Chapter Twenty-Five
Late Adulthood: Psychosocial Development

Theories of Late Adulthood

Three Major Theories
- self theories
- stratification theories
- dynamic theories

Self Theories

- Adults make choices, confront problems, and interpret reality to be themselves as fully as possible
- Emphasize the active part played by person in fulfilling potential
Integrity Versus Despair

- Erikson's 8th and final stage
- Seek to integrate their experience with their vision of community
- Life-affirming involvement in present

Identity Theory

- Identity Challenged in Late Adulthood
- Two Extremes of Coping
  - identity assimilation — new experiences incorporated into stable sense of identity
  - identity accommodation — altering self-concept to adapt to new experiences

Selective Optimization

- Chooses to cope with physical and cognitive losses
- Makes selective changes to cope with losses
- Readiness to make changes is a measure of strength of the self
Stratification Theories

- Social forces limit individual choice and direct life at every stage, especially late adulthood

Stratification By Age

- Disengagement Theory
  - one’s social sphere narrows, resulting in role relinquishment, withdrawal, passivity
- Activity Theory
  - need & want to remain active in a variety of social spheres
  - If withdraw, they do so unwillingly

Stratification by Gender and Ethnicity

- Sexual Discrimination
- Feminist theory draws attention to gender divisions
- In U.S., 60% of those over age 65 are females
Stratification By Gender and Ethnicity, cont.

• Ethnic discrimination and racism cause stratification, shaping experiences of both minorities and majorities

Better Female, Non-European, and Old?

• Positive Effects of Non-European American’s Strong Familism:
  - fewer elderly in nursing homes
  - elderly feel more respected
  - elderly feel more appreciated by families
  - in one study, minority women outlived majority women

Better Female, Non-European, and Old?, cont.

• Current stratification effects may not apply to cohort shift happening now
• We need to take a multicultural perspective to understand stratification theory
Dynamic Theories

- **Dynamic Theories**
  - emphasize change and readjustment
  - diversity of development within specific social context
- **Continuity Theory**
  - behaves & copes in much the same way as did earlier in life
  - Big five personality traits

Keeping Active

- Reality does not correspond with either disengagement or activity theories
- Employment has many advantages
- Select social activities

Continuing Education

- **Elderhostel**
  - people aged 55 and older live on college campuses and take special classes
- Thousands of learning programs filled with retirees
- Many elderly hesitate to take classes with mostly younger students
Volunteer Work

- Strong commitment to their community and believe they should be of service
- 40% of the elderly are involved in structured volunteering
- Elderly benefit, but not if forced to volunteer

Religious Involvement

- Religious faith increases with age
- Particularly important to those who feel alienated from overall society

Political Activism

- Ages 65 to 85 most likely to vote
- Political participation translates into power—AARP
- Interested in wider social concerns—war, peace, the environment
Home, Sweet Home
• Many busy maintaining home and yard
• Some move, but most want to age in place
• One result of aging in place is that many elderly live alone

The Social Convoy
• Social Convoy
  - family, friends, acquaintances, and even strangers who move through life with an individual
  - We travel our life in the company of others
  - Helps maintain sense of identity

Long-Term Marriages
• Spouse buffers many problems of old age
• Married elders generally are
  - healthier
  - wealthier
  - happier
Long-Term Marriages, cont.

- Nature of long-lasting relationships
  - tends to get better over time
  - sharing of accumulated experiences
  - affectionate acceptance of each other's frailties
  - passionate love still exists

Losing a Spouse

- Divorce is rare in late adulthood
- Widowhood is common
- Death of a spouse eventually occurs for half of all older married people
- Adjustment to loss varies depending on sex of surviving partner
- Many widows come to enjoy their independence

Widows

- 4 x as many widows as widowers
- Because women take better care of their health, they live longer than men
- Husband's death is never easy
- Can mean loss of close friend, social circle, income, and status
- Widows do not usually seek another husband
Widowers

- Living without a spouse is more difficult for men
- Widowers often lack social support
- Historical gender differences make adjustment more difficult

Widowers, cont.

- Men tend to become increasingly dependent on wives for social support of all kinds
- After death of spouse, more likely to become ill
- Often find themselves more likely to remarry than widows

Differences in Loneliness

- Men are lonelier than women
- Divorced or widowed are lonelier
- Recent losses heighten loneliness
Friendship
- Most important buffer against loss
- Life satisfaction correlates higher than family
- Older women do more befriending
- Even oldest adjust to changes in social convoy
- Many elderly keep themselves from being socially isolated

Younger Generations
- Typical older adult has many family members of many ages
- As more families have only one child, that child grows up without relatives

Younger Generations, cont.
- Relationships generally positive, but can include tension or conflict
- Mother-daughter relationship is close but also vulnerable
Younger Generations, cont.

- Affection influenced by history of mutual love and respect
- Sons feel strong obligation, while daughters feel stronger affection
- Assistance typically flows from older generation to their children

The Frail Elderly

- Defined as—over 65, physically infirm, very ill, or cognitively impaired
- Unable to perform Activities of Daily life (ADLs)

Increasing Prevalence of Frail Elderly

- No more than 2% of world population
- Reasons
  - more people reach old age
  - medical establishment geared toward death prevention
  - measures that prevent or reduce impairment often unavailable to people with low incomes
Age and Self-Efficacy

- Active drive for autonomy, control, and independence best defense against becoming dependent
- Loss of control invites further weakness
- Both one's attitudes and social structures influence outcomes

Caring for the Frail Elderly

- Most are cared for by relatives
- Toll of home caregiving is heavy
- Caregivers may feel resentful
- Most elder abuse committed by adult children

Elder Abuse

- From direct physical attack to ongoing emotional neglect
- Simplest form is financial abuse
Nursing Homes

- Want to avoid them at all costs
- The worst tend to be for-profit
- Good nursing-home care available for those who can afford it