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Determinants of Changes in Societal Participation

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The activity theory has a 'long tradition' in social gerontology. In essence, the activity theory assumes that continuing to be active in later life increases well-being. It seems to have been a kind of lay theory long before any scientific approach to aging was developed (Van Eijk 1997). However, since the disengagement theory was first presented (Cumming & Henry 1961) the activity theory and the disengagement theory seem to be in competition with each other. Whereas the disengagement theory has often been criticized and debated, only a few gerontologists have tried to evaluate the activity theory, and none of them were really successful (Lemon et al. 1972, Van Eijk 1997). There is no empirical evidence for the direct relationship between level of activity and well-being among aging people.

According to the activity theory, activity is assumed to have a positive effect on well-being in later life. This chapter, however, focuses on two aspects of activity. Firstly, societal functioning, and secondly changes in societal functioning which are accompanied by a decrease in activity with older age. The objective was to study changes between the first and the second cycle in the LASA study, covering a time-period of approximately three years.

Societal functioning, as addressed in the LASA study, was sub-divided into societal and socio-cultural participation. Socio-cultural participation is considered to be related to cultural, leisure and educational activities, in which people are usually individually and/or incidentally involved. Since the main focus was on societal activities, socio-cultural participation is not discussed in this chapter. Societal participation involves activities which people perform in an organizational setting, with or without formal membership, e.g. associations for older people, church membership, volunteer organizations and/or hobby groups and clubs. Within the concept of societal participation, a distinction has been made between three levels of involvement: formal membership/involvement, attending meetings/gatherings and performing (administrative and/or supportive) tasks within an organization. These three dimensions can be considered as three individual levels of increasing commitment and involvement in an organization, ranging from low to high.

Firstly, a description will be given of the changes in areas and levels of societal participation over a period of three years. Secondly, an attempt will be made to identify the determinants of changes in participation over a period of three years, including social, cognitive and health-related determinants.

Method

Data were used from the first two face-to-face interviews in the LASA study. Respondents were first asked whether they were a member of, and/or involved in one or more organizations. In this first question, 'membership' and 'involvement' were initially offered as two separate alternatives for commitment at a basic level, because people do not always consider 'membership' to be the same as an ongoing commitment to an organization. Both alternatives were therefore subsequently considered as 'membership'. In the case of an affirmative answer, twelve possible types of organizations were presented and respondents were asked to indicate the organization(s) of which they were a member. Subsequently, additional questions were asked about the respondent's involvement in specific activities in these organizational settings: i.e. attending meetings or performing voluntary activities and/or administrative activities. Due to time-constraints, these specific activity questions were not asked for each organization separately, but only in general. For 2159 respondents, data were available at T_1 and T_2 with regard to societal participation, of whom 322 indicated that they were not a member of any organization, either at T_1 or at T_2 . These 322 respondents were excluded from the bivariate and multivariate analyses.

The first research questions to be answered were whether older people demonstrate a shift in membership (commencing or withdrawing from membership) and to what extent people change their level of involvement in specific activities, varying from not being a member to performing activities on a regular basis. In both cases this concerns 'level stability' (Mortimer et al. 1982). Level stability is indicated by observing the same rating two (or more) times, using the same measurement instrument. Therefore, shifts in memberships and shifts in level of involvement will be determined by means of relative frequencies and cross-tabulations.

The second research question involves identifying the determinants of the level of involvement at T_2 . It is expected that changes in living conditions or in individual abilities have an impact on the level of participation. The study focused mainly on the impact of changes in five domains on participation: a change in cognitive functioning, a decline in ADL performance, the loss of a partner, retirement and moving house. To answer this question, logistic regression analysis was applied, with decrease versus stability/increase in level of participation at T_2 as the dependent variable. Independent variables included in the regression analysis were cognitive func-

tioning (MMSE: decline versus no decline), physical functioning (functional ability: decline versus no decline), loss of partner, retirement and moving house. In the first step of the regression analysis, sex, level of education and self-efficacy were introduced and controlled for.

Results

Table 6.5 presents the general stability in membership. 68% of the respondents were members of one or more organizations at both T_1 and T_2 , whereas 15% were not members of any organization at T_1 and T_2 . In general, this demonstrates a high level of stability in societal involvement.

Table 6.5
Membership(s) or non-membership(s) of one or more organizations at T_1 or T_2 :
general stability in membership(s)

	abs	%
Non-membership(s) at T_1 and T_2	322	15
Membership(s) at T_1 , non-membership(s) at T_2	183	8
Non-membership(s) at T_1 , membership(s) at T_2	183	8
Membership(s) at T_1 and T_2	1471	68

Table 6.6 presents an overview of the type of organization the respondents were involved in, at T_1 and at T_2 . Membership of religious organizations appears to be the most popular activity. Over one third of the respondents were a member at both T_1 and T_2 , and the percentage of respondents who became a member is higher than those who withdrew from membership. The second most popular activity appears to be membership of an association for the elderly (membership appears to be important at local level, because of affiliations with more specific activities in hobby groups and clubs, choirs, etc.). Sometimes these associations for the elderly are represented in an Advisory Board for a municipality, dealing with policy issues concerning older people. Participation in a neighbourhood club is also quite important, increasing over time. Moreover, at the level of specific organizations the results show considerable stability in membership. Significant change was also demonstrated for part of the respondents.

