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# The meaning of old age and the aging experience of in the elderly

O SIGNIFICADO DA VELHICE E DA EXPERIÊNCIA DE ENVELHECER PARA OS IDOSOS

SIGNIFICADO DE LA VEJEZ Y DE LA EXPERIENCIA DE ENVEJECER PARA LOS ANCIANOS

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of the present study was to identify and analyze the meaning of old age and the experience of aging for elderly individuals living in the rural area of Ceará state. This descriptive, exploratory study was performed with 48 aged men and women, registered in the family health strategy of the rural zone of Ceara, in the first semester of 2005. The statements of the elderly revealed that old age brings many losses, mainly when they fall ill. They also reported, however, that, today, they are happy for the personal and material achievements, and for the family that they have. For the study group, the experience of aging and old age itself appeared to be a positive event when compared to myths and preconceptions of the urban environment.

## KEY WORDS

Aged.  
Aging.  
Health of the elderly.  
Nursing.

## RESUMO

O estudo objetivou conhecer e analisar o significado da velhice e da experiência de envelhecer para os idosos moradores da zona rural do Estado do Ceará. Pesquisa descritiva-exploratória, realizada com 48 idosos, homens e mulheres, cadastrados e atendidos na estratégia saúde da família da zona rural do Ceará, no primeiro semestre de 2005. Os discursos dos idosos revelaram que a velhice traz muitas perdas, principalmente quando acometidos pelo adoecimento. No entanto, relatam que, hoje, são felizes pelas conquistas pessoais e materiais, além da família que conseguiram formar. A experiência de envelhecer e a velhice para o grupo pesquisado revelam-se como acontecimento positivo, comparado aos mitos e preconceitos oriundos do meio urbano.

## DESCRIPTORES

Idoso.  
Envelhecimento.  
Saúde do idoso.  
Enfermagem.

## RESUMEN

El estudio tuvo como objetivo conocer y analizar el significado de la vejez y de la experiencia de envejecer para los ancianos habitantes de la zona rural del Estado de Ceará. Investigación descriptivo-exploratoria, realizada con 48 ancianos, hombres y mujeres, censados y atendidos en la estrategia Salud de la Familia de la zona rural de Ceará, durante el primer semestre de 2005. Las declaraciones de los ancianos revelaron que la vejez acarrea muchas pérdidas, principalmente cuando están afectados por alguna enfermedad. Aún así, relatan que hoy son felices por las conquistas personales y materiales, y también por la familia que consiguieron formar. La experiencia de envejecer y la vejez para el grupo investigado se manifiestan como acontecimientos positivos en comparación a los mitos y preconceitos originados en el medio urbano.

## DESCRIPTORES

Anciano.  
Envejecimiento.  
Salud del anciano.  
Enfermería.

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## INTRODUCTION

Old age should be understood as a whole because it is simultaneously a biological phenomenon with psychological consequences once certain behaviors are pointed out as characteristics of the old age. As in every human situation, old age has an existential dimension that modifies people's relations with time generating changes in their relations with the world and with their own story. Thus, *old age should not be understood in any other way than in its wholeness; and also as a cultural fact*<sup>(1)</sup>.

In this sense, defining old age is difficult mainly when one desires to be healthy while aging, as everyone currently wishes for themselves and for everybody else. Therefore, it should be understood in its wholeness, in its multiple dimensions once it is a moment in the biological process, but it is still a social and cultural fact. It should also be understood as a phase in the life cycle where, as chronologic age advances, there are modifications at a bio-psycho-social level that affect the relations of individuals with their social context<sup>(2)</sup>.

Therefore, to reflect on the meaning of aging and old age through what is reported by the elderly probably is a way of understanding the real meaning of old age, which would enable healthcare providers, nurses among them, to plan reality-based strategies able to enable the maintenance of the autonomy and independence of the elderly based on the parameter of understanding the modifications resulting from aging, mirrored in the old age, thus allowing improving quality of life according to the situation the health of the elderly is.

