

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF AGING FROM PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract : The aging process is of course a biological reality which has its own dynamic, largely beyond human control. However, it is also subject to the constructions on the basis of which each society makes sense of old age. Old age basically is the closing period of life span. There are many theories through which aging processes can be explained and psychological aspect is one of them. The aim of the present study is to highlight aging from psychological perspective through eastern and western theoretical approaches. In this study both classical and modern approaches are adopted. The viewpoints of two dimensions are also different. Classical theories describe the structural aspects of aging, whereas modern theories emphasize on how aged individuals adapt social and personality changes into their core frame of mental structure. Life is basically another name of struggle. From the moment of conception to the end of life the individual has to overcome different shades of psycho-social conflict and it depends on the way how society and culture influence the personality pattern of the individual and also how the individual perceives the world and how he/she finds the meaning of his/her existence. Level of activity and the nature of engagement are the two main dimensions through which one can enjoy the fragrance of successful aging. In modern scenario psychological modification strategies are also found to be prosperous in achieving the goal of well-being for the aged individuals.

Keywords : psycho-social, conflict, phenomenology, successful, personality, intervention

Introduction

The word 'life' is the mirror of the world in terms of both inner and outer aspects. The changes in the world be it objective or subjective, initiates new ripples in the life. The desire to have a life, the incidence of zygotic conceptions — the birth of a child, introduces so many changes in the ontogenic process for the given child that alterations in inner and outer realities are possible to a great extent in any moment. All these imply that a small word like 'life' is not a simple thing at all; it is pregnant with multidimensional facets to indicate or maintain a continuum of its own. The starting point of it is zygote formation in prenatal state, birth in the postnatal process, having its terminating point at death. Nothing is predictable in 'life', but the average functions present a norm. This norm pinpoints major life phases or periods being ornamented by distinct bio-behavioural growth/ developmental processes. Each major period has a landmark, revealing

psychological implications of various sorts. Hence, each deserves special attention and analysis. The focus of the present era is aging, being the second major developmental phase of life, the reason being available in the techno-medico advancements resulting in stretched longevity span. In the second half of life, how 'we,' the human beings of advanced world, are behaving and causing changes in the outer reality, has become a matter of concern to be analyzed and understood properly. Being accustomed with comparatively more negativities than the first half in terms of declined socio-biological and psychological components, what type of psychological problems are endangering our adjustment pattern, has proved to be an important issue in the specific parlance of 'gerontology'.

The Concept of Aging

The aging process is of course a biological reality which has its own dynamic, largely beyond human control. However, it is also subject to the constructions on the basis of which each society makes sense of old age. The age of 60 or 65, roughly equivalent to retirement ages in most developed countries is said to be the beginning of old age. In many parts of the developing world, chronological time has little or no importance in the meaning of old age. Other socially constructed meanings of age are more significant such as the roles assigned to older people; in some cases, it is the loss of roles accompanying the physical decline which is significant in defining old age. Thus, in contrast to the chronological milestones which mark life stages in the developed world, old age in many developing countries is seen to begin at the point when active contribution is no longer possible (Gorman 1999).

Age classification appeared to vary between countries and over time, reflecting, in many instances, social class differences or functional ability related to workforce; but more often than not, it hinted at a reflection of current political and economic situation. Many times the definition is linked to the retirement age, as has been mentioned before. This change in livelihood became the basis for the definition of old age which occurred between the ages of 45 and 55 years for women and between the ages of 55 and 75 years of men (Thane 1978).

While aging impacts on everyone and (virtually) everything in the society, politics and economy, its impact differs greatly by country and by policy-area. Aging is a pervasive phenomenon in that it affects everyone, not only the older parts of the population, and global in that it affects all regions of the world. As a result, aging has important implications for inter-generational, intra-generational and also international equity. The study of aging involves examining it from three perspectives, namely, individual aging, population aging and qualitative changes in ageing (OECD 1996).

