

AGING PROCESS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ELDERLY PRACTITIONERS OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY



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ABSTRACT

Aging is a natural process of every human being, which brings social, psychological and physical changes, but the way these changes occur can be perceived differently by each individual. The objective of this study was to understand the aging process from the perspective of elderly people who practice physical activity. This is a descriptive and exploratory qualitative study, in which 24 elderly people of both sexes aged 60 years or older, participants in the PILEU project (Institutional Program for Leisure and University Sports) of UNIPAR were selected through an intentional non-probabilistic sample. For data collection, anthropometric evaluations and perception of aging were carried out through individual interviews, in which the statements were grouped into categories. From the analysis of the reports, different feelings and perceptions of the changes arising from the aging process were observed, as well as the PILEU project as a promoter of healthy aging. It is concluded that, in general, the elderly in this study feel included in society and understand that physical activity plays an important role in the continuation and acceptance of aging, as the body needs to remain healthy and productive, especially to maintain autonomy.

Keywords: Healthy Aging. Old. Physical Activity.

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INTRODUCTION

Aging is a natural physiological process that affects all living beings. Currently, there is an increase in the life expectancy of the world population. However, living longer does not always represent healthy aging, as this process is involved in a framework of pathologies related to aging. Thus, aging with quality is increasingly difficult due to economic, cultural, social and family aspects, making a phase pleasant or unpleasant depending on how you lived your years. Because unhealthy lifestyle habits, such as: alcoholism, smoking, intake of low-nutritious foods, sedentary lifestyle, etc., are associated with numerous chronic and degenerative diseases, especially hypertension, diabetes, osteoporosis, dyslipidemias, among others (Simieli et al., 2019).

It is estimated that in 2050 the Brazilian population will be a country of old people, which brings the concern related to structures to meet this demand, problematizing the health infrastructure due to more spending on medicines and treatments. Occasionally, family problems occur due to the need to list a caregiver, often full-time, for the elderly, which can burden the family income (Magalhães et al., 2016).

Focused on this context, the role of specialized centers for the development of activities and interaction focused on specific and diversified groups becomes important to make this population a more active and healthy public, thus promoting a better quality of life both physically, psychologically and socially, in addition to the adherence to new experiences. It is important to highlight that, in view of the aging process, the elderly need more attention and affection, within this context the nursing process is included, which is the insertion of qualified professionals focused exclusively on the care of the elderly. The nurse professional can assist and promote a holistic service aimed at comprehensiveness, pointing out what they lack most and referring them to qualified centers or directing care strategies for healthier aging (Formicole Filho et al., 2020).

In this sense, it is understood that aging is a complex process focused on various types of care, related to quality of life, need, attention and basic health promotion. As well as family and social integration, since an elderly person brings with him their physiological and cultural needs that must be addressed in an integral way, as the world is changing rapidly and, if there is no adaptation, they can become more resistant to change and become isolated. Thus, nursing care aims to understand several changes, both from the professional perspective of the health area and from the self-perception of the elderly

person and, thus, act directly in the care of the elderly and their families (Faller et al., 2015).

Thus, this study starts from the following problem: How do physically active elderly people understand the aging process? As a hypothesis, it was believed that physically active elderly people have a better perception of behaviors related to social life and functional autonomy, becoming more active and independent. Thus, this research aimed to understand the aging process from the perspective of physically active older adults.

METHODOLOGY

TYPE OF STUDY

This study was part of a project entitled "Effects of physical exercise programs on memory, physical capacity and quality of life of the elderly". This was an exploratory, field, qualitative research that was carried out in elderly participants of the PILEU project (Institutional Program of Leisure and University Sports) who performed water aerobics, swimming and weight training activities.

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

An intentional non-probabilistic sample was used to select 24 elderly people of both sexes over 60 years of age, who had been participating for at least one month in the PILEU project (Institutional Program for Leisure and University Sports) of the Universidade Paranaense – Francisco Beltrão Unit – Paraná.

