Observing the Elderly through the Eyes of a Developmental Theorist

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Abstract

Between September and November 2008, I devoted sixteen hours of service-learning to the nursing home residents of St. Margaret’s Daughters Nursing Home to fulfill a course requirement for a Human Development course. Through observation, I discovered that middle adulthood development played a part in the development of the late adulthood period. In this scholarly note, Schaie’s stages of development, Erikson’s personality development, disengagement theory, activity theory, and continuity theory are used to explain late adulthood development and aging. Five nursing home residents whom I shall call John, Gregory, Janice, Jerry, and Edward provided evidence for explaining that the development of elderly people is contingent on their development during their younger years.

Key Terms: Eric Erikson, Aging, Reintegrative Stage, Generativity-versus-Stagnation, Ego-integrity-versus-Despair

K. Warner Schaie was a developmental psychologist who believed that adults’ perceptions developed through a series of stages (1977). Schaie divided development into five stages, each pertaining to a certain age group. The stage of development that I was interested in was the reintegrative stage. The reintegrative stage occurs during late adulthood, and it states that individuals in this stage focus on personally meaningful tasks (Schaie, 1977). Elderly individuals go through life acquiring information to store for future use (acquisitive stage), to use in present situations (achieving stage), to care for their spouses, family, and further their careers (responsible stage), and finally to accomplish tasks that are important to them (Schaie, 1977).
While observing an elderly gentleman by the name of John, I could tell that he was currently in the reintegrative stage not because of his apparent old age, but because of his mannerisms. An interesting thing about John was that he and his wife were both nursing home residents; I have never seen a couple in a nursing home at the same time. John told me that his wife recently survived a stroke, and he has been trying to help her recover ever since. John mentioned that he and his wife have been happily married for forty-five years, and they raised two lovely daughters who are now both successful. Now that John’s daughters are grown and he is retired, the only thing that truly matters to him is the well-being of his wife. John’s decision to focus on helping his wife recover shows that he is focused on personally meaningful tasks (Schaie, 1977). As one can see, John is currently in the reintegrative stage.

Another theory that I witnessed at the nursing home dealt with Erikson’s stages psychosocial development from birth to death. Erikson’s view of psychosocial development is broken down into eight stages that pertain to various age groups. With each stage a person must go through what Erikson refers to as a crisis through which they either successfully or unsuccessfully pass. I was interested in Erikson’s last two stages, generativity-versus-stagnation stage and the ego-integrity-versus-despair stage. The generativity-versus-stagnation stage focuses on people who are in their middle adulthood years. Erikson believed that middle-aged individuals spent their middle adulthood in generativity or in stagnation (McAdams & Logan, 2004; An & Cooney, 2006; Peterson, 2006). Generative people desire to make an impact in the world around them, and they do so by guiding younger individuals, donating money to a charity that aids the future generations, and so on. Generative individuals take an altruistic interest in guiding future generations. In contrast, a person who is focused on their own lives rather than the lives of others and is more self-centered, according to Erikson, would be stagnant. People in stagnation tend to be seen as people who have contributed little to the world. Such people, if they self reflect, may feel frustrated and bored. They may seek change and become more generative and thus successfully pass through this crisis. If not, Erikson says they will be self absorbed, which may lead to dissatisfaction or possibly despair when they review their lives in their last stage of development (McAdams & Logan, 2004; An & Cooney, 2006; Peterson, 2006).

The ego-integrity-versus-despair stage follows the generativity-versus-stagnation stage. According to Erikson, ego-integrity-versus-despair is the final stage of psychosocial development occurring in late adulthood. In the ego-integrity-versus-despair, individuals whom are in their late adulthood years review, evaluate, and attempt to accept past decisions (Field & Millsap, 1991). Individuals who successfully pass through this stage will have ego integrity. People with ego integrity have reflected over their life and acknowledged both accomplishments and poor decisions. While they may say if they had the opportunity they would like to correct their mistakes, they are cognizant that they no longer have the time. They accept their past (Field & Millsap, 1991). On the other hand, individuals who do not complete this stage are said to be in despair. They tend to feel like they have not fulfilled all their desires in life (Field & Millsap, 1991). Individuals with ego integrity tend to appear happy and content, while individuals in despair tend to be unhappy and dissatisfied.

