and social change: age-friendly initiatives and environmental gerontology in the 21st century

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Introduction

The age-friendly cities movement has gained global enthusiasm for its efforts to address the multiple, interacting layers of the social world that influence the degree to which older adults are integrated in their communities (WHO, 2007). Many of the age-friendly initiatives implemented around the world have developed and occurred in parallel with the continued elaboration of academic research in environmental gerontology and related fields. Although these two streams have not always cross-fertilised, emergent and intersecting processes in the 21st century such as increasing globalisation, urban renewal and gentrification, and population ageing highlight the fact that both enterprises share common concerns and objectives, and they also share some common limitations. In this chapter, we articulate two key challenges, shared by prevailing paradigms in both age-friendly initiatives and the scholarly field of environmental gerontology: microfication and erasure. Then, using examples of two current issues facing many older people globally, we demonstrate how rapid social change in population processes underscores the need for concerted, multi-level consideration of the forces affecting the wellbeing of older adults.

The development of environmental gerontology

From its beginnings, environmental gerontology has been concerned with focusing on how environment and context may be arranged to enable older people to optimise and sustain high levels of physical,
mental and social functioning. For example, early work such as Lewin’s ‘living space model’ (1951), Lawton and Nahemow’s (1973) ‘ecological theory of ageing’ and Lawton’s (1986) ‘press-competence model’ were developed as part of efforts to understand the interactions between older individuals and their environments. Studies in environmental gerontology have examined the socio-spatial implications of ageing and its complex relationship with the environment at the micro-level (for example, home and family) and at more encompassing levels of social organisation (such as neighbourhood, city, region – see, for example, Wahl et al., 2004). In doing so, scholars of environmental gerontology have pushed the agenda of social and environmental planning and policies to improve the experience of ageing. They have sought to advance ‘ageing in place’ and awareness of the importance of place attachment and spatial experience to older individuals and their conceptualisation of place as a home (Andrews and Phillips, 2005). They have further sought to understand the relevant dimensions of context and to contribute to specifying the mechanisms through which external forces shape individual wellbeing.

Thus, environmental gerontology is justifiably viewed as a positive and progressive sub-field by those concerned with identifying and advancing the interests of elders. Yet, the impact of such work must be judged not only by what it has contributed, but also by its aspirations and its potentials. By and large, the objectives of environmental gerontology include identifying the relevant dimensions of environment and the mechanisms through which environment shapes individual ageing, and how such mechanisms may be addressed through policy and practice. Yet its prevailing approach is incomplete, because its ability to respond to the challenge of rapid social change in the 21st century is limited. Similarly, age-friendly initiatives that attempt to identify the key barriers to ageing well in one’s community must necessarily acknowledge that individuals can change all the while their environments – on multiple levels – are changing simultaneously. As Mahmood and Keating (2012, p 148) elaborate: ‘Neither person nor place is static; at different points in the ageing process, the “same” home in the “same” neighborhood can foster or impede access to other material resources or social relationships.’

As a starting point for our arguments, we thus note that both environmental gerontology and age-friendly initiatives have focused heavily on the micro-level realities that are part of daily experiences. We acknowledge that such factors are important in influencing both quality of life and the ability to function in everyday life. Yet such processes, like processes of individual ageing more generally, do not exist in a vacuum, and cannot be adequately understood if viewed as circumstances that themselves have no broader context. If we are to understand the scope of the actual environmental mechanisms that influence both ageing and age-friendliness, attention must be paid not only to the conditions, risks and opportunities that ageing individuals encounter in the immediacy of everyday experience, but also to the factors that shape those immediate conditions. These factors, some close and some far removed, appear in many consequential forms, whether in the nature of accessible public services, in the state or national laws and policies that shape those services, or in the response to demographic shifts. In sum, to understand the causal processes behind individual outcomes, the macro-environment, no less than the micro-environment, requires attention.

