


Another understanding of old age, from Psychology**Otra comprensión de la vejez, desde la Psicología****Outra compreensão da velhice, da Psicologia**Larissa Beatriz Turtós Carbonell 

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***Corresponding author:** lturtos@uo.edu.cu**Received:** 30-04-2024 **Accepted:** 18-09-2024 **Published:** 29-09-2024**ABSTRACT**

Aging has become an increasingly visible and worrying phenomenon for countries and scientists around the world. Due to the decrease in birth rate and mortality, the advancement of technologies, mainly medicine, and migratory processes, old age has grown significantly around the planet, being more acute in developed countries, which already show concerns about the scarcity of resources available for this sector in the coming decades and the increasingly extensive demands. Today humanity tries to restrict some of its manifestations and consequences by resorting to local, national and international programs. World organizations began to address the issue at the end of the 1970s and proposed objectives and measures aimed at improving the quality of life, health care and social security, and establishing social support systems for the population, older adult population. Working on the topic privileges a conception of development, implies reevaluating the biological and medical-

physiological criteria that have emphasized the vision of old age as deterioration, illness and death. Thus, this article provides a psychosocial understanding of old age, by emphasizing the human and subjective nature of the aging process and focusing on the broad development possibilities that the course of life offers us up to this sociopsychological moment.

Keywords: older adult, aging; psychology; psychosocial understanding

RESUMEN

El envejecimiento se ha convertido en un fenómeno cada vez más visible y más preocupante para los países y científicos del mundo entero. Debido a la disminución de la natalidad y la mortalidad, al avance de las tecnologías, fundamentalmente de la medicina, y a los procesos migratorios, la vejez ha crecido significativamente alrededor del planeta, siendo más aguda en los países desarrollados, los cuales ya muestran inquietudes ante la escasez de recursos que disponer para este sector en las próximas décadas y las demandas cada vez más amplias. Hoy la humanidad intenta restringir algunas de sus manifestaciones y consecuencias al acudir a programas locales, nacionales e internacionales. Los organismos mundiales se empezaron a ocupar del tema a finales de la década del 70 del siglo anterior y se plantearon objetivos y medidas destinadas a mejorar la calidad de vida, la atención en materia de salud y seguridad social y a establecer sistemas de apoyo social para la población de adultos mayores. Trabajar el tema privilegia una concepción del desarrollo, implica revalorar los criterios biologicistas y médico-fisiológicos que han enfatizado la visión de la vejez como deterioro, enfermedad y muerte. Es así que el presente artículo brinda una comprensión psicosocial de la vejez, al enfatizar en el carácter humano y subjetivo del proceso de envejecer y enfocarse en las amplias posibilidades de desarrollo que nos brinda el transcurso de la vida hasta este momento sociopsicológico.

Palabras clave: adulto mayor, envejecimiento; psicología; comprensión psicosocial

RESUMO

O envelhecimento tornou-se um fenómeno cada vez mais visível e preocupante para países e cientistas de todo o mundo. Devido à diminuição da natalidade e da mortalidade, ao avanço das tecnologias, principalmente da medicina, e aos processos migratórios, a velhice tem crescido significativamente em todo o planeta, sendo mais aguda nos países desenvolvidos, que já demonstram preocupações com a escassez de recursos disponíveis para esta setor nas próximas décadas e as demandas cada vez mais amplas. Hoje a humanidade tenta restringir algumas das suas manifestações e consequências recorrendo a programas locais, nacionais e internacionais. As organizações mundiais começaram a abordar a questão no final da década de 1970 e propuseram objetivos e medidas destinadas a melhorar a qualidade de vida, os cuidados de saúde e a segurança social, e a estabelecer sistemas de apoio social para a população idosa. Trabalhar o tema privilegia uma concepção de desenvolvimento, implica reavaliar os critérios biológicos e médico-fisiológicos que têm enfatizado a visão da velhice como deterioração, doença e morte. Assim, este artigo proporciona uma compreensão psicosocial da velhice, ao enfatizar a natureza humana e subjetiva do processo de envelhecimento e focar nas amplas possibilidades de desenvolvimento que o curso da vida nos oferece até este momento sociopsicológico.

