



## CONCEPTIONS OF NURSING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS ABOUT THE ELDERLY AND OLD AGE

### CONCEPÇÕES DE ACADÊMICOS DE ENFERMAGEM SOBRE O IDOSO E A VELHICE CONCEPCIONES DE ESTUDIANTES DE PREGRADO DE ENFERMERÍA SOBRE ANCIANOS Y LA EDAD MAYOR

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#### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** knowing the perceptions of undergraduate Nursing students about the elderly and old age. **Method:** descriptive study with a qualitative approach. The study participants were 30 students from a Nursing course of a public university in Ceará (CE), Brazil. Data collection took place in June and September 2015 through questions about the theme, which culminated in written responses and drawings. The discursive answers were analyzed qualitatively and the drawings by means of the Projective Drawing Technique. **Results:** the aging-related conceptions at the first meeting elicited the idea that old age is seen as an extension of youth and at the second meeting they explained topics related to healthy habits. **Conclusion:** we may infer that the view on the elderly and old age changes when undergraduate Nursing students complete the subject Geriatrics and Gerontology and, parallel to this, when they start seeing themselves as participants in this phenomenon. **Descriptors:** Nursing; Elderly; Aging; Nursing Students; Nursing Education.

#### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** conhecer as percepções de acadêmicos de Enfermagem sobre o idoso e a velhice. **Método:** estudo descritivo de abordagem qualitativa. Os participantes do estudo foram 30 alunos do curso de Enfermagem de uma universidade pública do Ceará (CE), Brasil. A coleta de dados ocorreu em junho e setembro de 2015 por meio de perguntas sobre a temática, o que culminou em respostas escritas e desenhos. As respostas discursivas foram analisadas qualitativamente e os desenhos por meio da Técnica de Desenho Projetivo. **Resultados:** as concepções relacionadas envelhecimento no primeiro encontro suscitaram a ideia de que a velhice é vista como uma extensão da juventude e no segundo encontro explicitaram assuntos relacionados a hábitos saudáveis. **Conclusão:** podemos inferir que a visão sobre o idoso e a velhice é modificada quando os acadêmicos de Enfermagem concluem a disciplina Geriatria e Gerontologia e, paralelo a isso, quando passam a se imaginar como sujeitos do fenômeno. **Descritores:** Enfermagem; Idoso; Envelhecimento; Estudantes de Enfermagem; Educação em Enfermagem.

#### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** conocer las percepciones de estudiantes de pregrado en Enfermería acerca de ancianos y la edad mayor. **Método:** estudio descriptivo con abordaje cualitativo. Los participantes del estudio fueron 30 alumnos del curso de Enfermería de una universidad pública de Ceará (CE), Brasil. La recogida de datos tuvo lugar en junio y septiembre de 2015 a través de preguntas acerca del tema, lo que culminó en respuestas escritas y dibujos. Las respuestas discursivas fueron analizadas cualitativamente y los dibujos por medio de la Técnica de Dibujo Proyectivo. **Resultados:** las concepciones relacionadas con envejecimiento en la primera reunión suscitaron la idea de que la vejez es vista como una extensión de la juventud y en la segunda reunión se explicaron asuntos relacionados con hábitos saludables. **Conclusión:** podemos inferir que la visión de los ancianos y la vejez cambia cuando los estudiantes de pregrado en Enfermería concluyen la asignatura de Geriatria y Gerontología y, paralelamente, cuando comienzan a verse como participantes en este fenómeno. **Descriptores:** Enfermería; Anciano; Envejecimiento; Estudiantes de Enfermería; Educación En Enfermería.

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## INTRODUCTION

Aging is a dynamic and progressive process, common to all living beings, which includes morphological, functional, biochemical, and psychological changes that cause greater vulnerability to the external environment and they are different for each individual, interfering with daily life activities.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary society worships a young, healthy, and vigorous body, repudiating the physical marks of old age, making it relevant to reinforce the idea that living is a continuous process, which does not cling to a weatherproof stage, and no one wants to give it up.<sup>2</sup> It is understood, therefore, that old age generates a dichotomy between losses and gains, either through the appreciation of experiences acquired throughout life or through the inherent losses of living, especially physical losses.

