Gerontology - Defined
What is Old?
Social Support - Introduction

January 24, 2006

What is Gerontology?

Gerontology is the multidisciplinary study of aging processes and individuals in middle adulthood through late adulthood
- Study biological, psychological, and sociological processes
- Study societal-level changes (policy, media, etc.)
- Use findings to create and change policy and programs for older adults.
- Considers positive and negative aspects of aging (e.g., successful aging)

Conversely

Geriatrics is the study of
- Health and disease in later life
- Concerned with the health care of older adults and their caregivers
### Part I: What is Old?

- How do we know whether or not someone is old?

### Defining an Older Adult

- **Chronological Age**
  - Def – Age you are in years from birth
  - The most basic and widely used determinant of an ‘older adult’
  - Age 65 to get Social Security, Age 50 to be a member of AARP
  - Often break down into sub-groups
    - Young-old (65-74)
    - Middle-old (75-84)
    - Old-old (85 or older)
  - Problems with this definition
    - People who are the same chronological age may be VERY different functionally, socially, and psychologically, etc.

- **Functional Age**
- **Biological Age**
- **Social Age**
- **Psychological Age**
Chronological Age

Age 60
Age 68
Age 68

Functional Age

- **Def:** Age based on what physical activities an older adult can do on a day-to-day basis.
- **Ex:** Get around in the community, bath, dress, prepare meals, handle finances, use the phone, etc.

Biological Age

- **Def:** Changes in the structure and functioning of the human organism through time
- **Affected by genetics and environment**
- **Ex:** Cataracts, type 2 diabetes, reaction time, grip strength, skin elasticity, etc.
Social Age

- What are considered “normal” social roles for an older adult?
- Social age for an older adult might be determined by the taking on or relinquishing of culturally acceptable social roles for older adults.

Psychological Age

- The behavioral capacities people use to adapt to changing environmental demands
  - Memory, motivation, learning ability, adaptation and coping with daily stressors, etc, maturity.

Defining What is Old…

- Changes over time due to:
  - Shifts in cultural and political perspectives of aging
  - Technological advances (plastic surgery, bifocals, etc.)
Part II: Social Support Theories

- Defined: “A network of relatives, friends, and organizations that provides both emotional support and instrumental support (p. 178)”
  - Emotional Support – who do you count on to love and comfort you in a time of need?
  - Instrumental Support – who do you count on to provide help around the house, transportation, etc. in a time of need?

Who is in your Social Support Network?

The Social Convoy Model – Activity

1. **Inner Circle** –
   - Persons to whom you feel very close to, so close it would be hard to imagine life without them.

2. **Middle Circle** –
   - Persons to whom you feel close, but not quite as close compared to those in the inner circle.

3. **Outer Circle** –
   - Persons to whom you feel less close, but still are important.

Social Support Network

- **Quantity vs. Quality of your Network**
  - **Quantity** – How many in network? How close do they live? How often do you see or talk with network members?
  - **Quality** – How much do you agree or disagree that network member X is (a) there for me with I need them, (b) makes me feel better when I’m feeling down, etc.
- **Change over time (temporal)**
- **Research has found that in terms of mental health - quality matters more than quantity**
Socio-emotional Selectivity Theory (SST; Carstensen, 1992)

- As we get older (or ‘our time’ left in life is viewed as limited),
  - Our interactions with acquaintances and close friends decrease
  - Our interactions with spouses, siblings, and parents increase
  - Our emotional closeness (quality) with family and friends increase

Socio-emotional Selectivity Theory (SST; Carstensen, 1992)

- In young adulthood, relationships with a wide range of people. Goals focused on gaining information, form casual relationships.
- As grow older, strategically choose social networks to maximize social and emotional goals.
- Thus, a decrease in the number of social contacts across the lifespan; as we start to choose who we want to have relationships with.

Gender Differences in Social Support

- Throughout the lifespan, women are more likely to have a larger social support network than men.
  - Benefit: More individuals to rely on for emotional and instrumental support. Research has linked to less illness and longevity.
  - Downfall: Women are more ‘sensitive’ to the negative interactions that occur in the social support network. Thus, if the relations are ‘unhealthy’, it will drastically affect women, less so for men.
Go over assignment #1