

KEY DETERMINANTS OF SOCIOEMOTIONAL SELECTIVITY THEORY ENHANCING SOCIAL ACTIVITY TO PROMOTE ACTIVE AGEING IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the key determinants (the underlying drivers) of socioemotional selectivity theory enhancing social activities to promote active ageing. Active ageing concept is most known among gerontologists as a holistic approach, introduced by WHO, during Madrid International Action Plan for Ageing in late 1980s era. The older aged cohort has always been unequally treated and pressured for the low weightage of their current contribution to the country. The struggle caused by scarce resources has labeled this vulnerable group as a burden to the country. Similar to other Asian countries, Malaysia is moving towards ageing country status. The upsurge in ageing population in the near future will tremendously affect the expenditure of the country, especially in social welfare. Early theory of disengagement argues that when a person steps into third age, they would automatically be cast away from societal obligation; the life after retirement, for instance. This situation is quite worrisome. Theory of activity, on contrary, claims that people can replace the losses, caused by their retirement, such as financial, work, social ties and others. In fact, every person can control their social situation. The absence of support from the social environment would definitely bring other problems to ageing population. Despite of having disengagement and activity theory, elaborating on ageing concept, this paper observes fundamental theory of socioemotional selectivity as the best theory to enhance social activities to promote active ageing. This is due to the emphasis that the theory puts on social interaction, a key survival of older people that helps them to be more active and discover their new identity in society after their retirement.

Keywords: Socioemotional selectivity theory, active ageing, social activity

Introduction

An upsurge in ageing population of a country symbolizes great expansion of healthcare provision in millennial era. The rise of ageing population has become a globally phenomenal issue. Malaysia began to focus on ageing issues since 1995, following the introduction of National Policy for Older Person. Although the world has recognized ageing issues since 1982 during the 1st Assembly Vienna International; Malaysia only began to grasp the idea 13 years later. At present, Malaysia has given more attention on ageing. This can be seen from number of government policy, initiatives and effort in enhancing healthy ageing, active ageing and productive ageing.

By 2030, all countries are expected to reach 'ageing country status' including Malaysia. Malaysia is expected to reach such status up to nearly 15% of total population (Aishah & Katiman, 2012). Accordance to Padmini et al (2012), the increasing number of ageing population in one country would become a disadvantage to the country. This is quite worrisome. The scarce resources can become a drawback to a country that has to face the explosion of ageing population (Philipson, 1996). This is because; the government would have to bear with high cost of the population's welfare including healthcare facilities, pension retirement and other indirect costs. Employment and income security have become major issues, faced by Malaysian ageing population. In addition, globalization, leading to the rising of cost of living, has dampened their quality of life. As the result, majority of older persons has no other options, but to be highly dependent on government including formal and informal support system (Zainab & W.A, 2014). Are Malaysian ready to face ageing population country? It is not only the question of ready for ageing population country; but also promoting active ageing in the country. Malaysia has started to grasp the idea of Active ageing. Yet, it is doubtful to what extend the government could help to produce active ageing population. Besides, the struggle caused by the scarce resource has labeled the older person as a burden to the country. The older aged cohort has always unequally treated and pressured for the low weightage of the contribution to the country.

While issues related to the world's and Malaysian ageing has been progressing through intellectual discussions; this paper only aims to observe one important aspect of ageing— promoting active ageing through engagement in social activity. Active ageing framework is the resurgence of early theories of successful ageing (Rowe & Kahn, 1987) and productive ageing (Cumming & Henry, 1959). While acknowledging that successful ageing and productive ageing are also important theories that promote active ageing, despite the fact that they have received a number of criticisms; this paper argues that 'socioemotional selectivity theory' is the most appropriate and applicable theory to enhance active ageing in Malaysian context. This is due to the important aspect of "social interaction" emphasized in the theory, which covers knowledge-related motive and emotional motive. Engagement in social activities would enable the elderlies to uncover their interests and hobbies as well as build social intimacy with the community. This concept paper focuses on one part of doctoral work.

