18.3A: Disengagement Theory

The disengagement theory of aging claims that it is natural and acceptable for older adults to withdraw from society and personal relationships as they age.

Learning Objectives

• Analyze the nine postulates of growing old and the impact at each stage for the elderly in society

Key Points

• Disengagement theory claims that it is natural and acceptable for older adults to withdraw from society and personal relationships as they age.
• Disengagement theory was the first theory of aging developed by social scientists.
• The theory was developed by Elaine Cumming and Warren Earl Henry in their 1961 book “Growing Old.” Subsequently, the theory has been largely debunked.

Key Terms

• disengagement theory: The disengagement theory of aging claims that it is natural and acceptable for older adults to withdraw from society and personal relationships as they age.
• activity theory: Activity theory claims that staying mentally and physically active preserves older adults happier.
• Robert J. Havighurst: Robert James Havighurst (June 5, 1900 in De Pere, Wisconsin – January 31, 1991 in Richmond, Indiana) was a professor, physicist, educator, and aging expert.
The disengagement theory of aging claims that it is natural and acceptable for older adults to withdraw from society and personal relationships as they age. The theory further suggests that society responds to the elder’s disengagement with a sort of mutual recognition that the elder will soon pass and society must prepare to function in their absence. As such, the theory argues that it is natural and acceptable for older adults to withdraw from society.

The Postulates of Growing Old

Elderly Woman: Disengagement theory suggests that adults become increasingly withdrawn as they get older.

Disengagement theory was the first theory of aging developed by social scientists. It was originally formulated by Elaine Cumming and Warren Earl Henry in their 1961 book Growing Old. In Growing Old, Cumming and Henry develop a logical argument for why older adults would naturally disengage from society. They formulate their argument along nine postulates to explain why it is rational for individuals who know that death is approaching and who have seen friends of their age pass to begin to anticipate their own deaths and disengage.

The postulates are as follows:

1. Postulate one: Everyone expects death, and one’s abilities will likely deteriorate over time. As a result, every person will lose ties to others in his or her society.
2. Postulate two: Because individual interactions between people strengthen norms, an individual who has fewer varieties of interactions has greater freedom from the norms imposed by interaction. Consequently, this form of disengagement becomes a circular or self-perpetuating process.
3. Postulate three: Because men have a centrally instrumental role in America, and women a socioemotional one, disengagement differs between men and women.
4. Postulate four: The individual’s life is punctuated by ego changes. For example, aging, a form of ego change,
causes knowledge and skill to deteriorate. However, success in an industrialized society demands certain knowledge and skill. To satisfy these demands, age-grading ensures that the young possess sufficient knowledge and skill to assume authority and that the old retire before they lose their skills. This kind of disengagement is affected by the individual, prompted by either ego changes or the organization, which is bound to organizational imperatives, or both.

5. **Sunday Morning Stroll in Piazza del Popolo**: The process of aging is greatly facilitated when older people pursue hobbies and relationships, and generally lead a more active lifestyle.

Postulate five: When both the individual and society are ready for disengagement, complete disengagement results. When neither is ready, continuing engagement results. When the individual is ready and society is not, a disjunction between the expectations of the individual and of the members of this social systems results, but engagement usually continues. When society is ready and the individual is not, the result of the disjunction is usually disengagement.

6. Postulate six: Man’s central role is work, and woman’s is marriage and family. If individuals abandon their central roles, they drastically lose social life space, and so suffer crisis and demoralization unless they assume the different roles required by the disengaged state.

7. Postulate seven: Readiness for disengagement occurs if the individual is aware of the shortness of life and scarcity of time, the individual perceives his or her life space decreasing, and the individual loses ego energy. Each level of society grants individuals permission to disengage because of the following: requirements of the rational-legal occupational system in an affluent society; the nature of the nuclear family; and the differential death rate.

8. Postulate eight: Fewer interactions and disengagement from central roles lead to the relationships in the remaining roles changing. In turn, relational rewards become more diverse, and vertical solidarities are transformed to horizontal ones.

9. Postulate nine: Disengagement theory is independent of culture, but the form it takes is bound by culture.

Disengagement theory, suffering from a lack of empirical support, has largely been dismissed by social scientists and gerontologists.