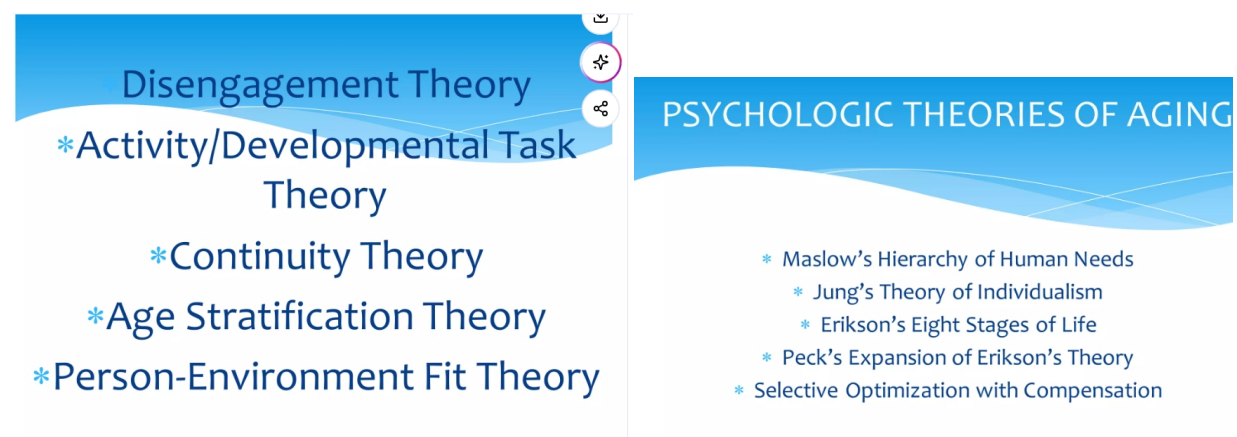


Theories of Aging: Psychosocial Perspective

INTRODUCTION

Aging is not merely a biological process — it also deeply affects a person's **psychological state and social relationships**. Psychosocial theories of aging explain how social, emotional, and cognitive factors influence the experience of growing old, focusing on adaptation, role changes, and life satisfaction. To understand aging holistically, scholars have proposed various **Psychosocial Theories of Aging**, which can be broadly divided into two categories:

1. **Sociological Theories** — Sociological theories of aging examine how social structures, cultural norms, and interpersonal interactions shape the experience of growing older. Rather than viewing aging merely as a biological decline, these frameworks analyze how society defines and responds to older populations.
2. **Psychological Theories** — Psychological theories of aging focus on how the inner mind, personality, emotions, and personal development change as a person grows older. Unlike sociological theories (which look at society and roles), psychological theories look inside the person — their thoughts, feelings, identity, and how they adapt mentally to aging.



PART A: SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF AGING

1. Disengagement Theory — Cumming & Henry (1961)

This is one of the **earliest and most debated** theories of aging. Disengagement Theory explores the aging process through the lens of **social roles and relationships**. It posits that as individuals age, they and society mutually withdraw from **social interactions (roles)** and **responsibilities**. The theory suggests that this process of mutual withdrawal is natural, universal, and functional part of aging.

For the individual, disengagement allows for a **focus on end-of-life reflections** and preparations, while for society, it facilitates a **smooth transition of roles** from older to younger generations, ensuring social stability and continuity.

Example: A retired government officer stops attending office functions, social gatherings reduce, and he spends more time alone at home.

Criticism: This theory is criticized for being too **negative and passive, deterministic and not universally applicable** — it ignores older people who remain highly active and engaged.

2. Activity or Developmental Task Theory

— Havighurst (1961)

This theory is the **direct opposite** of Disengagement Theory. It argues that older people who **remain active and engaged** in meaningful activities **experience greater life satisfaction** and better mental health. Havighurst's Developmental Task Theory of Aging proposes that successful aging involves **mastering specific social and psychological tasks**, such as adjusting to decreasing health, retirement, and death of a spouse. It emphasizes staying active and **replacing lost roles with new ones** to maintain life satisfaction. Participating in meaningful tasks leads to **positive self-concept**.

