CHALLENGES OF AGING AND THE PARTICIPATION IN THE OPEN UNIVERSITY FOR THE SENIORS: PERCEPTION OF THE ELDERLY

DESAFIOS DO ENVELHECIMENTO E A PARTICIPAÇÃO NA UNIVERSIDADE ABERTA À TERCEIRA IDADE: PERCEPÇÃO DE IDOSOS

DESAFÍOS DEL ENVEJECIMIENTO Y LA PARTICIPACIÓN EN LA UNIVERSIDAD ABIERTA DE LA TERCERA EDAD: PERCEPCIÓN DE LOS ANCIANOS

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Objective: to analyze the perception of the elderly on the challenges of aging and of their participation in the Open University for the Seniors. Method: exploratory-descriptive study with qualitative approach, performed with elderly participants of the Open University for the Seniors in a Brazilian capital. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews from September to October 2016 and analyzed using Thematic Content Analysis Technique. Results: three thematic categories emerged: "aging: conquest, freedom, opportunity and stage of the life cycle"; "the challenge to face the changes and society's view of aging" and "the Open University for the Seniors as a tool to face the challenges of aging". Conclusion: the participation of the elderly in the project Open University for the Seniors is a positive tactic for the individual and social inter-relations, presenting benefits assertive for his/her quality of life.

Descriptors: Geriatric Nursing. Aging. Aged. Education. Universities.

Objetivo: analisar a percepção do idoso acerca dos desafios do envelhecimento e de sua participação na Universidade Aberta à Terceira Idade. Método: pesquisa de natureza exploratório-descritiva com abordagem qualitativa, realizada com idosos participantes da Universidade Aberta à Terceira Idade de uma capital brasileira. Os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevista semiestruturada de setembro a outubro de 2016 e analisados por meio da Técnica de Análise de Conteúdo Temática. Resultados: emergiram três categorias temáticas: "envelhecimento: conquista, liberdade, oportunidade e etapa do ciclo da vida"; "o desafio de enfrentar as mudanças e o olhar da sociedade diante do envelhecimento" e "a Universidade Aberta à Terceira Idade como ferramenta para enfrentar os desafios do

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envelhecimento". Conclusão: a participação dos idosos no projeto Universidade Aberta à Terceira Idade é uma tática positiva para as inter-relações sociais e individuais, apresentando benefícios assertivos para a sua qualidade de vida.

Descritores: Enfermagem Geriátrica. Envelhecimento. Idoso. Educação. Universidade.

Objetivo: analizar la percepción de los ancianos sobre los desafíos del envejecimiento y de su participación en la Universidad Abierta de la Tercera Edad. Método: estudio de tipo exploratorio-descriptivo con abordaje cualitativa, realizado con ancianos participantes de la Universidad Abierta de la Tercera Edad de una capital brasileña. Los datos fueron recolectados por medio de entrevistas semiestructuradas de septiembre a octubre de 2016 y analizados por medio de la Técnica de Análisis de Contenido Temático. Resultados: emergieron tres categorías temáticas: "el envejecimiento: la conquista, la libertad, la oportunidad y la etapa del ciclo de la vida"; "el desafío de afrontar los cambios y la mirada de la sociedad delante el envejecimiento" y "la Universidad Abierta de la Tercera Edad como berramienta para enfrentar los desafíos del envejecimiento". Conclusión: la participación de los ancianos en el proyecto Universidad Abierta de la Tercera Edad es una táctica positiva para las inter-relaciones individuales y sociales, presentando beneficios asertivos para su calidad de vida.

Descriptores: Enfermería Geriátrica. Envejecimiento. Anciano. Educación. Universidades.

Introduction

In the current context, the increased number of Universities and Groups of Coexistence for the Elderly is accompanied mainly by the ability to mobilize the elderly, promoting the redefinition of values, attitudes and behaviors related to new meanings assigned to this life stage, so that they can receive new treatments, as a worthy and fair condition, in the search for pleasure and no longer as a process of losses. Aging is a natural and dynamic process that reaches all beings, associated with biopsychosocial and spiritual factors⁽¹⁾.

