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Old People Living in a Dementia Care Home

People with dementia living in long-term care facilities are often not involved in meaningful daily activities. This review investigated whether providing activities personalized to each person's interests and preferences improves their quality of life and reduces agitation. It updates a previous review from 2018.

Mohler et al. (2023) conducted a research on relevant studies published up to June 2022. They included randomized and controlled trials that compared personalized activity programs to usual care or non personalized activities. In these interventions, staff first assessed each participant's current or past interests to create an individual activity plan. The review focused on effects on agitation and quality of life. Eleven studies involving 1,071 participants were included. Most participants were between 78–88 years old and had moderate to severe dementia. There is low-certainty evidence that personalized activities may slightly reduce agitation. However the effect was small and not consistent across all studies. Based on low certainty evidence, personalized activities likely result in little to no improvement in quality of life when rated by care staff. Self reported quality of life data was very limited. The activities probably have little to no effect on reducing negative moods, and it remains unclear whether they improve positive mood, engagement, or sleep. However, any benefits appeared to last only while the activities were being actively provided. This assignment will adopt two psychological theories that are relevant to addressing adults with dementia.

Erik Erikson's Theory

This research examines the relevance of Erik Erikson's theory of adult development to the study of aging, with particular focus on his final life stage, the conflict between "integrity" and "despair." Erikson's model proposes a continuous, upward trajectory of growth that ideally culminates in old age with the attainment of integrity and wisdom. In this way, his theory has supported a gerontological perspective that seeks to ascribe meaning and dignity to later life.

However the model faces criticism. Empirical evidence for distinct, sequential stages in adulthood is limited, and the claim that integrity is a necessary marker of successful aging remains questionable. Despite these issues, Erikson's framework offers a valuable counter narrative to purely decline oriented views of aging by emphasizing purpose and continuity. Rather than treating Erikson's stages of identity, intimacy, generativity, and integrity as fixed developmental milestones, the paper suggests it may be more useful to view them as recurring narrative themes. These themes continually shape adult identity and character, and are negotiated, expressed, and revisited in various ways across the lifespan, including into late life (Gilleard, 2020).

Erik Erikson's Theory in Development to Adult Age 65 Years Old

Erikson's widely accepted theory proposes eight sequential stages of development across the lifespan, where outcomes in earlier stages influence success in later ones. The central task for older adults is to achieve "ego integrity," which involves accepting one's life as meaningful, as opposed to feeling despair. This final outlook is critically linked to an

individual's attitude toward death. To test this developmental continuity, researchers conducted a study with 292 participants aged 65 to 90. They assessed psychosocial development using the Inventory of Psychosocial Balance. The data were analyzed to examine the direct and indirect relationships between the first seven life stages and the final eighth stage.

The key finding was that all eight stages were significantly interconnected. Notably, the seventh stage of generativity versus stagnation (the adult concern for guiding the next generation) showed the strongest correlation ($r = 0.77$) with the achievement of ego integrity in old age. Path analysis further revealed that this stage had the greatest direct impact (a path coefficient of 0.89) on the eighth stage, indicating that the developmental tasks of adulthood have a particularly powerful influence on late life psychological adjustment (Chen et al., 2021).

Potential Challenges

Professionals applying Erikson's theory of integrity versus despair in old age face key challenges. These include navigating the tension between viewing integrity as a final achievement versus an ongoing internal dialogue, and overcoming practical barriers in care settings like reliance on staff proxy reports and systemic constraints (Zábranský, 2023).

Effective strategies involve shifting from a rigid stage model to a flexible, narrative approach. This includes facilitating life review as a dialogical process, actively creating opportunities for generativity, and advocating for person-centered care models that support continuous meaning-making for older adults.

John Bowlby Theory

This study investigated the connection between attachment styles and depression in older adults, focusing on how cognitive and social factors influence this relationship within a Pakistani community. While the link between insecure adult attachment and depression in the elderly is well known, the specific pathways are less understood. This research examined whether cognitive reappraisal (the ability to reframe negative thoughts) acts as a mediator and whether social connectedness acts as a moderator in this dynamic. Using a sample of 400 community dwelling parents aged 60 and above in Rawalpindi, researchers conducted interviews with standardized scales measuring attachment, emotion regulation, social networks, and depression.

