Gero-transcendence:
A reformulation of the disengagement theory

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ABSTRACT. This article offers a meta-theoretical reformulation of the disengagement theory. It is argued that what social gerontologists describe in negative terms and label “disengagement” is in reality often a positive development towards gero-transcendence. This latter can be described as a shift in meta-perspective from a materialistic and rational view to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally followed by an increase in life satisfaction. To understand the nature of gero-transcendence gerontologists have to make a meta-theoretical shift from a traditional positivist view to a view where disengagement is phenomenologically comprehended. As the article includes some criticism of interactionist-based social gerontology, it should be mentioned that the author himself has been and is working within this theoretical tradition. The article is as much self-criticism as anything else.

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When Cumming et al. (1) first published their tentative theory of aging, followed by an elaboration (2), the theoretical discussions turned into something like a riot. The theory assumed that there is an intrinsic tendency to disengage and withdraw when growing old, which supposedly goes hand in hand with the tendency of society to reject aging individuals. The individual gradually cuts his/her bonds with society and, to an increasing extent, turns inwards. This two-way process is, both for the individual and society, inevitable and functional. As a preparation for death the individual and society gradually disengage themselves from one another. This is not caused by dissatisfaction or mental problems on the part of the individual. On the contrary, since disengagement is a natural process, it is associated with satisfaction and inner harmony. According to this theory, disengagement is a culture free concept, but its expression is invariably culture bound.

In principle, the theory generated three types of hypotheses. The first states that all societies, in one way or the other, push the aging individual aside. The second hypothesis states that the individual, motivated by intrinsic forces, disengages himself from society. This individual disengagement is both social and psychological. Socially it refers to the reduction in interaction, that is the diminished participation in social roles and the amount of time spent in each of these. Psychological disengagement refers to the reduction of one’s ego involvement, interest and emotional involvement in other people and society as such and, in its place, a turning inwards. The third hypothesis assumes that, despite social and psychological disengagement, the individual continues to experience a high degree of life satisfaction, happiness and contentment. At the same time it indirectly implies a decrease in satisfaction if the natural process of disengagement is violated and old people are stimulated in

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some way. Thus, the main premise of the theory of activity, according to which activity leads to satisfaction and contentment, was disputed by this new theory of disengagement.

The theory of disengagement did not only run counter to the widely accepted theory of activity but also to the personal values held by many gerontologists and their wishes of what reality ought to be like. Entering the field with a mixed humanistic and scientific approach, many gerontologists held that old people are treated badly and wanted to study this phenomenon scientifically. It is not surprising that the theory of disengagement was thus perceived as threatening and uninviting. From a humanistic point of view, the word itself has negative overtones. Consequently, much time and effort were spent during the 1960's and 1970's to refute or modify the theory theoretically and empirically.

A series of modifying or alternative explanations to the empirically observable pattern of disengagement was offered. The theory in its original form was apparently unacceptable. Moreover, empirical data did not sufficiently support the theory (which was also the problem with the theory of activity). Cumming (3) herself qualified it by stating that the process of disengagement is somewhat different for different personality types.

All three hypotheses mentioned above have been the object of research for many gerontologists. Everyone seems to agree with the statement that Western societies reject old people. This agreement is also the only support for the disengagement theory. The second hypothesis, which states that the individual disengages himself socially and psychologically, is dismissed by almost every gerontologist. Most gerontologists agree that individual disengagement is non-existent, and even if it does exist, it is dependent on something other than an intrinsic drive to disengage (4-9).

Many gerontologists have been particularly interested in testing the third hypothesis and finding the causes of life satisfaction and contentment in old age, whether they may be activity, disengagement or something else. Lowenthal & Boler (10) argue than the lack of sufficient support for the hypothesis that activity leads to well-being and contentment must be understood in terms of deprivation. A voluntary reduction of the social network and social engagement differs from an involuntary one. Havens (11) gives prominence to the continuity of life patterns as the cause of life satisfaction and contentment in old age; the important thing is neither activity nor disengagement but continuity. Tissue (12) presents ideas similar to those of Lowenthal. The cause of dissatisfaction is the discrepancy between the social network the individual has created and the one he/she would like to have. Lowenthal & Haven (13) point to the fact that research usually fails to distinguish between the quantitative and qualitative aspects of social interaction. If the quantity of social interaction is measured, there are only weak correlations between interaction and satisfaction.

Most recently, social gerontology was supported by a new model which completely reduced the disengagement pattern to social psychology. Taking their idea from a model formulated by Zusman (14), Kuypers & Bengtson (15) introduced the concept of a social break-down syndrome. Zusman’s model described the process in which the individual’s social environment interacts with his/her self-perception in the production of a negative spiral resulting in a social breakdown. Kuypers & Bengtson transferred the model to social gerontology and presented at the same time a model of social reconstruction which described how the negative disengagement pattern could be broken. The original disengagement theory thus received its coup de grace and no self-respecting gerontologist could safely defend it.

It would almost seem that the defeat of the disengagement theory was insured by an almost “religious” conviction of its incorrectness. This emotional vindication of the incorrectness of the theory could be compared to that of other “isms” (communism, protestantism, racism, etc), and often, after some time, devotion to the “ism” veils the reality. This possibility in particular made us curious to take a new look at the theory utilizing a new meta-theoretical perspective.

This curiosity was sustained by some indications suggesting that certain theoretical aspects of the disengagement theory might have been overlooked. One such “unscientific” indication was a personal conversation with the deceased.