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# Scenario: Social Involvement and Aging

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Aging individuals experience many changes in their social environment. Many of these changes are not initiated by these individuals themselves, such as retirement, relocations, death of their partner. Some of these changes, however, may be the outcome of purposeful decisions, such as becoming a member of the local society of retirees, early retirement or ending a personal relationship (Carstensen 1992). Other changes are decided by the social environment, e.g. retreating from formal positions such as the chair of the local sports club. These examples just demonstrate that social involvement is still continuously changing among people sixty years and older. In the final chapter of the volume 'Living Arrangements and social networks of older adults' (1995), Knipscheer and Dykstra conclude that changes in social involvement by age seem to be the outcome of a process of loss as well as of selective withdrawal.

The study of changes in social involvement is the main focus of the LASA-scenario on social functioning for the next years. Two main areas are distinguished: changes in the social networks over a period of 4 to 7 years and changes in social participation in societal institutions and organisations over the same period.

The scenario proceeds along the following steps. First, changes in social involvement will be described. Second, changes in social involvement will be related to changes in emotional, cognitive and physical functioning. Third, two theoretical models will be applied, to see to what extent they contribute to understanding changes in social involvement. The first model starts from the environment docility hypothesis of Lawton (1980) and the second model uses the 'selective optimization and compensation' approach introduced by Baltes and Baltes (1988). Both models are yet to be tested empirically by developing and testing specific hypotheses. If they are supported by data, they may offer opportunities for policy measures in the promotion of successful aging.

## **Description of changes in social involvement**

From the social point of view it is important to stress that aging is not an individual affair. Not only does aging happen in a social context (which also provides structural and cultural definitions of the aging phenomenon), but also are changes in an individual's social context (e.g. losing one's parents or partner) implied in the aging process itself.

### *Change in social networks*

Most publications on changes in social networks among older people that have appeared during the past decade present a descriptive approach, sometimes based on longitudinal data, sometimes on cross-sectional data. The findings from these studies are often contradictory. Part of these contradictions can be traced back to a number of methodological limitations and problems (Starker et al. 1993). Also, many studies relate life events to changes in social networks and in well-being.

Description of the changes in social networks in the LASA study provides not only the opportunity to compare findings, but also to sort out the contradictory findings in earlier studies. Further examination may address how the changes in social networks are related to changes in well-being, in social participation and to recent and/or earlier life events. Also, analysis of LASA data may focus on specific types of social networks, e.g. small networks, family focused networks, 'vulnerable' networks, etcetera.

### *Change in social participation*

Cross-sectional data on age differences in social participation among older age groups have been available since decades. Many of these kind of data have been used to check hypotheses derived from disengagement theory, activity theory and continuity theory. However, longitudinal data in order to check whether these differences are aging-related or cohort-related are scarcely available.

Description of the changes in social participation over time will be a first step in the analysis of LASA-data. More interesting, however, is the question to what extent changes are related to specific life events, e.g. retirement, loss of partner, hip fracture. Changes in social participation concern, amongst others, increases or decreases in the amount of involvement in clubs or organizations, shifts in types of activity within clubs or organizations, and shifts in type of clubs or organizations one is involved in

### **Changing social involvement in relation to emotional, cognitive and physical aging**

Trajectories of aging are complex processes of changes in interrelated dimensions of aging. Given the exploration of changes in the social networks, one of the next questions will be how these changes are related to changes in the other dimensions of cognitive, emotional and physical functioning or the other way around, to what extent changes in social networks are the outcome of changes in the other dimensions.

To establish causal connections, three or more data collection cycles should be available. Nevertheless, several procedures allow to check possible causal connections and to control for intervening variables, using only two observations. An ongoing study explores to what extent social involvement promotes cognitive functioning, or at least prevents a decline in cognitive functioning.

### **Theoretical models**

In order to understand changes in social networks among aging people it is important to look for mechanisms which do not focus only on the loss of relationships in the social network but imply an open approach to the dynamics of changes in social networks. Two theoretical models seem to offer such a dynamic approach.

#### *The person-environment fit model*

The environmental psychology of later life was first introduced as a congruency model (Lawton 1980). The original aim was to provide physical environments that are congruent with the needs and capabilities of the older person. Older people with severe problems in activities of daily living (ADL) feel better in an easily accessible place. The general notion is that an older person's functioning is maintained at an optimal level when the environmental context fits to his/her capacities. 'Environmental demands' should fit the individual competence. As soon as 'environmental press' exceeds the individual capabilities, these individuals will find it hard to maintain independence and will feel uncomfortable.

Two extensions of the early model are important, and each of them makes it more dynamic. First, apart from the original focus on the physical environment other environmental dimensions have been suggested in the same model: e.g. the personal environment (social network of personal relationships), or the social environment (social geographic area, regional culture etc.). For example, changes in social net-

works may call for a change in individual aspirations, or changes in mobility may call for changes in social interaction within the social network.

Second, given the rather mechanic notion of 'fit' between individual competence and environmental demands, in his later works Lawton introduced a 'proactive' dimension to his model. Those individuals who do not resign in incongruity between person and environment have the opportunity to change either of the two. For example, a woman confronted with severe ADL problems may change her living environment and move to a residential home, change the facilities in her house, or adapt her physical functioning (by training new functions) in order to upgrade her physical competence. Another example: those who stop working may just wait for what comes up, may demonstrate a kind of retreat, or may take initiatives for new ways of social participation. In each example, of the different strategies to cope with the new situation, the last one is not the most comfortable but in any case the most challenging, and this one is expected to enhance well-being most. Thus, the 'proactive' coping strategy is expected to produce the most positive outcome.

#### *Selective optimization and compensation*

Baltes and Carstensen (1996: 397) state: 'This model is a meta-model that attempts to represent scientific knowledge about the nature of development and aging with the focus on successful adaptation. The model takes gains and losses jointly into account, pays attention to the great heterogeneity in aging and successful aging, and views successful mastery of goals in the face of losses endemic to advanced age as the result of the interplay of three processes, selection, compensation and optimization.'

Based on the premise of a dynamic interplay between restriction and progress, this model states that restriction or loss generates new forms of control or progress. In other words, the number of activities is restricted ('selection') in order that older individuals continue to be able to carry out a smaller number of activities in a satisfactory way ('optimization'). Older individuals have a latent reserve capacity, which enables them to find new ways to function normally ('compensation') in the areas they selected.

It remains to be seen to what extent the two models presented are overlapping and open the way to comparable questions. Both address adaptation processes, looking at gains and losses of aging individuals.

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