As an individual approaches the life's last stage, the future holds a given outlook for many. They are termed as 'senior citizens' and 'chronologically gifted' and are respected for their values and knowledge. Older adults are an important, growing segment of the population. They are the survivors, at their highest level of maturity and thus they have much to teach us regarding their experiences during their turn in society's roles of power and responsibility of leadership. Their angle of acceptance is obvious in this matured age. They are the first to face a number of problems that may have been unrecognized and become dominant social and economic issues of the next half century. They can be the role models in terms of the values and practiced behaviour patterns.

Old age is synonymous with wisdom, values and a host of positive things that are desirable in a community. Changed norms of society can be appraised by them and people may feel accepted and relaxed.

Aging is not an obsession in India, and death itself not so final an event due to the belief in reincarnation. Death is taken in a more philosophical sense and with greater resignation and acceptance of fading away. We should try to help them to be peaceful in terms of having less pain at the end period of their life.

Age, aging and aged are the three words frequently used in gerontological discussion. Sometimes they are used interchangeably; sometimes they are used to argue for theoretical advances. Basically age, aging and aged are neither interchangeable nor mark of theoretical advancement. As work progresses towards a more sophisticated body of knowledge in gerontology, one must recognize that age, aging and aged are indeed three windows into the phenomena in the present concept highlighted in this paper.

Age: Theories about age are the theories about cultural and social phenomena. It has already been mentioned that the connections between the time and life course are variable on a cross-cultural and perhaps on intra-cultural basis. Generations, age classes, and staged life courses based on chronological norms are at least three ways in which age is understood. Each conceptualization has its causes and consequences for the people who define their lives through respective cultural models. Basically, this approach of psycho-gerontology falls within the psychology of age, which studies the age differences in behaviour by comparing groups of different ages in cross-sectional research. Productive research focuses on identifying the causes and consequences of the processes responsible for age-related differences.

Aging: Theories about aging are theories about living. These theories are organized around a life span perspective and life courses. The psychology of aging studies the behavioural patterns of change with age. This integrates both the psychology of age and the aged in longitudinal research. It also includes questions about aging and changes in

health and functionality, changes in participation in the division of labor, changes in family roles, cultural values etc.

Aged: Theories about age are theories of old age. It focuses on the later life, culminating age and aging. It is the realization that lives, life changes and the consequences of how age is understood are all culturally constructed. Historically, with industrialization and urbanization, old age has been defined as a problematic state. Old age is seen not only as a medical and economic problem but also as a social problem, especially in terms of social support and care-giving.

Theories about the aged become relevant for social policy, legislation and political action. In politics and policy there are winners and losers. Thus, any theory about old age must account for the diversity in the cultural contexts in which older adults who are classified as problematic are actually experiencing their old age. The reasons are straightforward: (1) is what we see as problematic really a problem? (2) Is there any strength in the context that can be improved or supported? (3) Are there any weaknesses that can be reduced? (4) Because old age is the culmination of aging, is there any way for preventing the future old from experiencing what is seen as problematic?

Time is not complex; time is elementary. Age, aging and the aged are a complicated part of the human experience because they are subject to cultural interpretations. Culture is always perplexing. As a design for living, culture is central to the way humans comprehend, negotiate and manipulate their natural and social worlds. Culture is not a property of the universe like space or time. Although theoretical unification and parsimony are scientific goals, culture and what happens in time may not be amenable.

Any theory explaining the age, aging and the aged is likely to be multifaceted and eclectic. At the same time, if one is trying to arrive at scientific explanations of age, aging and the aged, theory is an essential ingredient. Explicit theory is a tool that enables us to separate cultural inventions from more general explanations. Explicit hypotheses relating study variables in a specific way not only clarify our thinking about phenomena but lead to the appropriate methods for evaluation of relationships. The cost of relying on implicit theory is to potentially perpetuate 'home grown' cultural models as scientific generalizations.

In order to understand the manifold implications of such stretched life span in direct reality, we need to go through several dimensional achievements in different theoretical framework. Hence, the following fold delves with a detailed sketch of the theoretical perspectives of ageing from psychological perspectives.

Theories of Aging

Researchers in the field of aging have aimed to analyze adult aging and have formulated several theories which aim to explain the complexities embedded in aging process and its related changes.