The social aging brings changes in the roles of the senior in relation to the family, work and society, thus setting an actual challenge because of the need to adapt to this new reality. Furthermore, the aging process has reflected in the inter-relationships between a person and his/ her social context, from life experiences, whether in training, education, social construction or in labor relations. Such inter-relationships vary from individual to individual, being gradual for some and more dynamic and accelerated for others. These variations, in turn, depend on factors such as socioeconomic conditions, presence or absence of chronic diseases and especially the life style of each person⁽¹⁾. In this way, when the elderly experience the retirement, the perception of bodily changes and finitude, their self-esteem can be damaged, which can affect their relationship with themselves and with the other and favor social isolation and depression⁽²⁾.

In this context, and with the significant expansion of the elderly population as a global phenomenon, governmental actions are necessary to meet the particularities of this age profile⁽³⁾. In Brazil, social tools, such as the Coexistence Centers and, specifically, the Open University for the Seniors (UATI), are spaces intended for the appreciation and active participation of the elderly, complying with public policies.

The elderly person, according to the Law n. 10,741, of October 1, 2003, which disposes about the Byelaw of the Elderly, has the right to education, culture, sports, leisure, entertainment, differentiated access to shows, products and services respect his/her peculiar condition of chronological age. In addition to these rights, it ensures the provision of courses and programs of extension in the modality of formal and nonformal activities, with the public body responsible for providing conditions that aim to support the creation and development of open universities directed to the elderly population (4).

Thus, the UATI has a commitment to intensify actions that aim to appreciate the knowledge of the elderly, thus enabling the development of skills and abilities that respect the life experiences of these people, in particular the diversity of knowledge and ideas.

The educational, health and social programs planned by the teachers from the UATI for the elderly aim to promote a balanced and successful aging, so that the declines peculiar to the age itself can be mitigated by the benefits obtained through participation in the activities offered in this space of coexistence and exchange of experiences. The proposal is an education focused on coping with the challenges of aging, so that the elderly can overcome the adversities imposed by age, acquire knowledge and skills, and expand the social bonds⁽⁵⁾.

This contextualization allows inferring that the space of UATI presents characteristics of a program of interactive activities, offered at no cost to the users and with the purpose of being a center for teaching, research and assistance focused on issues of an aging population. This fact justifies the development of studies that can give visibility to a program of such magnitude.

Considering the extension activities undertaken in partnership between professors and students of the nursing graduate course with the UATI of a public university in a city in the state of Bahia, the following question emerged: What is the perception of the elderly on the challenges of aging and their participation in the Open University for the Seniors?

The objective of this study is to analyze the perception of the elderly on the challenges of aging and their participation in the Open University for the Seniors.

Method

This is an exploratory and descriptive study with a qualitative approach, performed at a university extension program that develops activities of the Open University for the Seniors (UATI) in the city of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil.

The research was developed after consideration and approval of the research project by the Research Ethics Committee (CEP) of the Medical and Public Health School of Bahia under Opinion n. 1.703.006 and met the standards for researches involving human beings, according to Resolution n. 466/2012 of the National Health

Council. All participants were informed about the study and signed the Informed Consent Form (ICF), being informed about the measures to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality about the origin of the data obtained.

The data collection occurred between the months of September and October 2016, during the activities developed in the UATI. The participants were selected through the list of the enrolled in a curricular component offered, which counted with 55 elderly people. The inclusion criterion was being attending the UATI and duly enrolled in the component "Identity and Memory". The exclusion criterion established was having sporadic attendance in the activities of the UATI.

All the elderly people were invited to participate in the research and the interviews were completed, based on the criterion of data saturation, at the thirteenth interview. The delimitation of the number of interviewees occurred when the content was sufficient to allow the depth, breadth and diversity of the process of understanding the social group studied⁽⁶⁾. The semi-structured interview contained subjective questions that sought to meet the study objective: What does aging mean to you? What are the challenges of aging? How was your life before and after your participation in the UATI?

The interviews lasted an average 15 minutes and were recorded, after the participants' authorization, aiming to assimilate the contributions in an expanded way. As the interviews occurred, they were transcribed, until there were no different conceptions that could add new inferences, being able to provide innovations in the record units. After the whole process of organization of the statements, there was the grouping of the information on the perception of the elderly on the challenges of aging and the search for the contributions that the UATI provided them. The participants were identified with the letter "E", followed by a cardinal number, corresponding to the order of occurrence of the interviews, with the purpose of preserving anonymity.