Those actions and plans are possible by understanding that old age is not an absolute conception once the real meaning of the changes resulting from the aging process is unique, such as the way each individual thinks, acts, questions and interprets and how that affects his life.

In this sense, the direction and length of those transformations should be thought considering people as a whole, what they were in the past, before this process. In this line of thought, some old people seem to be receptive to new experiences, they realize that old age is a broader and deeper phase in life during the existence. Others, on the contrary, remain rigid as to the changes characteristic of old age and the way of seeing and identifying old age. Thus, the way of thinking and the meanings attributed to old age and aging by each old person are founded on dynamic and continuous relations with the values the society attributes to aging and the influences every person suffers<sup>(3)</sup>.

In this sense, researching on old age is setting a challenge of conscience to the social moral which mistreats and rejects the elderly, who actually are those who have lived

many years and have significant experience to pass on to people, once the society only values individuals' physical status<sup>(4)</sup>.

Therefore, we consider that there is not an age universally accepted as the threshold of old age. Opinions vary according to the economic situation and cultural level, and even among scholars there is no consensus. Under a demographic standpoint, old age is basically approached through numeric limits. The medicine, public and private healthcare and cultural and bureaucratic institutions set a number that varies from 60 to 65 years of age to characterize old age. According to the World Health Organization, old age is fixed at 60 years old for developing countries and the third world, and at 65 for developed countries, a classification that involves the economic and social situation in each country<sup>(5)</sup>.

On this matter, while living among the elderly in the rural area during the activities of the Family Health Program (PSF) in the state of Ceará, Brazil, healthcare providers, particularly nurses, try to learn the meaning attributed to old age and the experience of aging for the local old people. The willingness to learn and reflect on the meaning can be seen in the attempt to improve the care provided to the elderly assisted and mainly to plan actions to provide care to this part of the population. The rural area is a place where there are fewer myths and prejudices against old age and the aging process.

In their activities healthcare providers tried also to sensitize the families and communities about valuing old people while transmitters of experience, mainly those related to agriculture.

In the Family Health Program the elderly receive guaranteed treatment inside a reference system, particularly those suffering from highly complex problems requiring hospitalization. There, healthcare education is also used as a strategy that allows sensitizing people to make a change in life style and reflect on old age with health.

Healthcare providers, nurses among them, are committed to helping the elderly and to provide care successfully according to the possibilities of technical-scientific knowledge, human capacities, professional context and resources available. They are also committed to respecting and having others respect old people's principles, their unique way of expressing the meaning of old age and of aging. By doing that they are able to implement activities to promote health and autonomy<sup>(6)</sup>.

## OBJETIVE

Therefore, the objective of the study was: to analyze the meaning of old age and the aging experience for the

elderly living in the rural area of the State of Ceará registered in the Family Health Program.

## METHOD

A descriptive, exploratory and predominantly qualitative research conducted with the elderly living in the rural area of Mauriti-CE registered and assisted within the Family Health Program.

Mauriti is located 498 Km far from Fortaleza and has 42,201 inhabitants. Its economy is based on agriculture, animal husbandry and commerce. The Family Health Program was implemented in 1998 and it assists 4581 families.

The sample was composed of 48 old people living in the rural area who voluntarily wanted to collaborate with the investigation and signed a free and informed consent.

A form was used to collect data containing questions about personal identification and two guiding questions, to-wit: *what means old age to you and how have you faced the aging process*. The collection was made during appointments at the waiting room or at home, at their choice. The objectives of the research were explained to everybody and the research was done from April to August 2006.

The research observed the ethical dispositions of Resolution 196/96. The local secretary of the health and the Committee of Ethics of the State University of Ceará gave their consent (Process no. 05050462-2).

## ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

Out of the 48 old people interviewed nine men and 39 women, the age range varied from 60 to 70 years old. As to education, all of them could only write their name. As to income, 33 women were paid the Brazilian minimum salary by working with handicraft. The others, six, were retired field workers and today they are housewives. As to the men, five earned more than a minimum salary, had income from local commerce and four, despite retired, and worked the field to complement their income.