The term ‘macro-environment’ has of course been an explicit part of the vocabulary of environmental gerontology from its beginnings, but its meaning has often been quite limited – referring mainly to basic characteristics of proximate contexts, such as the neighbourhood itself. This limited conceptualisation of the ‘macro-environment’ harkens back to Lawton’s foundational work, in which 30 pages devoted to the macro approach refer mainly to neighborhoods (for example, Lawton, 1986, pp 21–52). However, neighbourhoods are themselves hardly free-standing realities. Neighbourhood conditions in general, and the age-friendliness of neighbourhood circumstances in particular, are subject to the vicissitudes of political, economic and other forces that lie beyond the neighbourhood, yet nevertheless affect crucial issues of daily life (such as food access, safety, transportation, communication) through factors such as migration and mobility, employment opportunities and policy developments. Such externally imposed influences and changes may also produce shifts in the experience of everyday social life and local culture.

Despite calls for integrating multiple levels of social organisation, from immediate home environments to policy, into age-friendly initiatives (Fitzgerald and Caro, 2014), many scholars continue to draw predominantly from the individual-level perspective espoused in environmental gerontology literatures in their approaches to policy as well as practical needs. Identification of problems and their analysis are both largely focused at the individual level, heavily drawn from the presumptive goal of ageing in place (compare Scharlach, 2016). While not unimportant, this focus by itself is inadequate to capture the full scope of influences and power dynamics that affect the lives of ageing individuals and their communities. To that end, in this chapter,
we focus on two specific problems that follow from the neglect of the connection of local circumstances to macro-level dynamics. The first is microfication, or the tendency for scientists and policymakers to focus on the characteristics of ageing individuals and their immediate milieu, while paying little attention to the interaction between the micro-individual traits and the macro-level workings. The second is erasure, which is an extreme form of social exclusion where groups of people are simply ‘unseen’ in policy, practice, or science. In the next section, we describe both of these problems. Then we present two examples where we have observed rapid social change in the 21st century, exposing the lag in the paradigms of both environmental gerontology and age-friendly initiatives globally: urban renewal and gentrification; and transnational migration of older adults.

Challenge 1: microfication

According to Hagestad and Dannefer (2001), microfication refers to the tendency to focus on immediate aspects of everyday life (the details of daily experience, face-to-face interaction, interpersonal relationships and so on), while overlooking broader, overarching aspects of the social context that define and set key parameters of daily experience. Theoretical concerns in gerontology regard the microfication of challenges of ageing (for example, Hagestad and Dannefer, 2001; Estes and Phillipson, 2002) should not be taken to imply that the micro-level of social reality is unimportant. Rather, we argue that an understanding of the fine-grained micro-realities of human experience comprises the beginning, not the endpoint, of an adequate analysis of how to understand and proceed to intervene in a given local situation. The layers of the social world in everyday life – the household, the apartment building, the street – are nested within one another, and the social worlds that one experiences at work or in other daily routines exist alongside those of family or household relations.

One such example of microfication in environmental gerontology is the tendency to look for solutions to mobility problems associated with limitations in activities of daily living in devices such as call-button lanyards or grab bars (for example, Iezzoni, 2003; Gooberman-Hill and Ebrahim, 2007; Resnik et al, 2009). Such discussions need to be accompanied by an interrogation of the broader, externally imposed dimensions of reality and institutional arrangements that serve to sort older adults into their current circumstances and living arrangements, as well as their states of health and functioning (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000; Abramson, 2015). Thus, attention to the constitutive mechanisms and dynamics present in everyday life, and to the risks and the opportunities that they afford, is essential to gain understanding of the mechanisms through which the conditions and state of a given individual are constituted, and these remain relevant throughout the life course (Dannefer and Kelley-Moore, 2009; Browning et al, 2016).

A second example involves older adults who choose to remain in sub-optimal housing, such as single-room occupancy (SRO) buildings, to live in or near city areas with desired features (Crystal and Beck, 1992). While the prevailing paradigm in environmental gerontology may indicate that such arrangements comprise a housing mismatch for older, co-morbid or functionally limited adults, the adults themselves may not see it this way. For them, importance of proximity to familiar spaces and resources outweighs the challenges of the immediate home environment for these seniors. A feature in The New York Times (Nagourney, 2016) profiling the greying homeless population in the United States detailed myriad cases of older adults who navigate precarious housing arrangements, including living in tents, in order to remain close to the services and charities that help support their existence.