The analysis technique used was the Thematic Content Analysis⁽⁷⁾, which unfolds in stages of preanalysis, in which there are the floating reading and data preparation, allowing researchers an involvement in relationships and impressions regarding the content of the interviews; the next step, the exploration of the material, allowed the understanding of the intersections and signs related to the speeches. Of these, clippings were performed in the meaning units, through analysis and selection of fragments from the interviews that expressed the perception of the elderly on the challenges of aging and their participation in the UATI. After the identification, the meaning units were assembled to enable the representation, inclusiveness and diversity in the process of understanding of the object under study. The last step, the inference, enabled the treatment and the interpretation of the results.

After the analysis, three thematic categories emerged, namely: Aging: conquest, freedom, opportunity and stage of the life cycle; The challenge to face the changes and society's view of aging; The UATI as a tool to face the challenges of aging.

Results

The participants were 12 elderly women and 1 elderly man belonging to the age range from 70 to 80 years. Regarding the elderly women, five had as profession "teacher", three "seamstresses", one "saleswoman", on "accountant", one "executive secretary" and only one "housekeeper". The elderly man reported "writer/entrepreneur of tourism" as profession. All women reported being retired, as well as the elderly man. In relation to the elderly women, four had "complete basic education"; one, "complete secondary education"; four, "higher education". One reported "incomplete basic education" and the other two, "incomplete higher education". The elderly man reported "complete higher education". The time of frequency in the UATI ranged between 2 and 17 years. In relation to marital status, three of them reported being unmarried, one married, five widows and three divorced, whereas the elderly man was divorced. The categories that emerged from the analysis explain the phenomenon of the challenges of aging and the participation of the elderly in the UATI.

Category 1 – Aging: Conquest, freedom, opportunity and stage of the life cycle

This category expressed how the elderly perceive aging, while stage of life full of conquests, losses, freedom, opportunities, learning closely linked to the resignification, to seeking knowledge and new activities.

It's a life experience. I feel I'm at a good age. I think it's good, I think it's great to be old! (E-1).

I think it's a gift God gives some people. My whole family is elderly, 60 and so, 70 and so. My mother and father died at 85. (E-2).

I'm in the best phase of my life. In my old age, for me, it was all good. (E-5).

Getting older is living well, right? Because you seek to, like me and other colleagues, we seek to study, right? (E-6).

It's spending all our lives, raising kids, then [...] I think it's great, because it gives us a new life. I think, in aging, I've improved a lot than when I was younger. (E-8).

I like being what I am now, because I'm free. I don't have to ask for anyone's consent, I just communicate. Because thank God I'm that age, but completely lucid, I drive, understand? I expected to be horrible; for me, it has changed, because I accepted it! (E-10).

Now my life is much more stable. I've got much more control over my life, I have the programming [UATI], I'm freer to choose where to go. There are certain losses, but at the same time, there are gains! I think I'm having a quality of life. (E-12).

Everything that is born, one day ages... it's normal. You just have to knowhow to age... You can get old with an almost perfect health, right? Because there is no perfect healthy health, in which you can travel, go out etc.... or aging sick, which is called old, right? Today, in psychology and identity and memory, we're called elderly, there may be the young elderly... as I am. I recite, sing, I lecture, I make poses to pictures. (E-13).

Other meaning units also illustrated the aging only as a part of the life cycle accompanied by loss of functionality resulting from body changes followed by a frailty condition, being accepted as the only option.

It's time going by, right? We're born, time goes by, and we get old. (E-3).

There comes the grown age and then the aging. For me, that's all! Getting old, as far as I know, is that. A life stage. (E-4).

I think that getting old is accepting the age's limitations! (E-7).

It's decreased life, activities, even of our cells. Our body loses vitality. (E-9).

Category 2 – The challenge to face the changes and society's view of aging

In this category, the context units revealed that the challenges faced by aging related to illness, reduced mobility and the presence of chronic symptoms arising from diseases, in addition to the search to keep physical, domestic activities, the care with the other, as well as leisure.

I'm 74, I exercise, dance, go to college [UATI], do the bouse chores, do the dishes, iron, cook, look after my grandson, children and everything, and still have [time] to take care of myself. (E-5).

Restriction of our muscles, our limbs. I have to get up, I have to challenge, this is a challenge! (E-6).

A thing that really bothers me as I get older is that we have difficulties in movement, pain, illnesses that appear. And we have to adapt and live with them. (E-9).

We have so much pain, right? And you have to deal with all of that. I think this is difficult. Looking at it this way, it's challenging! (E-10).