Among the subjects, 35 old people reported to suffer from high blood pressure and diabetes, nine had arthritis and four had only high blood pressure.

Working with an aged population in the rural area is to experience the wealth of diversified experiences and meanings. The daily contact with them is translated into an exchange of knowledge and the wealth of reports of a multiplicity of cases.

We can see pride in them and they seldom think about old age as a negative moment in their life story. Old age arrived unperceived in subjects' life, was legitimated with the pension, which was common among them. This perception by the nurses becomes relevant because it implies

a change in the paradigm to qualify healthcare providers once it breaks the hegemony of the technique-based qualification, to look for qualifying to humanize, to bring political awareness and to transform daily life<sup>(7)</sup>.

So, when researchers observed that the elderly in the rural area were dynamic in their actions, they effectively participated in agricultural activities and social movements of the city, the need of learning what they thought about old age and the aging process was intensified.

As to old age and the aging process, the elderly reported moments of dependence and losses. However, they also illustrated their experience under other perspectives:

I like being old because God has helped me come to this point. I'm satisfied [...] being old has not brought me any problems, I do everything I used to do, even suffering from high blood pressure, I take medicines. That's it, old age has been good to me... (Mr. A).

We can't be young or old all the time. When I was young I used to ask God to let me die when I was 50, but once it didn't happen, I'm moving ahead, but I'm satisfied with my old age. I keep on taking care of myself, I take my medicines, I feel fine. It hasn't brought any problems to me as I thought it would. What is important is not to neglect your health... (Mrs. S).

Ah! Old age, as I feared! I thought it would be too heavy! Today I've found out it is not heavy at all, old age is inside each one of us. Isolating yourself is foolish. One has to live his life (Mr. J).

According to some interviewees, being healthy in the old age is associated to religion. The most marking idea is that being healthy in the old age is a gift from God. It is clearly a religious conception, i.e., that the aging process and good health are associated to God's will and that unknown forces and spirits are the variables determining and conditioning the status of being healthy or sick in the old age for people with the alterations proper to the aging process<sup>(7)</sup>.

It was also observed that old people need to believe in themselves and accept the changes inherent to the aging process, accepting losses but perceiving them as possibilities of taking up new interests and opportunities to continue to learn and experience new situations. That is why it is important that healthcare providers plan educational, labor and leisure activities for the elderly in the communities where they work, thus drawing participants' interest to the importance of staying healthy while aging<sup>(8)</sup>.

Finding or creating reasons able to give meaning to the life of the elderly seems to be an objective always present in the actions of healthcare providers dedicated to taking care of them regardless the context where they are inserted.

While people get older, their quality of life is mainly determined by their capacity of maintaining autonomy and independence. Most aging people are afraid of old age because of the possibility of becoming dependent as a re-

sult of illnesses or because they are no longer able to do their daily chores. This strengthens the approach of a healthy life, which means to compress morbidity and prevent incapacities.

For all old people, aging favors remembering moments deemed relevant in their lives; in their speeches we can perceive a mix of joy and sadness related to the aging process and old age as described next;

Old age, when it come, is good for certain things, but bad for others. Sometimes I feel brave enough to do everything, and sometimes I just can't do anything. Being young is just different. In my case, there are pains that get in the way; when I was young I didn't have this disease, these pains (Sr. P.).

Old age means many things. Sometimes you feel sad, sometimes, joyful. Some nights I can't sleep, but I feel happy anyway, I have my family and I do what I like, I plant corn, cotton and when I can't do that, I plan beans...

On the other hand, subjects also said that old age means interrupting the activities they use to do satisfactorily which they would like to keep on doing, mainly those related to work. They say old age is like a vehicle that brings health changes that prevent them from doing things they liked to do, or did easily in the past, differently from others and successfully. They also compare old age to the proximity of the end of their dreams.

I can't hear any more, I go on with my life, I don't work in the fields any longer because of my back. When I was young, besides working hard in the fields, I enjoyed dancing, I just loved it! (Mr. Z).