Active Ageing Framework

An early idea of active ageing was introduced by World Health Organization (2002) during the second assembly of Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing in 1995. The main aim of WHO was to encourage older people to actively participate in activities to maintain their physical health and function. Active ageing framework is a new platform, elevating the opportunities for older persons' involvement in social, economic, spiritual and civic affairs despite being physically weak and financially stable (WHO, 2002). Active ageing is the resurgence of the previous frameworks called 'productive ageing' and 'successful ageing', that have received a lot of critics from various scholars with different perspectives. The criticisms include productive ageing concept is too limited that it only focuses on economic perspective. Hamblin (2013) argued that it would be impossible for elderlies to work at old-age due to their health and physical condition. Successful ageing, on the other hand, only focuses on the reduction of disease and disability that disregard the vulnerable group by putting them in least favorable condition. Following these two concepts, in 2002, WHO introduced active ageing as a new podium to encourage the participation of older-aged cohort in active activity, including social, economic and religious activity as well as civic affairs, despite of having weak physical and financial constraints (Hamblin, 2013).

After the introduction of active ageing, many countries including Japan, Hong Kong and other countries have moved towards active ageing. For example, in Japan, which is also known as an ultra-aged country, the elderlies have a strong belief for their cultural norms; this can be seen in the avoidance of 'Boke' (being senile) in Japanese character, to the extent that all of them are encouraged to actively participate in Ro'kun Kurabu (club activities) in order to avoid being a burden to their family (Maleen Bachmann, 2014). In line with their culture, Japan government has introduced REPRINTS to advocate volunteering program. One example of reprint activity is sharing stories with kindergarten children. This and other Reprints activities are the social activities which endorse active ageing among the Japanese.

The Implementation Of Active Ageing Frameworks In Malaysian Context

Malaysia, like other countries, has undergone the evolution of ageing population and the progress of the related issues. The development of the world's ageing policy has significantly influenced the development of ageing policy in Malaysia. Basically, the government has adapted two documents to guide the planning of programs that would be impactful for older person. The two documents include Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing and The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing. As the result of the adaption, National Policy for Older Person and Action Plans for Older Person were introduced in 1995 (Zawawi, 2013). It was actually based on National Policy for Older Person (1995) (UN) and Action Plan for Older Person (1998) (UN). Later, the Ministry of Ministry of Development of Women, Families and society (KPWKM) made several amendments in previous National policy for older person and Action Plan of Ageing in 5th January 2011 for preparing older people after the retirement phase.

In order to inculcate active ageing concept, several strategies, that are in line with Action Plan of Older Persons, have been injected by Malaysian government (2011). One of the pioneer initiatives, promoting lifelong learning among older persons in Malaysia, is the establishment of the first University of Third Age (U3A) in 2008. The idea was brought by the Institute of Gerontologist, University Putra Malaysia (UPM) with the aim to prepare older people for the life after retirement. Another initiative to promote lifelong learning program is the promotional discount up to 75% for study fees, given to older persons who wish to enroll in academic, skills and religious courses, offered by Open University Malaysia. Following this initiative, around 67 older learners successfully completed their degree in 2012 (Utusan Online, 2013).

Other than promoting lifelong learning, the government has initiated 22 activity centers throughout Malaysia, as part of the initiative of encouraging older people's engagement with the society (Department of social welfare Malaysia of official website, 2016). Lifelong learning program and activity center for older persons are two initiatives, promoting active ageing in Malaysia. This shows that Malaysia has started to grasp the idea of active ageing as stated in the Action Plan for Older Persons (2011) and National Policy for Older person (2011). However, despite the implementation of these initiatives, the extent of the effectiveness of these government programs, in term of the elderlies' participation, remains uncertain.