I have some restrictions, hypertension, and I'm undergoing treatment there, because I'm falling a lot, I'm having a lot of problems with falls. My tests are all normal. So, it's my challenge with old age, thank God! Because so many people, when 60 or more, don't even walk anymore, right? (E-11).

The results showed the challenge faced by these people, regarding the stigma of being elderly in a society concerned with the aesthetics and with pre-established standards that harm autonomy and disregard the achievements with the aging process. The manifestations of third parties, who consider the elderly incapable, unproductive, almost a hindrance to society, emerged because they are strongly present in the daily life of the elderly, thus causing social isolation and mental suffering. Furthermore, being in the university was also considered challenging, due to the misinformed, restricted and limiting view of society.

It's challenging to come to the UATI, I ended up here because of my pain. It was when my son died. (E-4).

There are differences, right, how other people treat us. We feel this lady thing, you know. You either throw yourself like us, or you stay back there, you are abandoned by society, society doesn't know you! It's a challenge. (E-6).

It's to accept what others think about you. When you say you are old, for example, you think you are fine, that you look great, but someone comes and says "you can no longer do this, that you are too old for that ..." It's a challenge! Then you have to show that you are able to do that. (E-7).

We have to make ourselves accepted, we have to keep up to date, we have to accept a lot that within the age, the standard, I would not like to accept, but I have to accept to survive, to be a person again. Because, if not, we become an old-fashioned, crabby old lady. I try not to be a very advanced ridiculous old woman, but always keep myself at an acceptable standard. (E-12).

Category 3 – The UATI as a tool to face the challenges of aging

The elderly considered the UATI a coexistence space that provided improves in the quality of life, by being an environment of socialization, time occupation with dynamic and interactive activities, promoting well-being and self-esteem. The elderly also emphasized how they felt welcomed and motivated, as well as considered the environment of the UATI as an extension of their family. The meaning units presented below reveal that the university is a tool for promoting mental health of the elderly.

There was a big change. My life improved, because of my contacts with colleagues. You know other people, you renew yourself. Here's my family. I feel younger, renewed. I feel well in here, see? I love it! (E-1).

My happiness increased in here. (E-2).

I came here because I was in pain [...] I was devastated, very depressed, so a person that used to come here brought me. So, I came without willingness, but, later, I saw I should stay. Here we have colleagues to chat, good teachers. That's it, I've been here for a long time and I feel well [...] here's my second home. (E-4).

I used to vegetate, not live. I used to have an agitated life, worked, looked after my son. After I came here, I felt renewed. (E-5).

You feel welcomed, you're part of what you want, you don't feel ashamed of getting to a place, saying what you feel, being who you are. It's a huge incentive! I do everything a young person does, even more! (E-6).

The UATI is also a space for those who are preparing to live their retirement with dynamics and social interaction. For one of the elderly women and the elderly man, there has been a preparation of life for the aging and the university space came as a complement to this process, after all a previous planning.

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I got here after my retirement. Here's great for me. You socialize, make friends with people at the same age range, who understand many things you've been through or may go through. It's so good to be here! (E-10).

Well, let's say that the UATI helped me 10 to 15%, right? I already had an active life. I'd worked for 34 years with tourism, met people all around the world. So, I mean, everything I have, everything I know, let's say that 90% were taught by my experience with tourism. (E-13).

Discussion

The way the elderly experience their own aging process is influenced by the interaction between psychosocial, historical, political, economic, geographic and cultural aspects, with emphasis on differences related to the context of daily life, their beliefs and personal characteristics, making each elderly person unique. Thus, there is a direct relationship between the conception of old age rooted in the society in which the elderly are inserted and that built by themselves in their aging process⁽⁸⁾.

The aging process goes through a social and vital process, loaded with many generational facets in a social, political and individual context. It tends to occur directed by three different dimensional levels: biological, emotional and social^(2,8). Aging in the biological dimension involves different biochemical/hormonal changes, as well as in anatomy and physiology, peculiar to the aging process. These changes are accompanied by a gradual weakness of organic capabilities. The emotional dimension refers to the person's behavior in relation to himself/herself or to another and is connected to the changes of attitude and limited capabilities. The social aging has a close relationship with the moral norms of interaction with the collectivity. The society, based on the age criterion, begins to control the behavior in specific activities or practices of an age grouping inserted in history⁽²⁾.

