Social theories of aging

**Definition of terms**

- Gerontology
- Social gerontology
- Geriatrics
- Senescence
- Aging
- Aged, older persons, elderly

**Emergence of gerontology**

**Social theories of aging**

- Disengagement theory
- Activity theory
- Subculture theory
- Personality theory
- Exchange theory
- Age stratification theory
- Phenomenological theory
- The future of social theories

**Summary**

The scientific interest in the study of aging and the aged has greatly increased in recent years with the growth of the aged population. The study of aging is in a state of ferment as new ideas replace old ones. Several theoretical frameworks have been developed in an attempt to explain the social process of aging. This chapter will examine some of the common terminology used by scientists who study aging and the aged, the emergence of the scientific study of aging or gerontology, and some of the theories that gerontologists have developed to explain the behavior of the aged.

The term *gerontology* has its roots in two Greek words: *geros*, meaning "old age," and *logos*, meaning "the study of." Gerontology is thus the study of old age or aging. It is a broad field of study, encompassing traditional academic fields of study such as biology, psychology, sociology, and economics, as well as areas of human service such as medicine, nursing, social work, and recreation. Almost every area of study or human service has included in it some relationship to human aging.

Social gerontology is a subfield of gerontology concerned with the social aspects of aging. Clark Tibbitts (1964, p. 139) described social gerontology as "concerned with the development and group behavior of adults following maturation and with the social phenomena which give rise to and arise out of the presence of older people in the population." Thus social gerontology is concerned with the relationship of the older individual to society.
Geriatrics

Geriatrics is a subfield of gerontology that focuses on the causes and treatment of physical pathological conditions in old age. Geriatrics is thus the study of the medical aspects of aging.

Senescence

Senescence is the organism’s increasing vulnerability as it moves through its life span. It is a term used in biology to refer to the physiological aspects of growing old and comes from the Latin verb senescere, “to grow old.”

Aging

The term aging is the process of growing older. There are various biological, psychological, and social changes that occur when mature individuals advance in age. Individuals are socially defined as aging when these changes produce noticeable effects, occurring for most people during their 40s.

Aged, older persons, elderly

The terms aged, older persons, and elderly are often used synonymously to describe adults 65 years of age or older. The age 65 is a somewhat arbitrary indicator adopted out of necessity for legislative purposes and everyday use; it is not based on the appearance of noticeable effects or symptoms.

EMERGENCE OF GERONTOLOGY

The study of human aging has a long history. Francis Bacon, the eminent scholar who proposed the scientific method, wrote The History of Life and Death in which he proposed that significant increases in life expectancy would result from improved hygienic practices (Freeman, 1965). Guetelet, a nineteenth century Belgian astronomer-mathematician, is considered to be the first gerontologist because of his statistical description of how abilities, skills, and strengths varied by age (Ward, 1979, p. 3). Sir Francis Galton conducted the first large survey, assessing 17 physical characteristics from a sampling of 9,000 visitors to the International Health Exhibition in London in 1884. He found that reaction time, visual and auditory acuity, and grip strength differ by age (Hendricks and Hendricks, 1977, p. 18). In the late nineteenth century the Russian scientist S.P. Botkin conducted a survey of nearly 3,000 of the poor of St. Petersburg to determine the differences between normal and pathological aging. He found that women tended to live longer, that married persons outlived single persons, and that older men had a higher incidence of atherosclerosis than older women (Bitren and Clayton, 1975; Chebotarev and Dupleken, 1972).

The scientific study of aging began in earnest during the twentieth century. In 1922 G. Stanley Hall, a psychologist with a background in child and adolescent psychology, published the classic Senescence, the Second Half of Life (1922). In 1939 E.V. Cowdry’s edited volume Problems of Ageing (1939) brought together some of the best minds of the period. Also in 1939 a group of British scientists established the Club for Research in Ageing, and in the same year...
this group was responsible for the establishment of the American Research Club on Ageing in the United States (Philibert, 1964) from which the Gerontological Society was formed in 1945.

