

Theories of ageing

Social disengagement

Engagement means being involved with people or activities. **Disengagement** means to withdraw from involvement. In 1961 two authors called Cumming and Henry put forward a disengagement theory that older people would naturally tend to withdraw from social involvement with others as they got older; older people would have restricted opportunities to interact with others. The issues that surround this are outlined in Table 4.10.

Cumming (1975) argued that older people would experience a reduction in social contact as they grew older and become increasingly 'individual' and less concerned with the expectations of others. He argued that it was appropriate and healthy for older people to withdraw from others – disengagement was a natural part of ageing.

The theory of disengagement was widely accepted in the past. For example, Bromley (1974) argued that 'although some individuals fight the process all the way, disengagement of some sort is bound to come,

Key term

Disengagement – a theory that older people will need to withdraw from social contact with others. Older people will disengage because of reduced physical health and loss of social opportunities.

simply because old people have neither the physical nor the mental resources they had when they were young.'

The theory of disengagement fits with the 'springboard' view of life (see page 133) and suggests that losing contact with other people is an inevitable consequence of biological decline and that withdrawing from other people is a natural and appropriate response to ageing. However, there is little statistical evidence to suggest that this is a general rule for everyone.

Zimbardo (1992) argued that 'The disengagement view of social ageing has been largely discredited for a number of reasons'. The majority of older people do remain socially involved with family and friends and many older people become more involved with close family as they become older. It may be that many older people choose to spend their time with people they feel close to, rather than seeking to make new friends. If people only interact with close friends, does this mean that they are disengaged?

While many researchers today do not agree with disengagement theory, it is important to remember that when Cummings and Henry first proposed the theory in 1961 there was no Internet or text messaging; many older people did not have access to a car and quite a few would not even have had a phone in their home!

Table 4.10: Issues that limit social interaction.

Problem	Explanation
Ill-health	Poor mobility or problems with hearing or vision may make interaction with other people more difficult.
Geographical mobility	Many people retire to areas away from friends and relatives. Family members may move away from older people in order to seek better housing or employment.
Retirement	Retiring from work may mean less contact with colleagues in a social setting.
Ill-health of friends and relatives	If friends or relatives have poor mobility or other disabilities they may have reduced social contact with you.
Travel and technology	Some older people do not have access to a car, the Internet or a mobile phone – this may limit opportunities for social contact.

Reflect

Imagine you have broken your legs. You have no access to a phone, text messages or the Internet and you cannot go out. Would you begin to disengage?

Now imagine the same situation but this time you have a mobile phone and an Internet connected laptop. Would technology help? Do health problems automatically cause social withdrawal or might it be more complicated?



Activity theory

Writing in 1966 Bromley argued that older people needed to disengage, but that they also needed to remain 'active' in order to prevent disengagement from going too far. Bromley said: 'It is not sufficient merely to provide facilities for elderly people. They need to be educated to make use of them and encouraged to abandon apathetic attitudes and fixed habits.' Bromley argued that it was important to remain mentally active and maintain an interest in life and enjoy the company of others. Too much disengagement would lead to 'stagnation' and a loss of mental and physical skills.

Continuity theory

Continuity theory (Atchley, 1989) stresses the importance of continuing as the person you have always been. For many people this may involve continuing with interests, lifestyles and social contacts from the past. The important thing is that people can continue to develop an internal sense of self-esteem and self-concept. Memories of the past may be important because they can help a person to tell their life story.

Continuity theory suggests that people will have different needs when it comes to activity. Some people may wish to withdraw from social and physical activity because they see themselves as a person who is entitled to retire and adopt a disengaged lifestyle. Other people may have lived with active involvement with family, friends or with hobbies and may not be able to cope without staying active. Some people can disengage without losing their sense of who they are. Some people need to stay actively involved

with people or hobbies in order to feel that life is worthwhile.

Key terms

Activity theory – a theory which argues that older people need to stay mentally and socially active in order to limit the risks associated with disengagement.

Continuity theory – a theory that older people will generally maintain a continuous sense of who they are and continue to adapt the self concept they developed earlier in life.

Ageing and health and social care provision

The majority of older people remain in their own home in the community, where they may be supported by friends, family and health and social services. Some older people choose to move to sheltered housing. Sometimes people choose sheltered housing because maintaining the family home has become too difficult. Day care centres provide a social setting where people can meet and some health authorities provide day care to assist with physiotherapy and other health needs. A small proportion of older people choose residential care where 24-hour support is available.

All services for older people will aim to provide respect and choice for service users as part of their policy on quality assurance. Many day and residential services will provide a range of social and leisure activities for service users. Older people should always have a choice as to how active they wish to be. Quality services will never attempt to force older people to be active and engaged, but they will provide opportunities for individuals to maintain the continuity of their lives and remain as active as they wish.

Assessment activity 4.3

P P M M D

BTEC

In your role as a reporter for a magazine, you now need to write about the life of your chosen celebrity as they grow older. You must imagine some of the physical and psychological changes that could affect the person in the future. You will also need to explain two theories of ageing such as disengagement and activity theory.

Grading tips

P To achieve P4 you could choose to explain disengagement and activity theory or you could research alternative theories such as continuity theory.

P To achieve P5 it will be important to use creative thinking and consider different possibilities. Some older people may no longer want to appear in public or be photographed. Other people will continue to develop their celebrity status. Some people are celebrities because they have overcome serious difficulties in their lives. These people might cope effectively with the challenges of later life. You can discuss the different possibilities that the future may hold within your fact file.

M To achieve M2 you need to discuss the degree to which your celebrity might disengage or stay