Such changes were observed in the results of this research, presented in the first category. These converge to the prospects of perception of some elderly women, covering the opportunity of adjustments to their own aging conditions as part of the life cycle, with losses and gains for freedom, independence, learning opportunities, growth and new achievements. The self-image,

recognized in the lines as resulting from the biological guidelines, is completely rooted in the limitations imposed by age. This understanding moves them away from the meanings, senses, sensory dimensions and life experiences.

The age imposes its limits and needs to constitute a social role, a temporality, a prestige; it needs to be named and present to society its distinct characteristics. However, in everyday life, there are the prejudices associated with age-related situations or characteristics. Various terms and expressions have been assigned to the word old, such as: best age, third age, grown person, senior, long-lived, among many others. These characteristics consider that, in our western society, marked by a capitalism that overestimates aesthetics and consumerism, being old is synonymous with frailty and physical, psychological and cognitive disability, dependence, submission and loss of autonomy (9)

There is an existential dimension in the aging process that ends up modifying the entire relationship of a person's life with his/her chronological time, in addition to the relation with the world and his/her own history. In this context, a study⁽⁹⁾ showed that the aging must be analyzed in order to be considered as a biological manifestation accompanied by cognitive and psychological consequences.

When considering the chronological time, this refers to the possibility to enjoy the moments, the possibility of being here, living the present. Thus, life can be lived without having to follow social dictates imposed by modernity. This seems to be a rule to be complied with by all⁽⁹⁾.

In this way, the negative results of aging direct their efforts to the possibilities in relation to the care with the appearance, aesthetics, as well as for the self-control regarding risk factors for the vulnerabilities to diseases of the physiological process of aging. From this perspective, there is a new look for the age, as a heterogeneous phenomenon, in which events such as physical and cognitive decline and the process of illness are experienced in different ways by individuals⁽¹⁰⁾. Thus, the context units resulting from this research pointed to this perception, when demonstrating that the UATI enables the

sharing of experiences, providing those seniors with a new meaning to their lives.

Concerning those elderly women who recognize the growth opportunities, it is worth highlighting the peculiarity of having a keen sense of psychological adjustment that allows them to develop their resilience power. This is discerned through a process of self-discovery and acceptance, which enables a condition and favors less conflict regarding the acceptance of the deleterious consequences of expected vulnerabilities relating to the aging. Moreover, it provides management, resilience and recovery from the negative stressing effects, through the use of personal strategies that can be characterized by a state of healthy, active, functional, optimistic life loaded with meanings, good self-esteem, positive affect, life purposes and self-control in the management of the vicissitudes of age⁽¹¹⁾.

It is important to integrate such coping strategies with social resources, such as active participation in the community, involving them in social discussions and decision-making, maintaining an active role in society and use of resources that enable the interaction and relationship with the collectivity, such as the participation in programs such as the UATI.

Denying one's own old age mobilizes the omnipotence and obscures the perception that aging can also be a possibility of existence. Frequently, the elderly says that "the age is very ugly". This repulsive image is perceived as the reverse of ideal image. Thus, when the ideal fails, there appears the "ugliness". One of the most prevalent prejudices is the issue of age linked to passivity; the elderly would have little emotional availability and little capacity to learn⁽¹²⁾.

The results of this study refer to a contextualization, when allowing us to understand that aging can be associated with a good phase of life, the search for independence/autonomy, even if associated with decreased capabilities of the organism, which physiologically is analog to human nature. There is a resignification, through adjustments that some authors entitle as psychological aging, whose consequence is the occurrence of readaptations, inadaptability and readjustments⁽¹³⁾

The second category refers to the challenges to face the changes and the society's view of aging. There is a difference of interpretation regarding the perception of aging as an ability for personal growth, but also as only an acceptance of aging-specific social and physiological limitations. The greatest concern is not with the aesthetics, but with the loss of autonomy and independence, being crucial to emphasize how essential it is to promote the insertion of the elderly in the active and dynamic social context, allowing them to work the limitations, the need to preserve the independence and autonomy.

To understand this category, it is important to define the "active aging", understood as a possibility to leverage best health status regarding the expected changes of aging; ensure the dynamic participation in the social context, in favor of quality of life. Importantly, the word "active" should be understood as a dynamic process of participation of the elderly in discussions and decision-making on social, cultural, economic and spiritual issues. In these circumstances, they can discuss and act in the defense of their ideas, according to their life history and knowledge. With this, one prevents the wrong understanding that the term "active" is restricted to physical or labor activities, paid or not⁽¹⁴⁾.

