

155 - OLD AGE, QUALITY OF LIFE AND RELATIONSHIPS IN A COMMUNITY- BASED NURSING HOME

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The elderly population of Brazil is growing at an ever increasing rate, with projections for 2025 of around 32 million individuals (Kalache et al'). More studies of this age group are needed and public policies must be created to help this vulnerable segment of society.

Life is a biological process ranging from the birth to the aging of cells. Herein we find the divisions and stages through which the human body goes through until it reaches the stage we call old age. However, the concept of old age varies according to the times. The 50 to 60 age group was once considered old, but today, the World Health Organization has raised this range because of the sociocultural change surrounding the concept of old age.

Knowing how the elderly residing in nursing homes view themselves is our assignment at the Vila Vicentina Júlia Freire nursing home in João Pessoa, Brazil. Their conception is a result of their cultural view of the world and their perception of themselves in their own environment. Their relation with the institution and other residents and how they deal with their sexuality and feelings will affect their quality of life and life expectancy.

The present study consists of narrative interviews, which attempt to discover the physical space occupied by the elderly and assess quality of life within the institution.

According to BORN IN PAPALÉO (1996:524), ideally, the elderly would be able to enjoy the company of family, given that they have special needs that could be carefully looked after by individuals intimately involved with their feelings. This family contact could be the union of technical efforts and love that guides the individual into a calm old age, surrounded by caring loved ones. However, the reality is completely different from what we think is best for the elderly. Nursing institutions are full of elderly patients living precariously and without family support. Those receiving retirement pensions are able to pay for their housing and food, while others, share accommodations with individuals who, like themselves, receive no retirement benefits.

1. Daily living

The day to day at Vila Vicentina Júlia Freire can be summarized as a peaceful life, where the residents are restricted to the common areas and their private rooms. They usually enjoy talking about their early lives and their sadness about living far from their family. Some have been completely abandoned by relatives while others receive occasional visits from family members. Daily living provides new friendships that shape social relationships, leading to romantic involvements or animosities among the residents.

I had a bad night, I feel terrible. They called me for breakfast, but I didn't go! Eating would have made it worse! I wanted some avocado leaf tea, but I didn't have the energy to get out of bed. (Antônio, age 71)

This apparent fragility seems to indicate that this individual needs special attention. Antônio was complaining about something that he did not know how to explain. He was seeking help for his problem and at the same time showing a natural physical aging discomfort.

Aging affects us in different stages, among them, biological, economical and social. The first is the inevitable biological aging that causes a decline in natural body functions that intensifies over time. Socially, aging starts at 40 years and can be observed from the social pressure exerted on individuals, impeding them from leading natural lives, and restricting them to social functions within the age group to which they belong. This pressure comes from the media, which extols the cult of the perfect body through the social stereotype that the youth determine the future, among other cultural codes.

In the case of the Vila Vicentina, the residents are there for various reasons, among them the need to be among their peers, thus avoiding the embarrassing feeling of imposing on their families. Modern times have impelled individuals to a culture of the instant, the express, of time that does not wait, but which leaves people at the margins of productive society. This race against time to occupy social spaces, establishes rules whereby the winners are the best, the young and the healthy, much like sperm fertilizing the egg.

The social relations of the residents with their peers mirror those of the society outside the institution. Life is the same, full of quarrels, jealousy, envy and all the other emotions that are found outside the nursing home, in relationships among relatives and friends, and in the workplace. According to Simmel (1977), what makes society possible is the fulfillment of the individual through social processes. In Frisby (1992:108), Simmel affirms that "Society is a social labyrinth within which individuals and groups intersect". It is in these intersections that all types of conflicts are processed.

The sociability among nursing home residents shows that they are aware of living apart from society because of their advanced age and that they consider themselves a burden on their family. However, even though they realize why they are in the institution, the patients, especially the women, find social contact difficult.

The relationships among the women vary from tolerance to estrangement because of constant mood swings.

Personal and intimate objects are also of great concern among nursing home patients, a fact which causes them to be always watchful of their own territory.

"I don't want anybody's hand-me-downs. They come here by the truckful. It's not my pride. I just don't want them! I don't want a used bed, or used clothes! My wife says that the best thing a person can have is hygiene. Hygiene is very important. I don't know if the person giving me something has a disease or not. José, nursing home patient." (Juan, age 82)

José's concern shows the care he takes with his body, hygiene and his body image vis-à-vis the collective. For him, the care to not use the objects of others is his protection from the outside world.

The living conditions in a collective environment always reflect how people see themselves and the world. At Vila Vicentina Júlia Freire, we observe a natural concern with appearance among most of the residents.