The study concludes that attachment orientations are important predictors of depression in older parents. It highlights cognitive reappraisal and social connectedness as key protective factors. For clinicians, these findings suggest that interventions aimed at reducing depression in elderly community populations should incorporate techniques to improve cognitive flexibility and strengthen social bonds, tailored to an individual's specific attachment style (Ul Hassan, Jilani and Zubair, 2023).

Finding a Balance Between Integrity and Despair: A Challenging Task for Older Adults in Residential Care

This study examines how older adults navigate the central developmental challenge of late life, the conflict between achieving a sense of ego integrity and falling into despair within the demanding environment of a nursing home. While Erikson theorized this as a dynamic psychological process, little research has explored how frail older adults manage it over time in long-term care settings.

To address this, researchers adopted a person-centered, longitudinal approach. They conducted structured interviews with 327 nursing home residents at three time points, spaced six months apart, to track changes. Using advanced typological analysis, they identified distinct and evolving profiles based on residents' reported levels of integrity and despair. Each profile was strongly linked to a unique pattern of psychological well-being over time. The Integrated group showed the most favorable outcomes, with fewer depressive symptoms, higher life satisfaction, and more stable subjective health. The Despairing group displayed the poorest functioning.

The study concludes that effective long-term care must actively incorporate and support these developmental psychological processes, rather than focusing solely on physical needs (Dezutter, Toussaint and Dewitte, 2019).

Applying Bowlby's Attachment Theory in Old Age: Challenges and Strategies for Professionals

Applying Bowlby's Attachment Theory to older adults requires professionals to adapt its core principles to the unique context of late life. A central challenge is the retrospective assessment of an individual's lifelong attachment patterns, as these must be understood through their narrative and current behaviours rather than through childhood observation (Bowlby, 1988).

Professionals must also interpret how cognitive and physical decline can manifest in ways that reflect attachment needs, such as agitation during separations or resistance to unfamiliar caregivers, which are efforts to maintain proximity to a safe haven. To manage these challenges, a key strategy is for the professional to consciously become a temporary secure base, offering predictability, empathy, and reliability to mitigate fears of abandonment. Interventions should focus on providing a consistent "holding environment" that supports the older adult's need for safety, while also helping them and their families navigate caregiving within an attachment framework that acknowledges these fundamental relational needs (Bowlby, 1988).

Conclusion

This review synthesizes the complex intersection of dementia care, psychological development and attachment in late life, revealing a critical need for holistic, person-centered interventions. The evidence on personalized activities within dementia care homes presents a nuanced picture, while such activities may slightly reduce agitation, their effect on quality of life, mood and engagement is limited and benefits appear contingent on active provision. This highlights that while tailored engagement is a valuable tool, it is insufficient on its own to foster profound well-being in long-term care settings.

The deeper layer is illuminated by developmental and relational psychology. Erikson's theory, particularly the final stage of integrity versus despair, provides a crucial framework.

Research suggests that the struggle for ego integrity, the acceptance of one's life as meaningful, remains a pivotal developmental task for nursing home residents, profoundly linked to their psychological health over time. Furthermore, the ability to achieve integrity is significantly influenced by success in the preceding adult stage of generativity versus stagnation. This underscores the importance of creating opportunities for older adults, including those with dementia, to engage in meaningful generative roles and to undertake life review, shifting from viewing integrity as a static achievement to a continuous narrative process. Simultaneously, Bowlby's attachment theory explains how core relational needs persist into old age. Insecure attachment styles are significant predictors of depression, with cognitive reappraisal and social connectedness acting as key protective pathways. The care environment itself must therefore function as a "secure base," with professionals providing consistency and empathy to mitigate fears of abandonment and meet fundamental attachment needs.

In conclusion, truly effective dementia care must integrate these perspectives. It requires moving beyond basic activity provision to create a therapeutic environment that actively supports the ongoing developmental task of achieving integrity, facilitates generativity, and consistently meets attachment needs. Future interventions and care models should be designed not just to manage symptoms, but to foster meaning, continuity, and security, thereby addressing the profound psychological and relational dimensions of aging in care.

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