

Viewing Life of Senior Citizen Convicts in Tihar from the Lens of Gerontological Theories

Rahul Kapoor*

PhD in Social Work, Department of Social Work, Delhi University, Delhi, India

Abstract

Ageing is a multidirectional change involving the physical, social, psychological and social spheres of a person's existence. Ageing is not a steady state but a dynamic process. Theories of ageing, therefore, lead to a body of knowledge that facilitates the description, explanation, modification or optimization of ageing behavior.

However, it is unlikely that any one theory of ageing can fully explain the ageing process and behavior and it is evidently possible that an ageing individual can be governed by small portions of multiple theories of ageing at the same time. This phenomenon was observed when life experiences of senior citizen convicts in Tihar prison, New Delhi were recorded and then analyzed in the context of various theories of ageing including the Disengagement theory, Activity theory, Continuity theory, Role theory, Labeling theory, Exchange theory, Subculture theory and Personality theory. Activity theory came out as the strongest and the most apt conceptual framework which governs the life of senior citizen convicts while glimpses of role theory, labeling theory, subculture theory and Exchange theory could also be seen influencing the life of senior citizen convicts and their behavioral traits and attributes.

Keywords: Activity theory; Role theory; Labeling theory; Senior citizen convict

Introduction

The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India defines a senior citizen as a person of Indian nationality who has attained an age of 60 years or above while a convict is a criminal prisoner under sentence of a court as outlined by The Prisons Act, 1894 under the Ministry of Law, Government of India.

Thus a senior citizen convict is a person who has attained an age of 60 years or above and is a criminal prisoner under sentence of a court. According to Prison Statistics India (2015) out of 1,34,168 convicts lodged in various jails in India 24,035 (17.9%) convicts were in the age group of 50 years and above.

Since, the Prison Statistics India does not release specific figures of Senior Citizen convicts lodged in the prison but does release figures on the convicts who are 50 years of age or above an implicit assumption can be made that out of the 17.9% convicts who are above 50 years of age, at least 13-14% are senior citizen convicts.

The senior citizen convicts in Tihar have to accustom themselves to the prison setting and fall in a complex mix of the contingencies imposed upon them by old age as well as their imprisoned status and therefore this article tries to bring fore their life style and experiences in the prison and the application of various theories of ageing on them.

This article is based on the research work undertaken by the author on the life of senior citizen convicts in Tihar Jail, New Delhi, from the period of July, 2016 - February, 2017.

Objective and Methodology

The objective of the study was to gain an insight into the life of senior citizen convicts including their perspective on ageing and to understand their life style and experiences in the context of various theories of ageing amidst the challenges which the prison setting offers.

The study is qualitative in nature and respondents who were chosen through purposive sampling technique which falls under the non-

probability method of sampling were administered interview schedules and their responses were recorded. The major themes emerging from the data were identified and reflected upon through a review of theories of ageing and their application to the senior citizen convicts in Tihar.

They study is exploratory in nature as not much knowledge exists on the life of senior citizen convicts in the Indian context by the virtue of their relatively small numbers in the Indian prisons and the closed nature of the prison setting which does not allow easy access to outsiders except the Jail staff.

Review of Literature

Prisons worldwide are facing challenges associated with growing numbers of aging prisoners. This trend will continue due to a greater call for public safety, longer sentences and the incarceration of a higher number of adults. As elderly inmates necessarily present such a drain on state and correctional budgets, it might make sense for states to rethink the sentencing laws and correctional practices that led to the graying of prison populations nationally [1].

The number of ill people incarcerated in America's prisons and jails has grown in tandem with the number of elderly inmates. At this juncture, in a developed country like USA, more than 33% of inmates in jail, 44% in state prison, and 39% in federal prison report an illness more serious than a cold or the flu. Women and elderly inmates in prisons, as in jails, report more medical problems than do other inmates. The extent of medical care provided for such inmates depends

*Corresponding author: Rahul Kapoor, PhD in Social Work, Department of Social Work, Delhi University, Delhi, India, Tel: 9643672132; E-mail: rahul.rstv@gmail.com

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on the jurisdiction, with some larger counties and some states, and the Bureau of Prisons at the federal level, providing better care than other jurisdictions [2].

