

Evaluation of socioemotional selectivity theory



There are three main theories put forward in relation to the study and understanding of social supports and engagement in older adulthood. Though the three theories are not necessarily exclusive to the area of social support and engagement, they are the most relevant theories to show how thoughts have changed or evolved over time. These three theories are Disengagement theory, Activity theory and Socioemotional Selectivity Theory. These theories are typically applied to a specific age bracket, older adulthood, which includes any person over the age of 65 years. Older adulthood is subdivided into three further age groups: Young Old, Middle Old and Old Old. Young Old is generally regarded as being between 65 years and 74 years of age. Middle Old refers to individuals in the 75-84 years age bracket. The Old Old age bracket is typically regarded as referring to anybody over the age of 85 years.

The first and oldest of the three theories is Cummings and Henry's Disengagement theory which was put forward in 1961. The main feature of this theory is the idea that disengagement is a mutual and healthy process between older adults and society. It is assumed that older people will have less physical, mental or psychological energy as a result of the lifespan process and they therefore actively and or passively disengage. This disengagement is facilitated by society. As one moves through the older adulthood age group one's social sphere contracts as a result of a number of factors such as retirement, bereavement, decrease in mobility, etcetera. These changes in the level, potency or frequency of these interactions is simply accepted by those experiencing it, those around them and wider society in general. It is assumed to be 'normal' and therefore it is expected

and unquestioned. The interactions between older people and others becomes more passive in that they initiate less interactions yet and become more passive in the interactions that others initiate. As a result of their social sphere size decreasing and their passivity levels increasing, they become more isolated and are offered less roles, this cycle of change repeats itself as one progresses through the older adulthood lifespan. The premise is that the social withdrawal experienced by people in older adulthood is directly related to and associated with their approaching death and its related self-reflection. They also stated that a “ disengaged older adult is a happy person” (McMordie, 1981, p. 72)

This entire theory is based on the idea of a decrease in mental energy, however one can neither concretely define mental energy nor can one measure or observe it. As such, this theory may technically be seen as having no foundation however its ideas were often accepted within the scientific, psychological and psychiatric communities.

The second of these three theories is Havighurst’s Activity theory in 1972. This theory arose partially in response to Disengagement Theory. The premise of this theory is that humans are social beings, and that social interaction is extremely beneficial and important to us even after the end of one’s working life. Regardless of one’s age or other characteristics, humans need “ interpersonal intimacy” (McMordie, 1981, p. 72) in order to be a fully integrated individual in their society. Humans are, after-all, a highly social species. This desire or need for this naturally sought social needs is often blocked by the social norms and expectations, such as forced retirement. (Malatesta, 1981) Havighurst’s theory argues that disengagement is

<https://assignbuster.com/evaluation-of-socioemotional-selectivity-theory/>

societally induced, as opposed to being a mutual decision which is initiated by the older person.

Activity theory claims that by allowing disengagement to take place society is prioritising the reduction of taxes and of industry rather than the engagement with and quality of life of older people. Activity Theory is inherently limited by its simplicity and by its position as an observer on a macro level.

Disengagement Theory and Activity Theory share some important features. Both use social changes as evidence of reactive processes which are uniquely associated with old age. They view loss as the “ principle organizer of changed social patterns” (Carstensen, 1995, p. 152). A major issue that is present in both Disengagement and Activity Theory is that they each believe themselves to be an absolute, ideal theory, in other words a one-size-fits-all theory. Such beliefs do not allow for the individual differences or the variation of human life, existence or experience. There are few, if any, experiences, beliefs, patterns, etcetera in individuals’ lives or in their psychology that can be said to be truly universal.

The third main theory that was put forward in relation to the study and understanding of social supports and engagements was Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (S. S. T.). This theory was put forward by Laura L. Carstensen in 1995; and is the prescribed topic on which this essay will be focused on. Socioemotional Selectivity Theory is especially concerned with the patterns of change in individuals’ social circles in relation to our understanding of their motivations. In essence, this theory believes that “

older adults' socioemotional adaptation as a function of their time perspective and prioritization of emotionally meaningful or hedonic goals" (Isaacowitz, 2012, p. 237). This theory recognises three key social motives in life: information seeking; self-concept; and, emotional regulation. These motives are not fixed throughout the lifespan development of an individual, instead they vary in different degrees at different times, in other words they are salient. Each of these motives will have an impact on your social circles. For example, in adolescence and early adulthood information gathering and identity formation are crucial in the discovery of who you are, and therefore a wide and diverse plane of social interaction is a key component of this process. In early adulthood one generally has a fairly concrete idea of who they are, their identity and of their place in the world and as such their social sphere becomes slightly more homogeneous, however information seeking remains a critical motive in early adulthood. Such learning is key as to understand one's new role in society.

