The Developing Person
Through the Life Span 8e
by Kathleen Stassen Berger

Chapter 25– Late Adulthood:
Psychosocial Development

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Theories of Late Adulthood

- Development is more diverse in late adulthood than at any other age.
- Some elderly people run marathons and lead nations, while others can no longer walk or talk.
- Many social scientists have tried to understand these variations as well as the general course of old age.
Theories of Late Adulthood

• **Self Theories**
  – Theories of late adulthood that emphasize the core self, or the search to maintain one’s integrity and identity.

• **Integrity versus despair**
  – The final stage of Erik Erikson’s developmental sequence, in which older adults seek to integrate their unique experiences with their vision of community.
Theories of Late Adulthood

• Most older people feel their personalities and attitudes have remained stable over their life span, even as they recognize the physical changes of their bodies.

• Objects and places become more precious, as a way to hold on to identity.

• Compulsive hoarding
  – The tendency to cling to familiar places and possessions, sometimes to the point of becoming a health or safety hazard.
The Positivity Effect

• *Selective optimization with compensation* is central to self theories.

• **Positivity effect**
  – The tendency for elderly people to perceive, prefer, and remember positive images and experiences more than negative ones.
  – Selective memory is a way to compensate for whatever troubles occur.
  – Unpleasant experiences are reinterpreted as inconsequential.
The Positivity Effect

• Self-perception normally tilts toward integrity rather than despair.

• Research on what people hope for themselves (the ideal self) and how they perceive themselves (the real self) finds that, with age, the two selves come closer together.

• As self theory contends, self-acceptance leads to happiness.
Stratification Theories

- Theories that emphasize that social forces, particularly those related to a person’s social stratum, or social category, limit individual choices and affect a person’s ability to function in late adulthood as past stratification continues to limit life in various ways.
Theories of Late Adulthood

Stratification by Age

• Industrialized nations segregate elderly people, gradually shunting them out of the mainstream of society as they grow older.

• Segregation by age harms everyone because it creates socialization deficits for members of all age groups.
Theories of Late Adulthood

• Disengagement theory
  – The view that aging makes a person’s social sphere increasingly narrow, resulting in role relinquishment, withdrawal, and passivity.

• Activity theory
  – The view that elderly people want and need to remain active in a variety of social spheres—with relatives, friends, and community groups—and become withdrawn only unwillingly, as a result of ageism.
Stratification by Gender

• Feminist theory draws attention to society’s guides and pressures to put males and females on different paths.

• Irrational, gender-based fear may limit women’s independence (i.e., older women persuaded not to live alone more than older men).

• Men seek medical help less than women.
Stratification theory says that factors such as education, health, employment, and place of residence create large discrepancies in income by old age.

*Weathering*, past stresses and medical disabilities, creates a high *allostatic load* which is an accumulation of problems that make a person vulnerable to serious disease.
Stratification by Ethnicity

Elderly People Living Below the Poverty Line, by Race, United States

Activities in Late Adulthood

Work

• The activities of older people are intense and varied.
• The psychological benefits of work can be obtained through volunteer work.
• Work provides social support and status, boosting self-esteem.
• For many people, employment allows generativity.
Activities in Late Adulthood

Elder Participation in the Labor Force

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, various publications.
Activities in Late Adulthood

Retirement

• Besides needing the money, some employees over age 65 stay on the job because they appreciate the social recognition and self-fulfillment of work.

• It was once believed that older adults were healthier and happier when they were employed than when they were unemployed and that retirement led to illness and death.

• Only when retirement is precipitated by poor health or fading competence does it correlate with illness.
Activities in Late Adulthood

Rates of Volunteering, United States, 2009

Percent

Age

Activities in Late Adulthood

Home Sweet Home

• One of the favorite activities of many retirees is caring for their own homes.

• Aging in place
  – Remaining in the same home and community in later life, adjusting but not leaving when health fades.
Activities in Late Adulthood

Naturally occurring retirement community (NORC)

- A neighborhood or apartment complex whose population is mostly retired people who moved to the location as younger adults and never left.

- An important reason for both aging in place and NORCs is the social convoy, the result of years of close relationships.
Activities in Late Adulthood

Religious Involvement

- Older adults are less likely to attend religious services than are the middle-aged.
- Yet, faith increases with age, as do praying and other religious practices.
- Religious institutions fulfill many needs, and a nearby house of worship is one reason American elders prefer to age in place.
Activities in Late Adulthood

Political Activism

• Fewer turn out for massive rallies and only about 2 percent volunteer in political campaigns.
• More letter writing to elected representatives, voting, and identifying with a political party.
• Many government policies affect the elderly, especially those regarding housing, pensions, prescription drugs, and medical costs.

AARP

• A U.S. group of people aged 50 and older that advocates for the elderly.
## Political Activism

### Table 25.1
Voter Registration in Nonpresidential Election Years, by Age Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Voters Registered in Election Year (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–20</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–24</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–34</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35–44</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45–64</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Friends and Relatives

• **Long-Term Partnerships**
  – Spouses buffer each other against the problems of old age, thus extending life.
  – Married older adults are healthier, wealthier, and happier than unmarried people their age.

• **Shared Laughter**
  – One characteristic of long-married couples is that they often mirror each other’s moods.
  – Thanks to the positivity effect, the mood is often one of joy.
Friends and Relatives

- One amazing aspect of long-term relationships is how interdependent the partners become over time.