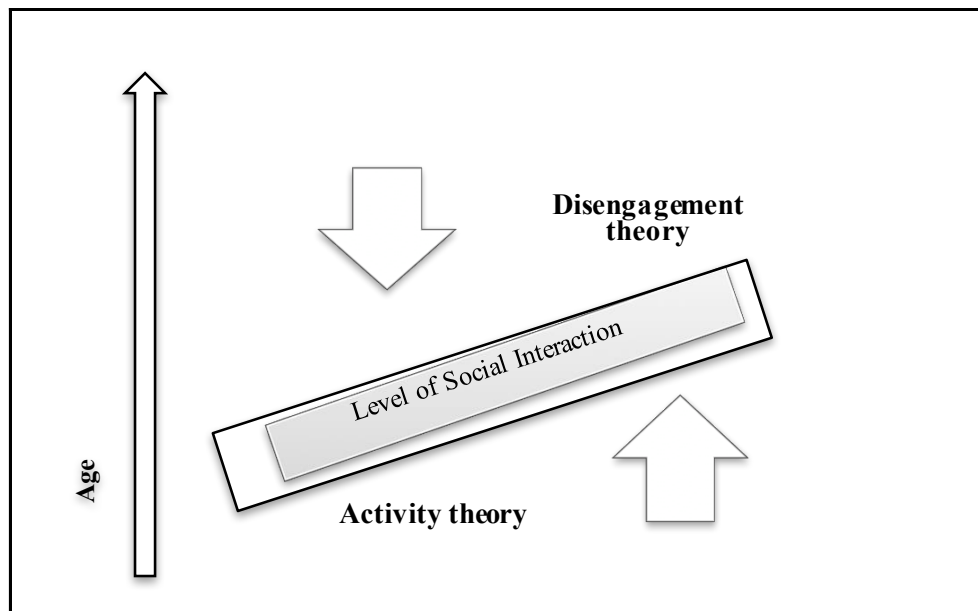
The Evolution Of Key Gerontology Theories In Understanding World's Ageing Trend

Since early 1950s, numerous ageing theories were developed to intensify few aspects, related to ageing population. Burgess, one of the early scholars in 1950s, argued that older people are always associated with the 'role –less role for the aged person'. Normally, people will abandon the role that does not fit their age (Collins, 2014). Following Burgess' idea, the theory of disengagement was then introduced by Cumming and Henry in 1959. They argued that active ageing was unrealistic that it denied the reality of ageing population being old. A person would automatically be withdrawn from social obligation and such situation

can be seen in life after retirement. Their arguments included the size of social network that would be demoted. This is because; older-aged cohort typically prefers to live quietly within a small-size social network that includes family and close friends. This is the reality that older persons need to face, and should be realized by everyone (Cumming and Henry, 1959). Another argument by Ranjizn (2010) that supports disengagement theory, was that older persons should not be discriminated that they are forced to engage with the society or in any activity. Failure to satisfy the older persons' expectation would drive them to be traumatized.

In contrary, the theory of activity, brought by Rowe and Kahn (1987), suggested that people can take control over their social interaction. They can replace the loss of financial, social obligation, broad network with something meaningful such as social activity (Fesko et al., 2012). The idea is that there is no such way for older persons to let their precious lifetime to be futile, as argued in disengagement theory. This is the opportunity for them to do things they could not do before. Hence, the introduction of activity theory helps to close the gap of being limited to do active activity, that the older persons have. Many studies have been conducted to explore the benefits of active activity (Sparks, 2011) including volunteering program (Maleen, 2014; Warburton & Peel, 2008; Principi et al., 2012), lifelong learning (Cross, 2014; Dave, 2014), health and sport activity and others. Figure 1 is a self-construct diagram, presenting the level of social interaction of elderlies based on disengagement and activity theory. While disengagement theory proclaims less social interaction among elderlies; activity theory promotes more social interactions among these people through participation in social activity.

Figure 1: self-construct diagram (level of social interaction based on activity theory and disengagement theory) based on related literatures



Based on the Figure 1, the level of social interaction were observed varies on both activity theory and disengagement theory. Cumming and Henry (1959) in the disengagement theory, believed the older person will face the harsh withdrawal from the social obligation including the social network from the workplace, working hour routines, source of income, life satisfaction and others. This situation will continuously shrink their social interaction and self-worth like they did before. As presented in Figure 1, as a person is getting older, his or her level of social interaction will slowly diminish. One significant example of empirical research that applies the socioemotional selectivity theory is Okun & Schultz (2003). The socioemotional selectivity theory perceives volunteering, to be one of the knowledge-related goals, which is less favored by older people. The finding of the study has shown that, the majority of older respondents, within the age range of 60-69 years old, join volunteering activities to expand their social contacts ($R=.57$, $P<.05$) and to help others. In contrary, activity theory claimed that a person can control over their social loss by replacing it with the meaningful activities such as volunteering, sport and hobbies, gardening and others. Reduction of social network will definitely induce another problem such as depression or social exclusion. This activity theory proclaimed that the higher participation in activities, the higher level of life satisfaction.