INSTRUMENTS AND PROCEDURES

Data collection was carried out during the month of June 2021. For this purpose, anthropometric measurements (weight, height and Body Mass Index) were collected using a digital scale to characterize the sample. The perception of aging was collected through individual interviews using a script prepared by the researchers, following procedures described by Formicoli Filho et al. (2020), composed of questions on the sociodemographic characterization of the elderly and the following guiding questions: What was it like to grow old? What has changed in your life during the aging process? What were the physical and social changes? Do these changes affect you? Would you like something about you or your life to be different? What changed in your life after starting to attend the PILEU Project?

The interviews were recorded in audio (by a smartphone and transcribed in full) on a day and time previously scheduled with the elderly and the PILEU Project. Prior to data collection, the elderly were instructed about all the procedures to which they would be submitted and the aspects of confidentiality, so those who confirmed their participation filled out and signed the Informed Consent Form (ICF).

It is worth noting that this study followed all the ethical precepts in force in Resolution No. 466/2012 of the National Health Council, and was approved by the UNIPAR Research Ethics Committee under protocol n=4,355,609.

Finally, after evaluations, the quantitative data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet for later analysis and the transcription of the interview was typed into Microsoft® Word documents.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analyzed according to the Content Analysis technique proposed by Bardin (2011), which is a qualitative technique of data analysis organized in the following stages: pre-analysis; exploration of the material; data processing with its systematic organization in thematic units; and construction of inferences and interpretation of the significant categories. The discourses were analyzed and grouped into four thematic categories proposed by Formicoli Filho et al. (2020) and adapted to the reality of the present study: 1) Aging process, 2) Physical and social changes in the aging process, 3) Desire for change, and 4) PILEU as a promoter of the active aging process. To identify the statements, we chose to use the letter "I" for elderly followed by the number that was assigned to each interview.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study included 24 elderly people (7 men and 17 women) aged between 62 and 80 years. As for occupation, all were retired or receiving welfare benefits. With regard to family composition, the elderly have, on average, three children. They live predominantly alone (n=11), seven of whom live with their spouse and another six live with family members. The average time of attendance at the PILEU was four to eight months.

In the analysis of the statements grouped in the category "Aging process", it was found that aging is perceived as a natural process, although it is accepted differently

among the elderly interviewed. Changes in the aging process have also been reported with different and sometimes contradictory perceptions.

"For me it's normal, I accept my age well... I do the activities that at my age you have to do, I don't abuse it" (I-4).

"I don't have old age in my head, to me it seems that I am 15 years old... you know, I don't really think I'm going to get old, that I won't be able to do things, so far I feel young" (I-7).

"A lot has changed, I was more active, more capable of solving things, now I feel a little always in doubt, should I, shouldn't I?" (I-11).

"I think little has changed, because I think that today even we have a much better life, right? With calmer now, more calm. In the past there was no crowd, I went to the center on foot and back, at the time I worked, I had a child" (I-1).

"To tell you the truth, I don't feel old, you know, it hasn't sunk in yet that I'm getting older, I feel like I'm 18 years old, damn... It is logical that a 63-year-old person will not do what an 18-year-old does. Age is still weighing on me, I don't face that normally, I think we have to be prepared, it's not that I would like me to remain 18 years old always, I have my creativity of 63" (I-3).

In view of the statements associated with the category of "Physical and social changes of the aging process", there was a consensus on biological and physical capacity changes. Regarding social changes, it was noticed that they have more difficulty in performing activities that they used to do alone and that now they need help, and they do not like to go to specific places.

"Look, we feel an emotional maturation. We notice a lot of physical losses, because you lose a little bit of agility, strength and balance, I'm calm in that sense, it's bad, but we feel more difficult today than I used to" (I-17).

"I was more active, more able to solve things. Now I feel a little insecure" (I-15).