Keeping active throughout life promotes biological, emotional and social health gains, providing quality of life for the elderly. Thus, the strategic planning for an active aging should base on the rights of the elderly. It should allow the recognition regarding equal opportunities and respect the way each elderly person deals with the peculiar aspects of his/her life history. One must avoid keeping the focus on the needs from a derogatory view that the elderly are a passive being without autonomy. Thus, he/she will be respected and supported regarding their responsibilities in the exercise of their autonomy and participation in decision-making processes, as well as those relating to aspects of life in society⁽⁸⁾.

The social and economic demands have increased as the global aging reached the 21st century. This process has entailed major challenges, such as those related to economic, social and cultural issues that involve the

participation of the person, the family and the community in a global perspective. This scenario demands from society new skills and abilities to deal with the demands arising from demographic trends⁽³⁾.

In relation to these challenges, this research revealed the perception that the aging is a provocation beyond the subjectivity of the being, but, above all, is a challenging act for the maintenance of autonomy and independence in the completion of activities of daily life.

This perception, however, in not broad. Therefore, the capitalist societies, concerning the scenario of a process of social inequalities, are responsible for developing a dynamic of social mobility, focusing on the different features of aging - health, body and longevity - with challenges beyond social groups. It is essential to broaden discussions to overcome the issues of prejudices about the aging and reach the aspects linked to the prejudice against unassisted and less economically favored strata⁽¹⁰⁾.

Another challenge identified was unveiled by the citation of negative stereotypes of old age in the physical, cognitive and aesthetic aspects and their negative influence on physical and mental health of the elderly. Defining the subject by age causes real damage to the mental health of the elderly, reducing their desire to live. The problem becomes more difficult because the prejudice and stereotypes about aging tend to be recognized not as serious problems, but as "fun truths—and, thus, the ageism perpetuates in the lines of our society. It represents a clear and direct threat to healthy aging⁽¹⁵⁾.

Individuals who redefine and avoid such negative descriptions see aging as a time for ongoing growth, with positivity, socialization and activity and tend to show results of mental and physical health significantly better than their peers with greater pessimism⁽¹⁵⁾. The elderly women and the elderly man in this study saw the UATI as a way to give new meanings to their lives.

In this context, the meaning units exposed the aesthetic and bodily adaptations as a challenge that was associated with beauty, as a contemporary custom influenced by the current aesthetic standards. The aesthetic experience of an expression reveals a duality between images appreciated and depreciated, which are expressed in different ways of understanding and feeling the reality of old age. When unveiling the appearance of the aged body, the women confess their feelings in relation to the experiences of the years lived in an entanglement of beauty and ugliness. It is an attentive look at the body and soul, which follows rules, behaviors and principles. The perception of beauty is abstracted in the uniqueness of the appreciation and love dedicated to themselves. It is through language that the body presents itself as the bearer of meaning⁽¹⁶⁾.

Feeling active in this reality implies a view of joviality that requires updating and attitude of professional, social, intellectual and sexual activism. Thus, considering the social and coercive dictates, to assume such roles, the elderly need to embrace their potential to exercise the micro powers in each occupied space⁽¹⁷⁾. Being part of a program as the UATI is a way of putting themselves in such devices, resisting the social demands and placing themselves before them, demonstrating their positions.

Subjectively, there is a process of identification with this view, with the exercise of joviality, with the willingness to be up-to-date and accept the changes in society, in addition to the attempt to keep themselves active in several areas. In contrast, there are points of resistance, such as beliefs and the option for certain leisure activities, in which the subjects slide and constitute themselves through practices considered more traditional. Thus, one understands that these subjects are becoming older, elderly, which they did not allow themselves to cease to be in their entirety⁽¹⁷⁾.

In this way, the elderly need incentives and means to structure the rupture of barriers based on social adversities imposed by aging and invest in spaces that foster self-esteem, creativity and biopsychosocial support. The policies and programs linked to this paradigm do not reflect the reality in its totality, because there is a portion of the elderly that remains independent and actively participates in the work force, especially in developing countries⁽⁸⁾.

In this way, aiming to maintain a good satisfaction with life, programs for continuing education for the elderly, provided by universities and other sources, contribute to the assessment of their own path of development and commitment to society, in addition to considering their own commitment to seek an ideal of personal excellence⁽¹⁸⁾. We can say that living the experience of aging as a privileged moment of life can also be learned in an educational establishment.