For both examples, the immediate home environment is not the operant explanatory feature of the older adult’s environment. In this way, such findings make clear that trying to understand an individual’s situation solely by looking at characteristics of the individual, or even of the household, leaves us short of understanding. Of course, both individuals and neighborhoods can be seen as located within yet more encompassing social realities, with broader economic, political and cultural dimensions, an issue we discuss later in the chapter.

Analogous to the spatial aspects of microfication (focused on the immediate physical surroundings), microfication can also be seen as having a temporal aspect. For example, temporality describes the tendency to focus on current circumstances and assumes that an individual’s needs and capacities can be read from current location, apart from considering the biographical and historical location of one’s present situation. Here, the danger is in the neglect of cultural forces that are integral to the life experience and community life of residents. Such neglect risks the reduction of a lifetime of generative action to narrow ‘prescriptions’ for ageing well by gerontological specialists. Several key elements of such temporal dimensions of neighbourhood life – all potentially relevant to age-friendliness – involve temporal dimensions such as neighbourhood stability versus turnover, cohort replacement and neighbourhood composition, and the longevity of a given individual’s or family’s residence in the same neighbourhood.
(Kelley-Moore and Thorpe, 2012; Woldoff, 2014). One type of situation in which the relevance of such factors is dramatically in evidence is that in which the arrival of new immigrants is part of the neighbourhood cohort replacement process. Immigrants in general and older immigrants in particular may appear as unremarkable, yet they bring with them, individually and collectively, experiences that have inevitably shaped their own sense of the aspects of everyday life that are required for meaning making and a sense of wholeness and integrity in an unfamiliar/alien context.

**Challenge 2: erasure**

The second problem deriving from a predominant focus on micro-level realities for older adults in age-friendly initiatives is the potential for *erasure*. Cultural erasure has its roots in the problem of *exclusion*—an absence of key voices and groups from the conversation. Erasure is a concept used as social critique of the ways certain groups of people are simply ‘unseen’ in policy, research, or institutional practices. It is a form of social exclusion so embedded in the cultural assumptions of a society that the absence of these groups is not even recognised. Some recent examples from other fields are: exclusion of sexual minority groups from public health research by focusing on behaviour and not identity (Young and Meyer, 2005); lack of legal protections from discrimination against Mexican Americans compared with ‘real’ races such as Black or White (Haney-López, 1998); and suburban development initiatives for predominantly White homeowners that overrun culturally important spaces for Black communities (Greason, 2013).

A poignant example of the erasure of vulnerable older adults in urban space is offered by Klenenberg’s (2002) study *Heat wave*. In 1995, a severe weather event in Chicago resulted in 521 deaths, 73% of which were among adults aged 65 or older. More than 90% lived alone. The modal victim were poor, elderly, Black adults, disproportionately located in the most violent neighbourhoods of the city. Sadly, 170 of the victims’ bodies were never claimed by family or friends from the morgue. Yet the study of the disaster, commissioned by the mayor, ultimately characterised the heat wave as a ‘unique meteorological event caused by a rare convergence of critical factors’. The report focused on the epidemiology of heat exposure (that is, what happens when bodies are exposed to excessively high temperatures) and paid virtually no attention to the social patterning of the victims. In reaction to the complete absence of discussion regarding the preventability of the deaths of these disadvantaged older adults, Klenenberg concludes:

**Silent and invisible killers of silenced and invisible people, the social conditions that made heat waves so deadly do not so much disappear from view as fail to register with newsmakers and their audiences— including social scientific experts on disasters. (2002, pp 16-17; emphasis added)**

While the concept of erasure has appeared in other work, such as critical race discourse (Gilborn, 2005) and disability studies (Campbell, 2008), to our knowledge it has had limited, if any, application in the study of older adults. Interestingly, resource debates cite the ‘war between generations’ or ‘greedy geezers’ (Williamson et al., 1999; Peterson, 2004; Williamson and Watts-Roy, 2009) when discussing the tension between investing in our youth or supporting our older citizens. Implicit in the characterisation of these debates is that older adults are recognised and considered, perhaps even actively working against the interests of younger people. For example, the housing debate tends to frame older adults as ‘sitting on’ good property, while young people are ‘forced’ to rent in less desirable areas (McKee, 2012).