It may be relevant here to discuss what a theory is. All scientific theories have their origin in observation and are evaluated ultimately in terms of observation. From causal situations in everyday life, from clinical studies and field survey, and from controlled experiments, there gradually emerges a collection of observations. Associated with these observations, is a group of ideas that attempt to interpret these observations. A scientific theory deals with the objects, events or situations that are found in nature and that, as natural phenomena, belong to a particular class as specifiable characteristics. The scope of theory is directly related to range of phenomena encompassed.

In short it can be said that, the psychology of aging studies the regular changes in behaviour after young adulthood (Birren and Renner 1977). Basically, the psychology of aging is grounded in two-stages-of life perspective, development and aging, which are usually described as the two successive processes of change in time, with the transition point or apex at maturity. It also highlighted on an unresolved issue, that is, what changes are typical or normal psychological processes of change in the individual, and what changes are atypical, abnormal or pathological patterns. The boundaries between these phenomena are often indistinct. Sometimes psychological theories of aging are labeled as 'psycho-social'; at other times they are conceived as bio-behavioural, behavioural genetic or neuropsychological, with the emphasis on biological substrate. In either case aging individual falls into the trap of biological and social reductionism. But also within the field of psycho-gerontology there is a question of reductionism, because of the unidirectional emphasis on cognition and information processing, to the neglect of affective and conative processes of change over the life span (Schroots1996).

The following overview illustrates the different viewpoint of psychological theories of aging from ancient period to modern period.

Classical Theories

This theory first appeared in 1941 in an article by Snygg and later was elaborated by Combs and Snygg (1959) which contained the basic notion that human behaviour is best understood in light of his perceptual world. The basic assumption behind this theory is that to understand human behaviour one must understand the individuals' perceptual world. The major idea is that through life experiences and socialization, individuals develop a perceptual framework through which they selectively perceive and interpret the world. Thus different individuals perceive the same phenomenon differently, and respond differently to experiences of retirement, health changes, or death of a spouse. This perceptual framework is developed through a variety of experiences and also as a result of the socialization process which helps the individual in interpreting the world around him. It perhaps becomes apparent that the phenomenological theory is born from the concept of socialization. However, the theory does not consider age as the single

determinant of behaviour. The phenomenological theorists suggest that in order to explain behaviour, one must make use not of age but of the perceptual framework of the individual in question. The age at which a particular event does take place is not considered of any importance by this group of thinkers. Once again, it must be noted that, it is not the event that is important, but the individual's interpretation of the event is considered of greater importance than anything else.

Phenomenological theory mainly emphasizes on the individual's perceptual framework. By doing so, they feel, predicting and explaining individual behaviour becomes easier than before. In many ways, the phenomenological theory seems to be satisfactorily complete because there are few, if any, exceptions. In other theories, researchers consider the majority of the individuals. Phenomenological theory, on the contrary, claims that if one is able to understand a particular individual's perceptual frame, then one can successfully explain and predict behaviour.

Stage theories

These theories suggest that all human beings, no matter where or when they live, move through an orderly progression of different stages in their development. Piaget's (1965) theory of cognitive development and Freud's (1905) stage theory fall under this group. Erikson (1987) proposed that development proceeds through a series of distinct stages, each defined by a specific crisis. This crisis results from the fact that as individuals grow older, they confront new combinations of biological drives and societal demands. The biological drives reflect individual growth and physical change, while the societal demands reflect the expectations and requirements of society for people at different ages. Erikson's perspective of old age relates to the stage of Integrity versus Despair where integrity results from feeling that life was worth-living as it happened, while old people who are dissatisfied with their lives fear death.