To me, dear, old age has only brought disease [...] this is the end of my life, death is coming. I'm not what I used to be, someone who was always happy with almost nothing, who always wanted more and the best for my family. As I've gotten older my diabetes and blood pressure got worse and I stopped working. Now I just help doing some chores at home, at my daughter's home (Mrs. R).

Old age brings a number of significant losses, such as chronic-degenerative diseases, widowhood, friends and relatives' death, absence of valued social roles, increasing isolation and financial difficulties. Those losses may affect the self-esteem of the elderly and a crisis situation may follow. They may also lose their courage to face those losses, or feel incapacitated or fragile to face them, when professional intervention may be required<sup>(9)</sup>.

Old age for the elderly sometimes has a positive meaning or is associated to suffering. The elderly point out the situation of getting sick as something that compromises their functional capacity, mainly when the disease causes pains which prevent them from working, dancing, socializing and/or maintain stronger ties with friends like in the old days<sup>(8)</sup>.

They also say that the hammock is their comfort and companion, it is where they can remember the good mo-

ments lived when they were young but, nevertheless, they remain active and believe that currently they are in a better situation. Their lives are calmer, they have no concerns.

Old age! It's good, I keep on fighting and sometimes I miss my life when I was young, active, worked the whole day in the fields, went to parties and on the next day I was just fine. Then the responsibility associated to being an adult, wife, children and the need of saving some money for our things, our obligations and responsibilities. Today I have my own business. I sometimes miss the old days. But my life is calm and I feel happy. So, being old, getting old has been good because it went smoothly for me. I have no problems with old age... (Mr. M).

Therefore, we can understand that old age is a complex process of changes in people's life path. Every context has its particularities which will change the life style of each and every one. The ways of reporting the meaning of old age and the aging process for the elderly will depend on how that person lived and how they adapt and face daily challenges. The impacts of old age are faced differently depending on the story of their personal life, availability of affective support, of social networks, of the system of personal values and life style adopted by each one of them.

Old age seems to go smoothly when a person led an emotionally rich life, full of experiences. Maybe losing youth and beauty becomes less painful when new values replace them<sup>(6)</sup>.

Therefore, we could verify that in the old age human beings are bound to have evolving losses in several areas as a result of their genetic programming, of biological, psychological and social events characteristics of their individual story and events that happened during the history of every society. However, saying that in the old age there are more losses than gains is not the same as saying that old age is synonym of disease, nor that people are prevented from getting involved in other activities. Living means adapting or the possibility of constant self-regulating oneself, both at biological level and at psychological and social level<sup>(9)</sup>.

There is a contemporary trend towards reviewing stereotypes associated to growing old. The idea of a process of losses has been replaced by consideration that the most advanced phases in life may be propitious moments for new accomplishments driven by a search for pleasure and personal satisfaction. The experiences lived and the knowledge accumulated are gains that offer opportunities of exploring new identities, implementing projects left behind in other phases, setting more profitable relationships with the world of the young and old people<sup>(9)</sup>.

In consonance with this idea, the elderly also expressed that the body might be getting old, but it would still serve all purposes. It might be different from what it used to be, but it worked more wisely. These thoughts are expressed as follows:

Dear, I don't regret anything I've done, I'd do it all over again, but I'd give my right arm to think as I do now but had

my 30, 35-year-old body. You'd never guess what I would do. I'd do everything better (Mr. T).

I've always taken good care of my body and now I take care of it even better, I need it, I've always need it. Even with the wrinkles, walking with difficulty, the pains. And there is more: controlling the diabetes and high blood pressure is not too difficult. If it weren't for the diseases, the body would be fine, I know it. It is a prize to be alive (Mrs. M).

Liking their old body, with its needs of care and love, requiring more training to have it *work* properly, patience because they do not always remember how the day was<sup>(10)</sup>, is a kind of happiness that they have learned from experience, that old age can be better thought and discussed without the myths and prejudices imposed by the society. People should get excited with something inside their own situation, but outside their pessimism<sup>(9)</sup>.