Cultural erasure, however, is a more extreme form of social exclusion, because the social group is invisible to the mainstream culture. The substantial literature on the social exclusion of older people grounds the unequal treatment and devaluation of old and very old groups in the pervasive force of societal ageism (compare Scharf and Keating, 2012; Stucklerberger et al., 2012), a feature of which would be the complete erasure of older adults from the cultural gaze. Thus the poignancy in the findings of the Klenenberg study described earlier is that researchers and policymakers could not even see the glaring age disparity in the victims, effectively rendering their preventable deaths to an ageless accident.

In sum, the dual challenges of microfiction and erasure can be found to operate across a diverse array of domains and experiences. A delimited focus on individual-level and micro-level characteristics of older adults’ living environments, as well as invoking some degree of temporal suspension at all levels of consideration, can potentially obscure the influence of larger-scale factors that have implications for age-friendliness. Emerging trends in the 21st century, largely at the nexus of increasing globalisation and urbanisation, accompanied by population ageing, provide an opportunity to observe how the immediate milieu of older adults can be couched within social change and macro-level trends, and how the neglect of consideration at these levels can result in microfiction and erasure. We first discuss urban
renewal and gentrification. Then we turn to the emerging patterns of transnational migration among older adults.

Social change and emergent macro-level forces

Urban renewal and gentrification

An overriding narrative in the urban redevelopment/gentrification discourse is the effort to make city spaces ‘family-friendly’ again. Indeed, many urban redevelopment initiatives are grounded in the assumption that familification (Goodsell, 2013) — prioritising the housing and service needs of working-age residents and their children — is the formula for economic growth and stability in previously declining urban spaces. The return and settlement of ‘families’ in gentrifying areas are frequently touted as indicators that a neighborhood has succeeded in addressing issues related to social disorder, safety and economic desolation (Goodsell, 2013). Older adults, however, are effectively erased from urban renewal discourse that is grounded in familism, since these older persons do not figure in the constellation of families or neighbourhood age structure. As a result, economic and policy initiatives designed to support gentrification typically focus on the neighbourhood features of most value for families with children, such as the schools, day-care centres and playgrounds (DeSena, 2012). A complementary process in gentrifying neighbourhoods arises where the housing stock is increasingly occupied/rented by university students (Smith, 2008). Older residents, who are frequently home owners, can be faced with new neighbourhood social dynamics that no longer include them, or could even be overtly unwelcoming. In these circumstances, older adults are effectively erased from the vision of urban renewal — making clear the implicit cultural bias towards age-segregated residential landscapes (Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2007).

In addition to the erasure of older adults from definitions of safe, thriving neighbourhoods, the bias towards families in urban renewal is also the effective obliteration of older adults from the valued cultural and economic dynamics of neighbourhood life. Research shows that displacement is not as high a risk for older residents as is the potential to be erased, or rendered invisible, in their own neighbourhoods (Burns et al., 2012). One reason for this is that gentrification creates new partnerships and/or alters the social contract between community institutions and its residents (Hankins, 2007). As such, long-time older residents may lose influence or power in their own communities as other partnerships gain primacy. Further, these new stakeholders in the redevelopment of these neighborhoods may disinvest in activities and spaces that are long-standing and socially important for older adults (such as bingo halls, coffee shops and other traditional gathering places). Since these same older residents may not participate in the new activities (for example, kick boxing) or use spaces (such as gyms) for meeting friends, once-integrated seniors are more likely to remain home alone (Burns et al., 2012). This often carries an added irony when, as taxing homeowners, they may continue to contribute disproportionately to the community tax base relative to young renters.