Erikson (1987) termed that late adult development chiefly involves the main psycho-social conflict of 'integrity versus despair' where the adult looks back or adopts a retrospective glance towards life in general and evaluates whether his/ her life was a satisfied one, had meaning and was worth it. If the answer is yes, and they feel they have reached many of their goals, they attain a sense of integrity, otherwise they may experience despair. Successful resolution of this crisis can have positive effects on how the person comes to accept his own mortality, and also his/ her physical and psychological health during the final year of life. According to the developmental process, Gould (1987) has stated the stage of later adulthood (classified by stage VI which is from 45-53 years), where the main developmental tasks are settling down, and accepting one's own life. Stage VII ranges from 53-60 years, where the major developmental task involves increasing tolerance, acceptance of past life and decreased negativism to general mellowing. Levinson

(1978) classified middle adulthood (40-60 years) where 50 to 55 years was considered by him to be transition years, and 55-60 years were stated as culmination of middle adulthood. Late-life transition according to him was 60 to 65 years, and 65 years onwards was regarded to be late adulthood. In Levinson's studies where he focused more on adolescence and early adulthood, he stated four major developmental tasks, namely:

- ❑ finding a mentor,
- ❑ developing a career,
- ❑ establishing intimacy and defining a dream of adult accomplishment

Developmental Task/Activity Theory

In 1948 Havighurst said that a developmental task arises at or about a certain period in the life of the individual, successful achievement of which leads to his happiness and success with later tasks, while failure leads to unhappiness of the individual, disapproval by the society, and difficulty with the later tasks. All of these tasks have biological and cultural bases. Havighurst described six developmental stages or age periods in total, each with its own developmental task.

Psycho-social Theory of Personality Development

The developmental task of each age period is to resolve its conflict, which requires the integration of personal needs with the demands of society. Erikson's psycho-social stages of development are not tied closely to specific age periods. This division reflects the increase in psycho-social variability with age: the developmental tasks of an infant are relatively universal, but the tasks in later life are dependent as much on personal experiences as on general principles.

Counterpart Theory

In 1960 Birren presented a general theory of aging as a counterpart of development. The term 'counterpart' is meant to express the idea that there are latent structures of behaviour (emotions, cognition, and motivations) carried forward from earlier experience that interact with present situations. Counterpart theory advocates indirect selection for positive late-life characteristics that embrace a wide range of complex biological (e.g., potential for a long life) and behavioural (e.g., intelligence) characteristics.

Disengagement/Activity Theory

Cumming and Henry theorized in 1961 that this primary mental process produces: (a) a natural and normal withdrawal from social roles and activities and (b) an increasing preoccupation with self and decreasing emotional involvement with others. Although the disengagement theory professes to explain general psychological and social processes of aging, it offers in fact a one-sided view of the aged, given the significant proportion of

older people who do not lose interest in life and do not withdraw from society. Disengagement theory encouraged the development of an opposing theory of the aged, activity theory, which is based on the concept of developmental tasks.

Personality Theory of Age and Aging

Starting in the 1950s, Neugarten (1968) and associates studied the life cycle with two theoretical emphases. The first emphasis is on the timing of transitional events in the lives and roles of individuals. The second emphasis is on the study of personality type as predictor for successful aging. Aging is viewed as a process of adaptation in which personality is the key element. Eight different patterns of aging have been distinguished. The successfully aging individual not only plays an active role in adapting to the biological and social changes that occur with the passage of time, but also in creating patterns of life that will give him or her greatest ego involvement and life satisfaction. Neugarten and Moore (1968) defined three age groups, namely, young adulthood (20's and 30's), middle adulthood (40's and 50's) and senescence (65 and seventy's). Santrock (1985) used the label of early, middle and late adulthood, where late adulthood extends approximately from 60 to 70 years until death. According to him it is a time for adjusting to decreased health and strength and to retirement. Establishing affiliations with members of one's group and adapting to social role are important during this period.

Cognitive Theory of Personality and Aging

In 1970, Thomae described briefly a cognitive theory of the aging personality, one which is intended to integrate various biological, sociological, and interactionist perspectives while at the same time focusing upon the psychodynamics of aging. Central concepts in his theory are those of perception, perceived situation, and perceived self.

Considering the different viewpoints of classical theories, it can be commented that these dimensions of aging basically highlighted on the structural aspects and the social and personality changes that occur during the processes of aging.

