

Perception of nursing undergraduate students on self-aging

Percepção dos graduandos de enfermagem sobre o seu envelhecimento
Percepción de los estudiantes de enfermería sobre lo propio envejecimiento

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to analyze the perceptions of nursing undergraduate students on their self-aging process. **Method:** qualitative study carried out between August and September, 2011 with 18 nursing undergraduate students of a public university in Salvador, Bahia. The interviews were analyzed by means of the Content Analysis method. **Results:** the following thematic concept was apprehended: Perceptions of nursing undergraduates on their self-aging, which generated two subcategories: A) The “don’t think about it” process; B) The context influencing the process. **Conclusion:** undergraduates reveal that the aging process is an intrinsic factor to human development. Family ties, spirituality and physical activity would be key mechanisms toward active aging. However, students also reported that their accelerated and stressed social lifestyles led to inadequate habits, such as the consumption of fast food and alcohol, which become negative influences in their aging process.

Key words: Nursing Students; Aging; Nursing Baccalaureate.

RESUMO

Objetivo: analisar a percepção dos graduandos de enfermagem sobre o próprio envelhecimento. **Método:** pesquisa de abordagem qualitativa, realizada em agosto e setembro de 2011, com 18 graduandos de enfermagem de uma Universidade pública de Salvador (Bahia). Os depoimentos foram analisados por meio da Análise de Conteúdo. **Resultados:** apreendeu-se o núcleo temático: Percepção do graduando de enfermagem sobre o próprio envelhecimento e, a partir deste, emergiram duas subcategorias: A) O Não Pensar; B) O contexto influenciando no processo. **Conclusão:** os graduandos revelam que o envelhecimento está intrínseco ao desenvolvimento humano, e possui o vínculo familiar, a espiritualidade e atividade física como ferramentas fundamentais para um envelhecimento ativo. Entretanto, os mesmos relatam que, o modo de vida acelerado e estressante vivido na sociedade possibilita inserir hábitos considerados inadequados, como o consumo de “fast food” e álcool, que trazem influências negativas para o próprio processo de envelhecimento.

Descritores: Estudantes de Enfermagem; Envelhecimento; Bacharelado em Enfermagem.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: analizar la percepción de los estudiantes de enfermería sobre su propio envejecimiento. **Método:** estudio cualitativo, realizado en agosto y septiembre de 2011, con 18 estudiantes de enfermería de una universidad pública en Salvador/Bahia. Los datos fueron analizados através de análisis de contenido. **Resultado:** incautados el tema central: Percepción de alumnos de enfermería sobre su propio envejecimiento y de esto surgieron dos subcategorías: A) No creo; B) El contexto influye en el proceso. **Conclusión:** los estudiantes revelan que el envejecimiento es intrínseco al desarrollo humano, y tiene los vínculos familiares, la espiritualidad y la actividad física como herramienta clave para el envejecimiento activo. Sin embargo, el mismo informe que, debido a la forma de vida que se vive en la sociedad de ritmo rápido y estresante permite insertar hábitos considerados inadecuados, como el consumo de “comida rápida” y el alcohol y convertirse en influencias negativas para su propio proceso tuvo como objetivo analizar de los estudiantes de enfermería su propio envejecimiento.

Palabras clave: Estudiantes de Enfermería; Envejecimiento; Bachillerato en Enfermería.

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INTRODUCTION

Human aging is characterized as an essential process of life and inherent to human development. It also stands out as a continuous, permanent process with several different social and personal meanings⁽¹⁾.

The social representation of the aging process depicts a handful of differences, in conformity with the analyzed group age. Adolescents and adults usually connect the aging process to human losses and deem this process to be quite a difficult phase; yet, they also realize that as years go by they may often bring more wisdom, experience and knowledge. Senior citizens, on their turn, share the ideology of the "good age", and consider that being old depends on each person's mindset and attitude⁽²⁾.

Within this context, aging individuals seek to demystify the identity built by aged people from past times and try to turn it into a more autonomous, active and successful process by means of the adoption of behaviors and practices that value the human being as a person capable of playing any of the roles performed by other people⁽³⁾.

Nonetheless, the knowledge of undergraduate students on the aging process is still very much grounded on common sense, highlighting stereotypes found in society, such as dependence, abandonment, sadness and lack of value⁽⁴⁾.

In face of these facts, the present study observed that nursing undergraduates realize that the care offered to people undergoing aging processes is very similar to models they have regarding the aging process, and that these models often address a narrow, derogatory perception of an aging process loaded with stereotypes created by society and family relationships⁽⁵⁾.