Gerontological research began to accelerate following World War II, coinciding with the growing number of older persons and increased life expectancy. The late 1950s and early 1960s was a period of increasing interest in the social processes associated with aging. The literature published between 1950 and 1960 equaled the literature of the previous 115 years (Birren and Clayton, 1975). A bibliography of biomedical and social science research for 1954 to 1974 yielded 50,000 titles (Woodruff, 1975).

One of the difficulties associated with the increase in social gerontological research is the necessity for conceptual frameworks. Data collected in the many studies of aging need to be cumulative, not just an expansion of descriptive studies, so that the knowledge base can be expanded beyond facts to the development of linkages. Integration of knowledge has been slow in coming, but efforts within the past 25 years to develop theoretical conceptual frameworks are the beginning of a holistic grasp of the issues. The remainder of this chapter will examine seven of these theories.

The disengagement theory maintains that high levels of life satisfaction in old age are associated with older persons reducing the number and importance of societal roles (Cumming and Henry, 1961). Happiness in old age consists of the recognition by older persons that they are no longer young and that more competent individuals are available to fill their roles. By phasing older persons out of important roles, their deaths do not disrupt the functioning of society. Disengagement is therefore a gradual, inevitable, universal, and mutually satisfying withdrawal of the individual from society that normally occurs to provide an optimum level of personal gratification and an uninterrupted continuation of the social system.

The disengagement theorists were heavily influenced by the sociological theory structural functionalism. The leading exponent of structural functionalism in American sociology is Talcott Parsons. According to Parsons, the United States has a social structure built on instrumental activism, meaning structures and ways of operating that produce visible, material things that are immediately useful. Instrumental activities usually favor the young and operate to the disadvantage of older persons who are not as strong or agile (Parsons, 1960, 1962).

Disengagement theory was based on the Kansas City studies of the 1950s, a cross-sectional survey analysis of 275 people ranging in age from 50 to 90. In these studies Cumming and Henry (1961) noted that with increasing age there was a significant decline in the number of current roles, current role activity,
ego involvement in current roles, and in social interaction. It was felt that these declines were logical, natural, normal, and satisfying, leading to the process called disengagement.

Disengagement theory represented the first major theoretical system attempted by social gerontologists, and from its inception it has generated criticism. The major criticism of the theory is that it is too simplistic—there are many older persons who do not disengage and who do not suffer from their engagement. Other analyses of the Kansas City studies suggest that the typical pattern is actually high engagement and high satisfaction rather than low engagement and high satisfaction (Havighurst, Neugarten, and Tobin, 1968). Disengagement may not represent the desire to disengage on the part of older persons but the failure of society to provide opportunities, as illustrated in a study by Roman and Tietz (1967), who found that if given the opportunity for role continuity emeritus professors preferred not to disengage from research, teaching, consulting, and administration. Thus disengagement theory may be criticized for its presumed inevitability, universality, and mutually satisfying withdrawal of the individual from society.

Activity theory

Activity theory was formulated in response to the disengagement theory, although activity had been a persistent theme in the literature (Crandall, 1980, p. 111). Activity theory claims that personal satisfaction and positive self-images of older persons are maintained through continued active participation in socially valued middle-aged roles, and that it is important to replace these roles through substitution to avoid feelings of uselessness and decline (Havighurst, Neugarten, and Tobin, 1968). The activity theory essentially states that the greater the activity, the greater the life satisfaction, and that the more roles that are lost but not replaced, the greater the drop in life satisfaction.

The activity theory of aging is an application begun by Ernest W. Burgess (1960) of symbolic interaction theory to social gerontology. Burgess observed that older persons were becoming a distinct social group in American society, but that the society was not accustomed to accepting them as fully participating members in the normal daily activities of society and that this resulted in a "roleless role" for older persons (Burgess, 1960). Burgess felt that old age did not have to be devoid of socially meaningful activity but could be a new role leading to a meaningful existence built on responsibilities and obligations.

