

Body and aging: discourse on the bodies of institutionalized elderly citizens

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The Brazilian population has been aging rapidly since the beginning of the 1960's when the decline in fecundity rates began to alter its age structure, progressively narrowing the base of the population pyramid. Due to the increase in life expectancy and the resulting increase in the number of elderly people, dramatic changes in people's lives have been seen (Chaimowicz 1997, quoted by Danilow *et al.*, 2007).

The insertion of a greater number of family members in the job market raises the question of whether the elderly should stay at home. In certain situations or times, the capacity of the family to care for the elderly may become an obstacle to the autonomy of the family members, be it due to the demands of everyday life or the impossibility of finding one or more family members who are willing to and can be accountable for the care for the elderly. In this case, institutionalization becomes one of the solutions to the problem.

Institutionalization is a reality which has been presenting more and more demand due to demographic, social and health factors (Davim, 2004). Law No. 10.741 of October 1st (2003), which deals with the National Policy for the Elderly states that, in the case of Institutions of Prolonged Stay for the Elderly – (the ILPI in Portuguese), the aims are: to provide assistance to the elderly "who do not have any family ties or who cannot provide for themselves so that they can meet the needs of the elderly in regards to housing, food, health and social interaction" or "who are dependent on others, and/or independent but who are in a state of social vulnerability".

When people's views on the body are analyzed, studies demonstrate that they are permeated by social and personal significance. Regarding the elderly's views and perception of their bodies, there are gaps indicating the need for more in-depth studies, which is justifiable due to the complexity and heterogeneity of the theme of body in general and, especially the body of the elderly.

According to Blessmann (2004, p. 27), “since old age is a stage, just like childhood and youth, it is in it that wherein the most dramatic moment of changes in body image occur, since it is hard to accept an aged image in a society which has the beauty of youth as a point of reference”. The elderly’s body image adjusts itself gradually during the process of aging, however, it can undergo alterations due to pathological impairments or motivational disorders which may affect changes in physical activity (Monteiro, 2001). This image can also suffer distortions due to the negative views regarding old age, which are based on the false idea that aging always generates incompetence (Okuma, 1998, quoted by Marcelino, 2008).

According to Schilder (1999), body image is the representation of the human body, formed in the mind, in a sense that it is this body that is presented to one’s self and to the world. The perception we have of our bodies is influenced by the concepts and values of society and it is also structured through social contact. We create this image from our sensations, but we are influenced by what society thinks of and idealizes about our body (Schilder, 1999; Tavares, 2003).

It is in this perspective that this study sought to verify, through the testimonies of the elderly, which aspects they consider when referring to the perception and view they have of their bodies, as well as to develop reflections on these discourses.

The sample of this study was obtained by convenience, gathering 09 senior citizens; three men and 6 women, ranging from 60 to 96 years of age. All of them live in an ILPI in the city of Juiz de Fora – MG.

The institution researched was chosen intentionally, due its easy access by the researchers, with the objective of being a pilot study. The interviews were carried out after the signing of a Free and Clarified Consent Term and approval by the Ethics and Research Committee of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora on the date 20/05/2010 as protocol number 2057.116.2010.

A semi-structured interview with socio-demographic data, as well as a question on perception and view of the elderly’s bodies. were used as research tools. The testimonies were literally transcribed and analyzed qualitatively, as per Bardin (2008). A brief discussion was made regarding which aspects they

consider when referring to the perception and view of their bodies. The demographic data were used to give more consistency to the study.

Three views were found in the interviews. One of them was “positive”; another one regarded mainly the perception of “diseases”, which is a “biologicist” view of the body; and, in some testimonies, we have found the influence of the concern with “esthetical” cares and beauty.

In this study, the major prevalence was the positive association of perception and view of the body. “I am feeling very much alive.” (*Mr. A*); “*I like to live, I’m happy and have good children.*” (*Mrs. B*). This shows, in an adverse way to the negativity of aging that these senior citizens can face this stage of life positively. And, according to Cícero (1997, quoted by Marcelino, 2008), the elderly has the power to build a positive image of old age and of the process of aging and this stage of life consists not only of losses, but also of positive changes.

Nevertheless, “many experiences lived by the elderly in this process are not entirely positive since they contain social marks and symbols which end up preventing the senior citizen from doing everything he or she would still be able to do” (Ferreira, 2006, p.64). As such, the association of the perception and view of the body towards illnesses, commonly found in this stage of life, was also observed. “Health is something I do not have, right?! *Because...it’s bursitis here, pain in the femur, pain in the back.*” (*Mrs. Z*); “*I cannot perform the same activities I could before. I cannot walk on my own, I do not have the balance.*” (*Mrs. N*). Related to this perception of the body, Withbourne and Skultety (2004) show that the experiences of health and disease have deep implications on the quality of life of the elderly and interfere dramatically with the individual, regarding his/her feelings on life or death.

Aside from that, one can see in one discourse the biological view of the body. This one presents itself as simply a machine which operates depending on fuels, “*I think that for the body to survive it needs care, right? Hygiene, food, rest and fun...all these things are of fundamental importance in the survival of the human being, right?*” (*Mr.T*). When emphasizing the question of his perceptions he demonstrated that he did not stop to think about his body – because that would not have any effect.

As Marcelino (2008) states that this demonstrates that “the entire historical process of one’s life, all of the perceptions and experiences lived along one’s

existence, are major factors in trying to understand and comprehend the body of a human being” (p.40). Analyzing the thought of this author and the discourses, we can highlight the presence of the influence of the aesthetical concepts which permeate us. “*I try to put on a perfume, always have my hair clean, combed, especially for visitors at meal times.*” (Mrs. D); “*I like to be well groomed, and I enjoy having my nails and hair done.*” (Sra. Z). This reinforces how meaningful these truths which are proposed to us are and how much we accept them.

In this work, discussions were raised regarding the social, biological and physiological interpretations which a group of institutionalized senior citizens have of their bodies. We were able to gather information which demonstrates a positive perception of the body, as well as an increase in expectations of the views and perceptions of the senior citizens' bodies. However, by means of the analysis of the literature and of the interviews, it is evident that the perceptions of the body differ significantly, which does not allow us to make generalizations at this time.

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