Subjects' speeches were also marked with memories of the past in comparison to the present. The quality of the current life is defined in terms of the characterization of the phase in life, a moment with more freedom as opposed to a past, when they were young, when oppression victimized them.

I already know what it is like to be young, I experienced it. When I was young girls couldn't go anywhere, couldn't do what they wanted, parents wouldn't allow it. We had no freedom, didn't do many things, the boyfriends had to ask your parents to see you (Mrs. M).

The speeches, predominantly of women, disclosed that they miss their youth, physical vigor, unwrinkled skin, besides physical strength for house chores and in the fields. However, they believe that currently their moments with their children and grandchildren are irreplaceable and happy

... I miss the old days because of my youth, the beauty lost, my posture, my physical strength for work, I'd help my husband in the field, I was good at mathematics. Today I've lost my youth, my memories fail sometimes, and I don't feel like adding, subtracting, etc. My mind doesn't work well any more, like in the old day. But I'll tell you very honestly: today I'm very happy with my accomplishments, with the things my husband and I were able to do, with my children and grandchildren. I have a great sadness in my life, because I lost my husband last year. I can't recover my joy. Old age also does that, it takes away those you love very much. He was very sick.... (Mrs. R).

I'd like that time could go back, but I see every day that this is impossible. So, you have to accept old age, with its wrinkles, memory losses, because I'm always forgetting something. But my children are the best thing. This one helps me all the time, mainly with my businesses. I always ask him for help when I can't understand something. To be young and smart is something else. That's the only thing I regret, but I like being old, people respect me. Here everybody knows me and respects me for what I know and can teach (Mr. P).

For old age to be a positive experience it should be accompanied with continuous opportunities of health, participation and security. At the end of the 90's the World Health Organization called this process *active aging*. The expression was chosen with the intention of passing on a message more complete than *healthy aging*, and to acknowledge that the factors and the sanitary attention affecting the way individuals and populations age were the pain references<sup>(11)</sup>.

The society nowadays essentially values youth, even being aware that aging is a normal process affecting all human beings and, by having a negative view on this period of life, it leads the elderly to have this same idea, which is one of the preconceived meanings of old age. Lack of knowledge of this process leads people to absorb and pass on false perceptions that contribute, both direct and indirectly, to isolate and speed up the aging process<sup>(12)</sup>.

Therefore, it is known that men and women face the aging experience differently. This is not about who adapts to it better or worse. All interviewees tried to differentiate their own experience from that of an old person in general: in this sense, all of them actually resist to old age instead of trying to adapt to it. An old person is always someone else; old age – a disturbing reality<sup>(1)</sup>.

Women adapt to old age better than men once while they grow older they maintain a network of exchanges, they provide services, mainly related to taking care of their grandchildren, keeping a close relationship with their family and descendants. This approach, however, assumes that old age is an experience common to both genders. Thus, it is acknowledged that each person grows old in their own way and they can either lead an active life or find it difficult to find pleasure in life or become extremely dependent of others.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the group researched the meaning of old age and the aging process is perceived, according to the speeches, as a good situation although subjects get nostalgic when they talk about their youth, mainly related to their functional capacity for work and leisure. For the women, old age is marked by the loss of the beauty of the youth and the wrinkles. Nevertheless, they are happy because they are close to their children and grandchildren.

It was also observed tranquility related to the changes during the aging process. They regret their illnesses, loss of posture and lack of participation in activities such as agriculture. However, as to old age, they are aware of the responsibility of the whole existence and that they should share the satisfaction of being subjects of the current history.

Old age is also reported as loss of health involving aspects that the elderly evidenced as independent from age. The influence of the conditions people have experienced during their life is determined by the loss of quality of life,

which progressively wears out the organism and leads to aging, markedly precociously for some study subjects.

Therefore, it is known that the society tries to change its concepts, mainly those related to old age and the aging process. Today people are willing to understand old age, divulging innovations and possibilities of participating in daily activities, either in agriculture or in commerce related to men, as presented in the research.

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