

Late Adulthood: Psychosocial Development

Chapter Preview

Chapter 25 begins with an examination of the major theories of psychosocial development during late adulthood. Self theories emphasize the active part each person plays in his or her own psychosocial development. Stratification theories maintain that social forces limit individual choice and direct life at every stage, particularly in late adulthood.

In the following two sections, discussion focuses on how older adults meet their needs for generativity and affiliation, respectively. Special attention is paid to some of the issues facing the elderly, including retirement, volunteer work, religious involvement, political activism, friendships, relatives, and grandchildren.

The final section addresses some of the problems facing the frail elderly and their families, including caregiving and living arrangements. Elder abuse, which in many ways parallels child and spouse abuse, may result when caring for a frail elder creates feelings of resentment.

What Have You Learned?

The “What Have You Learned?” questions at the end of the text chapter are reprinted here for your convenience in checking students’ understanding of the chapter contents.

1. How does Erikson’s use of the word *integrity* differ from its usual meaning?
2. How is self theory reflected in older adults’ wish to age in place?
3. How does hoarding relate to self theory?
4. What are the advantages of the positivity effect?
5. What are the disadvantages of the positivity effect?
6. How can disengagement be a mutual process?
7. If activity theory is correct, what does that suggest older adults should do?
8. What are the problems with being female, according to stratification theory?
9. What are the problems with being male, according to stratification theory?
10. In terms of independence, how is old age difficult for members of minority groups, according to stratification theory?
11. How does retirement affect the health of people who have worked all their lives?
12. Why would a person choose not to retire?
13. What are the age differences in how likely someone is to choose to volunteer?
14. Of the four possible reasons listed for lack of volunteering among the elderly, which do you think is most valid and why?
15. What are the benefits and liabilities for elders who want to age in place?
16. How does religion affect the well-being of the aged?

17. How does the political activism of older and younger adults differ?
18. What is the usual relationship between older adults who have been partners for decades?
19. Who benefits most from relationships between older adults and their grown children?
20. Which type of grandparenting seems to benefit both generations the most?
21. Inability to perform which of the ADLs do you think is most indicative of frailty and why?
22. Why are IADLs considered even more important than ADLs in assessing frailty in an elderly person?
23. What three factors increase the likelihood of elder abuse?
24. What are the advantages and disadvantages of assisted living for the elderly?
25. When is a nursing home a good solution for the problems of the frail elderly?

Chapter Guide

- “On Your Own” Activities: Developmental Fact or Myth?; Portfolio Assignment
- AV: The Journey Through the Life Span, Program 9: Late Adulthood; Transitions Throughout the Life Span, Program 25: Late Adulthood: Psychosocial Development
- Teaching Tip: Students’ Life Plans

I. Theories of Late Adulthood

Instructional Objective: To examine the psychosocial development of older persons from different theoretical perspectives.

- AV: Aging Well; To Be Old, Black, and Poor; Close Harmony
 - Observational Activity: Recording a Life Story
1. The major theories of adulthood include self theories and stratification theories.
 2. **Self theories** emphasize the active part played by each person in fulfilling his or her potential.
 3. In Erikson’s theory, the final crisis of development is that of **integrity versus despair**, in which older adults attempt to integrate their personal experiences with their vision of the future of their community.
 4. As with every crisis described by Erikson, tension occurs between the two opposing aspects of development at this stage. Past crises, particularly *identity versus role confusion*, reappear when the usual pillars of the self-concept begin to crumble.
 5. The importance of maintaining their sense of self may lead to behaviors such as **compulsive hoarding**.
 6. Self theories emphasize *selective optimization with compensation*, which is the idea that individuals set their own goals, assess their own abilities, and then figure out how to accomplish what they want to achieve despite the limitations of later life.
 7. One example of selective optimization is that the elderly tend to perceive and remember positive images over negative ones, a shift that is referred to as the **positivity effect**.
 8. **Stratification theories** maintain that social forces are particularly powerful during late adulthood, when a person’s ability to function depends largely on which stratum of society he or she is located in.
 9. One form of social stratification theory focuses on age stratification. **Disengagement theory**, the most controversial theory of adult psychosocial development, maintains that during late adulthood the individual and society mutually withdraw.
 10. Critics of disengagement theory point out that older people need to and want to substitute new friends and activities for those they lose with retirement. In contrast, **activity theory** holds that the more active the elderly are, the greater their life satisfaction and the longer their life. The most recent view of age stratification is that dis-

engagement theory and activity theory are too extreme. According to this view, healthy older adults who see decades of life after retirement compensate for their losses by finding new roles and activities.

11. In addition to age stratification, contemporary theories of adult development focus on the impact of stratification by gender and ethnicity. Feminist theory points out, for example, that because most social structures and economic policies have been established by men, women's perspectives and needs are devalued by society. Gender-stratification theory has recently recognized that men, too, are pushed into certain roles because of their sex, roles that may harm them in late adulthood.
12. Ethnic background affects every aspect of development, including education, health, and employment. Stratification theory suggests that these factors accumulate, creating large discrepancies in income by old age. Stratification by ethnicity also involves the accumulation of health disparities as people age. This phenomenon, which is called *weathering*, creates a high *allostatic load* in the form of medical problems such as hypertension and obesity.