The bias towards families in urban renewal is not just a free-market phenomenon. State-generated urban revitalisation efforts use this framework as well, effectively erasing poor older adults from their communities through policy and investment of public money in urban renewal. Public housing initiatives, such as HOPE IV (Home Ownership and Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere) and the Moving to Opportunity programme in the United States, are two such large-scale political and economic efforts to decentralise poverty in urban spaces (Chaskin and Joseph, 2010; Gennetian et al., 2011). While the intent is to replace concentrated low-income housing with new, low-density, mixed-income housing, such efforts can displace many older residents to make room for the younger replacement residents (Davidson and Lees, 2010). In the quest to accommodate children and working-age adults in these communities, seniors who qualify for public housing are increasingly concentrated in high-density buildings located further away from resource-rich areas or left behind in their deteriorating neighbourhoods (Kelley-Moore and Thorpe, 2012; Chaskin et al., 2013).

One argument for these programme choices is that seniors, who ‘need’ more accessible housing, should be congregated into one large-scale building, rather than scattered throughout the public housing communities across counties and cities (Van Hoffman, 1996). Such corolling of older adults — a deliberate form of age-segregation — is also justified because of claims of lower levels of crime and potential for disorder than would be likely if younger populations lived in such high-density environments (Newman, 1972; Normoye and Foley, 1988). In the US, even the federal eligibility criteria for living in senior public housing includes a restriction that no one in the household can be under the age of 50, effectively excluding persons who are part-time or full-time caregivers of their grandchildren. In these ways, public housing policies effectively view the ‘problem’ of being old and poor as an individual rather than a structural issue.
In sum, the erasure of older adults from the discourse about urban renewal persists, either through free-market discrimination or through exclusion from residential priority in federal or state housing programmes. The economic or programmatic forces that serve to erase older adults from neighbourhoods with young families run counter to sociological work on the benefits of neighbourhood collective efficacy on child wellbeing. Such literature argues that intergenerational closure – or the degree to which non-household adults and children in a community are linked – is a mechanism contributing to positive outcomes for all residents (Coleman, 1988; Sampson et al, 1999). The concept of the ‘urban village’ is based, in some part, on the idea that the social dynamics of a diverse neighborhood can transcend individual social networks with regard to benefits and social control (Campbell and Lee, 1992). Further, other work shows that the degree of social capital decreases sharply as neighbourhoods become more age-homogeneous (Marshall et al, 2001).

**Transnational migration trends and older immigrants**

A second area in which the dual problems of microfication and erasure may challenge efforts toward age-friendliness is found within the 21st-century trend towards increasingly global and fluid migration patterns (see, further, Chapter Three). Coupled with population ageing, we observe a rapidly growing pattern of increase in transnationalism among older adults (Treas, 2008; Walsh and Näve, 2016). For example, in the United States, one in eight foreign-born older adults is a new immigrant over the age of 60 (Treas, 2008). We note with surprise that discussions of the intersectionality of age and migrant status have been notably absent from research focused on urban environment and age-friendliness, leading to a lack of knowledge regarding the particularities of the lived experiences of older adult immigrants (Becker, 2003; Treas and Torres-Gil, 2008). We suggest that this scholarly absence is likely for two reasons, both of which we explicate further below: first, research, policy and social service agencies tend to consider migration and settlement issues to be ‘ageless’ without consideration of the special needs or assets of older adult immigrants; and second, state-sponsored social welfare benefit structures effectively erase older immigrants from income and medical supports designed to help older adults. We discuss each of these in turn.

First, cultural and media narratives of older immigrants tend to focus on destination moves for immigrants to be reunited with their successful children in a new country (Carr and Tienda, 2013) and/or settlements into high-resource ‘ethnoburbs’ with culturally appropriate resources (see Jones, 2008, for a review; for a discussion of Chinese ethnoburbs in San Gabriel Valley, see Li, 1998; Zhou et al, 2008). Yet the stark reality is that the living conditions of older immigrants are more frequently characterised by living in inner cities where they face conditions of poverty, crime, poor-quality housing and inadequacies in the basics of comfort and safety (Becker, 2003; Phillipson, 2007, 2011; DeSena and Shortell, 2012).