The institutional environment itself attaches a social stigma, even though its aim is to care for the elderly separated from their family without any prejudice. Every institution is legally obliged to meet health care criteria and provide quality of life to the patients by offering physical and recreational activities.

It is this apparently negative environment that provides the elderly with an opportunity to socialize with individuals in the same age bracket in a common setting that might give them back their autonomy, given that they will be in the same situation as their peers. At the nursing home they live with other elderly individuals and visitors and form another social circle that brings new relationships. At Vila Vicentina, there are all types of relationships, such as courtships, engagements and married couples. Some are endorsed by the family, others are rejected, but all are formed within the confines of the nursing home.

In the institution in question, we followed the relationship of two residents who decided to get married. The groom justifies getting married in old age as follows:

A man can't live in the world by himself, and neither can a woman. I know a woman has value. A man without a woman is dead, finished! I do what I can for her and she does what she can for me (Ronaldo, age 92)

According to statistics of the Pan American Health Organization², the 60-85 year age group has proportionally the highest growth rates in the world. The tendency of individuals in this age bracket is toward isolation, caused by various factors, such as widowhood, lack of same-age partners or abandonment by the family who, concerned about work and social activities, have no time for their elderly family members. As a result, Federal Law 8.648 of 20 April, 1993 obliges sons and daughters to take care of their elderly parents. Nevertheless, a large number of abandoned elderly individuals seek nursing institutions or friends to spend their last years.

2. The reasons for bonds

The institution enables interactions between people with the same types of problems, which leads to other relationships, including friendship, love, solidarity and even marriage, following the same social rules of the society outside the nursing home. At Vila Vicentina Júlia Freire, we witnessed the marriage of two residents who met at the institution and decided to take care of each other.

The reasons for involvement in this case are more related to concerns about looking after the other partner, shared old age and less solitude than those concerning sex.

Ronaldo was taken by surprise lying in his fiancée's bed and reacted by saying:

"Nothing is going on; I'm not going to hurt her at all. I'm a man of God and I'll only sleep with her after, God willing, we're married." (Ronaldo, age 92)

His discourse shows a cultural morality, typical of his age and the region and illustrates the way of life among the elderly, who respect each other and display the moral conservatism of their upbringing.

Elderly individuals get married to strengthen their feelings for their partners and to fulfill a cultural ritual and way of life they are accustomed to. According to CAPODIECI (2000:183):

(...)most of the elderly consider living together out of wedlock a contradiction of their own religious and moral convictions.

The relationships are formed and strengthened by living together in a group in an environment that produces friendship, affectivity, love as well as aggressiveness, isolation, and animosity in some individuals. The relationships are always conflicting because people are different and have their own personal conflicts.

The quality of life in this institution is also directly linked to the care they receive and to how they relate to the social environment. The elderly residents take part in social and recreational activities and undergo medical examinations. This is part of the health care provided by the institution.

At the nursing home studied, the choice of romantic partner is not always related to sexuality, but rather to companionship and to having a person at one's side to take care of. The elderly that we interviewed affirmed that their choices were based on the character, manner of being, affection, background, respect, kindness, among other attributes that are conducive to living together. This was made easier by the close contact of living in a group in a nursing institution.

It is therefore clear that a nursing home environment has advantages and disadvantages in the lives of the elderly; however, it is considered a second home by all, a second chance for social communication that brings about the same conflicting family relations, even among individuals with no blood ties. Collective life has two sides and cannot be considered all bad or all good, since the ideal would be that all elderly individuals could continue living with their family and take advantage of this same-blooded "harmony" to lead a healthier life.

According to the Statute of the Elderly, elderly institutions are subject to civil and criminal penalties for acts practiced against individuals under their care. Furthermore, in addition to providing care, they must promote activities that are conducive to an acceptable quality of life or face closure.

The need to improve quality of life at all stages of life has stimulated an interesting debate on the theme. According to Rufino Neto, speaking about quality of life at the 2nd Congress of Epidemiology (1994):

I consider quality of life good or excellent if it provides minimum conditions for individuals to develop their maximum potential, that is, to live, feel and love, work, produce goods and services, science and art. What is lacking is the will to put the concept into practice.

Making an environment favorable for sociability and taking advantage of social space are essential factors for nursing home residents to be able to move about freely and calmly and enjoy a quality of life. This concept can be seen in the eyes of the elderly. If the look in their eyes seems distant, expressionless, we soon notice that an extra concern is hiding behind that supposed absence of expression.