In this sense, the comprehension of how seniority, old people and the aging process are understood and represented allow society at large and especially the aged population to envision the behaviors and feelings related to this critical process⁽⁶⁾.

Allied to these presuppositions, we believe that the awakening of reflections that could help reorient such issue allows for the apprehension of new subsidies aimed at the preparation of care action plans toward the aged person, adding up to the intention of amplifying concepts currently bound by myths and prejudices regarding the aging process nursing undergraduate students have.

The attempt to define the aging process by isolated parameters, without taking into account other factors, is a mistaken undertaking. Even the perception of seniority in society is quite divergent. Many people perceive it based on the age criterion; others, on moral and cultural values; others address their social locus; and there is a whole array of other conceptions still left out in this discussion⁽⁷⁾. In the aging process, the body assimilates several different debilitating transformations throughout the years⁽⁵⁾.

The negative associations related to the old age have perpetuated century after century. Even today, with so many resources available to prevent and postpone diseases, the aging process is feared by many people and seen as a detestable life stage⁽⁸⁾.

In our current society, youth stands out as the beauty standard. Perfect bodies are daily exposed in the media, thus

consolidating an unnecessary relevance that ends up contrasting with the image of seniority⁽⁵⁾.

In order to better comprehend the aged person, we need to reflect on the aging process itself and pay specific attention to the issue of the unequal distribution of rights and duties. Just then we will be able to minimize the current crisis that leads citizens to a lack of credibility, as pointed out by the Brazilian society in our democratic state based on the rule of law⁽⁹⁾.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of the present study was to analyze the perception of nursing undergraduate students on their self-aging process.

METHOD

A descriptive, qualitative study was carried out with undergraduate students of the Nursing School of the Federal University of Bahia (EEUFBA) between August and September, 2011. As a first approach, the nursing students were invited to participate in the research by means of invitation letters or visits during their classes, so that an interview could be scheduled later, according to their availability.

The study sample was composed of 18 nursing undergraduates. Two students selected in each semester introduced themselves to the researchers after the information concerning the research was announced in each classroom. The two first-comers under legal age were selected in each semester of the course. The researchers used a room located at the Aged Person Study and Research Center (NESPI). As students showed up, they were immediately interviewed. After interviewing two students per semester, the researchers did not continue interviewing other undergraduates pertaining to that same semester.

The research proposal was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Nursing School of the Federal University of Bahia under protocol number 16/2011 FR 329 293.

Data were collected by means of semistructured interviews and guided by the following question: How do you perceive your self-aging process? The interviews were carried out in a private room at the EEUFBA with the face-to-face technique, on a previously scheduled day and time, and in accordance with the availability and convenience of the participant and the researchers. The audios of each interview were recorded.

The subjects of the study were identified by fictitious names of gods. Following the interviews, the audios were transcribed and the resulting contents were submitted to Bardin's Content Analysis⁽¹⁰⁾ by means of the thematic analysis technique. The operationalization of the analysis unfolded in three phases: pre-analysis, exploration of the material, and data treatment and interpretation.

RESULTS

In the characterization of the subjects, 15 nursing students, out of the 18 participants, were women. Regarding their age, there was a predominance of subjects aged between 20 and

27 years. There was only one representative aged 18, 19, 31, and 33 years.

As per their religion, 10 students stated to be catholic; three, Christians; two affirmed not to have any religion; and finally there was one evangelical, one spiritist and one Adventist representative. Regarding marital status, all 18 subjects were single.

After reading the contents of the interviews, the following thematic concept emerged: Perception of nursing undergraduate students on their self-aging process, as well as two resulting subcategories: the “don’t think about it”; and the context influencing the process.

Perception of nursing undergraduate students on their self-aging process

This category represents the meaning units in which the nursing undergraduates reveal their conceptions on their self-aging process. They consider this time to be a life stage one has to undergo, a phase that is inherent to all human beings in their social, cultural, spiritual and biological dimensions, and also a reflection of their lifestyles. They highlighted the relevance of family relationships and friendships, thus reinforcing the importance of such strong bonds toward guaranteeing emotional, affective and social support.