Activity theory has also been the subject of a number of criticisms. One of the major criticisms is that high activity may not be the major determinant of high morale but that high morale may enable individuals to remain more active than those with low morale (Crandall, 1980, p. 112). Another criticism is that the necessity of remaining active to successfully age would be a tremendous burden on those who are not or cannot remain active, which would thus result in a sense of failure, anxiety, and worthlessness (Atchley, 1980, p. 27; Crandall, 1880, p. 113; Ward, 1979, pp. 104-105). Studies have questioned the basic assumptions on which activity theory is built, noting that high morale was not
determined by the number of roles an individual had but by an intimate and stable relationship with at least one person (Lemon, Hengston, and Peterson, 1972; Lowenthal and Haven, 1968). On the other hand, both cross-cultural studies (Havighurst, Munnichs, Neugarten, and Thomae, 1969) and longitudinal studies (Palmore, 1970) of old age have found a positive relationship between activity and morale. However, there have been very few empirical studies to test activity theory.

Subculture theory

The subculture theory of aging, proposed by Arnold Rose (1965), asserts that the aged have developed a distinctive aged subculture as a result of more interaction among themselves than with individuals of other categories. This interaction develops an aging group consciousness that fosters "an awareness of belonging to a particular group and not simply a chronological category" (Hendricks and Hendricks, 1977, p. 113). Higher status within the aging subculture is conferred on those having good physical and mental health and greater social activity levels; money, occupation, and educational achievement are less influential than during earlier years.

Rose (1965), the initial advocate of the subculture theory, observed that there were a variety of conditions within the society contributing to an aged subculture. The number of persons 65 and older who are healthy and able to interact because of proximity in inner city neighborhoods, rural areas, and retirement communities has promoted greater age identification. Social services for older persons, elderly participation in voluntary associations, and greater publicity given elderly concerns have tended to develop group self-consciousness.

The subculture theory and the activity theory have an interactionist framework that is concerned with the relationships of roles and social identities to life satisfaction. Whereas the activity theory assumes a continuity between middle age and old age of socially valued middle-aged roles, the subculture theory stresses the development of a distinctive aged subculture. However, neither is able to explain the discontinuities between middle age and old age or the diversity of the aged.

Personality theory

The personality theory of aging views the aging person within the context of lifelong development in which there has been an interaction among biological, personal, and social changes that have resulted in the individual's own coping style. Personality is the term used to describe distinctive psychological and behavioral patterns that individuals use to meet the tasks of living. These patterns are rooted in the past and have been built over time into relatively stable characteristics of the self, yet they are dynamic, adapting, and continually evolving (Birren, 1964; Havighurst, 1968). Thus personality lends continuity to old age, while allowing change according to the new demands of aging.

Gerontologists have been able to identify a number of personality types
based on empirical descriptions, even though personality is highly individual. Havighurst, Neugarten, and Tobin (1968) developed a description of personality types using the Kansas City data employed by Cumming and Henry (1961). The "reorganizers" substitute new activities for those that have been lost, corresponding closely to the activity theory's approach to successful aging. The "focused" are selective in their activities, withdrawing from some and maintaining or even increasing others. The "disengaged" are content in their voluntary withdrawal from involvements and responsibilities. The "holding on" defend themselves from the threats of aging by clinging to middle-age patterns, while the "constricted" close in their world by erecting defenses against anxiety. The "sorority-seekers" satisfactorily maintain themselves as long as they can lean on others to meet their dependence needs. The "apathetic" maintain long-standing patterns of passivity and low activity, and the "disorganized" show low activity accompanied by poor psychological functioning.

The personality theory points out the individual variability of reactions to aging—variability not captured by the disengagement, activity, or subculture theories—while addressing the problems of discontinuity between middle age and old age. However, the theory does not address the reciprocal relationship between the personal resources that older persons possess and the social environments to which older persons belong.

The exchange theory of aging is based on the assumption that each person in an interaction is seeking to maximize the benefits of that interaction while minimizing the costs in terms of loss of prestige, self-esteem, or other rewards. Thus individuals continue personal exchanges only as long as the benefits of the interaction outweigh the costs. Older persons may voluntarily withdraw from exchange relations in their social environments when they find themselves without valued skills and the opportunities to initiate rather than be the recipient and are thus left with only the capacity to comply (Dowd, 1975) or simply to cultivate the appearance of "mollowness" (Blau, 1973).