Palavras-chave: idoso, envelhecimento; psicologia; compreensão psicosocial

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INTRODUCTION

Every culture assumes a legacy about old age and aging. Stereotypes and social representations about old age and the elderly have dismissed the advantages of age and have generated a fear of aging associated with illness and death.

Although it is recognized as a natural process, it is conditioned by contextual, personal, economic, and even socio-psychological variables such as lifestyles and lifestyles; idiosyncratic and unique influences that define the experience of each individual and organize a sense of life and way of living this life, different for each human being.⁽¹⁾

Old age, on the other hand, can be considered as another stage of life: the last one, where the individual can become aware of the achievements and failures of his relationship with others and with himself, including his past self and his future self; the possibility of having reached maturity and even wisdom is glimpsed as the pinnacle of this process of personological development from the integration and processing of the experiences acquired during his life. If aging is a process, old age is the final stage of it.

However, the aging process has been treated in a biologicistic way and the “old” in an instrumental way, in such a way that they are only worth what they can contribute to the survival of the society in question (which explains in part the decadence they have reached in our times according to the values privileged today in our societies).⁽²⁾

On the other hand, everyone wishes to reach many years of life but, at the same time, old age has been for centuries associated with death, so it has been both desired and feared, this being one of the many indicators of one of the most contradictory stages of the life cycle of man, if not the most complex.⁽³⁾

The reflection that is imposed now is: if we are aging since we are born, why do we only worry about its consequences when a certain type of deterioration is evident and certain limitations cannot be solved? The subjects acquire preparation for each significant event in their lives: to become parents, to become professionals, to live as a couple; however, we do not do it with the longest and most inevitable process we live. If we do not organize, plan and guarantee the ideal way to live, grow and age, how do we expect to have a healthy old age?

It will therefore be in the interest of this conference of the First Regional Research Workshop for the Development of Support Technologies for the Elderly CENPIS of Universidad de Oriente (November 2023) to address two fundamental aspects of this process: the first, focused on distinguishing the peculiarities that psychological theories have determined for the elderly, by offering a possible ideal profile of development based on the harmonious integration of processes such as aging, death, the meaning of life and the responsibility of living this process, with emphasis on the notion of role and experience of old age itself.



The second direction implies identifying from which type of psychology we are going to approach this stage of development. In this sense, non-normative theories that emphasize interindividual differences and different patterns of development should be favored. A theory such as the life cycle⁽⁴⁾ that assumes gains and losses as processes inherent to each stage and visualizes development as a process of adaptation and personalized experience of these gains and losses. Without dismissing the normative theories of development, such as the cultural-historical approach,⁽⁵⁾ which contribute significant elements to understand the place of mediations and culture, as well as the role of the other in psychological development, are redefined.

This approach to the concept of growing old promotes a vision in which the criteria of normality and pathology lose value, and highlights the potential of each person based on interpersonal differences, which shape a life history. Such psychology, then, will not only serve to diagnose and classify disease, progress or regression at each stage of the life cycle, but will allow a more contextualized and historical understanding of development and of each subject, in his individuality and in his group.

DEVELOPMENT

What does it take to achieve healthy aging? If we age from birth, can we speak of healthy aging at all stages?

It has already been understood that the biological process implies a gradual, constant and irreversible aging, which begins to happen from the embryonic moment, therefore, in order to move to the next stage of our life and reach higher levels of development, it is unfailingly necessary to age. From this perspective, even from a biological perspective, development could be understood as part of aging. However, at some point in the life cycle this aging, in addition to placing gains and advantages, begins to impose a biological deterioration at the level of cells, organs and the whole of each organism. People begin to have less physical capacities but contradictorily, associated with processes of selection, optimization and compensation of our own resources and the contributions of the environment, socio-psychological capacities begin to be maximized.⁽⁶⁾

This apparent contradiction is resolved by understanding that the graph of biological development, at some point in the life cycle, is separated from psychological development, since they are conditioned by different indicators. However, the normative theories, biased by the biologist vision of Medicine, did not manage to conceive or explain development beyond the stage of youth,⁽⁷⁾ even though in both theoretical conceptions chronological age was assumed only as a starting point to understand development, but not as a determinant of it.^(4,5)



For its part, the life cycle theory⁽⁴⁾ provides us with substantial principles for conceiving other influences on development, which not only mark a chronological age and a biological age, but also a psychological process based on the subject's encounter with the surrounding environment, thus determining other developmental influences associated with gender and history, which would determine a social age and a psychological age. In addition, life experiences that impact everyone in different ways are privileged, generating resources or deficits depending on how they are lived at each moment.