II. Activities in Late Adulthood

Instructional Objective: To explore the ways in which older adults fulfill their need for generativity.

- AV: Aging in the Future Series: Part I: Work and Retirement, Part II: Retirement Income Security, Part V: Politics of Aging; Aging in Japan: When Traditional Mechanisms Vanish
- Classroom Activity: On the Street Where You Live: The Importance of Walkable Green Spaces in Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities

1. Contrary to long-held beliefs, recent research has found that most older adults want to stop working as soon as they are eligible to do so. Since 1980, the average age of retirement has decreased.
2. Cross-sectional research finds a strong link between good health and volunteering. Advantages are strongest when volunteering occurs in moderation and for one organization. Older people who volunteer are those who have been strongly committed to their community.
3. Many older adults stay busy by maintaining their homes and yards, reflecting their desire to **age in place**. One result of this is that many of the elderly live by themselves.
4. Rather than moving, many elderly people prefer to remain in the neighborhoods in which they raised their children, thus creating **naturally occurring retirement communities (NORC)**.
5. Religious faith and praying increase with age. However, older adults attend fewer religious services than the middle-aged.
6. By many measures, the elderly are more politically active than any other age group. The major U.S. organization affecting the elderly is the AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons).
7. The elderly are interested in wider social concerns than those that affect their own economic interests. This concern about generational equity is worldwide.

III. Friends and Relatives

Instructional Objective: To explore the ways in which older adults fulfill their need for affiliation.

- AV: Grandma Didn't Wave Back
- Classroom Activities: Social Networking During Late Adulthood; Ageism and Marital Relationships
- "On Your Own" Activity: Grandparents

1. The social convoy is as important in old age as at any other stage of life.

2. Married older adults tend to be happier, healthier, and wealthier than those who are unmarried.
3. Most older married couples believe their marriage has improved over the years. This may be because the accumulation of shared life experiences makes husbands and wives more compatible. Divorce is rare in late adulthood, but the rate is increasing.
4. Because more people are living longer, more older people are part of multigenerational families than at any time in history. Some are *beanpole families*, in which there are more generations than in the past, but with only a few members in each generation.
5. While relationships with younger generations are clearly positive, they also include tension and conflict.
6. Because most of the elderly are capable of caring for themselves, financial and emotional assistance typically flows from the older generation to their children.
7. **Filial responsibility** (the idea that adult children are obligated to care for their aging parents) is found in every culture.
8. Grandparent–grandchild relationships take one of three forms: *remote*, *involved*, or *companionate*. Although the remote pattern was common in the past, it is rare today in developed nations. Some elders who become involved grandparents do not do so by choice. Most contemporary grandparents seek the companionate role as they strive for the love and respect of their grandchildren while maintaining their own independence.
9. Sometimes, grandparents become *surrogate parents* who take over the work of raising their children's children. Grandparents are most likely to provide surrogate care for children who need intensive involvement, such as infants who are drug-affected or school-aged boys who are rebellious. Social workers often seek grandparents for *kinship foster care*.
10. (A View From Science) The idea that grandparents always enjoy their grandchildren and vice versa is a myth. One study found less depression in emerging adults who had a close relationship with a grandparent only when the young adult also had a good relationship with his or her mother.
11. Of those currently over age 65 in the United States, only 4 percent have never married, making this the most married cohort in history. The never-married are usually quite content and not usually lonely. Some of them are in gay or lesbian relationships and some have heterosexual romances.
12. Older people's satisfaction with life bears relatively little relationship to their contact with younger members of their own family, but correlates significantly with the quality of their contact with friends.
13. (Thinking Critically) Elders who have strong social networks, close friends, and cognitively stimulating activities tend to live long and healthy lives.

IV. The Frail Elderly

Instructional Objective: To help students understand the problems facing the frail elderly and their caregivers.

- AV: Aging in the Future Series: Part III: Health Maintenance and Care, Part IV: Living Arrangements and Services; To Be Growing Older; Caring for Your Parents; Caring for the Elderly; Nursing Home Care; Abandoning the Elderly
 - Classroom Activity: Problem-Based Learning: Design an Assisted-Living Residence
 - Teaching Tips: Housing Difficulties for the Aged; The Frail Elderly
 - Critical Thinking Activity: Frailty During Late Adulthood
1. The **frail elderly**—people over age 65, and often over age 85, who are physically infirm, very ill, or cognitively impaired—are differentiated by their inability to perform adequately the **activities of daily life (ADLs)**, which consist of eating, bathing, toileting, dressing, and transferring between a bed and a chair. Equally important to independent living are the **instrumental activities of daily life (IADLs)**, or actions that require some intellectual competence and forethought such as paying bills, shopping, and so forth.

2. The caregiver of a frail elderly person is usually the spouse, who is also elderly. If there is no living partner, a sibling or adult daughter provides care.
3. Family caregivers for the frail elderly often experience substantial stress. Expectations for how the elderly should be cared for vary significantly from one culture to another.
4. The frail elderly are particularly vulnerable to elder abuse. Researchers find that about 5 percent of elders say they are abused and that up to one-fourth of all elders are vulnerable but do not report abuse.
5. Many older Americans and their relatives feel that nursing homes should be avoided at all costs, usually because they believe the care is poor. A popular, intermediate form of care is the ***assisted living*** arrangement.