The exchange theory has a potential to analyze almost any interaction as an exchange by asking what are the benefits and what are the costs in relationship to control of the environment and the physiological and social factors in the adjustment process of the elderly (Dowd, 1975). However, individuals vary as to what they count as costs or benefits, and this results in problems of application to the full range of social behavior (Hees and Markson, 1980, p. 21).

The age stratification theory developed by Riley, Johnson, and Foner (1972) views age not only as an individual characteristic but also as a component of society. Central to this theory is the observation that society in the process of age grading develops a hierarchy of age strata, with every individual being a member of a birth cohort (a group of individuals born at about the same time). Each birth cohort has a life course dimension, sharing a general biological hist-
tory and common experiences in role performance (e.g., student, worker, parent, and so on) and a historical dimension, sharing a particular historical period with its unique characteristics (e.g., depression, war, natural catastrophies, and so on). Every birth cohort experiences a cohort flow, or demographic history, starting with a definite size, slightly more males than females, and certain ethnic and racial composition. But during its life cycle each cohort will change its sexual, racial, and ethnic composition because of differences in life expectancies. The members of every cohort will experience changes in the roles they perform at different ages, according to the processes of allocation (assigning or reassigning people of various ages to suitable roles) and socialization (learning how to perform new roles, adjusting to changing roles, and relinquishing old roles). As individuals move from one age stratum to another, there are age-related role expectations and sanctions to enforce these expectations to prevent individuals from behaving inappropriately. Thus each age stratum develops its own subculture as it moves through time, and because history presents each cohort with unique conditions, each stratum manifests distinctive patterns of aging (Riley, Johnson, and Foner, 1972).

The age stratification theory is the most comprehensive theoretical perspective yet developed in social gerontology (Hendricks and Hendricks, 1977, p. 124). It has the advantage of allowing each age stratum to be looked at in terms of its own history and characteristics and at the same time viewing each age stratum in relationship to other strata (Decker, 1980, p. 145). The theory, however, has been criticized because it does not take into account the perceptions and expectations of different social classes and ethnic and racial groups (Crandall, 1980, p. 122) or the practical problems of operationally defining age strata for purposes of empirical research (Atchley, 1980, p. 22).

The phenomenological theory of aging is concerned with the meanings attributed to aging by those who are aging, seeing "everyone as ultimately assigning his or her own meaning to aging" (Decker, 1980, p. 146). Not everyone may have a unique view of aging, since meanings are influenced by interaction with others and various settings. Cumbrian (1975) documented the meaning of life in a nursing home by living in the setting to determine how residents, staff, administrators, and visitors perceived and interpreted this environment. Marshall (1975), in a study of a retirement community, described the social meaning of death and how it was defined as a routine occurrence that should not be disruptive, with residents learning "not to make a great fuss about their dying" (Marshall, 1975, p. 1140). Thus the basic idea behind the phenomenological theory of aging is to understand the perceptual framework through which older persons "selectively perceive and interpret the world" (Crandall, 1980, pp. 122-123).

Phenomenology is a philosophical movement begun in Germany by Edmund Husserl and practiced by philosophers such as Max Scheler, Nicolai Hartmann, and Martin Heidegger (Caponigri, 1971). This approach began to have an
These older persons represent a birth cohort that experienced the Great Depression and World War II at approximately the same age during each of their life spans.

impact on American behavioral science through the works of Snygg (1941) and Combs and Snygg (1959) and has resulted in the sociological school known as Phenomenological Sociology or Ethnomethodology. Social gerontologists such as Gubrium (1975), Jacobs and Marshall (1975) have used the phenomenological approach in their ethnographic case studies of retirement communities and nursing homes.