After working in the nursing home and getting to know many residents, I developed a hypothesis using Erikson’s psychosocial development theory. I hypothesized that a person who successfully passed through generativity-versus-stagnation stage during middle adulthood would...
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One day while waiting on lunch, Gregory asked me why I came to the nursing home. I told him about my Human Development class and I explained service-learning. Gregory then asked me about my parents’ occupations and about my future endeavors. He was glad to hear that both of my parents worked in the medical field and that I planned to follow in their footsteps by pursuing a career as a psychiatrist. My story brought a smile to Gregory’s face because it reminded him of his life. Gregory told me when he was a middle-aged adult his main goal was to make a positive impact on the lives of his family members and the people in his community. Gregory made a positive impact in his family’s life by bringing money to the table while his wife stayed home with their daughters, by taking his family on trips each summer so as to allow his wife to relax, and by exposing their children to different cultures. By putting others’ needs and wants first, Gregory’s life illustrated that of a generative person. After observing that Gregory’s middle adulthood was spent in generativity, I asked him if he was currently happy with his life. A radiant smile stretched across Gregory face and he answered, “I couldn’t be happier.” Gregory told me that taking care of his wife and daughters and being active in his community brought joy to his life because he was making a difference in the life of others. When Gregory talked about being currently happy and satisfied, he had first referenced his accomplishments in middle adulthood. These earlier accomplishments indicated a successful passage through generativity-versus-stagnation stage, which helped him to develop strong ego integrity. According to Erikson (Field & Millsap, 1991), strong ego integrity would indicate that Gregory had successfully passed through the ego-integrity-versus-despair of psychosocial development. Gregory is a case study example that supports my hypothesis that there is a link between the generativity-versus-stagnation stage and the ego-integrity-versus-despair stage.

An interesting aspect to examine when observing the elderly is to see how they decide to spend their final years. There are three major theories that explain different ways that the elderly age: disengagement theory, activity theory, and continuity theory. Disengagement theory describes people in late adulthood aging through a gradual psychological and physical withdrawal from their social worlds (Cummings & Henry, 1961). People who age according to disengagement theory tend to spend more time reflecting over their lives, while decreasing their level of interaction with others (Cummings & Henry, 1961). In contrast, activity theory states that people do not withdraw from their social worlds. Rather, successful aging is measured by a person’s desire and ability to maintain their interest, activities, and social interactions (Charles, Reynolds, & Gatz, 2001; Consedine, Magi, & King, 2004; Hutchinson & Wexler, 2007). People who age according to activity theory often tend to be happier than those who age according to disengagement theory because they have remained engaged with the world (Charles, Reynolds, & Gatz, 2001; Consedine, Magi, & King, 2004; Hutchinson & Wexler, 2007). Also, individuals whose aging follows activity theory may find replacement activities if they are unable to continue the same activities from their middle adulthood (Charles, Reynolds, & Gatz, 2001; Consedine, Magi, & King, 2004; Hutchinson & Wexler, 2007). The final major theory that pertains to successful aging is continuity theory. Successful aging, according to continuity theory, is defined in terms of maximizing one’s senses of well-being and self-esteem by...
maintaining a certain level of involvement with society (Charles, Reynolds, & Gatz, 2001; Consedine, Magi, & King, 2004; Hutchinson & Wexler, 2007). For example, if individuals lead a very active life during their middle adulthood, then they would be happiest by continuing that level of activeness throughout their late adulthood. Similarly, if individuals lived a more introverted life during their middle adulthood, then they would be happy by having the same introverted lifestyle during their late adulthood.