In Brazil, there is a significant amount of UATI, influenced by similar programs developed in Europe, with origin in France, at the end of the 1960's, which received the designation of "Free Time Universities". These aim to provide care to the elderly population with a view to improving their quality of life. Psychoeducational interventions are developed to enhance knowledge and skills, in order to encourage the elderly to feel accepted and understood in their skills and abilities, taking into account their potential, as well as their difficulties and limitations⁽¹⁹⁾.

The present study found that some elderly people managed to re-invest in their unfinished talents and projects, duly adapted to their current moment of life. When asked about how their life was before and after participation in the UATI, aiming to understand the implications of the aging of an active senior, the interviewees described positively such participation.

It is essential to strengthen the senses of "negativity", "accomplishment" and "competence". To do this, the elderly need to become involved with new projects that allow developing their skills and help transform their latent desires into actions that give meaning to their life. For this purpose, there is need for support from governmental institutions, with public policies that develop interventions, allowing integrating the elderly population into the social context, thus strengthening the promotion of a healthy aging (20).

With this, a dynamic participation in programs such as the UATI poses new challenges that may contribute to the ongoing active participation of the elderly to make their life more dynamic and interactive.

The UATI is perceived as a coexistence center that contributes to the social interaction in addition to a network of full and singular support. Thus, it plays a relevant role and potentiates the active participation of the elderly, in addition to promoting the exchange of experiences and fellowship among those who experience the old age.

It is worth highlighting the moments experienced by the elderly regarding losses, such as the loss of companions, spouse or longstanding friends with whom they shared the life. They are painful and difficult experiences, because they approach them to the possibility of imminent death, resuming the conflict between the experienced intimacy and the situations of isolation. With this, the coexistence in the program is an opportunity to share such experiences and recognize that one's life story can also be many others', glimpsing the reality that death is part of the life cycle and we need to learn to deal with it. The UATI provides this opportunity to create bonds and share knowledge, in addition to constructing a new sense of mutuality and social interaction, which was evidenced in the results of this study, based on the elderly's statements.

Another important point to be discussed is the planning of the post-retirement life, considering the need for reorganizing the planning of time, which becomes idle, due to the absence of labor activities. This requires a strategic plan for new experiences, whether remunerated or not, to give meaning to this time previously filled with paid work.

A literature review indicates that this preparation for retirement is an indispensable strategy to maintain the quality of life of the elderly completing their cycle of labor activity. Therefore, the preparation for retirement should be a practice in working environments, so that people, when approaching retirement, can rearrange their everyday life without the work, giving meaning to their lives and feeling useful (21).

For that individual with socioeconomic support structure for retirement, leaving occupational activities and staying in a common space, such as the UATI, which sees the maintenance of insertion into activities that involve sociocognitive dynamics and psychoeducational activities with ongoing planning and development, provides stimulus

and adherence, besides the resignification of the erroneous conceptions about old age, positively affecting his/her life.

Some limitations of the study include its development in only one UATI unit, as well as the difficulty to compare to other similar studies, due to their scarcity, which allows suggesting the development of further investigations in other realities.

Conclusion

The results showed the existence of a significant social prejudice in the life of the elderly, making the aging a process with major challenges related to the process of becoming ill, reduced mobility, presence of chronic symptoms, the quest for maintenance of physical and domestic activities and care with the other/family. In this sense, the elderly sought strategies to overcome them, and their participation in the UATI was a positive tactic that led to benefits conducive to a better quality of life.

Understanding the multidimensionality of the aging process, the spheres that integrate the social, economic, political, functional and clinical contexts, was crucial to understand the subject to whom we refer in health and educational services. Understanding the aging and its challenges in the perspective of the elderly tends to favor directly health professionals, especially nurses, to understand the context of the universe that encompasses the fields of human life, seeking psychosocial well-being.

The study contributed with the main role and the social participation of the elderly, considering them as active subjects. Reflections on the performance of the elderly in society are expected to be fostered, which can be considered one of the greatest challenges faced by the elderly, unveiled by the speeches of the study participants.

Collaborations:

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2 – writing of the article and relevant critical review of the intellectual content: Juliana Araújo Castilho, Maria Olívia Sobral Fraga de Medeiros, Jacilene Santiago do Nascimento Trindade dos Santos, Juliana Bezerra do Amaral and Rudval Souza da Silva;

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