The phenomenological theory of aging attempts to individualize the understanding of the aging process. Rather than seeking to determine the general process of aging applicable to everyone, as do most of the social theories of aging reviewed in this chapter, it is concerned with interpreting aging according to individual circumstances. Unlike the age stratification theory, it is not an event such as the depression of 1930s that is important but the individual’s perception and interpretation of the event that is important. The theory has been praised because of its comprehensive and complete nature but has been criticized because of its abstractness and the difficulty of conducting scientific research using this approach (Crandall, 1980, p. 123).
The future of social theories

The social theories of aging are each an effort to understand the social world of older persons. They strive to integrate theory with application and serve to stimulate inquiry and further growth in explanation. It is apparent that attempts to develop a general theory of aging to explain the multiple dimensions of aging have not been successful, but each new effort has served to sharpen and focus the critical issues and thus lay the foundations for future efforts. The development of social theories of aging must continue if programmatic interventions are to be of social consequence and if life is to be more satisfying for older persons.

SUMMARY

The scientific study of aging and the aged has led to the emergence of common terminology. Terms now used on a regular basis are gerontology (the study of old age or aging), social gerontology (a subfield of gerontology concerned with the social aspects of aging), geriatrics (the study of the medical aspects of growing old), aging (the process of growing older), and the synonymous terms aged, older persons, and elderly (adults who are 65 years of age or older).

The scientific study of human aging has a long history. Examples of scholars involved in gerontological study are Francis Bacon, Quetelet, Sir Francis Galton, S.P. Botkin, G. Stanley Hall, and E.V. Cowdry. Gerontological research began to accelerate after World War II and has seen a rapid expansion of interest and research during the last 2 decades.

A number of social theories of aging have emerged in social gerontology in an effort to develop theoretical conceptual frameworks. The first major theoretical system was the disengagement theory, which states that high levels of life satisfaction in old age are associated with older persons reducing the number and importance of societal roles, with this disengagement being gradual, inevitable, universal, and mutually satisfying to the individual and society. Activity theory was formulated in response to the disengagement theory and essentially states that personal satisfaction and positive self-images of older persons are maintained through continued active participation in socially valued middle-age roles. This theory states that the more roles lost and not replaced through substitution, the greater the drop in life satisfaction. Whereas activity theory assumes a continuity between middle age and old age of socially valued middle-age roles, subculture theory stresses the development of a distinctive aged subculture as a result of more interaction among older persons, thus fostering group consciousness and age identification. The individual variability of reactions to aging not addressed by the previous three theories is captured by the personality theory of aging, which views the aging person as having developed distinctive and relatively stable psychological and behavioral patterns, lending continuity but allowing change to meet the demands of aging. The reciprocal relationship between personal resources and social environments to which older persons belong is addressed by the exchange theory of aging, which is based on the assumption that individuals continue personal exchanges as long
The world of social psychology is one that is rich in perspectives that attempt to capture the dimensions and complexities of human behavior over the course of a lifetime. These perspectives serve to sharpen our understanding of the social context in which the aging process unfolds. The study of aging in the context of human development allows us to appreciate the interplay between personal and social forces, and to develop a comprehensive approach to understanding the aging process. Aging is a fascinating phenomenon, but its study is often hindered by a lack of common understanding of what it entails. This is evident in the complex array of perspectives on aging, which range from the biological to the psychological. It is important to recognize that these perspectives are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary in nature. The social theories of aging offer a valuable framework for understanding the complex interplay between social and individual factors in the aging process.

As the benefits of the interaction outweigh the costs in terms of loss of prestige, self-esteem, and other rewards. The age stratification theory of aging is a comprehensive theoretical perspective that views aging not only as an individual characteristic but as a component of society. It views society as made up of age strata composed of birth cohorts, having a life course dimension and a historical dimension, resulting in each age stratum manifesting distinctive patterns of aging and developing its own subculture as it moves through time. Unlike the age stratification theory, which stresses the events within the life course and historical dimensions, the phenomenological theory of aging puts its emphasis on the individual old person's perception and interpretation of events, while attempting to understand the perceptual framework of older persons that has been influenced and developed by social interaction and various settings. Each of these theories is an attempt to develop a general theory of aging and to explain the multiple dimensions of aging.

REFERENCES


SUGGESTED READINGS