Thus, it is common to see nursing home patients looking after each other. If they are well, everyone is aware, if they are sick, everyone knows because there is a feeling among them of belonging to a closed community. Therefore, it is common to find out about everyone even when a question is asked about only one. Life in a small community is marked by common concern about life itself as well as matters of individual and collective survival.

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OLD AGE, QUALITY OF LIFE AND RELATIONSHIPS IN A COMMUNITY- BASED NURSING HOME

ABSTRACT

The present article, is part of a research initiated in the year of 2006 in the Institution to put in a home Vila Vicentina Júlia Freire in João Pessoa - Paraíba, who has for objective, to observe the behavior of lodged in relation its personal life, socialization and way of life, being aimed at its corporal image. The lodged ones of Vila have its values based on the individual experience of each one. To value the corporal image arrives to be an almost instinctive attitude, in view of the care that the women and the men have with its appearance and the concern with what the others think. The experience in the Village has presented the relationships between the aged ones, and the way of them to face its sexuality and forms of relationship enters its pairs bringing á tona of this form the same conflicts that we find in the society it are of the shelter. The aged ones keep social relations, exactly living in separate rooms, where it keeps a social life in the collective environments that serve of a great square of socialization and collective life.

KEYWORDS: oldness, quality of life, relationships

VIEILLESSE, QUALITÉ DE VIE ET RELACIONEMENTOS A UNE COMMUNAUTÉ ASILAIRE

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article fait partie d'un travail de recherche qui a été commencé in 2206, dans une institution pour personnes âgées, un asile qui s'appelle Vila Vicentina Júlia Freire à João Pessoa- Paraíba. Notre objectif a été celui d'observer le comportement des asiles, leurs comportements envers leur vie personnelle, les interactions les uns avec les autres. Nous avons observe que la representation de leur sexualité et de leur corps. La valeur attribuée au corps a comme base l'expérience de vie personnelle et l'attention donnée à l'apparence et à ce qu'en pensent les autres. L'expérience à la Villa a dévoilé les relations entre les agés et les modes de traiter leur sexualité entre les pairs, apportent à la surface les mêmes types de conflits existant à la société où ils se retrouvent. Les asilés gardent des relations sociales, ils vivent dans des chambres séparées et individuelle tenant aux environs un lieu de socialisations et de vie collective.

MOTS-CLÉS: vieillesse, qualité de vie, relations.

VEJEZ, CALIDAD DE VIDA Y RELACIONAMENTOS EN UNA COMUNIDAD EN SITUACIÓN DE ASILO

RESUMEN

Este artículo es parte de un trabajo de investigación que empezamos en 2006 en una comunidad de personas idosas, la Villa Vicentina Julia Freire en João Pessoa- Paraíba. Nuestro objetivo fue lo de observar el comportamiento de los retirados con sus vidas personales, et sus interacciones con los otros. Observamos que la representación de su sexualidad et de sus cuerpos se basa en la experiencia de vida personal et la atención de la mirada de los otros sobre ellos. La experiencia en la Villa desveló les relations entre los idosos y los modo de tratar su sexualidad, demostrando los mismos tipos de conflictos existentes en la sociedad global. Ancianos mantêm relaciones sociales, incluso en habitaciones separadas, donde tiene una vida social en ambientes colectivos que sirven como una grande plaza de socialización y vida colectiva.

PALABRAS-LLAVES: vejez, calidad de vida, relacionamentos

VELHICE, QUALIDADE DE VIDA E RELACIONAMENTOS EM UMA COMUNIDADE ASILAR

RESUMO

O presente artigo é parte de uma pesquisa iniciada no ano de 2006 na Instituição asilar Vila Vicentina Júlia Freire em João Pessoa - Paraíba, que teve por objetivo, observar o comportamento dos albergados em relação a sua vida pessoal, socialização e modo de vida, visando a sua imagem corporal. Os albergados da Vila têm seus valores baseados na vivência individual de cada um. Valorizar a imagem corporal chega a ser uma atitude quase instintiva, tendo em vista o cuidado que as mulheres e os homens têm com a sua aparência e a preocupação com o que os outros pensam. O trabalho, a vivência na Vila, apresenta os relacionamentos entre os idosos e a maneira deles encararem a sua sexualidade e as formas de relacionamento entre os seus pares, trazendo à tona, dessa forma, os mesmos conflitos que encontramos na sociedade, fora do albergue. Os idosos mantêm relações sociais, mesmo morando em quartos separados, onde mantêm uma vida social nos ambientes coletivos que servem de uma grande praça de socialização e vida coletiva.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: velhice, qualidade de vida, relacionamentos

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