Theories provide conceptual frameworks to guide our thinking and research. There are quite a few numbers of theories that were developed providing the psychosocial perspective for gerontology. In this paper, I am going to discuss activity theory (Havighurst, 1963) and disengagement theory (Cumming and Henry, 1961). First, I am going to briefly describe each of them and then examine their strengths and weaknesses. At last, after critical analyzing the two theories throughout this paper, I will conclude with choosing one of the two theories for my future work with older adults.

Early gerontology theories focused on the way roles are assigned, developed, and changed (Hooyman and Kiyak, 2008). It is a common belief that individual’s activity level decreases as the individual ages. Activity theory posits the idea that activities such as volunteering, participating in faith-based associations can help older adults to adjust and take on age-appropriate replacements for past roles. Therefore, the more active the older adults are, the more stable and positive self-concepts are, which in turn lead to greater life satisfaction and higher morale (Havighurst and Albrecht, 1953). Successful aging is viewed as an extension of middle age as older adults seek to maintain some roles in later life (Hooyman and Kiyak, 2008). Policies and programs during that time emphasized and supported active participation and integration.

Disengagement theory emerged after activity theory (Havighurst and Albrecht, 1953). It posits that the characteristic of the social system should play an important role for aging adults. Moreover, aging adults will withdraw from society and vice versa. Importantly, disengagement theory suggests that withdrawal is inevitable. Positive self-concept can be attained by adjusting to the loss of past roles through mutual withdrawal, so that the society can allow younger
generations to refresh the labor force and prevent disruptions of the society caused by slowing or
death of the older population (Cumming and Henry, 1961).

There are some similarities and differences between activity theory and disengagement
theory. Some of them will be discussed in the context of strengths and weaknesses of the two
theories. In terms of similarities, first, they are both criticized for being too simplistic in using
one variable (activity level/withdrawal level) as the sole consideration to their explanation of
aging (Quadagno and Street, 1996; Hochschild, 1975). Second, they both fail to account for
variability in personality and environmental factors (Covey, 1981; Estes and Associates, 2000).
Lastly, in spite of these shared criticisms, they both served as a theoretical catalyst for more
empirical researches, which is a characteristic of a good theory (Utz, Carr, Nesse, and Wortman,
2002).

After covering some similarities of the two theories, this paper will now focus to the
differences between them. Activity theory, which encourages aging adults to become active,
differs from disengagement theory as this theory encourages older adults to withdraw from the
social and decrease their activity levels. Hence, the two theories have different views on how
aging adults should adjust in order to maintain positive self-concept. Second, while activity
theory views old age as an extension of middle age, disengagement theory views old age as a
separate period of life (Hooyman and Kiyak, 2008). Lastly, it seems that activity theory has had
greater and more long-lasting impact on gerontology than disengagement theory. While
gerontologists do not usually consider disengagement theory nowadays, activity theory is still
impacting the field as an empirical and professional instrument. For example, the Activities of
Daily Living (ADL) is a widely used framework to assess physical competencies and ability to
function independently. ADL is also associated with other constructs such as quality of life (Lawton, Moss, and Duhamel, 1995).

As a volunteer at a senior center, I had a case where a senior just lost her husband and I had to ask my supervisor for advice. He told me to encourage her to come to the senior center and participate in activities and not to make her feel that she is disengaged from the community. Also, he asked me to offer grieve counseling for her. Although I did not know anything about activity theory back then, it worked pretty well for my client (personal experience, 2012). While I was a volunteer at the senior center, I had an opportunity to attend to a conference that was held by the Asian Social Services Association. I learned there is an under usage of local social services in the Asian geriatric population and how it is related to the heighten suicide rate in that population. The host of the conference urged social workers to be actively involved in outreach and encourage seniors to use local social services in order to get them to become active (practice wisdom, 2012).

Based on my critical analysis and different ways of knowing, I would use activity theory over disengagement theory in my future work with older adults for its applicability, despite of its weaknesses in ignoring personality, cultural background and other social influences. My proposition might have been biased by my lack of practical insights and failure to obtain favorable evidence for disengagement theory. Social workers should take those into account regardless of what kind of clients they are interacting with. It is helpful to bear in mind is that activity theory and disengagement theory were published forty to fifty years ago and so as their criticisms. The training of social workers and the field of social work have changed a lot since then, what was applicable back then may not be applicable today. Perhaps, it is interesting to see how critics view these old gerontology theories in today’s context.
References


