

Motivation explains disconnect between testing and real-life functioning for seniors

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A psychology researcher at North Carolina State University is proposing a new theory to explain why older adults show declining cognitive ability with age, but don't necessarily show declines in the workplace or daily life. One key appears to be how motivated older adults are to maintain focus on cognitive tasks.

"My research team and I wanted to explain the difference we see in cognitive performance in different settings," says Dr. Tom Hess, a professor of psychology at NC State and author of a paper describing the theory. "For example, laboratory tests almost universally show that cognitive ability declines with age, so you would expect older adults to perform worse in situations that rely on such abilities, such as job performance – but you don't. Why is that? That's what this theoretical framework attempts to address."

Hess has been developing this framework, called "selective engagement," over the past 10 years, based on years of work on the psychology of aging.

At issue are cognitive performance and cognitive functioning. Both deal with cognition, which is an individual's ability to focus on complex mental tasks, switch between tasks, tune out distractions and retain a good working memory. However, cognitive performance generally refers to how people fare under test conditions, whereas cognitive functioning usually refers to an individual's ability to deal with mental tasks in daily life.

"There's a body of work in psychology research indicating that performing complex [mental tasks](#) is more taxing for older adults," Hess says. "This means older adults have to work harder to perform these tasks. In addition, it takes older adults longer to recover from this sort of exertion. As a result, I argue that older adults have to make decisions about how to prioritize their efforts."

This is where selective engagement comes in. The idea behind the theory is that older adults are more likely to fully commit their mental resources to a task if they can identify with the task or consider it personally meaningful. This would explain the disparity between cognitive performance in experimental settings and cognitive functioning in the real world.

"This first occurred to me when my research team saw that cognitive performance seemed to be influenced by how we framed the tasks in our experiments," Hess says. "Tasks that people found personally relevant garnered higher levels of cognitive performance than more abstract tasks."

Hess next hopes to explore the extent to which selective engagement is reflected in the daily life of [older adults](#) and the types of activities they choose to engage in.

"This would not only further our understanding of cognition and aging, it may also help researchers identify possible interventions to slow declines in [cognitive functioning](#)," Hess says.

The paper, "Selective Engagement of Cognitive Resources: Motivational Influences on Older Adults' Cognitive Functioning," is published online in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. The work builds on research performed under multiple grants from the National Institute on Aging.

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