According to an EPW report by Bhalerao [3], there is a beautiful garden in front of the jail. But as you go inside, the prison appeared as a den of corruption, mismanagement, sex crimes, various gangs operating in collusion with prison officials and outside people, and the unquestioned power and authority of the “dadas” among the inmates. Some of them were reportedly involved in drug trafficking, smuggling and other corrupt practices and had contact with released prisoners.

In fact, the EPW said, the jail inside looked like a veritable miniature hell. Will the government give urgent attention to this much-neglected area of our criminal justice system and initiate basic prison reforms as advocated by the National Human Rights Commission in the form of a Model Prison Act to be followed by all the states in the country?

The various theories of crime also try to explain the nature of criminology of elderly convicts like the idea of anomie which means the lack of normal ethical or social standards. Durkheim [4] indicated that the rules of how individuals interact with one another were disintegrating and therefore people were unable to determine how to act with one another. As a consequence, Durkheim believed that anomie was a state where the expectations of behavior are unclear, and the system has broken down. He termed this state as normlessness and claimed that this normlessness caused deviant behaviors.

Mathew [5] in his “Three R Theory” For Rehabilitation of Prisoners states that, if a conducive atmosphere is provided, any prisoner can rise up to a normal standard of living. Every prisoner has an ardent desire to lead a better life in society. But society is not prepared to accept a prisoner, and the prisoner is not equipped to face the challenges of society.

Release; Renewal and Rehabilitation are the three main factors, which play a vital role to equip a prisoner to lead a normal life.

Release

In ordinary sense of the word, is an act by which a prisoner is freed by the government. Release, in this context, is the outcome of an ongoing process in which a prisoner gets various positive strokes, which facilitate to develop hope, attitude of forgiveness and love specially towards those whom they hate and to view the positive aspects of the whole universe.

Renewal

Renewal is the second stage of rehabilitation. It means to put new life and vigour into a person to restore him/her to the original condition. Here a released prisoner is motivated to undergo various kinds of training to face the challenges put forth by the society.

Rehabilitation

Is the last stage of the prisoners upliftment programme. Here a prisoner is being initiated for normal, social life, by-re-training, treatment etc.

Theories of Ageing in the Context of Senior Citizen Convicts

According to Cumming and Henry [6], Disengagement theory contains three basic propositions:

1. A process of mutual withdrawal of aging individuals and

society from each other is a usual occurrence.

2. This process of withdrawal is inevitable.
3. It is also necessary for successful aging.

In its simplest form this theory states that aging involves an inevitable withdrawal or disengagement, resulting in decreased interactions between the aging person and others in the social milieu to which he or she belongs.

Disengagement is not usually a single event but instead a gradual process that involves the separation of an individual from several of his or her regular social roles and activities.

Disengagement Theory in the Context of Senior Citizen Convicts

Senior citizen convicts in Tihar find it difficult to age successfully in the context of Disengagement theory because for them the process of withdrawal from the society does not take place as a phase of transformation from middle age to old age but as a sudden and forced change because when they are convicted they are forcibly removed from their immediate society including their family and therefore they find this sudden change and snatching of social roles from them difficult to accept.

So, while on one hand they do experience a process of withdrawal from the society both inside and outside the Jail on the other hand this experience has not come to them in a gradual manner but is imposed upon them from an external stimulus which is the court. This does not allow senior citizen convicts in Tihar to experience successful ageing as the inherent equilibrium present in the Disengagement theory of experiencing mutual withdrawal from the society is affected because of their conviction.

Activity theory is the antithesis of the Disengagement theory. This theory, as suggested by Havighurst, is primarily an action theory of successful ageing. It consists of three basic premises:

1. The majority of the normally ageing persons will maintain fairly constant levels of activity
2. The amount of engagement or disengagement will be influenced by past life styles and by socio-economic considerations rather than by some intrinsic inevitable process.
3. It is necessary to maintain or develop substantial levels of social, physical and mental activity if ageing experience is to be successful.

The assumption of the activity theory is that the relationship between the social system and the personality remains fairly stable as an individual passes from the status of middle age to that of old age. Successful ageing consists of being or behaving as much as possible like a middle aged person.

Activity Theory Governs the Life of Senior Citizen Convicts

Activity theory to a large extent fits in the context of senior citizen convicts especially when physical activities form a major part of the life of any convict including the senior citizen convicts who have to perform their daily chores and indulge in more physical activities than they would outside the Jail as free individuals.

