9.4: Sociological Perspectives on Aging

Learning Objectives

- State the assumptions of disengagement, activity, and conflict theories of aging.
- Critically assess these three theories.

Recall that social aging refers to changes in people’s roles and relationships in a society as they age. We have seen that social aging and views of the aging process both differ cross-culturally and over time. A few decades ago, social gerontologists began to explain how and why the aging process in the United States and other societies occurs. These explanations, summarized in Table 9.1 "Theory Snapshot", have their merits and shortcomings, but together they help us understand patterns of social aging. They fall roughly into either the functionalist, social interactionist, or conflict approaches discussed in Chapter 1 "Sociology and the Sociological Perspective".

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical perspective</th>
<th>Major assumptions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Disengagement theory</td>
<td>To enable younger people to assume important roles, a society must encourage its older people to disengage from their previous roles and to take on roles more appropriate to their physical and mental decline. This theory is considered a functionalist explanation of the aging process.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activity theory</td>
<td>Older people benefit themselves and their society if they continue to be active. Their positive perceptions of the aging process are crucial for their ability to remain active. This theory is considered an interactionist explanation of the aging process.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conflict theory</td>
<td>Older people experience age-based prejudice and discrimination. Inequalities among the aged exist along the lines of gender, race and ethnicity, and social class. This theory falls into the more general conflict theory of society.</td>
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One of the first explanations was called disengagement theory (Cumming & Henry, 1961). Cumming, E., & Henry, W. E. (1961). Growing old: The process of disengagement. New York, NY: Basic Books. This approach assumed that all societies must find ways for older people’s authority to give way to younger people. A society thus encourages its elderly to disengage from their previous roles and to take on roles more appropriate to their physical and mental decline. In this way, a society effects a smooth transition of its elderly into a new, more sedentary lifestyle and ensures that their previous roles will be undertaken by a younger generation that is presumably more able to carry out these roles. Because disengagement theory assumes that social aging preserves a society’s stability and that a society needs to ensure that disengagement occurs, it is often considered a functionalist explanation of the aging process.

A critical problem with this theory was that it assumed that older people are no longer capable of adequately performing their previous roles. As we have seen, however, older people in many societies continue to perform their previous roles quite well. In fact, society may suffer if its elderly do disengage, as it loses their insight and wisdom. It is also true that many elders cannot afford to disengage from their previous roles: if they leave their jobs, they are also leaving needed sources of income, and if they leave their jobs and other roles, they also reduce their social interaction and the benefits it brings (Hochschild, 1975). Hochschild, A. (1975). Disengagement theory: A critique and proposal. American Sociological Review, 40, 553–569.

Today most social gerontologists prefer activity theory, which assumes that older people benefit both themselves and their society if they remain active and try to continue to perform the roles they had before they aged (Joung & Miller, 2007). Joung, H.-M., & Miller, N. J. (2007). Examining the effects of fashion activities on life satisfaction of older females: Activity theory revisited. Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal, 35(4), 338–356. As they perform their roles, their perception of the situations they are in is crucial to their perception of their aging and thus to their self-esteem and other aspects of their psychological well-being. Because activity theory focuses on the individual and her/his perception of the aging process, it is often considered a social interactionist explanation of social aging.

One criticism of activity theory is that its appraisal of the ability of the elderly to maintain their level of activity is too optimistic: although some elders can remain active, others cannot. Another criticism is that activity theory is too much of an individualistic approach, as it overlooks the barriers many societies place to successful aging. Some elders are less able to remain active because of their poverty, gender, and social class, as these and other structural conditions may adversely affect their physical and mental health. Activity theory overlooks these conditions.

Explanations of aging grounded in conflict theory put these conditions at the forefront of their analyses. A conflict theory of aging, then, emphasizes the impact of ageism, or negative views about old age and prejudice and discrimination against the elderly (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011). Hooyman, N. R., & Kiyak, H. A. (2011). Social gerontology: A multidisciplinary perspective (9th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson. According to this view, older workers are devalued because they are no longer economically productive and because their higher salaries (because of their job seniority), health benefits, and other costs drive down capitalist profits. Conflict theory also emphasizes inequality among the aged along gender, race and ethnicity, and social class lines. Reflecting these inequalities in the larger society, some elders are quite wealthy, but others are very poor.

One criticism of conflict theory is that it blames ageism on modern, capitalist economies. As we have seen, negative views of the elderly also exist in preindustrial societies, even if the views there overall are often more positive than in their modern counterparts.
Conclusion

• Disengagement theory assumes that all societies must find ways for older people’s authority to give way to younger people. A society thus encourages its elderly to disengage from their previous roles and to take on roles more appropriate to their physical and mental decline.

• Activity theory assumes that older people will benefit both themselves and their society if they remain active and try to continue to perform the roles they had before they aged.

For Your Review

1. Which theory of aging—disengagement theory, activity theory, or conflict theory—makes the most sense to you? Why?