Modern Theories

Life-span Development and Aging (Baltes 1987; Baltes, Reese and Lipsitt 1980; Baltes, Smith, and Staudinger 1992): The central focus of this model is on the management of the dynamics between gains and losses, i.e., a general process of adaptation, consisting of three interacting elements. First, there is the element of selection, which refers to an increasing restriction of one's life to fewer domains of functioning because of an age-related loss in the range of adaptive potential. The second element, optimization, reflects the view that people engage in behaviours to enrich and augment their general reserves and to maximize their chosen life courses (and associated forms of behaviour) with regard to quantity and quality. The third element is compensation which results also (like selection) from restrictions

in the range of adaptive potential. It becomes operative when specific behavioural capacities are lost or are reduced below a standard required for adequate functioning.

Contextual Theories

They focus on the developmental process on the basis of the specific response(s) which the individual gets from his environment, i.e., ideas, views and approach towards that age in that particular society or culture that influence the process of development itself. These theories suggest that as life events and conditions may vary from culture to culture and over time, adult development must be viewed against this backdrop of social and historical factors. Under this group falls Neugarten's (1987) theory of ***social age clocks***, or internalized calendars telling individuals when certain events should occur in one's lives and what one should be doing at certain ages. According to Neugarten, these clocks vary greatly depending on the environment, i.e., our occupation, socio-economic status, or the cultural bindings in that particular society. The ***transactional*** view-point comes under the contextual theories where successful ageing is defined as the point of intersection between the developing person and the changing societal context.

Reduced Processing Resources

It has been generally accepted that there is an average age-related decline in cognitive performance. Researchers have advanced several explanations for this phenomenon of aging, but so far only the resource-reduction view has found wide support. In this view, aging leads to a reduction in the quantity of one or more processing resources, such as attention capacity, working memory capacity or speed of processing. According to Salthouse (1985, 1988, 1991) a typical exponent of this view since the eighties suggests that processing resources are characterized by three properties: (1) they are limited in quantity, with a measurable aspect such as quantity or effectiveness of allocation increasing until maturity and then decreasing across the adult years; (2) they enable or enhance cognitive processing so that performance in many cognitive tasks is improved when greater amount of the resources are available; and (3) they are not local or specific in the sense that they are restricted to a small number of highly similar cognitive tasks, but instead are relevant to a broad range of cognitive processes. Salthouse hypothesizes that processing speed may well provide the cornerstone for integrative theories of cognitive aging. It should be noted, however, that the resource-reduction view leaves unanswered the fundamental questions of why the reduction in resources occurs, and how that reduction results in lower levels of cognitive performance (Birren and Fisher 1995).

Personality and Aging

Studies of personality and aging reflect the concept of personality behind them, here defined as the set of characteristic dispositions that determine emotional, interpersonal,

experiential, attitudinal, and motivational styles. Generally speaking, two theoretical traditions can be distinguished in this field, trait and developmental stage models. In both traditions, the central issue concerns the extent and nature of personality stability and change over the life span; or, to put it differently, the extent to which aging processes per se are responsible for personality change (Erikson 1950; Levinson 1978; Costa and McCrae 1988, 1992).

Personality Theory

This is a theory of psychology, which aims to explain certain contradictions noted in the disengagement theory. It can loosely be termed as the personality or psychological theory of aging. Havighurst (1968), one of the major proponents of this theory, holds that disengagement and activity theories are inadequate to explain the process of aging quite successfully. According to him both the theories have inappropriately focused on the amount of activity as the major variable in determining life satisfaction. In Havighurst's opinion different levels of activity need to be ascribed to different personality types for high life satisfaction. For example, the 'recognizers' try to remain middle aged by finding new roles to replace lost roles. In so doing, they maintain high activity as well as high satisfaction levels. Therefore, it can be said that the recognizers support the activity theory but not the disengagement theory. In contrast, the 'disengaged', according to Havighurst, are those who voluntarily give up most of their activities and roles. The group of people seems to enjoy 'rocking chair' approach to life and have low levels of activity but high levels of life-satisfaction. Thus, the disengaged ones support the disengaged theory and contradict the activity theory.