The intersection of older age and new immigrant status provides both challenges and opportunities for social service providers and policymakers. On the one hand, some characteristics of older immigrants may interact with neighbourhood and community characteristics to render them especially vulnerable. For example, immigrants generally have lower levels of educational attainment and incomes below established levels of poverty relative to native-born residents (Buffel et al, 2012). Many of these older immigrants settle in poorer neighbourhoods with few resources, which also have poor-quality housing, close proximity to environmental toxins (including poor air and water quality) and higher crime rates. For this population, the personal resources available to respond to adverse neighborhood conditions are inevitably limited, increasing the risk of adverse outcomes (Iceland, 2009). Even in resource-rich neighbourhoods and economically established households, new older immigrants could be at high risk of social isolation and loneliness, particularly in car-dependent suburbs located away from ethnic activities and resources (Treas and Mazumdar, 2002; Ajrouch, 2008).

On the other hand, special strengths deriving from some circumstances may be overlooked by policymakers and professionals if their focus is limited to the immediate context. Older foreign-born adults who live in ethno-homogenous neighbourhoods may receive socio-cultural benefits that protect against health decline, even if the social spaces are not resource-rich (Markides et al, 2013). A neighbourhood context with high ethnic homogeneity can be rich with supportive and expansive social networks that are linguistically and culturally compatible to facilitate close personal friendships and assistance with instrumental activities of daily living (Almeida et al, 2009). For example, older Mexican immigrants residing in high-density immigrant areas have been seen to have better health profiles and slower health declines over time than older Mexican immigrants who reside in areas with a low concentration of immigrants (Eschbach et al, 2004). Thus, a neighbourhood context can be either disabling or enabling,
based on opportunities for supportive relationships and exchanges, fostering a sense of social and environmental safety to ensure wellbeing.

A particularly interesting and growing population segment in most developed nations is that of long-term immigrants who migrated as children or young adults and are now ageing in place as long-standing residents. In many ways, these immigrants may share the cultural and economic advantage of being long-term residents in the host nation, and in some respects they may be quite similar to their ageing native-born counterparts (Angel et al., 2012; Wilmot, 2012). Yet in other ways, these long-term immigrants are quite distinctive from each other and from native older adults. For example, fluency in the host country’s language can vary widely, based on geo-political forces such as colonialism and national policy on accepting refugees. Language barriers are less likely among older Northern African immigrants to France, for example, relative to Mexican immigrants to the United States (Silverstein and Attias-Donfut, 2010). Religious congruity with the host nation is another issue that may serve to exclude older immigrants, particularly those who settle in rural areas of their new nation (Jones, 2008). Despite the differences in countries of origin, destination countries, and even circumstances of migration, older immigrants are substantially more likely to depend on and invest in intergenerational relationships as a strategy for survival and success (Treas, 2008; Silverstein and Attias-Donfut, 2010; Wilmot, 2012).

A second reason for the limited attention to the intersectionality of age and immigration may be due to the erasure of older immigrants from the welfare state. Examples of this tendency can readily be found: first, employment-based pension structures such as social security in the United States do not apply to older immigrants who have not had any or a sufficient amount of paid labour to qualify for income benefits. Second, based on the 1996 Welfare Reform Law, supplemental security income (SSI), which is designed to provide financial support to very low-income seniors, carries the restriction that the recipient must be a naturalised citizen (Van Hook, 2000). As a result, many – and a growing number – of elderly immigrants may be living with minimal to no financial assistance for extended periods of time. As a third example, in some countries (for example, England and the US), eligibility for health insurance and other benefits carry residency restrictions whereby benefits receipt is conditional on limiting the number and duration of return visits to the recipient’s home country (Buffel and Phillipson, 2011).

