**FINAL REFLECTIVE PAPER**

This paper is a reflection on your learning throughout the course, as you incorporate your reflection on the service-learning project (and, specifically, the age group with which we worked) with class material. How did the service-project, textbook, and class materials contribute to your knowledge of adulthood and aging? Be sure to support your positions with examples from the service projects, the textbook, and class notes.

**Service Learning and Class Reflection**

In this Adult Development course, I feel that my knowledge of the stages of adulthood greatly increased. We studied the cognitive, social, and socio-emotional changes that occur during the aging process, and this learning was enhanced both through in-depth class discussions and the two parties we organized for our service learning. The service learning aspect of the Adult Development class was very beneficial to the overall course.

Through interaction with older adults in the two parties we organized, both for the Woman of West Oakland (WOWOs) and the Sisters of Mercy, we got to see some of the things we were learning about. I particularly connected with the physical and social development of adults through the parties organized as the service learning part of the course.

Perhaps the most important concept of this class is the concept of multidirectional, which states that “development involves both growth and decline; as people grow in one area, they may lose in another and at different rates”. This shows that decline in function is a natural part of the aging process; however, a less realized part of aging involves growth in other areas.

Perhaps the most extreme example of this appeared in our classroom discussion of Alzheimer’s patients; as short-term memory declines, their long-term memory almost appears to sharpen as memories from long ago become prevalent in their minds. Unfortunately, in this example, the decline will eventually worsen to the point that it outweighs the growth aspect.

Aging is a very difficult concept; it seems nearly impossible to explain why people must grow old and die, and the search for answers has led to several theories regarding why we age. One of these is called the Rate-of-Living Theory, also known as the Wear-and-Tear theory. This theory states that “organisms have only so much energy to expend in a lifetime… Additionally… there are some data showing that the number of calories animals and people eat is related to longevity” (Cavanaugh, 2010, p. 67).

By this theory, it is better to lead a lazy life than an active one because over-activity leads to premature death. However, “a detailed review of data from many species does not support the view that metabolism is related to length of life,” so I am not inclined to believe this theory (Cavanugh, 2010, p 67). Also, as we discussed in class, physical activity helps strengthen the heart, improve circulation, increase respiration, and does a number of other good things for the body, so it seems counterintuitive to believe that being more active would lead to a shorter life.

I am more inclined to believe in either a Cellular Theory or the Programmed Cell Death Theory. The Cellular Theories cover a variety of issues, from the Hayflick limit, which states that there is a limited number of times a cell can divide “which presumable limits the life span of a complex organism”, to the stiffening of tissues from cross-linking, in which “certain proteins in human cells interact randomly and produce molecules that are linked in such a way as to make the body stiffer”.

The Programmed Cell Death Theory states that aging is somehow programmed into our genetic code, although this brings up a variety of questions that we discussed in class. If aging is pre-programmed, why are there diseases that appear to speed up the aging process, and why do some people show the effects of aging more slowly than others? Because of these questions, I am more inclined to believe in the cellular theories, although they still have many questions around them.

As we age, we go through many physical changes that were evident in the older ladies we interacted with at the parties. Perhaps the most evident physical change was the difficulty many of the women had with mobility. Several women at both parties used walkers to help them move around. This coincides with what we learned about because we lose strength in our muscles as we age; “by age 80 the loss in strength is up to 40%, and it appears to be more severe in the legs than in the arms and hands” (Cavanaugh, 2010, p. 72). Due to their mobility difficulties, we had to help them get in and out of their chairs, and we would get food and drinks for those with a lot of trouble to minimize how often they had to stand up and sit down. These strength issues also lead to balance problems that can cause falls, making it somewhat dangerous to live alone.

For this reason, many older adults choose to change living arrangements so they are not alone. According to the U.S. Census Bureau article we read, 1.91 million older people (age 65 and older) lived in a household with a grandchild. Also, 14.3% of those age 85 and older lived in a setting such as a nursing home.

Many people also find themselves in a nursing home setting due to their inability to perform everyday tasks. Everyday competence is a “person’s potential ability to perform a wide range of activities considered essential for independent living,” and when it becomes too difficult for one to perform these tasks, other living arrangements need to be considered (Cavanaugh, 2010, p. 168). Some people have only minor problems, like misplacing items or being unable to climb stairs, and do not need the intense care of a nursing home. However, others have trouble feeding, dressing, and/or bathing themselves and need more personalized care.