[...] I think that we all have stages to be fulfilled. And the aging process is one of them. So, growing old for me does not bring any sort of sad feeling. I know exactly who I am and I can even anticipate this enjoyable feeling right now [...]. (Aphrodite)

[...] the important thing is to be surrounded by your family, that's when I feel good, to enjoy myself, to date, all these things that make me feel good! I think that they all help me in my aging process [...]. (Hera)

Religiosity issues are addressed in two distinct ways toward coping with their self-aging process. First, they develop the idea that spiritual issues may be used as a strategy aimed at generating personal benefits. On the other hand, they also reveal the belief in a supreme being that determines such process, and that it is up to us to deal with it the best way possible.

[...] In terms of the spiritual issue, I feel very assured. I am not going to be a bored elderly [...]. (Hecate)

[...] and I know that spiritual issues also influence us very much. So, I rest assured that God controls each of our life stages [...]. (Athena)

The students also spoke about their expectations and concerns in face of their desire for a healthy life and a smooth aging process. The most quoted aspect was their physical health. They believe the maintenance of this aspect is fundamental to an active, healthy aging process.

[...] I want to reach 80 in a very healthy shape, so that I can be still active, doing what I like to do, participating in

group activities. I do not want to be a senior woman full of health problems, sort of stuck in life, because I know that such shape will make my aging process quite a difficult time [...]. (Athena)

I keep thinking to myself, Am I going to make it? Can I get to 70? [...] but, I really want to have a healthy aging process. [...] I want to grow old without being in need of everything, all those medications you have to take when you are old, right?! (Morpheus)

I am very much concerned at it all [...] then, I try to grow older in a healthy way, because I'm already 24 and I am growing older, you know. (Hera)

The image of the self-aging process for the undergraduates is based on a vision associated with the morphological modifications of the body, perceptible by the alteration of the visible appearance of those who grow old and represented by the emergence of grey hair and wrinkles. The following statements clearly show that students steadily strive to be found within the beauty standards, as well as their attempt to disguise aging signs, aiming at prolonging their youth.

My aging? [...] well, I don't see the physical aging in a positive way, I see it negatively, grey hair shows up and so on [...]. (Eris)

[...] You know, you look at yourself in the mirror, look at your breasts, well, my breasts are not the same anymore, my belly, my face, my wrinkles, my grey hair. I'm sure of one thing: I will definitely paint my hair, I don't like the idea of having grey hair. (Aphrodite)

This thematic category generated two subcategories: A) the “don’t think about it” process; and B) the context influencing the process.

A) THE “DON'T THINK ABOUT IT” PROCESS

The students stated not to have ever thought about their own aging process.

[...] well, I usually don't even think about that! (Iris)

[...] I don't know, I have never stopped to face it, I mean, growing old, you know... Never ... I don't know! [...]. (Persephone)

[...] Well, I just can't see my own aging, you know... I still think I have plenty of time to take measures to improve my aging process. [...]. (Hestia)

I don't see it! (Eos)

In this way, the reactions toward the experience of coping with their self-aging process show both their denial and their

resistance to accept the process. The statements present distinct reactions toward the aging process, thus indicating the singularity of each subject.

B) THE CONTEXT INFLUENCING THE PROCESS

The students showed to be quite affected by their context and the environment they were inserted into. In society, people wish to grow old in a smooth way and to ensure their quality of life in the process; however, they have to be productive in their universe, and in an accelerated lifestyle that might eventually produce difficulties to the aging process.

I, uh... Well, I am certainly worried, because everybody wants to have quality of life, right? When I retire, I want to travel, I don't know, I want to be healthy so that I can do whatever I want to do, and meanwhile I can't do it. As the young people are very much focused on their formal studies, they want to have a stable standard of living, even though [...] this ends up leading them to an early aging process and diminishing their quality of life. (Apollo)

[...] it can't be prevented. Nowadays, you get stressed, you are in a constant rush, because everything is like that today, especially in large cities. In order to live in a big city, like Salvador, for instance, you take buses, you get very stressed, you know, transit, people are quite stressed [...] and all this damages our aging process [...]. (Hera)

Another element showed in the meaning units consists of inadequate habits represented by the exaggerated consumption of fast food and alcohol. Such habits are highly valued and complied with due to the need for meeting societal demands.

Well, there are so many things, you know... The fast food we end up eating. Well, this is it. (Apollo)

It's hard for young people to take care of their health nowadays [...] I mean, not going to McDonalds to eat French fries. But, it has to be done with moderation. (Hebe)

DISCUSSION

The aging process must be seen as a life stage filled with intrinsic values and characteristics, in which several organic and metabolic alterations affect the individual's biochemical balance, immunity, nutrition, functional mechanisms, emotional conditions, intellectual structure and communicational status⁽¹¹⁾. Nevertheless, the perception of the aging process varies in distinct age groups.