Behavioural Genetics and Aging

Behavioural geneticists of aging are concerned with the extent to which hereditary factors influence age-related changes over the life span of the individual. Here, heritability is defined as a descriptive statistic referring to the portion of observed, phenotypic variation in the population that can be accounted for by genetic differences among individuals; the rest of the variation, the non-genetic portion, is called environmental. Thus, change in heritability over the life span indicates that the relative roles of genetic and environmental influences can change with age in terms of their effects on biological and behavioural difference among individuals in the population (Plomin and McClearn 1990).

Modern theories of aging emphasize on both structural and the functional changes of aging process and how the aged individual perceives or receives these changes in his/her subjective world of mind. Moving our glance from the western perspective, we can also find the same traditional changes in the eastern perspective also.

Psycho-social theories however, help in identifying the degree and the nature of

psycho-social factors associated with change across the adult life course as well as measure the extent of frustration and contentment of these change agents at various stages of the life cycle of the individual. The Indian version of Disengagement theory is known as the 'Ashrama theory' or the notion of the four-stage ideal life course (Bhatia 1983). This cultural version emphasizes the traditional Hindu view of life and delineates four 'Ashrams' or distinct stages or phases of human life and development. The first stage that every individual goes through is the 'Brahmcharya' stage, which is a stage of learning skills and receiving an education and lasts roughly for the first 25 years of life. This stage is followed by the 'Grihasthashram', roughly coinciding with the domestic phase involving performing the duties of a householder as well as raising and maintaining a family, lasting from age 26 to age 50. 'Vanaprastha' represents a stage of gradual withdrawal, with reducing responsibilities and is roughly between 51 and 75 years. The last stage, 'Sanyasa', is one of total renunciation of all attachments and submission of oneself to the pursuit of spiritual freedom. Essentially this stage represents retirement from the mundane and routine activities of life. The third and fourth stages are often combined to represent the present retirement phase of over 65 years. These stages are not rigid or mandatory or even obligatory on the part of any individual, but they have been suggested as a means of ensuring a smoother transition in life and are well known and accepted by the members of the society. This theory however, views social disengagement with regards to age stratification, age based roles and social sanctions. This theory however has been criticized since the amount of disengagement or involvement is now seen more as a function of past life patterns and socio-economic factors rather than being an inherent process (Palmore 1969).

Traditionally, the informal support systems of family, kinship and community are considered strong sources of providing support to the older adults in the society in India. Older adults typically enjoy an 'ascribed' status providing them with authority, wisdom, maturity, prestige and power in the society. In general, in Asian societies, the elderly remain integrated with the family and the community. The older people in urban areas to a large extent still enjoy a fairly high status in their families and are generally well respected by their children. Desai and Naik (1971) reported that the advice of the elderly is usually taken in all family affairs. In addition, recent studies indicate that the attachment between children and their parents as well as the commitment to care of the elderly is an essential element in Indian culture (Ramamurthi and Jamuna 1993). This includes providing emotional, financial as well as socio-cultural support and assistance in varying degrees.

Healthy Aging, Active Aging, Aging with Confidence, Happy Aging are today's concepts of aging. They are considered as the goal of life by the United Nations and the World Health Organization (Bagchi 2003). It implies that if 90 yrs is regarded as the

approximate target terminal age for older persons, in order to keep a person healthy, in spite of the continuing biological decline, healthy ageing has to be objective or slogan. In ancient Indian society aging was considered as a stage of giving up all the worldly pleasures and preparing themselves for the next world. Those were the days when the individual accepted aging as part of the growth. Today aging is contextual and viewed differently by the society and individuals do not want to give up their 'life' during this stage.

Keeping in mind the structural and functional contributions of several theories from eastern and western perspectives, the most significant implications that illuminates our mind is that in the closing period of life span aged individuals have started to establish their identities in a new way. But, unfortunately only a handful are able to reach their goals through meaningful pathways and enjoy their ages as successful. 'Successful aging' or 'graceful aging' basically depends on the way, how individuals with their subjective frame of reference interpret their closing period of life span. Psychological intervention strategies in today's world become one of the most beneficial strategies for reaching towards the goal of well-being in both subjective and objective directions for the aged persons.

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