Considering the premise that puts old age before human beings as a key condition to live, it becomes urgent that society prepares to grow old and to take care of this population extract, understanding the physical limitations inherent to this process, finding strategies to enable the maintenance of autonomy and independence. Elderly health, as a complex process, requires from health professionals technical and scientific means to provide comprehensive and humanized care that addresses the multiple dimensions involving these subjects.<sup>3</sup>

From this perspective, reflections based on the demystification of the elderly individual as an old body, disabled, unproductive, and hopeless should be stimulated, providing means to actions appropriate to this context that have as a principle the broad understanding of plural dimensions of old age, noticing its strong traits and reaching the perception of the strong social and cultural influence to which it is subjected.<sup>4</sup>

It is believed that education is an instrument capable of empowering individuals to make effective changes in the environment where they live, it should be guided by actions that sensitize people to deal with all phases of human development, stimulating the ability to respect and recognize the difficulties and potentialities inherent to each one, not allowing people to lose the perspective of safeguarding dignity, protection, and care.<sup>5</sup>

Nursing, as a profession that takes care of the other, must be prepared to assist the elderly, understanding and respecting their peculiarities. However, the lack of a broader understanding of the elderly as carriers of

peculiar needs makes it urgent to implement actions aimed at some training that prioritizes this understanding and prepares the professional to provide care that encourages autonomy and a better quality of life.

Given this panorama, this study aimed to know the conceptions of Nursing undergraduate students about the elderly and old age.

## METHOD

This is a descriptive study with a qualitative approach.<sup>6</sup> The participants were 30 students who were attending the subject Geriatrics and Gerontology in the Nursing course of a public university in Ceará, Brazil. We selected students who were regularly enrolled and those who were present in the first class of the subject.

Data production took place in June 2015, when the classes began, and in September 2015, when the classes ended; the students had already discussed theoretical/practical contents related to the theme and experienced the practice in curricular internships in all the scenarios of care for this population: primary health center (PHC), long-term institution for the elderly (LTIE), and large hospital – reference in traumatology. The two meetings had the participation of the professor responsible for the subject and one Ph.D. student who were attending the subject Internship for Teaching, with the consent of the coordination of the Nursing course.

For data production, the undergraduate students were divided into 5 groups to discuss questions about the elderly and old age, something which culminated in written answers and drawings that were analyzed and discussed in the next step of research. In order to obtain the written answers, 3 open questions were launched: “What is old age and the elderly?”, “Do you see the world without the elderly?”, and “How would the world be like without the elderly?” Finally, the question “How do you see yourself in old age?” had its answer represented through drawings with colored pens on A0 size wood sheets.

Based on the assumption that people express their feelings and emotions by manipulating many materials<sup>6</sup>, we use drawing in order to facilitate access to unconscious content.

For the best use of data, we used the Projective Drawing Technique to analyze the last question. This technique is one of the expressive methods and it provides freedom

to the participants’ imagination, giving support to the researchers’ interpretation. For extracting these data, we rely on the work of a psychologist, who is professor at a private university in Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil.

The written answers and the drawings produced were analyzed qualitatively. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Dr. José Frota Institute, under the Opinion 849,116, on 10/28/2014. The students’ anonymity was preserved insofar as the questionnaire did not require any kind of identification.

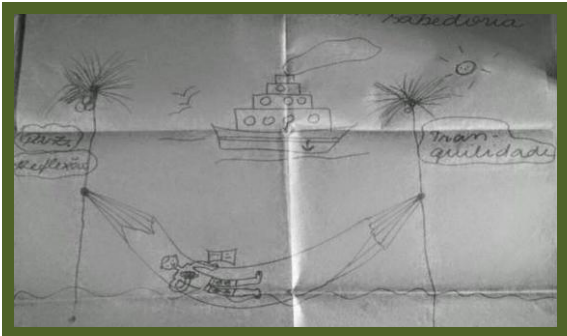
RESULTS

The study participants were mostly women (91.5%), with an average age of 24 years. In the answers to the question “What is old age and the elderly?” we obtained several meanings for old age, such as *process*, *experience*, *pejorative*, *stigma*, *changes*, and *special care*, and for the elderly, meanings such as *dependence*, *fear* and *coping*, *patience*, and *stubbornness*. When addressed at the second meeting, we noticed that the answers refer to rather elaborate concepts, having scientific literature as a basis, such as the idea that translates the elderly into chronological age and definitions of senility and senescence. Besides, the concept of aging began to focus on other dimensions, in

addition to the physiological dimension, taking a broader view that included social and psychological aspects.

As for the question “Do you see the world without the elderly?”, 80% of the students said they did not thought of this hypothesis. Regarding the third question, “How would the world be like without the elderly?”, the students conjectured about how this context might be, in order to justify the refusal to the previous question: it would be a world with no history, with no experience, and without expectation. However, one group answered that they could see the world without the elderly, justifying the answer through the possibility of a world without the limitations inherent to physical aging.

Concerning the last question, which addressed the conceptions related to aging itself and answered by means of drawings, we noticed, in the first meeting, the idea of old age as a phase of life in which people hope to enjoy financial stability, represented by figures of big houses, cars and money, and time to engage in pleasurable activities, such as traveling, going to the beach, and having a good time with the family, conveying the idea that brings old age closer to a period of ‘permanent vacation’ and dissociates it from the meaning of usefulness and productivity, as observed in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Perception of undergraduate students about the elderly and old age at the first meeting - permanent vacation.

