



An increasing proportion of the UK population now live well into 'old age'.

## P4 Understanding ageing

The ageing process is an inevitable part of human growth and development. Various attempts have been made to explain the process of ageing and to identify the key influencing factors. Health and social care practitioners often work with older people and need to understand how individuals adapt to life during old age.

### What is disengagement theory?

Cumming and Henry (1961) proposed disengagement theory as a way of explaining behaviour and development in old age. They suggested that when people reach their sixties they began to *disengage* from active roles in society for a variety of reasons, for example:

- ill-health
- retirement from work
- loss of friendships and social support, through illness and death of partners, friends and relatives
- lack of access to travel facilities
- inability to use communication technology (email, internet, ICT systems).

Your assessment criteria:

P4 Explain two theories of ageing

### Reflect

What physical and mental characteristics do you associate with the following age groups?

- 65+
- 18–64
- 12–17
- 0–11

### Key terms

**Disengage:** to become disconnected from something



Is old age still associated with loneliness and isolation?

Cumming and Henry argued that disengagement in old age occurs voluntarily and with the approval of the younger generation because it frees up employment opportunities. This, they suggest, is a normal and appropriate response that has benefits for society and for older people.

Disengagement theory has been criticised for promoting acceptance of the social exclusion of older people. For example, it could be argued that ageism, ageist policies and ageist practices restrict the ability of some older people to remain active citizens and that withdrawal from active social roles is imposed, not a choice. Cumming and Henry's (1961) original research has also been criticised as it was based on a small sample of American adults who were taken to be typical of all older people everywhere! Other evidence also suggests that many older people remain engaged with their family and friends and are often more socially active in these groups once they have retired from work.

## What is activity theory?

This theory proposes that, in contrast to disengagement theory, the more active an older person is, the more satisfied they will feel. Activity theorists such as Fennell, Phillipson and Evers (1989) argue that older people often resist disengagement from important aspects of their life by maintaining a 'middle-age' lifestyle. Many older people take part in social and educational activities as a way of staying mentally and physically healthy, for example. Enjoying the company, support and friendship of others and having hobbies and interests are ways of avoiding stagnation and preventing the loss of mental and physical skills.

Activity theory has been criticised on the grounds that it may be a way of explaining the response to ageing of some people, but that it fails to take the diversity of the older population into account. Being socially active and engaged may be possible for those with certain personality characteristics living in certain circumstances. However, other people may not have the financial resources, good health or drive to maintain an active lifestyle in old age. Activity theory has been criticised on the grounds that it may be a way of explaining the response to ageing of some people, but that it fails to take the diversity of the older population into account. Being socially active and engaged may be possible for those with certain personality characteristics living in certain circumstances. However, other people may not have the financial resources, good health or drive to maintain an active lifestyle in old age.



Many older people live active, healthy lives long into their 'old age'.

## Key terms

**Social exclusion:** being on the edge of or outside mainstream society

## Reflect

1. Can you think of any older relatives, neighbours or family friends who have disengaged as they have aged? Bearing confidentiality in mind, describe how the person's behaviour, relationships or activity levels have changed as they have disengaged.
2. Can you also think of older relatives, neighbours or friends who haven't disengaged from society during old age? Again, bearing confidentiality in mind, describe how these people have maintained their social connections and activity levels.
3. What do you think about disengagement theory as a way of explaining responses to ageing? Is it helpful and realistic or an unhelpful, inadequate way of explaining responses to ageing?

## P4 Continuity theory

This approach argues that it is important for ageing individuals to maintain a continuous sense of self, as well as the same habits, interests, contacts and lifestyle as in earlier years. Continuity theorists, like Atchley (1989) argue that older people make adaptations to achieve this sense of continuity, promoting and maintaining their self-esteem, self-concept and wellbeing in later life. Continuity theory accepts that people have different approaches to their old age. Some wish to withdraw and disengage from a previous lifestyle and can do this without losing their sense of self. Others are energised and motivated by active involvement with family, friends and need to stay engaged.

## Contemporary theories

Contemporary theories are critical of both disengagement and activity theory. Both are seen as rigid and uncritical of society's role in structuring ageing.

A political economy perspective draws attention to the impact of social and economic structures on the financial status, isolation and opportunities open to people in later life. It is argued that the cumulative effect of earlier advantages and disadvantages in life impact on people in old age. For example, women with small incomes due to earlier part-time work and disrupted career patterns often have to live on low incomes later in life. The result is a polarisation of older people into poor, socially excluded and 'young-at-heart', fit and wealthy groups.

Social gerontologists also argue that subjective experience of ageing is important. In this sense the historical background to a person's life, as well as their position in society, is important. Ageing is an integrated process where the life a person has lived gives meaning to their experience of old age.

## M2 Explaining development in older adulthood

The various theories of ageing provide a number of ways of explaining development in older adulthood. The main claims of each theory can be evaluated by applying them to the development of a particular individual. Asking older people about their experiences of ageing in the context of each theory will produce material that will allow you to compare and contrast the accuracy of the claims being made and the usefulness of each theory.

### Your assessment criteria:

- P4 Explain two theories of ageing
- M2 Discuss two major theories of ageing in relation to the development of the individual
- D2 Evaluate the influence of two major theories of ageing on health and social care provision



**Gerontologist:** a person specialising in the health and social care of people in old age