Key Points:

- Aging well means **replacing lost roles** with new ones
- Social participation leads to positive self-concept
- Activity = happiness and purpose in old age
- Developmental tasks must be achieved at each life stage

Developmental Tasks of Old Age (Havighurst):

- Adjusting to declining physical strength
- Adjusting to retirement and reduced income
- Establishing satisfactory living arrangements
- Adapting to death of spouse
- Affiliating with one's age group

Example: An elderly woman who loses her role as a working professional joins a community kitchen or teaches children in her neighbourhood — she replaces one role with another.

Importance in Social Work: Social workers are encouraged to **facilitate activities and group programs** for elderly clients to promote active aging.

3. Continuity Theory

— Robert Atchley (1989)

Continuity Theory says that as people age, they **continue to maintain the same lifestyles, habits, personalities, and relationships** they had before. They use their past experiences as a foundation for present decisions — so aging becomes a smooth continuation of who they already are. Atchley called continuity a "**grand adaptive strategy**" — meaning it is the main tool older people use to cope with the physical, mental, and social changes that come with aging. Change is adapted in a way that is **consistent with past identity**.

Two Types of Continuity

- **Internal Continuity** → Same personality, same beliefs, same values — the person **continues** to think and feel the same way inside
- **External Continuity** → Same relationships, same social roles, same familiar environments — the person **continues** the same life outside

Example: A person who loved gardening all their life continues gardening even in their 70s. A religious person continues daily prayers even after retirement.

Significance: This theory helps social workers understand why **forced changes** (like shifting elderly people to a new city or institution) can be deeply distressing.

4. Age Stratification Theory

Riley (1972)

This theory is a sociological framework viewing **society as divided into age-based strata or cohorts**. Each **strata** or **cohorts** systematically experience and occupies a different position in society with **different roles, power, and opportunities**. As generations age, they move through these **societal structures**, encountering different societal events and **cohort-specific experiences**. Society separates individuals and assigns **age norms** (e.g., children, adolescents, adults, elderly), with distinct roles and expectations for each. It views aging as a socially constructed process where **age acts as a determinant of social status, affecting behavior and opportunities**.

Example: Fixed retirement at age 60 is a structural lag — many people at 60 are healthy, experienced, and capable, but the system forces them out.

Relevance to Social Work: Helps social workers understand that problems of elderly people are often **structural and systemic**, not just personal — requiring policy-level interventions.

5. Person-Environment Fit Theory

Lawton & Nahemow (1973)

The Person-Environment (P-E) Fit theory of aging, primarily developed by **M. Powell Lawton and Lucille Nahemow**, states that an older adult's well-being and behavior result from the interaction between their **personal competence (physical/cognitive abilities)** and **environmental press (demands of their surroundings)**.

Also called the **Ecological Model / Competence-Press Model**, this theory states that the wellbeing of an older person depends on the **match between their personal competence and the demands of their environment**.

Key Concepts:

- **Competence** = the person's physical, mental, and social ability to cope
- **Environmental Press** = the demands or pressures the environment places on the person
- Best wellbeing occurs when there is **moderate press matching the person's competence**

Situation	Outcome
High competence + Low press	Boredom

Situation	Outcome
Moderate press + Matching competence	Wellbeing ✓
Low competence + High press	Stress, decline ✗

Example: An elderly man with arthritis living in a house with no ramps, high shelves, and no support — high environmental press, low competence = poor fit = poor wellbeing.

Social Work Application: Assess the environment, recommend home modifications, arrange support services, and promote **aging in place** safely.

PART B: PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES OF AGING

1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs

— Abraham Maslow (1943)

Maslow proposed that human needs are arranged in a **pyramid of five levels**, and people are motivated to fulfill lower needs before higher ones. In old age, many of these needs become threatened. Maslow's theory of aging applies the hierarchy of needs to seniors, suggesting that while basic physiological and safety needs (health, housing) remain critical, the elderly can uniquely achieve higher-level self-actualization through wisdom and life experience.