"The walk made it a little difficult... when I need to walk a lot I can't, I go leaning on someone slowly, then I found it difficult to leave the house on foot".

"I like to go to places where there is a calmer environment where we can talk and be calmer, I don't like hectic places like parties anymore" (I-11).

For the category of "Desire for change", it was noticed that the elderly felt happy with the pleasure of aging in many cases, others only regret not having achieved something more.

"So I regret not having been able to be a teacher, because I had my children, I gave them an education, and when I saw it I was about to retire" (I-22).

"There is nothing I would like to be different, I lived my life and enjoyed it and if I had the opportunity I would make the same choices again" (I-4).

"So I would have liked to have enjoyed my family more, when my children were younger, now I kill this desire a little in my grandchildren" (I-5).

When questioned about the changes from the participation of physical activity performed in groups, grouped in the category "The PILEU project as a promoter of the aging process", it was perceived that this project brought both social and physical benefits, with recognition of improved health and functional autonomy.

"It's wonderful here, right? You make friends with other people, in addition to being good for your health" (I-2).

"I felt like this, that the energies renewed, invigorated, I feel more energized, actually better" (I-3).

"I can say that in addition to all the exercises, now hydro keeps me active, keeps me healthy, right? It's a great health benefit that's why I do it, and I'll continue to do it as long as I can in life because I think it's essential to maintain health" (I-4).

"I had arthrosis in my hip, and I didn't walk on crutches out of embarrassment, after I started hydro, it's true that the medication helped a lot, but now I don't feel anything, nothing more pain, and I got some friends, colleagues who do it too" (I-12).

Aging causes several biological, psychological and social changes. Among the biological ones, the decrease in some physical capacities such as strength, balance, flexibility and cardiorespiratory capacity stands out. Currently, Brazil has the highest levels of elderly population. However, being able to live longer is not always synonymous with living better. Old age can be associated with suffering, increased physical dependence, functional decline, social isolation, depression, and unproductivity, among other factors that do not represent positive meanings. However, it is possible to live longer with a better quality of life, through the search for healthy and active aging (Miranda et al., 2016; Faria et al., 2019; Dias et al., 2019).

However, the aging process can be felt according to each individual's perspective over time. Factors such as economic condition, access to health treatment, culture, family support and lifestyle directly interfere with the perception and feeling of aging. The positive perspective of the elderly in aging is essential for the acceptance of the process that helps in greater physical and social benefits. Additionally, the search for groups with the same interests, such as socialization and physical well-being, can minimize the negative effects of aging (Tavares et al., 2017).

It is a fact that throughout life aging provides several changes, such as work, family, reduction of autonomy, emergence of diseases, psychological changes, etc. Castro et al. (2016) believe that the aging process consists of three phases: first is aging in the family, which occurs with the children leaving home, making it emptier; the second is the daily life and work that reduces and loses the functions related to productivity, the elderly are no longer doctors, architects, teachers, they become retirees, losing their qualifications; and third is the function of the organism which gets more tired with small efforts, loses part of its physical autonomy and social life is no longer the same.

According to Cruz (2017), the human being is the sum of the experiences he has lived during his life, successes and failures in the personal and professional areas. This will influence the way you live and perceive the aging process. According to the author, experiences interfere with the ability to solve problems at this stage of life and low capacity can develop sentimental fragility, dependence on physical and emotional care, which can lead to a negative health outcome.

Another important point refers to illness, which is generally associated with the negative representation of aging and this can have repercussions on self-esteem, as the elderly relate the presence of diseases to the possibility of becoming dependent or the proximity of death, in addition, health problems make it difficult for the elderly to enjoy the positive gains of aging (Ribeiro; Borges, 2018). It is worth noting that the elderly have some difficulty in understanding that illness is the result of lifestyle habits, so many diseases aggravated at this stage of life may have been acquired at earlier ages. And it cannot be denied that many pathologies associated with inadequate lifestyle habits, such as smoking, alcoholism, obesity, diabetes, etc., can cause physical weakness, which generates a worsening in the perception of the aging process, because the sicker they are, the older they feel (Castro et al., 2020).