Also, the senior citizen convicts are so pre occupied by the thoughts

of their release and freedom that they remain mentally very active. Nothing more than hope can keep a person going and hope to get freedom from the Jail is one thing that keeps them going.

While they may be doing physical activities out of compulsion like Mr. Guru Gobind, a 72 year old senior citizen convict in Tihar who complains that if he would have been at his home, his grandchildren would have not let him pick even a glass of water himself and in the Jail he has to wash his own clothes and wash his own utensils. The mental activity which they do comes as a byproduct of their imprisonment; they continuously think about their release and hope to get back to their social roles like rearing grandchildren as soon as possible.

The component of mental activity in the activity theory is the one which does not allow them to contemplate their own death but look forward to the next big thing in their life which is freedom just like the next big thing in the life of an 80 year old politician may still be position and power and therefore he will remain mentally active in the pursuit of that power.

According to Maslow, people are motivated to achieve certain needs and that some needs take precedence over others. Our most basic need is for physical survival, and this will be the first thing that motivates our behaviour. Once that level is fulfilled the next level up is what motivates us, and so on (Figure 1).

In the above model, it can be clearly seen that the only the lowest level needs of a senior citizen convict is met in the Jail and so he continuously thinks about achieving needs on the higher level and that is the intersection point of the Activity theory with Maslow's hierarchy of needs model where the motivation of senior citizen convicts to achieve needs at the top of the pyramid specifically psychological needs which include freedom, love and dignity keeps them mentally active.

Continuity theory starts with a single notion that as people age, an individual will try to maintain as long as possible his lifestyle, and then holds that adaptation can go in several different directions depending on how the individual perceives his/her changing status and attempts to adjust to this change. The decision regarding which roles are to be discarded and which maintained will at large be determined by the individual's history and preferred style of life.

According to Peterson, individuals maintain as long as possible their previous self-concept by continuing in those activities and roles

that are most directly related to greater status and by discarding those that are of less value.

Continuity Theory in the Context of Senior Citizen Convicts

Continuity theory is not applicable to the senior citizen convicts to a large extent because it rests with individuals the decision to hold and discard roles and adapt to the process of ageing as per their life styles including set of personal attributes, norms and values but the environment in the Jail does not permit an individual to do so and he has no other option but to adjust to the prison setting. Since, the choice of accepting and discarding roles and activities does not lie with the senior citizen convicts hence they cannot age successfully in the context of continuity theory of ageing.

Role theory

Several writers have set forth the belief that behavior in old age can be explained through role theory. A role is behavior expected from individuals who occupy certain positions (e.g., father, teacher, grandfather) or a certain status. Most role theorists use what is called the dramaturgical model. The major idea behind the dramaturgical model is that just as actors play different roles on the stage, so individuals play different roles in everyday life.

Senior Citizens Crave for Social Roles

Senior citizens have social roles of their own which include being grandparents and family mentors in the family accompanied by roles attributed to them out of their profession like teachers, public speakers, politicians, doctors or any other professional role.

The prison setting strips them of all their social roles and many of the convicts lose a lot of years of their social roles inside the Jail and hence they crave to get back to their social roles outside the prison and eagerly look forward to their release from the prison to perform their social roles again. Senior citizens in their pursuit of freedom act as rationale actors being governed by the role theory.

"I want to play with my grandchildren and take them to school," says Bismillah Khan (name changed), a 70 year old convict in Tihar who is eager to don the hat of a committed, caring and loving grandfather as soon as he gets free from the jail.

Role theory is also inextricably linked to a heightened feeling of

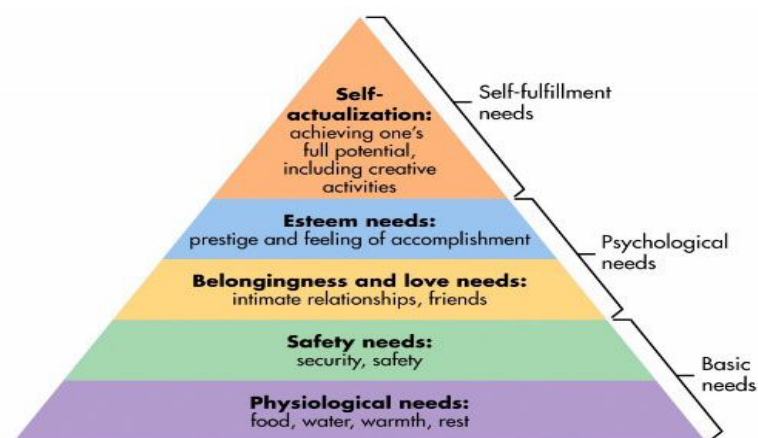


Figure 1: Maslow's Need Hierarchy Model.

role loss which the senior citizen convicts experience in the prison for many years. Their senior citizen counterparts outside the prison may have exhausted all their roles by the age of 70-75 years and may have nothing to look forward to as they have already performed their roles for many years, the same years which the senior citizen convicts have spent and lost in the jail.