- Generally, older spouses accept each other’s frailties, assisting with the partner’s physical and psychological needs.
Friends and Relatives

Relationships with Younger Generations

• In past centuries, most adults died before their grandchildren were born.
• Today, some families span five generations.
• *Beanpole family*
  – Multiple generations but only a few members in each one
Friends and Relatives

The Beanpole Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paternal Line</th>
<th>Maternal Line</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great-grandfather (widower)</td>
<td>Great-great-grandmother (widow)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandmother and grandfather</td>
<td>Great-grandmother (widow)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunt (father's only sibling; not married)</td>
<td>Another great-grandmother and great-grandfather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Grandmother (widow)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grandmother and grandfather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mother (only child)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child (only child; no first cousins)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Friends and Relatives

• Feelings of *familism* prompt siblings, cousins, and even more distant relatives to seek out one another.

• **Filial responsibility**
  – The obligation of adult children to care for their aging parents.
  – A major goal among adults in the U.S. is to be self-sufficient.
  – Adult children may be more willing to offer support than their parents are to receive it.
Friends and Relatives

Tensions Between Older and Younger Adults

• Although elderly people’s relationships with members of younger generations are usually positive, they can also include tension and conflict.

• Few older adults stop parenting simply because their children are grown.

• Adult children also imagine parental disapproval, even if it is not outwardly expressed.
Extensive research has found that relationships between parents and adult children are affected by many factors:

- Assistance arises from need and from the ability to provide.
- Frequency of contact is related to geographical proximity, not affection.
- Love is influenced by the interaction remembered from childhood.
- Sons feel stronger obligation; daughters feel stronger affection.
Friends and Relatives

Grandchildren

• Most (85 percent) elders over age 65 are grandparents.
• Factors influencing the nature of the grandparent-grandchild relationship:
  – Personality
  – Ethnicity
  – National background
  – Past family interactions
  – Age and the personality of the child
Friends and Relatives

• In the U.S., contemporary grandparents follow one of four approaches to dealing with their grandchildren.
  – *Remote grandparents* (sometimes called *distant grandparents*) are emotionally distant.
  – *Companionate grandparents* (sometimes called “*fun-loving*” grandparents) entertain and “**spoil**” their grandchildren.
  – *Involved grandparents* are active in the day-to-day lives of their grandchildren.
  – *Surrogate parents* raise their grandchildren, usually because the parents are unable or unwilling to do so.
Friends and Relatives

Friendship

• Many middle-aged adults, married and unmarried, have no children.
• Elderly people who have spent a lifetime without a spouse usually have friendships, activities, and social connections.
• All the research finds that older adults need at least one close companion.
The Frail Elderly

Frail elderly

• People over age 65, and often over age 85, who are physically infirm, very ill, or cognitively disabled.

• Most older adults become frail if they live long enough.

• Frailty is most common in the months preceding death.
The Frail Elderly

Activities of Daily Life (ADLs)

• Actions that are important to independent living, typically identified as five tasks of self-care:
  – Eating
  – Bathing,
  – Toileting
  – Dressing
  – Transferring from a bed to a chair

• Inability to perform any of these tasks is a sign of frailty.
The Frail Elderly

Instrumental activities of daily life (IADLs)

• Actions (for example, paying bills and driving a car) that are important to independent living and that require some intellectual competence and forethought.

• The ability to perform these tasks may be even more critical to self-sufficiency than ADL ability.
# The Frail Elderly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Exemplar Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managing medications</td>
<td>Determining how many doses of cough medicine can be taken in a 24-hour period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Completing a patient medical-history form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping for necessities</td>
<td>Ordering merchandise from an online catalog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comparing brands of a product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing one’s finances</td>
<td>Comparing Medigap insurance plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Completing income tax returns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using transportation</td>
<td>Computing taxi rates versus bus rates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interpreting driver’s right-of-way laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the telephone</td>
<td>Determining amount to pay from a phone bill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Determining emergency phone information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining one’s household</td>
<td>Following instructions for operating a household appliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comprehending an appliance warranty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing meals and</td>
<td>Evaluating nutritional information on food labels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>understanding nutrition</td>
<td>Following recipe directions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Adapted from Willis, 1996.*
Caring for the Frail Elderly

- Family caregivers experience substantial stress.
- Their health may suffer, and their risk of depression increases, especially if the care receiver has dementia.
- In the U.S., the spouse is the usual caregiver.
The Frail Elderly

- Even in ideal circumstances with community support, family caregiving can present problems:
  - If one adult child is the primary caregiver, other siblings tend to feel relief or jealousy.
  - Care receivers and caregivers often disagree about schedules, menus, doctor visits, and so on.
  - Resentments on both sides disrupt mutual affection and appreciation.
  - Public agencies rarely provide services unless an emergency arises.
The Frail Elderly

• When caregiving results in resentment and social isolation, the risk of depression, poor health, and abuse escalates.

• Elder Abuse
  – More likely to occur when:
    • the care receiver is a feeble person who suffers severe memory loss.
    • the caregiver is a drug-addicted relative.
    • care occurs in an isolated place.
    • visitors are few and far between.
The Frail Elderly

• Most research finds that:
  – about 5 percent of elders say they are abused.
  – up to one-fourth of all elders are vulnerable but do not report abuse.
• Elders who are mistreated by family members are ashamed to admit it.
• Outright abuse is now rare in nursing homes.
• In the U.S., the trend over the past 20 years has been toward fewer nursing-home residents (currently about 1.5 million people nationwide).
Long-Term Care

- Good nursing care is available for those who can afford it and know what to look for.
- Although 90% of elders are independent, half of them will need nursing-home care at some point as they recuperate from hospitalization.
Alternative Care

Assisted living

• A living arrangement for elderly people that combines privacy and independence with medical supervision.

• Assisted-living facilities range from group homes for three or four elderly people to large apartment or townhouse developments for hundreds of residents.