The Five Levels:

1. **Physiological** — food, sleep, health (threatened by illness in old age)
2. **Safety** — security, stability (threatened by financial insecurity, crime fear)
3. **Love & Belonging** — relationships, family (threatened by isolation, death of spouse)
4. **Esteem** — respect, dignity (threatened by loss of roles, ageism)
5. **Self-Actualization** — fulfilling one's potential (achieved through wisdom, legacy)

Relevance: Social workers must assess **which level of need is unmet** for an elderly client and intervene accordingly.

2. Jung's Theory of Individualism

— Carl Jung

Carl Jung viewed aging as a crucial, transformative "afternoon of life" **focused on inward**, psychological growth rather than just physical decline. He argued that after age 40, individuals must shift from external, ego-driven goals (career/family) to finding internal meaning and wholeness through **individuation, shadow integration, and preparing for the final stages of life**. Jung believed that the second half of life (middle to old age) is a time for **turning inward** — focusing on self-discovery, spirituality, and the deeper meaning of life.

Key Points:

- Young adulthood = outward focus (career, family, achievement)
- Old age = inward focus (**individuation** — integrating all parts of the self)
- Older people naturally become more **reflective, spiritual, and philosophical**
- This is a **positive and necessary** process, not a decline

Example: An elderly person who was a busy businessman in youth becomes deeply interested in meditation, writing, or spirituality in old age — this is healthy individuation.

3. Peck's Expansion of Erikson's Theory

— Robert Peck (1968)

Robert Peck expanded Erikson's final stage (stage 8) of psychosocial development (integrity vs. despair) by proposing that adult development, particularly in old age, is defined by **three more specific, critical psychological tasks**. Peck argued that these tasks allow individuals to redefine themselves, move beyond work-centered identity, and **find new meaning in later life**.

Task	Meaning
Ego Differentiation vs. Work Role Preoccupation	Finding self-worth beyond job/career after retirement
Body Transcendence vs. Body Preoccupation	Focusing on mental/social joys despite physical decline
Ego Transcendence vs. Ego Preoccupation	Accepting death peacefully; finding meaning beyond one's own life

Example: A retired teacher who defines himself only by his job will struggle (work role preoccupation). But if he finds joy in his relationships and hobbies, he achieves ego differentiation.

3. Erikson's Eight Stages of Life

— Erik Erikson

Erikson proposed **eight psychosocial stages** of development across the entire lifespan. Each stage has a **central conflict** that must be resolved for healthy development.

The stage most relevant to aging is Stage 8:

Stage 8 — Ego Integrity vs. Despair (Old Age)

- The elderly person **looks back at their life**
- If they feel it was meaningful and well-lived → **Ego Integrity** (peace, wisdom, acceptance)
- If they have deep regrets and feel life was wasted → **Despair** (bitterness, fear of death)

Key Virtue of this stage: *Wisdom*

Example: An elderly woman who raised her children well, served her community, and fulfilled her responsibilities feels a sense of peace and acceptance as she ages — she achieves Ego Integrity.

5. Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC)

— Paul Baltes & Margaret Baltes (1990)

Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC) is a **psychological model of successful aging and adaptation**. It propose that people manage developmental changes by selecting goals, optimizing resources to achieve them, and compensating for lost abilities. It focuses on maximizing gains and minimizing losses, often cited as a key strategy for maintaining well-being in older adulthood. **Three Key Strategies:**

Strategy	Meaning	Example
Selection	Focus on fewer, most important goals	Instead of 10 hobbies, focus on 2 meaningful ones
Optimization	Put more effort and practice into chosen goals	Practice more, use aids, stay consistent
Compensation	Use alternative means when abilities decline	Use a walking stick, hearing aid, written reminders

Famous Example by Baltes: Pianist Arthur Rubinstein in old age — played **fewer pieces** (selection), **practised them more** (optimization), and **slowed tempo before fast parts** to seem faster (compensation).

Social Work Relevance: Encourage elderly clients to **set realistic goals**, build on strengths, and use assistive tools — rather than focusing on loss.

CONCLUSION

The psychosocial theories of aging — both **sociological and psychological** — give us a comprehensive picture of the aging experience. While sociological theories highlight how **society shapes aging** through roles, norms, and environment, psychological theories focus on how **individuals adapt mentally and emotionally** to the changes of old age.