The assumptions underlying the purpose and execution of benefits in a welfare state are not explicitly designed to exclude older immigrants. Indeed, this form of erasure from policy is most likely due to the ways in which trends towards globalisation and transnational migration are out-paceing traditional structures of the welfare state. In the era of increasing globalisation, migration is no longer properly conceptualised as a one-time move, but as a process that entails increased interlinkage of two (or more) contexts and the endurance of social ties that transcend geographic boundaries to create a transnational population (Smith, 2005; Schunck, 2011). Whether recent or long-residing, many immigrants participate in the social, political and economic spheres in both the host country and the country of origin through transnational activities or involvement (for example visits; voting). Even when host communities provide various religious, cultural and social opportunities designed for integration, older immigrants can have enduring, dual attachments to both the county of origin and the receiving country. The neglect of global trends such as transnational caregiving limits our understanding of these older immigrants’ lives (Treas, 2008; Walsh and Näre, 2016).

Thus, revisions to the structure of the welfare state to make older immigrants visible to their new home country must necessarily acknowledge trends in globalisation and transnational social ties. Yet, even when older immigrants are explicitly included in benefits structures, policymakers and social service providers must also recognise the unique needs older immigrants may have, such as limited host-country language proficiency or particular types of challenge relating to health and functioning.

For example, in highly regulated markets such as the Netherlands, the transition from a welfare state to more of a ‘participation society’ where residents are expected to take a more active role, may result in older residents becoming more vulnerable, especially those with multiple intersecting disadvantages such as older immigrants (Van der Gref and Fortuin, 2017). For instance, relative to older native Dutch residents, Moroccan and Turkish older immigrants face multiple disadvantages to such ‘participation’ requirements, including increased risk of lack of support in the face of the deinstitutionalisation of elderly care in the Netherlands and withdrawal of other local community resources to support ageing in place (Van der Gref and Fortuin, 2017). This may be further complicated by the precariousness of the living conditions of older migrants in disadvantaged areas of the city, especially in terms of a lack of basic comfort and safety, and housing quality (Scharf et al., 2002; Becker, 2003).

However, little is known about the ways in which older migrants manage issues of daily life in disadvantaged communities. Furthermore,
there is a need to explore how different resources and assistance programmes may differentially enable or disable older immigrants in their quest to create a sense of ‘home’ in their locality. It is vital that social gerontology addresses these issues (Buffel et al, 2013; Buffel, 2015).

Conclusion

Population ageing is a demographic reality, not only in postindustrial societies but in virtually all societies. Although this trend is certain to continue through the 21st century, the social and physical worlds of individuals continue to be premised on ageist assumptions that privilege youth and discount the needs and interests of older adults. Both environmental gerontology and the age-friendly cities movement are dedicated to changing and ameliorating these circumstances by identifying problems and needs and creating fresh and innovative approaches to recognise the special potentials as well as the special needs of older people. Herein, we have argued that despite the resultant successes of both of these enterprises, the predisposition to focus on the micro-level without interrogating some fundamental assumptions of our ageist society and culture continues to limit their effectiveness in realising their objectives. We suggest that the value and effectiveness of both of these enterprises will increase through a systematic interrogation of the tendency to accept social and cultural narratives and circumstances that define older people as irrelevant, residual and useless, as a population to be segregated or otherwise marginalised without recognising their interests, capabilities and potential for active engagement and growth, along with possibly significant limitations.

We have focused on the limiting effects of microfication and erasure on two issues – processes of gentrification occurring in urban neighbourhoods, and immigration trends and policies and the struggles of older immigrants – as representing domains within which greater awareness of broader and macro-level realities could benefit both environmental gerontology and the age-friendly movement. We have shown how, too often, developments in these domains have had their potential for advancing the needs of older people thwarted by a conceptual scope that too readily accepts conventional and dominant narratives of individualism and ageism. These examples suggest that much can be gained by clear and deliberate attention to macro- as well as micro-level factors, as they shape the daily experience of 21st-century elders. Thus, we suggest that a critical, sociologically informed approach is essential to enhance awareness of these tendencies and to provide a conceptual framework within which elders’ needs will not remain invisible, nor their voices inaudible.

References