These three motives are part of the foundation of needs on which one's social partner preferences are based. When information is sought by an individual it is generally found amongst a relatively large, unfamiliar and diverse group of people. Information seeking tends to be quite a social action that is less prevalent both pre and post the early adulthood stage of life. Pre and post this stage the emphasis is on emotional regulation. Such emotional regulation occurs most effectively in a smaller group of people that is far more familiar. The dynamic of a group which most effectively supports an individual's emotional regulation is therefore a more intimate one.

Socioemotional Selectivity Theory acknowledges that there is a reduction in

the number of contacts people have in their old age but that is due to a change in their motives for social engagement. As people age the number of people within their social circle will decline however the number of their close relationships will remain relatively consistent, it is those on the periphery of their social circle, their acquaintances, that older adults will disengage or be disengaged from.

While Socioemotional Selectivity Theory is by no means absolute, as allowances for individuality and variation of the human experience must be made, it is, however, a far more refined theory than both Disengagement Theory and Activity Theory.

The question that theories such as Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, Disengagement Theory and Activity Theory seeks to provide an answer to or information about is: Why does an individual's goals change dependent on their position in their lifespan development.

These goals change alongside our time perspective. They change depending on what we want and what we deem to be important. When time is perceived to be unlimited the pursuit of knowledge and knowledge-related long-term goals take precedence. In contrast to this, when time is perceived as limited or constrained, emotional goals and short-term goals take precedence. The negative inextricable belief amongst the general population is that the greater one's chronological numerical age the less time that remains in their life-span. This belief allows for the formation of 'typical' age-related progression patterns. Despite these patterns being thought of as a universal template, they are not absolute. These patterns change

depending on the individual's perspective of their own life cycle. Major events such as terrorist attacks and outbreaks of disease emphasise the fragility and unpredictability of life, in doing this they encourage one to shift their focus from long-term goals to short term emotional ones.

The aforementioned theories as well as theories in general are ineffectual without the empirical and research evidence which supports them. There have been a number of studies and experiments conducted to test life-span theories, particularly Socioemotional Selectivity Theory. The data that has come from these studies and experiments supports Socioemotional Selectivity Theory.

Evidentiary information does not have to come from new studies but can also come from the reinterpretation of past and available data. One example of a combination of past studies with some new data is found in regards to a 1928 Berkeley study and a 1990-1993 German study. The picture of social activity that emerges from both a re-analysis of Jean McFarlane's 1928 longitudinal studies of Berkeley children's development from infancy to and through adulthood, and the cross-sectional analysis of a representative group of people from the Berlin Ageing Study who fall into the young old, middle old and old old age group categories appears to more closely resemble the notion of increased social selection as opposed to social withdrawal or disengagement. Lang and Carstensen found that there was a "significant negative correlation between total network size and age" (Carstensen L. L., 1998, p. 24). They also suggested that a possible reason for the reduction in those on the periphery of your social sphere, such as acquaintances, is that many of those in this area would be of a similar age or

<https://assignbuster.com/evaluation-of-socioemotional-selectivity-theory/>

generation to you and as such they are more likely to die than those with whom you share close, kin or familial bonds, such as children, nieces, nephews, etcetera. In this study they also looked at the average level of emotional closeness in relation to personality traits with regard to the number of social partners a person has and their average emotional closeness to these partners. The personality traits assessed were neuroticism, extraversion and openness to experience. It was found that emotionally condensed social networks in very old age are prototypical. Lang, Carstensen and Steinburg hypothesised that personality characteristics were related to the size of an individual's social network but are not related to the emotional closeness to the members in those networks. This hypothesis was subsequently proven. It was also found that regardless of individual personality differences in extraversion, neuroticism or openness to experience, social networks are far more emotionally condensed in very old adulthood when compared to old adulthood. Feelings of social embeddedness and family status are typically related to the average emotional closeness one has towards network members, additionally the strength of the association between these social embeddedness and average emotional closeness was found to differ depending on family status, completely independent of personality characteristics.