This vision of the life cycle, which also determines asynchronism in personal and social development, allows us to understand it as an opportunity for each human being depending on his or her life history, the social environment that surrounds him or her, with the incorporation, of course, of the biological part of each being.

From this perspective, then, psychological development is dynamic, dialectical but continuous, which would determine in each stage of development greater formations and better functioning than in previous stages. Seen in this way, aging and psychological development would be homologous, marking cultural and, at the same time, individualized lines of development.

This allows us to understand two fundamental theses:

- Old age is a social construction, determined by the conception that each society has of this phenomenon and the patterns they determine for going through this stage in each culture.
- The old age of each individual is a psychosocial process, which implies that regardless of the chronological and biological standards imposed, we do not all reach old age at the same time or in the same way.

Therefore, in order to understand and deal with those who live in old age, we must understand the context in which they have lived and live, as well as trace their life history. It is not possible to make a social characterization of old age, but of old people in a given historical context and time. In turn, to understand and deal efficiently with those living in old age, we must also probe our values and stereotypes.

Thus, to understand old age, one must understand aging by conceiving it from the earliest stages of life.

What would it mean then to age healthily in childhood or adolescence or in old age? In essence, it would mean adapting biological changes to social demands through the incorporation of psychological contents that allow this adaptation.



Aging is then understood as the necessary learning to successfully pass through the different moments of the life cycle until reaching the current age, with sufficient personal and social resources to face the challenges of the stage, in addition to the social stereotyping that marginalizes and excludes. The necessary balance between aging and psychological development is then evident, confirming the possibility of following similar curves of evolution. Thus, successful aging is conditioned and conditions psychological development and its customary progress through the stages of the life cycle.

Successful aging is then a human and social aspiration, even when the factors that would allow this yearning are not materialized in the individual and social consciousness.⁽⁶⁾ It is important to understand from which perspective we are going to assume the real possibility of achieving such aging.

The first frames an individual capacity: successful aging would be conditioned by prevention and health promotion actions. Losses, according to this approach, are caused by subjective and personal processes under the control of the individual subject, such as lifestyles, diet, and even the types of relationships maintained, so that successful aging would be the result of individual choice. Although these elements are very important for successful aging, overestimating them would imply revictimizing the older adult who has not been able to develop a healthy old age and forgetting some elements such as genetics, accidents, economic conditions, possibilities of access to services, among others.

The other variant proposed for successful aging emphasizes the functioning of the young population by envisioning health, educational and aesthetic practices aimed at maintaining youthfulness and postponing the effects of aging. This responds to the well-known stereotype “whoever wants to be young should be young”, which maintains the stigmatization of old age, and declares that aging well means maintaining the characteristics of eternal youth.

Above all, this vision incorporates today the values privileged by consumer societies:⁽⁸⁾

- The simplistic cultural model: beginning, fullness and decay.
- Physical-biological ideology, which reduces the human being to a pure connection of cells that obviously age and deteriorate. Ideology of “old-ageism” or ageism.⁽⁹⁾
- Privileged values in Western society such as: consumerism, beauty, speed and effectiveness.
- Deficient relationship Technology-Development.

Finally, we can highlight the last proposal to explain successful aging, related to those behaviors that allow each of us to perform optimally, associated with what mobilizes us and is meaningful to us. This last line of thought emphasizes potentiality and the possibility of change based on the insertion of the individual in situations that enhance development and opens the door to timely interventions by community and health agents in order to direct the aspiration of successful aging and healthy old age, not only for those who from an age point of view are part of this group, but also for society in general, which undergoes this process. Therefore, it could be proposed that:



“(…) Healthy aging is the process of developing and maintaining the functional capacity that enables well-being in old age. Functional capacity comprises the capabilities that enable a person to be and do what is important to him or her. There are five key domains of functional capacity, which environmental factors can extend (or restrict). These are: meeting basic needs; learning, growing and making decisions; being mobile; and being purposefully engaged in life through maintaining interpersonal relationships and participating in meaningful activities to contribute to society. It is the capacity not only to survive, but also to thrive in old age. It is a multidimensional concept that encompasses, transcends and surpasses good health”.⁽¹⁰⁾

It is understood then that good aging is associated with the intention to remain functional, useful and happy. It is associated with a life with meaning, intention and motivation.