I witnessed these three theories of aging while getting to know three different nursing home residents whom I shall call Janice, Jerry, and Edward. Janice lent support for disengagement theory. I noticed that Janice always sat by herself during activities and meals. When Janice was in the presence of others, she did not interact much with them. The interesting thing about Janice was that she did not appear to be depressed; she actually seemed content and happy. After participating in the nursing home church service, I asked Janice if she enjoyed being on her own or amongst the company of others. Janice began talking about her husband and how his death triggered self reflection and a shift in priorities. Prior to her husband’s death, Janice described herself as very active and social. For instance, she would go on walks with her girlfriends, travel with her husband, and volunteer at the homeless shelter. After her husband’s death, her priorities became more focused on intimate relationships. She replaced socializing with more introspective activities such as meditating, improving her relationship with God, and praying for her loved ones. I asked Janice if she was happy with her choice of how she was spending the remainder of her life. Janice replied by saying, “Once I detached myself from unimportant things, I found peace.” Janice is an example of aging according to disengagement theory. Janice’s contentment can be seen with her choice to withdraw from the world around her and focus on herself, her relationship with God, and those that are truly important to her.

Jerry exemplified a person aging according to activity theory. During the nursing home church services, Jerry was known for leading the hymns. I noticed that Jerry truly loved to sing. Not only did he sing during the church service, he also sang during activities and meals. One day I asked Jerry why he was always singing. He told me that he had always been an active singer in his church choir prior to coming to the nursing home. Unfortunately, since Jerry was in the nursing home, he could not sing in the church choir. Jerry told me that he would not allow his current circumstances to hinder him from doing what he loved, which was to sing. He decided to sing whenever he wanted because that was what made him happy. As one can see, Jerry was aging according to activity theory by staying committed to an activity that he was involved during his younger years. In addition to staying committed to singing, Jerry’s decision to lead the hymn in the church service can be seen as his replacement activity for singing in the church choir.

Edward’s aging can be explained by using continuity theory. Every time I played bingo with the nursing home residents, Edward always caught my attention. Edward was quite a loud individual who enjoyed telling jokes and making others laugh. In short, Edward was a social butterfly. I asked Edward if he had always had such an animated personality. He replied, “I have always been the life of the party.” Edward also claimed that he enjoyed being social because that was the kind of person he was and he would be unhappy acting differently. Edwards’s decision to carry his high social level from his middle-aged year to his late adulthood years showed that he was aging according to continuity theory. Elderly individuals who are as active and social as
they were during middle adulthood tend to be happy. As one can see, three major theories of aging can be used to explain different ways in which individuals grow old.

Every time I arrived at the nursing home to carry out my service-learning, I kept various human development theories in mind when I interacted with the nursing home residents. Approaching the nursing home with Schaie’s theory, Erikson’s theory, and the aging theories in mind enabled me to see that the development of elderly people is contingent on their development during their younger years. For instance, when examining successful aging using Schaie’s theory one can see that people in late adulthood tend to focus on matters that contain personal meaning, as John did (1977). When applying Erikson’s theory on psychosocial development, elderly people are happy with ego integrity if they successfully passed through the generativity-versus-stagnation stage during their middle-aged years. Finally, disengagement theory, activity theory, and continuity theory explain how people age by disengaging from social life as Janice had chosen to do, remaining active in their older years with an activity a person loves as Jerry demonstrated, or continuing with behaviors and ways of being as Edward had done. This assignment enabled me to see that people do not develop by spontaneously jumping from stage to stage; they develop in a manner that is orderly and gradual. In other words, every developmental stage in life is a stepping stone that leads to the next developmental stage in life, thus enabling individuals to evolve into the people they are today.

Over the span of this semester, I devoted sixteen hours of service-learning at St. Margaret’s Daughter Nursing Home. Unfortunately, my time at the nursing home has ended. Prior to my service-learning experiences, I stereotyped all elderly people as slow, mean, and useless people. After spending time at St. Margaret’s, however, the nursing home residents crushed those stereotypes and helped me develop a new appreciation for the elderly. The information that I provided in this scholarly note may give others a better understanding of the elderly people.
References


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