This means that their will to perform these roles as per the role theory is much higher than their senior citizen counterparts outside the jail and they will perform these roles more actively and will reach their threshold of role exhaustion later than their contemporaries outside the jail.

The reason that they will be more active in the social roles they perform after getting released from the prison is their wish to make up for all the years of role loss in the prison and hence there are chances that they will age more successfully and gracefully according to the Activity theory.

So, Mr. Shyam Lal (name changed), a 73 year old senior citizen convict is not entirely wrong in his belief that his longevity will increase if he gets freedom from the prison and this is why he so ardently thinks about his freedom and not about his death because he knows that it is a matter of one court order and he can be a free man again and perform his social roles to the best of his abilities.

Labeling theory by Becker posits that people come to identify and behave in ways that reflect how others label them. It is most commonly associated with the sociology of crime and deviance, where it is used to point out how social processes of labeling and treating someone as criminally deviant actually fosters deviant behavior and has negative repercussions for that person because others are likely to be biased against them because of the label.

Bengtson has suggested that this theory can be used to explain some of the behavior of the aged. The basic assertion of labeling theory is that one derives the concept of self from the interaction with other people in one's social milieu.

Thus, from the labeling perspective, the behavior of older persons may largely depend on the reactions of significant others in their immediate social milieu. Labeling theory suggests that when a label such as 'senile' or 'old' is given, it has a significant impact on the way individuals will be treated and perceived by others.

Labeling Theory Stigmatizes a Senior Citizen Convict

A senior citizen convict may have not read the Labeling theory but is still pretty much aware of the label which he will leave behind for his family and the stigma which his family will have to go through as a consequence of his death in the Jail and therefore he does not want to die in the Jail to save his family and the people associated with him from this long lasting stigma which may lead his family members towards deviance as outlined by the Labeling Theory.

The fear of being labeled even after their death as a consequence of their demise in the prison haunts all the senior citizen convicts in Tihar.

"My son should not feel that his father suffered a rotten death in the Jail," says Mr. Hari Ram (name changed), a 66 year old lifer who has already spent 7 years of his life in the Jail and is in the grip of deadly diseases like arthritis and asthma. It is not death which Mr. Hari Ram fears but the contempt and humiliation in the eyes of his son for him

is what he fears, a label of a 'convicted criminal' attached with his life and the way his loved ones in particular and the society in general will remember his legacy is what keeps senior citizen convicts perturbed.

Subculture theory

Rose and Peterson proposed that the aged form a subculture and that it is this subculture that defines and gives direction to their behavior.

Rose believes that a subculture among age groups emerges when the group members interact with each other significantly more than they interact with persons in other age categories. This, he asserts, occurs when the members

1. Have a positive affinity for each other due to factors such as long-standing friendship or common problems, interests or concerns.
2. Are excluded from interactions with other groups in the population to some significant extent.

Both sets of circumstances, according to Rose and Peterson, apply to the elderly of most societies in which most often the elderly are not actively involved in any occupation or career, are dependent on others for their income, and are generally excluded from the mainstream life.

Subculture Theory and the Life of Senior Citizen Convicts

The prison allots separate wards to senior citizen convicts and therefore in a way imposes on the senior citizen convicts to interact more frequently with their senior citizen counterparts in the Jail rather than the younger inmates. So, not just out of choice but also out of force, the senior citizen convicts in the jail rely on the subculture theory of initiating interaction in the same age group.

The senior citizen convicts in the jail have similar concerns be it as small as the requirement of a nutritious and easily digestible diet to the haunting fear of death in the prison. The senior citizen convicts in the prison also bond with each other on spiritual alignment and an increased faith in religion and the almighty.