A study carried out with young Italian students concerning the social representation of the aging process observed that the characterization of the aging process may be grounded on the mutual connection and dependence among social objects, such as health, family, body, work, time and death. The family is pointed out as a fundamental social unit, as it is usually referred to as the element in which people look for

support⁽¹²⁾. In the old age, we need to count on a strong emotional support that enables us to accept and adapt to eventual losses and limitations in a better way⁽⁵⁾.

Another support element toward coping with the students' aging process was religiosity. Their religious practice is generally an attempt to more smoothly cope with the stressing events inherent to the aging process, playing a significant emotional role and generating physical and mental wellbeing⁽¹³⁾.

The nursing undergraduates also seemed to be worried about having a healthy aging process, without the dependence on medications. Despite the early age, they already notice an ongoing aging process. Developing care activities toward themselves throughout their lifetime, represented by changes of habits and the adoption of new behavioral standards, enables a healthy aging process and improves quality of life⁽¹⁴⁾. This attitude grounds the desire of an aging process full of satisfaction, health and contentment⁽¹⁵⁾. In order to achieve this purpose, several efforts toward preserving the balance of the body are necessary, aiming at the construction of a satisfying bodily image⁽¹⁶⁾.

Emotional wellbeing is also related to physical aspects, or in other words, the beauty of the body. The old age, in their opinion, should be postponed at any cost, as the expectations toward the future are heavily focused on the way we see the burdens of time imposed to our bodies⁽¹⁾.

In the aging process, the body and its distresses allow for the visualization of the transformations brought about by time. All people enjoy a singular view of their bodies; however, aging characteristics are the most feared imagery one can have⁽⁵⁾.

Experiencing the aging process should be a natural reality; nevertheless, due to stigmatized standpoints, it becomes a representation of a threat to the person's self-esteem and self-acceptance, making them vulnerable to all sorts of psychic sufferings and even pathologies⁽³⁾. A study carried out with nursing students points out that the vast majority of interviewed subjects have never thought about their self-aging process, and struggled to answer the question about such process⁽⁵⁾.

Therefore, although the aging process stands out as a significant reality in demographic and social terms, a pessimistic view about it still predominates. In addition to this fact, the context and the environment directly influence the aging process. In spite of the desire of growing old in a smooth way, one also needs to adapt to a high-speed lifestyle and consequently to inadequate habits, such as the consumption of alcohol and fast food.

In this sense, to live in a society that imposes an accelerated lifestyle means to adapt to relevant events or situations that promote the emergence of stress, a reaction of the organism conjointly with psychological and physical factors⁽¹⁷⁾. Hence, the meaning one gives to the aging phenomenon occurs from the correlation among the self, the mind and society, an such equation will result in the process⁽⁵⁾.

In a nutshell, we should pay attention to the type of social standards we are building and offering to the aged, so that the aging process does not encompass a mere transmission of biased models. At the same time, we should provide senior people with a richer subjectivity, allowing them to have wider windows of opportunities⁽¹⁸⁾.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The present study allowed us to apprehend that the aging process is seen by nursing undergraduate students as a life stage inherent to the human development, and that it can be influenced by biological, social, cultural, spiritual and psychological issues. Family relationships and religiosity are deemed to be an important emotional and social support, and may help people cope with the process.

Students look at their own aging process as morphological modifications and highlight physical alterations, such as the presence of grey hair and wrinkles. However, the perception of their self-aging process also leads students to feelings of denial, or the decision of not to think about their own seniority.

The undergraduate students revealed that a successful aging process results from the maintenance of physical health, a fact that can ensure a healthy lifestyle. Nonetheless, the accelerated lifestyle demanded by society imposes a fair distance

to a healthy old age, as it leads to the adoption of inadequate habits, such as the consumption of fast food and alcohol. Hence, the context in which we live will certainly produce negative reverberations to our aging process.

In this sense, the present study is quite a relevant action. The analysis of the perception of undergraduate students on their self-aging process, aiming at identifying how they see their own aging process and demystifying inherent stereotypes in the process, generates more information to the scientific literature. The research may also awaken and contribute to the knowledge and improvement of issues related to the aging individual, thus allowing for an active and healthy aging process.

In face of such considerations, the discipline Nursing in the Elderly Health Care, from the nursing undergraduate course, should offer students a new perspective on the aging process, thus enabling them to build new representations on the aging process and altering attitudes, myths and stereotypes related to this ever-growing population segment.

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