Promoting Active Ageing Through The Lens Of Socioemotional Selectivity Theory

Both activity and disengagement theory have indeed contributed to the body of the knowledge, which is related to ageing. Until today, both theories have been applied interchangeably in many studies, as guideline for improvement. However, the introduction of socioemotional selectivity theory by Cartensen (1995) was found to be more appropriate and relevant to the needs of the world's ageing. The main idea proposed by Cartensen was to encourage social interaction among elderlies—with the belief that without social interactions, more problems would occur.

Although Cartensen (1995) agreed that older person would undergo the harsh stage of social obligation withdrawal, as being claimed in the theory of disengagement; Cartensen also stated that the absence of support from social environment would bring other problems to ageing population. This is because, social interaction is actually the key survival of older people. Active activity and social interaction can also help them to discover their new identity in the society. As argued in the theory on disengagement, retirees would usually face harsh withdrawal from social obligation. Nevertheless, as proclaimed by the theory of socioemotional selectivity, such loss can be replaced with interaction with the society.

Socioemotional selectivity theory is basically relevant to explore ageing issues in Malaysian context. One study undertaken by Minhat & Amin (2012) revealed that social activities can bring positive impact to the elderlies' mental health. Even a simple activity such as shaking hands with people can help boosting the elderlies' self-esteem— this is regarded as a positive impact that a simple activity can have on the elderlies. Although Minhat & Amin (2012) did not mention socioemotional selectivity theory; the empirical findings from the author's study proved the existence of the theory; particularly when social activity involving Malaysian elderlies was discussed. The example is consistent with Cartensen's idea on the theory which suggests that participation in activity can help to rebuild the elderlies' social connections as well as preserve their physical and psychological health. Other study conducted by MacKean & Abbott-Chapman (2011) also proved the benefits of participation in social activity among the elderlies in the Australia.

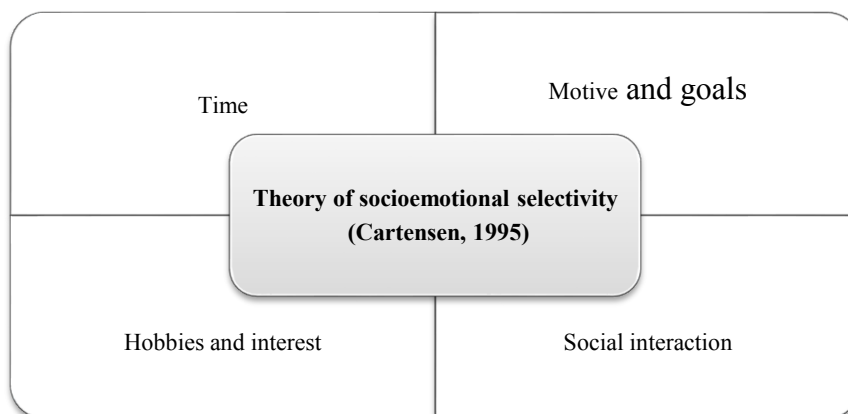
Key Determinants Of Socioemotional Selectivity Theory Enhancing Social Activity

In general, the theory of socioemotional selectivity theory claims that, a person would normally choose either emotional goal or knowledge-related goal (Cartensen, Isaacowitz & Charles, 1999). Emotional goal is significantly related to the intimacy one shares with their partner as well as their drives and purpose in life. In contrast, knowledge-related goal can be obtained from distinct sources of information. Cartensen has illustrated a simple example to explain this idea: a sick teenager would usually not bother to keep up with anything associated with college as he perceives his time to be limited. Hence, the same teenager would rather seek emotional support from his family or close friends. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily mean that limited time would limit the possibility for the option of knowledge-related goals to be undertaken. Through social interaction, such as helping others through volunteering or charity program, older people may discover miracle or their purpose in life. This would subsequently give socioemotional rewards to these elderlies. This shows that interaction with the society, through social activity involvement, would definitely help to promote active ageing.