Table 6.6

Changes in membership(s) in twelve types of organizations between T₁ and T₂: specific stability in membership(s), (N=1831), excluding those who were not members at both observations (N=322)

	T ₁ and T ₂ not member (%)	T ₁ member, T ₂ not member (%)	T ₁ not member, T ₂ member (%)	T ₁ and T ₂ member (%)
Association for the elderly	65	7	9	20
Trade union	80	5	5	10
Political party	84	4	5	7
Religious organization	45	9	11	36
Neighbourhood organization	74	6	9	10
Women's organization	83	4	3	10
Organization to assist the elderly	85	5	6	4
Social organization	88	4	5	3
Patient organization	93	2	3	2
Song, dance or music club	83	4	3	10
Hobby group	70	10	10	9
Sports club	77	7	6	10

Table 6.7 presents the results of cross-tabulation of the shifts in level of participation in (one or more) societal organizations. Of the total sample, 52% appeared to be stable in the level of participation. While 21% increased in level of participation, 17% decreased and 10% withdrew totally. Consequently, in approximately one half of the sample there appears to be a shift in level of participation, presenting either an increase or a decrease in level of participation.

Table 6.7

Shifts in level of participation between T₁ and T₂ (N=1831), excluding the 322 respondents who were not member at T₁ and T₂

Types of change T ₁ -T ₂	abs	%
Withdrawal of membership(s) at T ₂	183	10
Decrease in level of participation at T ₂	309	17
Stable	960	52
Increase in level of participation at T ₂	385	21

Table 6.8 shows the extent to which the shift in level of participation is related to the age of the respondent. Those who withdrew from participation and/or membership appear to have the highest average age, and those who increased in level of participation were in the youngest average age-group.

Table 6.8
Average age of respondents in relation to shifts in level of participation (N=1831)

	withdrawal n = 183	decrease n = 309	stable n = 960	increase n = 385
Average age at T ₂	73.9	72.6	72.4	70.5

The next question involves the extent to which the increase or decrease in societal participation between T₁ and T₂ is related to changes in living conditions and individual abilities within the study period. A logistic regression analysis was performed for the dichotomy of decrease in level of participation versus stability or increase. The results presented in Table 6.9 show that males and those with a higher level of education were more likely to show decrease in their level of participation. As may be expected, a decrease in functional abilities appeared to result in a lower level of societal participation. In addition, respondents who were retired were more likely to stabilize or increase their level of participation. In contrast to the expectations, a decline in cognitive functioning, loss of a partner and moving house did not seem to contribute to a decrease in level of participation.

Table 6.9
Regression of the effect of changes in living conditions and physical functioning on decrease in level of societal participation versus stability or increase (logistic regression analysis)

	Exp (B)	<i>p</i>
Sex	0.76	0.01
Level of education	1.04	0.01
Self-efficacy	1.01	0.48
Decrease in functional ability (0-1)	1.25	0.05
Decline in MMSE (0-1)	1.21	0.18
Retirement (0-1)	0.62	0.04
Loss of partner	0.76	0.21
Moved house	1.25	0.14
Change in Chi-square	27.8 (df=8)	<i>p</i> < 0.05

Discussion

The first research question to be answered was whether older people in the LASA sample demonstrated shifts in membership/involvement between specific organisations and shifts in level of societal participation. The results indicate a fairly high general stability in membership(s), as well as a fairly high stability in membership(s) of specific types of organizations over a period of three years. This stability supports the continuity hypothesis of aging, i.e. people have a tendency to continue their behavioural patterns with aging at the same level for as long as possible (Victor 1987). Nevertheless, approximately 50% of the respondents who participated at T_1 and T_2 did show a change in their level of involvement in societal participation, with a somewhat higher percentage of decrease than increase.

The second research question, related to the individual determinants of shifts in societal participation, demonstrated some interesting findings. A distinction could be made between determinants within and outside the social domain. Three of the four significant determinants were from the social domain. In addition, a decrease in functional abilities appeared to result in a lower level of societal functioning. Neither self-efficacy nor cognitive decline could explain any variance in the decrease in societal functioning. Although a high level of self-efficacy was expected to result in maintaining a higher level of societal functioning, the findings do not support this assumption. Going one step further, it could even be postulated that self-efficacy and cognitive decline are possible counterparts. It has been demonstrated that an important stimulus for involvement in volunteer work is retention: if you do not use it, you lose it (Mertens & Claessen 1989)! Self-efficacious people, aware or afraid of (minor) cognitive decline may continue with their societal involvement in order to demonstrate to themselves and to others their ability to cope with the onset of aging.

The social determinants of a decrease in societal participation also demonstrate an interesting complex of factors. The finding that people of 55 years of age and over who retire, either stabilize or increase their societal participation comes as no surprise. This supports the finding that the people who increase their participation are the youngest adults. Although involvement in societal participation, in itself, is not necessarily an activity which is restricted to couples, memberships often involve both partners. This makes it even more surprising that partner loss is not related to a decrease in societal participation. On the one hand, this may be a gender issue, as partner loss is often more detrimental for the participation of women than men. On the other hand, in the LASA sample partner loss in two thirds of the cases concerned the loss of a male partner, many of whom were care-dependent. Some of the widows may have increased their involvement in societal participation, even before the loss of the partner.

In conclusion, the analyses showed that changes in the level of involvement in societal participation are, to some degree, related to a complex set of determinants, social as well as non-social. The complexities of the interactions which have been suggested, question not only a direct relationship between the level of societal participation and chronological age, but also between the level of participation and well-being, which is the central thesis of the activity theory.

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