The second assertion of the subculture theory that, elderly are excluded from interactions with other groups in the population to some significant extent also holds true in the prison as the senior citizen convicts are excluded both by force by keeping them together in the same ward and thus limiting their interaction with the younger inmates and also by choice as the senior citizen convicts do not like to interact with the younger inmates in the jail who live a fast paced life in the jail and are involved in strenuous activities of the jail of which the senior citizen convicts can't be a part of.

The Exchange theory offers a new perspective from which to view the process of ageing and interaction between the individuals and the social system.

Dowd believes that the decreased social interaction in older age can perhaps best be explained in terms of an intricate process of exchange between the society and the its older population resulting from the older people's power dependent relationship.

In viewing aging as exchange Dowd argued that decreased social interaction is the eventual result of a series of exchanging relationships in which the power of older persons relative to their social environment is gradually diminished until all that remains of their power resources is exhausted.

Senior Citizen Convicts have Little to Offer in the Context of Exchange Theory

“We are a burden on the jail staff as we can’t do any physical labor for them like the younger inmates do and hence even our genuine demands for basic necessities like a bucket of hot water are not met by them,” says, Mr. Manoj (name changed), an ailing 75 year old senior citizen convict in Tihar.

The senior citizen convicts have very less to offer as per the exchange theory and they are incapable of putting in physical labor in the activities of the jail like their younger counterparts do and hence have very less bargaining power.

This power imbalance leads them to be seen as redundant in the jail and even their most basic demands for nutritious food and necessary medical facilities are ignored in the jail setting whereas their younger counterpart by the virtue of getting involved in the activities of the jail and offering physical labor are in a better position to not only bargain better facilities for them but also get access to the sites of power and resources in the jail.

Personality theory

Havighurst claims that both disengagement and activity theories are inadequate to explain the ageing process. He opined that disengagement and activity theorists have incorrectly focused on the amount of activity as the important variable in determining life satisfaction. He believes that it is not the level of activity but rather the personality type that is the pivotal variable in determining life satisfaction. In other words, different personality types need different levels of activity for high life satisfaction.

Jail Setting Neutralizes the Personality Type of a Senior Citizen Convict

Personality consists of the distinctive patterns of behaviors including thoughts and emotions that characterize each individual’s adaptation to the situations of his or her life. The basic premise of the personality theory which posits that it is the personality type which governs the ageing process of individuals does not allow it to be applicable on the life of the senior citizen convicts as the choice to adapt to the prison setting as per their personality type and behavioral traits does not lie with them in the prison setting.

Instead, the only option which the senior citizen convicts have is to adjust and not merely adapt to the jail setting which is often seen as not natural but forced adaptation to their life situation.

There are senior citizen convicts who would have otherwise been very active individuals as per their personality types had they been outside the prison but the prison setting has suppressed their personalities and have forced them to live a routine mechanical life. Any, action governed by their personality type is often suppressed in the jail and they are made to follow the rules of the prison setting and live a conditioned standard life in which everything is defined including their level of activities.

“I do nothing in the jail but I would like to go back to teaching when I get free from here,” says a 73 year old senior citizen convict who still wants to teach students and earn a living for himself and this shows the dichotomy between his personality type and the space which the prison setting offers him to exercise that personality type.

Conclusion

The theories of ageing when analyzed in the context of life experiences of senior citizen convicts in Tihar highlight the gaps which exist in the prison setting which leads to a negative experience of ageing for the senior citizen convicts.

One prime example is the exchange theory which heavily turns the tide in the favor of younger inmates in the prison setting as compared to the senior citizen convicts and raises questions on the power dynamics which exist in the prison setting.

Activity theory which governs the life of senior citizen convicts in the jail prompts the need of prison reforms for senior citizen convicts so that the component of physical activity is tailor made for them as per their expertise and at the same time the component of mental activity is reinforced and strengthened to give them a constructive environment.

The prison setting forcing the senior citizen convicts to fall in the ambit of a particular theory like the subculture theory is also evident in the jail which is not a desirous act for a positive experience of ageing for the senior citizen convicts.

The space for senior citizen convicts to reveal their personalities is missing in the jail and this snatches from them an opportunity to use their personality type to experience successful ageing.

A further study of the senior citizen convicts across jails in India can give deeper insights to a conceptual framework for prison reforms which can take place for senior citizen convicts in the context of various theories of ageing to ultimately give them a better experience of ageing.

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