The theory of socioemotional selectivity is indeed crucial as it includes the element of social interaction as a key survival of older person. Besides, this theory explained the real preference of a person when he steps into the old aged. Basically, there are several underlying drivers in socioemotional selectivity theory including time, hobby and interest, motives and goals, and social interaction. Time is the contributing factor, encouraging the participation of older person in social activity. Typically, older persons would only prefer activity that is seen to be worth of their time. Cartensen (1995) added that older persons also seek for activity that may give them meaningful life. This is because; these elderlies see their time to be precious and believe that there is a need to spend it on worthwhile activity. The theory and its key determinants are appropriate and relevant for the study of ageing in Malaysian context.

Further, as the elderly perceives his of her time is limited, he or she will become selective to choose their partners. Only family and closure friends will become his or her first choice. However, he or she will maintain the relationships that they have even though the distant separate them. The second element is hobbies or interest. A person with unlimited of time will usually seek for something new or bucket of list to do it. In comparison, the older person will focus on their hobbies or interest and keep to do the routine or personal interest such as volunteer, religious activities, gardening and others. In addition, Cartensen argued that, due to the limited of time, a person will only concentrate on present rather than pursuit the long term goals (knowledge related goal). In fact, at the old age, he or she will shift their attention on building the intimacy (emotional related goal) with the chosen partners. As for social interaction, the older person is usually stay connected in smaller networks.

Figure 2: self-construct diagram based on the theory of socioemotional selectivity (cartensen, 1995)



Socioemotional Selectivity Theory Enhancing Active Ageing In Malaysia: Discussion And Conclusion

While earlier discussion presents the early theories (disengagement and activity theory) and socioemotional selectivity theory; the following discussion argues that socioemotional selectivity theory is the most relevant and appropriate theory to explore active ageing in Malaysian context. Malaysia is known as a country that has rich cultures and practices. This is actually the result of having a multi-racial society. Disengagement theory is argued to be only applicable in Malaysia in early years, between 1970s – 1980s. Activity theory, in contrast, appears to be more applicable after 1990s where Malaysia was undergoing modernization and urbanization— the impact of modernization and urbanization can be seen in the increasing participation among ageing community in social activity. Notably, socioemotional selectivity theory is most appropriate and relevant to explore active ageing issues in Malaysia that can be found in this 21st century. This is due to the fact that the aspect of social interaction is emphasized in the theory, whereby active ageing is said to be able to be promoted through social contacts and engagement. As a matter of fact, the key determinants of socioemotional selectivity theory appear to be relevant to Malaysian culture and practices. The examples, proving that the theory is in fact most relevant to be used in Malaysian ageing study, include lifelong learning activity, volunteering and community activity.

Malaysia adopted the concept of active ageing, proposed by WHO in 2002. However, not all elements of active ageing are included in the application of the theory in Malaysia. Malaysia has revisited active ageing concept and made some amendments. The definition of active ageing in Malaysian context is to enhance the population's life quality and life expectancy through the optimization of opportunity in physical, social and mental aspect (Ambigga et al., 2011). Based on this definition, social contact is basically one of the crucial aspects that can help promoting active ageing. Social contact can be inculcated through involvement in social activity. Social activity can be divided into four categories, including community-related activity, job-related activity, lifelong learning and religious activity. All these four facets require direct interaction from the society (Tamakoashi et al., 1995). In the study, undertaken by Ng et al., (2011) involving older persons in Malaysia, revealed that majority of the respondents (31%), who aged 60 years and above, preferred leisure activity and family-based activity. In fact, these two types of activity have significantly affected the wellbeing of older people. The preferred leisure activity includes; chatting and sharing stories with family member as well as other routine activities. One study done by Houbert et al., (2004) as cited in Boudiny (2013) suggested that older person should involve in active activity rather than passive home-based activity. This has to do with the theory of socioemotional selectivity, which asserts that the elderlies tend to be selective in choosing their partners to share their interest and hobby. They usually prefer a small group network rather than a larger group. Small group network includes family, close friends, and other people with sources of information.