This possibility of healthy aging assumes man as a coexistential and temporal being, that is, social, historical, creative, dynamic and projective, where the first project is “to be able to be”. Therefore, the meaning of life is inscribed as an articulating element of healthy aging. Thus, the lack of meaning in life is expressed in several behaviors visibly common in this age group: disregard for life, but at the same time fear of death, little or no useful and creative social activity, little or no personal satisfaction with the way of life and the tasks performed (often not chosen by them), weak or unsatisfactory family relationship and poor access to formal and informal integration networks, lack of future prospects or life plans. The lack of meaning in life, which is translated in psychology as the difficulty in “being able to be”, constitutes the antagonist of this quality of good living and good aging, and generates processes of “death in life”.

“As an anthropological constant, in all cultures there is a way of dying without disappearing physically: social death, civil death, death by the breakdown of meaningful relationships (...). The destruction of meaningful ties is already a disease and a stigma (...). The consideration of this kind of death (...) perhaps clarifies the association between dying and aging”.⁽¹¹⁾

It is common for older adults to experience this possibility of dying while alive, in the first place, through the invisibility they begin to suffer in their community, which, assumed as not being there for others, is recognized as a social death. This in turn generates the loss of the meaning of life (already mentioned), as they are unable to synthesize their own aspirations.

The poor possibility of having a reference group, of being able to satisfy their needs and desires, culminates in the rejection of the characteristics that society imposes on the stage, so they live with the possibility, social and not necessarily real, of death, loneliness and disease. This generates a desire not to be what they already are and deconstructs their sense of identity in favor of marginalization and stigma. This situation also generates progressive depersonalization processes that lead to mental illnesses and limitations, which induces psychological death when there is evidence of slowing or stagnation of the developmental processes foreseen or necessary at this stage,⁽¹²⁾ which inevitably brings physical death forward.



Thus, healthy aging implies learning new roles and shaping new meanings of life. Learning is required at all stages of life to face the psychosocial challenges of progress.

Successful aging articulates the unfolding of all the potentialities allowed by the psychological development achieved up to previous stages, as well as the efficient use of experience and insertion into the environment to develop a functional and full life.⁽¹³⁾

Thus, although aging and old age cannot be stigmatized from a single developmental profile, good aging would imply the satisfaction of certain needs:

- Need for communicativity: relating to one's environment and belonging to a group. To maintain social relations and personal expression without censorship and discrimination.
- Need to choose according to values and beliefs: to direct the meaning of one's life and not only according to the meaning of others.
- Need to learn: continuously about oneself and one's changing environment.
- Need for self-fulfillment: to feel satisfied with oneself by maintaining an active life and achieving one's needs and projects. Transcend in others.

And the development or health of the older adult would respond to indicators also applicable to the rest of the stages of the life cycle:

- Harmonious relationship between the different types of age (chronological, biological, social, psychological and functional).⁽⁶⁾
- Healthy transit through the previous psychological stages.
- Complexification and resizing of the psychological structure and functions, according to the activation of behaviors that respond to the demands of the environment.^(5,6)

CONCLUSIONS

Age is not an indicator of deterioration, or on the other hand of progress or psychological evolution. It is necessary to value the diversity of older adults, their ways of inserting themselves and living the stage and their ways of aging.

In addition to the recognized biological deterioration, the main loss of old age is related to the reduction of spaces and relationships, which place the older adult in a frank process of disengagement and depersonalization, which establishes progressive processes of psychological and social death, in which many older adults live before reaching physical death.



Achieving a successful old age depends on the healthy ways of aging that have been established since the early stages of life and on the efficient use of the psychosocial resources developed in those stages to cope with the demands of the environment in old age itself. Therefore, success in old age depends on the same factors that condition development in previous stages, only modified by the barrage of prejudices and stereotypes challenged at that stage, so we must expand resources for effective coping. In this way, today we are responsible for the elderly of today, and for the elderly of tomorrow.

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