This research was also concerned with the relationship between socioemotional selectivity and social-contextual resources. It is been argued that individuals who are in the latter portion of their lifespan are depleted of personal internal resources and therefore the availability and use of external

social resources becomes increasingly important for their adaptive functioning. (Carstensen L. L., 1998) As such, the social context in which an older individual exist in in later life provides opportunities and makes demands which requires an individual's context-specific adaptation. Two main findings were reached. The first being that the social networks of elder people who had nuclear family supports had a tendency to be greater and more emotionally condensed than those who did not have a nuclear family. The second being that irrespective of the specific reason, when nuclear family members are deceased, removed or otherwise unavailable the average level of emotional closeness to others becomes strongly associated with the feelings of social embeddedness.

Socioemotional Selectivity theory can also be interlinked with something known as the positivity effect. The positivity effect refers to the comparison between younger and older adults which shows that older adults have a relative preference to remember, notice or attend to positive information over negative information. Socioemotional Selectivity Theory was employed as a tool by researchers to explore and explain positivity effect. As this lifespan theory demonstrates that as people enter and proceed through old ages one places greater emphasis on short-term, emotional and positive goals and to actively prioritise emotional gratification. Barber et al conducted two experiment which tested this aspect of socioemotional selectivity theory and its relation to the positivity effect. Both of these experiments were written activities which either did not orient participants or it expressly directed them to think of time as being limited or expansive. They were then shown a series of pictures which were designed to evoke an emotional

response which they were then asked to recall in writing. The result of both of these experiments showed that independent of chronological age, by thinking of time as being limited the participants' recall was positively enhanced. Additionally, the results of the second experiment demonstrated that this effect was not driven by changes in mood. Building upon these results it was proposed that the naturally shifting goals, time horizons and recall of information by older adults tends to be more positive than that of younger adults simply due to the natural progression of time and age. This link between socioemotional selectivity theory and the positivity effect is robustly backed up by evidence.

Socioemotional selectivity theory is a comprehensive theoretical framework to conceptualize life-span changes in personal goals, social networks, and cognitive processing. The shift of one's goal throughout their lifespan, but particularly as one moves through the stages of adulthood is far more inclusive in Socioemotional Theory than it is in Disengagement Theory or Activity theory. The shift from seeing their life time as unlimited to limited may sound pessimistic but it is far healthier emotionally. Viewing life as a compilation of short-term goals does not limit the pursuit of knowledge but it makes it a more diverse and expansive one. It has been argued that the proposed goal shifts may substantially promote or challenge psychological and physical well-being across the life span. Importantly, even if one's future is short, it may not be beneficial to focus exclusively on present-oriented goals and disregard future-oriented goals altogether. The old adage, "live like you're going to die tomorrow, plan like you're going to live forever" captures the wisdom of attending to both types of goals.

Although previous research is largely consistent with motivational arguments, significant gaps in the empirical evidence remain, and, so far, only a few studies have directly tested Socioemotional Selectivity Theory in the domain of health-related decision making. More research is needed to disentangle the effects of cognitive and motivational factors in health-related choices across the life span.

Bibliography

- Baltes, P. B. (2001). *The Berlin Ageing Study: AGEING FROM 70 – 100*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Carstensen, L. L. (1995). Evidence for a Life-Span Theory of Socioemotional Selectivity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science* , 151-156.
- Carstensen, L. L. (1998). Perspectives on Socioemotional Selectivity in Late Life: How Personality and Social Content Do (and DO Not) Make a Difference. *Journal of Gerontology* , 21-30.
- Isaacowitz, D. M. (2012). Mood Regulation in Real Time: Age Differences in the Role of Looking. *Current Directions in Psychological Science* , 237-242.
- Malatesta, C. Z. (1981). Affective Development over the Lifespan: Involution or Growth? *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly of Behaviour and Development* , 145-173.
- McMordie, W. R. (1981). THE PHENOMENON OF WITHDRAWAL IN RELATION TO THE AGEING PROCESS: A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE. *Social Behaviour & Personality: an international journal* , 71-79.

- XXVII International Congress of Psychology. (2000). CHANGING TIMES ALTER DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORIES. In L. (. Backman, *Psychology at the Turn of the Millennium* (pp. 154-156). Stockholm: Taylor and Francis.