

POPULATION AGEING: SOME THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Population ageing is an inevitable consequence of the process of demographic transition. It has become almost a universal phenomenon in the contemporary world. It essentially means a continuous increase in the proportion of aged (60+ population) in the total population. Population ageing is multidimensional in nature that is supposed to have multifarious implications for all aspects of human lives. The study of population ageing has given birth to an altogether new discipline named gerontology that is grounded on strong theoretical perspectives. Many of such theories consider an elderly as an individual and some as members of the broader society and highlights on their behaviour accordingly. This article is an attempt to provide an insight into such theories with a purpose to develop a better understanding of the process of population ageing particularly its social aspects.

Key Words: Population ageing, demographic transition, theoretical perspectives, social breakdown syndrome, social stratification.

Introduction

Population ageing is an inevitable consequence of the process of *demographic transition* in which fertility and mortality rates are the major players. Fertility and mortality rates in turn, are associated with the economic development of any society. This linkage is essentially portrayed by the **demographic transition** model.

Back in 1989, it was predicted by sociologist and demographer, **Alfred Sauvy** that 21st century shall be the century of the ageing for humans. Hence, population ageing is almost a universal phenomenon in the contemporary world. The French demographer **Jean Deric** who may be regarded as one of the pioneers in the study of population ageing, defined this

phenomenon as a process of continuous increase in the percentage of aged (60+ population) in the total population.

The process of population ageing is supposed to have multifarious implications not only for demographics but also for the society at large, the economy, polity, culture, health as well as public administration. According to the **International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, 1968** the multidimensional nature of population ageing necessarily implies that ageing may be of *three* types:

- *Biological*, referring to the anatomical and physical changes that occur with age.
- *Psychological*, meaning the general decline in the mental abilities with old age; and,
- *Social*, that includes the changes in the situations encountered by an individual as member of different social units.

From the point of view of the social scientists, the latter two aspects of population ageing holds great significance. The multidimensional aspects of the phenomenon of population ageing now forms the subject matter of an altogether new and separate branch of knowledge that is known as *gerontology*. The word is derived from the Greek words '*geras*' meaning old age and '*logos*' meaning to study.

The Theoretical Perspectives on Population Ageing

The study of population ageing of humans as a process (social) is grounded on some very strong theoretical framework that also provides linkage with some of the major sociological theories since humans are essentially social beings. Such theories may be categorized under *three* broad heads:

- The *functionalist theories* that includes the disengagement, activity and continuity theories.
- The *conflict theories* of ageing refer to the exchange, modernization and age stratification theories; and,
- The *symbolic interactionist theories* of ageing comprise of the subculture and selective optimization and compensation theories.

The **disengagement theory** propounded by **Cumming** and **Henry** in **1961** provides one of the earliest theoretical perspectives to the study of population ageing. This theory is widely used by the gerontologists. The disengagement theory assumes that, independent of other factors such as poor health and poverty, ageing involves gradual but inevitable disengagement, that is, withdrawal of interaction between any individual and his/her social arena.

The **activity theory** developed by **Robert J. Havighurst**, around the same time that is **1961** however, contradicts the disengagement theory. The activity theory suggests that social interaction and social participation greatly acts to augment the morale of an individual. Successful and healthy ageing can only be experienced in re-engagement of older persons in meaningful social roles.

The **selective optimization and compensation theory** proposed by **Baltes** and **Baltes** in **1990** provides a more positive outlook to the disengagement theory. This theory explains that as the energy level of an individual decreases with age, personal goals of an individual may be selected in a way to optimize the output of the efforts given to certain activities such that the losses of wider social, economic and physical goals of the previous life stages may be compensated. In other words, elderly people can reserve their time and energy for the most important and purposeful activities.

While the above theories related to population ageing are from the perspective of the broader society, there are other theories that follow an individualistic approach. One such theory is the **exchange theory** developed by **Dowd** in **1975**. According to this theory, lives of elderly people are often disadvantaged in modern societies since they possess lesser power and status as compared to the younger people.

Akin to the exchange theory is **Cowgill** and **Holmes'** **modernization theory** developed in **1972**. This theory is based on *four* key components namely, economic and industrial technology, urbanization and education. The modernization theory hypothesizes the fact that the role and status of the elderly in any society shares an inverse relationship with the degree of modernization of that society.

The underlying essence of the exchange theory and the modernization theory is that the status of the aged people in modern societies tends to minimize due to the decline in their economic productivity with age. This may create what is known as **social breakdown syndrome** among the elderly people. This concept is basically derived from the discipline of psychology according to which, the individual's ability to interact with the society and perform roles as its member largely depends on the kind of social labelling and values that individuals experience with the process of ageing.

In contrast to the exchange and modernization theories, the **continuity theory** of **Robert Atchley** that was developed in **1971** is based on the fact that irrespective of age, any individual may retain all aspects of their personality.

Apart from the above theoretical perspectives related to the ageing process, there are certain theories that regard age as a criterion of social stratification such as the **subculture theory** of **Arnold Rose**. This theory formulated in **1965**, is based on the presumption that as people grow old, they increasingly interact with other old people and in the process, gradually develop a subculture or subgroup within the larger society. Subsequently, they begin to recognize their common interests in relation to other age groups. This theory however, may be negated by the '*class*' factor.

The **deculturation theory** found in the works of **Anderson** in **1972** is closely linked with the subculture theory. This theory proposes that as older people develop their own range of functions, they gradually start behaving outside the prevalent traditions followed by the rest of the population.

However, while the subculture and deculturation theories accords a distinct identity to the aged population within the large societal framework, at the opposite end of the scale is the concept of **aged as a minority group** found in the works of **Milton Barron** as early as in **1953** that minimizes the aged into marginalized and minority groups facing discrimination within the society.

The most prominent of the theories considering age as a criterion of social stratification is the **age stratification theory**. According to this theory, age is a social class and any society may

be arranged into different age strata that is composed of different age cohorts, that is, people born during the same period of time.

Conclusion

The different theories associated with population ageing finds relevance at the different societal levels, be it at the individual level considering an individual as a basic social unit or at the larger societal level. However, though the relevance of these theories may be variable within the space-time framework, nonetheless, they provide strong theoretical base to the study of population ageing. Most importantly, they enable us to identify the *inequalities* that may arise among the elderly population just because they are old, a process that is popularly known as *ageism*. Once such inequalities are identified, necessary efforts may be initiated to resolve them.

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