However, it cannot be denied that life experiences can make the elderly a much more resilient person, especially in the face of the adversities of aging. For example, the study by Ribeiro and Borges (2018), which evaluated elderly people in palliative care due to oncological disease, reported that the main perception about aging and getting sick was resilience, that is, they responded to life's frustrations and stresses with overcoming and emotional recovery, since the participants focused their lives much more on gains rather than losses. The authors also highlighted that spiritual support, cognitive restructuring and acceptance, especially of the disease, were striking factors in the elderly interviewed.

Currently, the literature focused on the care of the elderly and the aging process has instituted the concept of successful aging, which arose from the understanding of the individual, heterogeneous and irreversible trajectory in the aging process, which can be understood as the reduction of functionality, however, without compromising the functions necessary for daily activities. In this concept, the healthy elderly person will be able to manage their own life and determine when, where and how their leisure, social and work activities will take place, regardless of the presence or absence of comorbidities, with autonomy and independence (Canêdo; Lee; Lourenço, 2018). Thus, successful aging can be addressed by elderly care strategies, individually and/or collectively, through social interactions and programs, in order to meet the needs and demand of the population to be able to age healthily (Costa et al., 2020; Maia et al., 2020).

Thus, maintenance in productive activities, with financial or assistance objectives, involvement in leisure activities, participation in social groups and regular practice of physical activities, in addition to care and the presence of specialized assistance are essential in successful aging. Since it is important that the elderly person feels productive and gets involved in dynamic activities that stimulate body, mind and social integration, as these practices improve motor and neurological skills, reducing the advance of chronic diseases typical of this stage of life (Magalhães, 2016).

What is in consensus in the literature are the benefits that the practice of physical activity provides to the elderly, such as reduction or delay of the deleterious biological effects of aging, which improve the lipid profile, increase cardiorespiratory capacity, strength and muscle mass, promoting better balance, providing hemodynamic benefits, such as blood pressure control, and greater autonomy capacity, etc. (Boechat, Rodrigues, 2017; Ferreira et al., 2018; Bortoloti et al., 2019; Bezerra et al., 2021)

It is worth noting that the elderly in this study are participants in a physical activity practice project (PILEU Project), in which they practice water aerobics, swimming or resistance training activities on a weekly basis, which possibly infers the perception of a successful aging process, based on the perception of social benefits, improvements in physical aspects, as well as the recognition of improved health and functional autonomy. These results corroborate a study by Formicoli Filho et al. (2020), in which the authors evaluated 14 elderly users of a Day Center, a space created for the elderly to stay during the day with the objective of welcoming, social integration, and the development of activities that promote physical and mental health. This study found that the aging process

was perceived by positive changes in health status and social changes, in addition to the authors highlighted that the Day Center was recognized as a promoter of the active aging process, as it is a space for coexistence and leisure.

Thus, this study seems to demonstrate that the elderly evaluated perceive the aging process individually and possibly associated with their life experiences, in addition, they understand that it is a process of change and a natural stage of life, finally, they recognize that the practice of physical activity is important from a functional perspective and for positive health.

As limitations, the study presents the reality of a specific context, which suggests that participation in the PILEU Project, which promotes improvements in the physical and health conditions of the elderly. Thus, there is a need for further studies in this area, in order to understand how and in what way professionals from different areas of health, especially in public health, can involve and promote successful aging in elderly participants from different contexts.

CONCLUSION

It is concluded that the aging process from the perspective of physically active elderly is one of successful aging, as the elderly feel included in society and understand that physical activity plays an important role in the continuation and acceptance of aging, mainly for maintaining autonomy, improving physical and mental capacities, well-being, reducing pain and increasing concentration on certain activities, thus stating that aging associated with physical activity improves mood, thinking and willingness to enjoy life.

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