



Encyclopedia of Death and the Human Experience

Disengagement Theory

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Disengagement theory states that it is beneficial to both society and the individual to participate in a process of withdrawal from meaningful roles and relationships as that person enters the later years of life. While the theory does not suggest that one should sever all ties with previous acquaintances and enter a hermit-like state of existence, it does suggest that an aging individual will be less bound by the social networks in which he or she was previously engaged, and a decreased level of involvement will take place at four levels. First, the number of people with whom the individual regularly interacts will be reduced. Second, the amount of interaction he or she has with those persons will be diminished. Third, the style of interaction will be changed due to the altered status that the older individual now occupies. Finally, and most importantly, as the frequency and quality of interaction with others is diminished, the older individual will become increasingly preoccupied with his or her own situation; society will withdraw from the individual just as he or she will withdraw from society.

The roots of disengagement theory can be traced to an article published by Elaine Cumming, Lois Dean, David Newell, and Isabel McCaffrey in 1960, and a more complete description of the theory was provided 1 year later when Cumming and William E. Henry published *Growing Old: The Process of Disengagement*. Using data from the Kansas City Study of Adult Life, the authors fleshed out the details of disengagement theory by presenting nine postulates and eight corollaries. Within the postulates, Cumming and Henry asserted that disengagement is universal, though the form it takes is influenced by the culture in which one lives. In addition, the process of disengaging can be initiated by the individual or society. However, the desire of one party to disengage does not necessarily mean that the other party is willing to comply. When this occurs, the desire of society usually outweighs the desire of the individual. The authors also emphasized that disengagement varies by gender because the central role of men in society revolves around instrumental tasks whereas the central role of women involves socioemotional tasks. As it relates to the study of death and dying, two postulates are particularly relevant. Postulate 1 emphasizes the inevitability of death, though it also acknowledges that disengaging is a highly personal experience that reflects the individual's physiology, personality, and life situation. Postulate 7 describes how the proximity of death impacts the readiness of the individual, as well as society, to disengage from one another. When the individual recognizes that death is approaching, he or she begins to curtail certain activities and discontinue selected relationships. In addition, the nearness of death leads the individual to more focused reflections on the meaning of life.

Since its introduction in the early 1960s, disengagement theory has been heavily scrutinized by a number of behavioral scientists, many of whom argue that the underlying logic of the theory is flawed and that its basic tenets cannot be adequately tested with empirical research. Nevertheless, disengagement theory has played a major role in the emergence of the multidisciplinary field of gerontology (the study of the aging process) as well as the area of life span development due in large part to the role it has played in theory development. For instance, when disengagement theory was first presented, Cumming and Henry argued that an implicit theory of aging had shaped social-scientific thought for many years without being formally stated or adequately tested. In response, the implicit theory was formalized by Robert Havighurst and named activity theory. Once in place, the theory provided the polar extreme to disengagement theory because activity theory rests on the assertion that individuals want to remain as active in later life as they have been in their middle adult years. To accomplish this,

when a role or relationship is lost it is essential that another one be identified to fill the void created by the loss of the previous role. This process allows for the maintenance of one's current level of social involvement while simultaneously encouraging the expansion of his or her social network. In stark contrast, disengagement theory emphasizes that as an individual ages, he or she desires to gradually withdraw from the roles and responsibilities that were held throughout adult life. Society encourages this withdrawal because it provides the opportunity for younger individuals to occupy positions of increasing power and importance.

In addition to contributing to the formalization of activity theory, reactions to disengagement theory have led to the emergence of other theories, including continuity theory, which states that adults seek to maintain the same activities, behaviors, and relationships in later life as they did earlier in life. In order to achieve this continuity, older adults modify strategies for dealing with life events that worked in the past in order to handle the situations they face in later life. Because continuity theory is a modification of activity theory, it is also diametrically opposed to disengagement theory.

Although many scholars have been critical of disengagement theory, its role in examining how people navigate the changes that accompany the later years of life must be acknowledged. As the first explicitly stated theory of aging, it prompted the development of additional schools of thought which have greatly enhanced our understanding of the human experience.

- disengagement theory
- disengagement
- activity theory
- theories of aging
- death
- withdrawal
- individual and society

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See also

- [Aging, the Elderly, and Death](#)
- [Gender and Death](#)

Further Readings

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