**Work, Retirement, and Activity**

Coping Challenges for the Elderly

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**INTRODUCTION**

To consider the social development of elderly individuals might seem odd to some, given the more common and stereotypic concern with the deterioration of physical and mental capacities in this group. But, in order to interact effectively within a social environment, one must continue to obtain information, acquire skills, and cultivate dispositions conducive to one's own well-being and to the well-being of those with whom one interacts. Thus, despite the greater visibility of social development during the first few decades of life, individuals of all ages continue to develop.

In addition to providing information about the functioning of older people in their work, retirement, and activities, in this chapter we will comment on myths about growing older, examine hypotheses about retirement and adjustment, and discuss a life events and coping perspective on optimizing adjustment during the later years.

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Demographic Change

The importance of a discussion on the social development of the elderly is a function of the familiar demographics: the group of individuals aged 65 and older is the most rapidly growing segment of the population in the United States. Such profound growth will affect the functioning of government, industry, medical and educational institutions, and families. Virtually every dimension of society will feel the effects of increased numbers of elderly individuals, many of whom will function relatively well as they reach their 80s, 90s, and 100s. Perhaps the most dramatic shift will be experienced by the aging individuals themselves. Although the elderly are not a homogeneous group—due, in part, to the wide diversity among older cohorts—they will probably continue to experience expanding political power and have a greater impact on society. Their perceived influence will no doubt shape their own attitudes, and those of younger individuals, about the possibilities for participation in society's roles and activities.

Disengagement versus Participation

In 1961, researchers reporting findings from a Kansas City study of adult life developed an influential theory of aging (Cumming & Henry, 1961). Their "disengagement theory" described normal aging as an inevitable withdrawal from many of one's social systems. The theory, described as "provisional," held that as individuals age, their participation with others diminishes. Such disengagement supposedly leads to a new equilibrium characterized by a social network with fewer connections to others. Relinquishment of some of one's roles might be initiated by the individual, by members of groups to which one belongs, or by both. The theory allows, however, that a person may remain relatively close to individuals in some groups while withdrawing more completely from others. The originators of the theory also stated that increased preoccupation with oneself often accompanies disengagement.

A theory, per se, implies an accumulation of a set of cohesive findings or facts that explain some phenomenon. The phenomenon addressed in the disengagement theory was the apparently (in the sample studied) universal social withdrawal of aging individuals—disengagement. This was the behavior that was to be explained. The theoretical portion of the disengagement theory can be summarized as an explanation: Aging individuals disengage because this is the normal, gradual progression that eventually ends in death. In other words, disengagement as one ages is appropriate for the human species (i.e., it is biologically determined). Increased self-preoccupation could simply indicate that one is attempting to make peace with oneself or to derive meaning from one's life. According to this theory (that disengagement characterizes normal, healthy aging), successful aging would be distinguished by sufficient disengagement, and, excessive reluctance or failure to disengage would lead to decreased morale, and, presumably, to maladjustment or illness.

The disengagement theory was criticized after publication of Growing Old: The Process of Disengagement (Cumming & Henry, 1961) as untestable (Hochschild, 1975). It also seemed to run counter to theories of psychological adjustment and evidence suggesting that ample social support and participation with others are