Importance of Social Theories of Aging

- In contrast to our personal observation about age changes, scientific approach to theory development is a systematic attempt to explain why and how an age-associated change or event occurs.

- **Theory-building**: cumulative development of explaining and understanding observations and findings. It represents the core of foundation of scientific inquiry and knowledge.

- Many social gerontological theories have been formulated since the 1950s and 1960s, and some have not been adequately tested.
Social Gerontological Theory Before 1961: Role and Activity

- **Role theory** is an early attempt to explain how individuals adjust to aging.

- **Age norms** serve to open up or close off roles that people of a given chronological age can play. There are assumptions that we all make about age-related capacities and limitations.

- **Socialization**: lifelong process by which individuals learn to perform new roles, adjust to changing roles, relinquish old ones, learn a “social clock” of what is age approach and thereby become integrated into society.

- **Role discontinuity** means what was learned at one age may be useless or in conflict with role expectations at a later age.
Social Gerontological Theory Before 1961: Role and Activity

- **Activity theory** defines aging as a social problem that can be addressed by trying to retain status, roles, and behaviors similar to those of earlier life stages.

- Activity theory is consistent with value placed by our society on paid work, individual responsibility, and productivity.

- It does not take into account how personality, social class, gender, race, and lifestyle may be more salient than age when associated with life satisfaction, health, and well-being.
Next Stage of Theory Development: Disengagement and Continuity Theory

- **Disengagement theory** is based on hypothesis that older people, because of inevitable decline with age, become decreasingly active with outer world and increasingly preoccupied with inner lives.

- Disengagement is useful for society because it fosters an orderly transfer of power from older to younger people.

- **Continuity theory** is based on hypothesis that central personality characteristics become more pronounced with age or are retained through life with little change. People age successfully if preferred roles and adaptation techniques are maintained throughout life.
Newer Social Theoretical Perspectives

- **Age stratification theory** is a perspective that explicitly takes account of how cohort and historical time period affect aging, challenges focus on individual adjustment inherent in activity and disengagement theories

  - **Cohort effect** results in shared experiences among individuals born in a particular time period

  - **Structural lag** occurs when social structures cannot keep pace with population changes

  **Social exchange theory** suggests that withdrawal and social isolation result from an unequal exchange process of “investment and returns” between older persons and members of society

**Life-course perspective** attempts to bridge structural or societal level and individual psychological level factors that affect human development. It takes account of role of individual decisions that affect one’s future, along with accumulation of risks and resources
Newer Social Theoretical Perspectives

- **Political economy theory of aging:** based on hypothesis that social class determines a person’s access to resources and that dominant groups within society try to sustain their own interests by perpetuating class inequalities
  - Cumulative disadvantages are structured inequalities resulting from social stratification

- **Social constructionism** theorizes that aging is defined as a problem more by cultures and society than by biology and bodily changes
  
  differs from political economy because it gives greater recognition to importance of our interpersonal interactions in shaping aging experience

- **Social phenomenology/social constructionism** is a point of view in studying social life that places an emphasis on assumptions and meanings of experience rather than “objective” facts, with a focus on understanding rather than explaining

- **Feminist** gerontology view that experiences of women are often ignored in understanding human condition, with efforts to attend critically to those experiences