There are numerous social activities that have been executed by most countries, and they include community activity, lifelong learning and others. Community activity has been recognized as a meaningful activity among the elderlies. Mackean and Chapman (2011) suggested that involvement in community activity would reshape the behaviors and attitudes of older people through valuable real experience that they get from this. In a research undertaken by Chapman (2011), revealed that one female respondent, who aged between 60-74 years old, responded '*You learn something from every little thing*'. Although the response is only from one respondent, but it is significant as the response proves that community activity does give the elderlies valuable experience and the chance to learn something new.

One common social activity, promoted among the elderlies, is volunteering program which has been recognized by most countries. For example, in early 2000s era, most European countries had made volunteering activity part of government agenda in order to turn volunteering activity into a job opportunity for older persons. This initiative was believed to be helpful in reducing the elderlies' financial burden (Principi et al., 2012; Fesko et al., 2012). Since then, many private agencies have collaborated with European government to establish volunteering organization and hire the elderlies as volunteers. Japan has also started to implement volunteering activity called REPRINTS (reading book to kindergarten children) as an attempt to prepare the population for the life after retirement. The intergenerational culture has taught older citizens not to feel like a burden to their family or to become, as what is known in Japanese character as 'Boke' (senile). This can be seen when this similar cohort is encouraged to participate in any club activity or Japanese character 'ro' jin kurabu (Maleen Bachmann, 2014). Most elderlies are usually willing to join volunteering activities due to a number of reasons, which include to build social networks, to carry out humanitarian responsibility and to be part of the learning process (Clary & Synder, 1999). The volunteering activities, undertaken by European countries and Japan, can be used as one example of how our country can promote active ageing.

The next activity which can help to promote active ageing is lifelong learning that can be divided into two forms, including formal learning and informal learning. Basically old-age learners are free to choose any type of learning that fits their age and capability. According to Dave (2014), lifelong learning can be defined as "an activity that includes people of all ages, learning in variety context, including educational institutions; or either at work or at home; and through leisure activity". Lifelong learning does not only cover formal learning but also informal learning which includes leisure activity (singing choir, dancing contest, etc.), club activity (hobbies, playing games, etc.), swimming and others. For example, participation in choir helps to inculcate the sense of friendship and boost the population's self-esteem as they would be recognized by the audience (Mackean & Chapman, 2011). In Western countries such as United Kingdom, lifelong learning activity has been implemented since the past decades. The older aged cohort no longer prefers the conventional term of senior citizens, but is more engrossed in contemporary term of Third age learner (Simpson, 2015). Thus, it can be said that this activity has significantly influenced the attitude of the population that they feel positive about their future. Since then, lifelong learning has spread to other countries, including developing countries like Taiwan. In Taiwan, lifelong learning has become a common activity among the elderlies. Not only that, Confucius' phrase has made the belief of 'joyful learning, forget ageing' part of the symbol of happiness among the Taiwanese (Lee, 2015).

Similar to other countries, Malaysia has started to embark lifelong learning program since year 2007, through the establishment of the first third age university (U3A) as an initiative done by the University of Putra Malaysia (UPM) Gerontologists. In fact, according to the Ministry of Women Development, Family & Society, lifelong learning is also part of the Action Plan for Ageing and this is to encourage the elderlies' participation in Lifelong Learning Program as a preparation to face aging country status. The minister, Datuk Rohani Abdul Karim has recommended Malaysian elderlies to enroll in lifelong learning program in Open University Malaysia with the incentive of 75% discount for study fees. After the introduction of the lifelong learning in U3A University, there were 548 older learners in 2012 as compared to only 84 old learners in the first year of the initiative (Utusan Online, 2013).

As a conclusion, all these social activities, including lifelong learning, community activity, volunteer activity and others, can help to promote active ageing among Malaysian elderlies. As discussed earlier, the theory of socioemotional selectivity claims that the elderlies prefer meaningful activity that would be worthy of their time. This, however, does not necessarily mean that limited time would prevent them from seeking for knowledge-related goals, such as community activity or lifelong learning. In fact, engagement in social activity can help to replace these people' losses as discussed earlier in disengagement theory. Such losses can basically be replaced by uncovering new social role and this can be done once they participate in a social activity. Besides, active participation of Malaysian elderlies in social activity would help the country to achieve its targets of producing successful, productive and active aging population. However, this requires all supports from various parties in order to support this growing population.

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