It was also interesting to learn about mental development as we age, and, considering this is a psychology course, this was covered extensively. One of the things I found most interesting was our discussion of attentional resources and how it becomes more difficult to divide our attention as we age. Some researchers believe that this is due to a decrease in our processing resources, “the amount of attention one has to apply to a particular situation” (Cavanuagh, 2010, p. 189). It is much more difficult for older adults to multitask than it is for younger adults, especially if the tasks are difficult or if they are unfamiliar with them.

This was evident during the parties and even in planning. During the planning of the WOWO party, we were told to specifically allot time for the women to eat. If we were not careful, they would get to talking and would talk instead of eat. As young adults, my classmates and I were able to both eat and talk, but the women we interacted with were not. We also had to make sure that they were finished eating before starting BINGO with them because they would not be able to focus on both tasks; they took BINGO too seriously to focus any of their attention elsewhere!

I particularly enjoyed the second party with the Sisters of Mercy, mostly because I felt more comfortable interacting and really got to know some of the Sisters. My friend Marcia and I sat at a table with several Sisters, two of which were some of the oldest ones in the room and were less mobile than the others. While Marcia got one of the Sisters some food, the Sister asked me a lot of questions about my life. She asked me about my relationship status, and when I told her I was single, her eyes grew wide, and she exclaimed, “Well, what is wrong with them?” which made me laugh.

She also told Marcia and me that many of the Sisters in the room were over ninety years old, which was remarkable. Many of them were very mobile and so active that I would not have placed them much older than 70. The Sisters were particularly interested in our majors in school, jobs, families, and why we chose to attend Carlow. The Sisters were fun to talk to and quick with jokes. When Marcia said that she was studying chemistry and I was studying psychology, one of the Sisters quipped that I could help Marcia when all that science drives her batty in a few years. I told them that I thought Marcia was already too far gone, and they seemed to find that funny.

The Sisters told us a lot about their leisure activities, particularly their craft room. They said that everyone has a particular craft they like to do, and it seems like they overall have a wide variety. Some of them like to knit, others like to make no-sew fleece blankets, and they are currently making decorations for the various Christmas trees set up in the convent. The preferences the Sisters show for certain crafts ties in to what we learned about leisure activities. Many people develop preferred leisure activities and, especially as they become more competent at certain activities, tend to stick to the same thing once they are comfortable with it.

I also learned quite a bit from the preparation we did for each party. Our class was full of personality, and this sometimes led to disagreements. I am still not sure why some people insisted we had to sing songs at both parties when the rest of the class expressed a desire not to do so not just because we did not want to but also because we did not think the party-goers would enjoy it; I think that sometimes, personality got in the way. However, people had a lot of good ideas in the classroom, and our in-class and online discussions about party planning were very helpful.

The class had a lot of great ideas, but I think it was very difficult to actually follow through with many of our plans. Since class only met once a week, we either had to hurry through our party discussion or hurry through the lesson to get everything to fit in one class. Also, since this was the first time a class had ever done something like this, it was awkward for us to know where to start with party planning.

The first party was too late in the semester, so we had to rush to plan the second one. However, we were able to pull everything together for the second party because we already had much of the groundwork laid, such as where the party would be held and who to contact. Had we had this information for the first party as well, I feel that we could have focused our attention on how to work together more as a class. It felt like we broke into smaller groups to get things done.

While that worked very well, it would have been nice if we could have collaborated on certain tasks like making decorations or party favors.

Overall, I think the parties were a success. The Women of West Oakland had never interacted with Carlow students like this before despite meeting in the convent often to play BINGO, so I am thrilled that they finally got to meet some of us. They were wonderful, open, energetic women. The Sisters of Mercy were also a joy to be around, and everyone was so grateful for everything we did to organize the parties.

It was somewhat ironic, because I was so thankful to have the opportunity to spend time with them. I am not around older adults often, especially not in such large groups, so I really enjoyed the service learning. I think it was a great way to see our text in practice and to reflect on our classroom experiences. The organization and follow-through of these two parties were extremely enjoyable and beneficial to me and will not soon be forgotten.