The drawings also gave rise to the idea that old age is conceived as an extension of youth. Most human figures showed physical traces of young individuals, with vigorous musculature and tattoos, unveiling the idea of invulnerability to morphophysiological changes of aging. Love relationships were also

represented, and the drawings’ features refer to young people, appreciation of the elderly is noticeable, by maintaining attributes inherent to youth, letting us glimpse the difficulty and accept an aged body that has limitations, as shown by Figure 2.

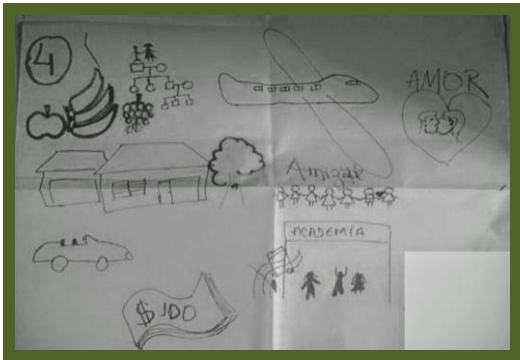


**Figure 2.** Perception of undergraduate students about the elderly and old age at the first meeting - attributes of youth.

Only two groups depicted the elderly with wrinkles, white hair, and using a walking stick, and this drawing is represented in a minimal size, revealing the idea of old age as something distant and remote. The same group also represented old age with larger figures with tattooed and muscular arms, revealing the association with youthfulness and physical vigor.

In the second meeting, which took place in the end of the subject classes, students expressed a greater understanding related to senescence. The drawings exposed gyms, suggesting the significance of physical activity

and maintenance of functional capacity; roundtables with friends, symbolizing the insertion of the elderly in the social environment; a couple, something which shows that the elderly sexuality awoke; and drawings of fruits, which reveal understanding on the need for healthy habits, letting us grasp that the students had a well-formed conception of health promotion and prevention of illness, as illustrated in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Perception of undergraduate students about the elderly and old age at the second meeting - healthy habits.

DISCUSSION

Students' evolution was noticed as for the preparation of definitions related to the theme, translating the influence of discussions and reflections instigated by the contents and practices addressed by the subject. Besides, other dimensions inherent to aging were mentioned, moving from the purely physiological point of view to a look that reached the social and psychological dimensions.

Undergraduate students tend to see old age as a set of physiological, biochemical, and psychoemotional changes.<sup>6</sup> However, many health professionals have a strictly biological view of aging, and there is a need to rescue a broad understanding of the process, since the perception of specificities of this phase of life

facilitates the promotion of better quality care.<sup>7</sup>

The perception that the world without the elderly would have no history, experiences, and expectations highlights an appreciation of experience and knowledge accumulated in the course of existence.<sup>5</sup> This fact is emphasized by the results, since the existence of a contemporary social movement of marginalization and increasing the elderly exclusion, disregarding their wisdom of life, denotes that technology shows to be more effective than knowledge accumulated between people. Although the symbolic place of old age has already been characterized without doubts through the knowledge and wisdom accumulated that were perpetuated to future generations, in contemporary times, this place gives room to experts, connoisseurs, and specialists who seek constant updating



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through high-technologies. And in this space marked by the virtual, the ephemeral, and the instantaneity there are the elderly who, to a large extent, are on the margins of this process feeling unprotected, helpless, subject to prejudice, and guilty for being old.<sup>8</sup>

The drawings represented old age with strong references to aspects of youth, making implicit the overappreciation of this phase as the only way to have good-quality and contentment life.<sup>2</sup> In our culture, consumerist and performance driven, there is an ideal cult of a young, beautiful body, healthy, sculpted, and without wrinkles, and the subject was subtly seduced by a certain prohibition of growing old with all the specific attributes of old age. In this way, an elderly individual who is appreciated by the current society is the one closest to youth features, pushing the idea that aging is something shameful.

The drawings showed significant references to financial stability, leisure, and rest. With the same view, a study conducted with nursing professionals revealed positive expectations about their own aging, depicted with emphasis on a stable financial situation and a peaceful and pleasant life.<sup>7</sup>

Defining old age as a process has made it clear that students confuse the definitions of old age and aging, failing to consider that the former refers to one of the phases of the life cycle and the second refers to the process which the individual goes through to arrive at such a phase, both having different repercussions to understand the phenomenon as a whole. This misconception reveals the need to know well the aging process, making it possible to reach old age with the conditions to live it fully.<sup>7</sup>

We emphasize herein the need to detach such a fullness from attributes, whose maintenance becomes an irrevocable condition, where physical and intellectual vigor prevails, the individual's productivity does not decline and its usefulness remains unchanged.

The answers also showed a connotation that revealed the group's reflection about aging itself and finitude, letting us glimpse the difficulty of dealing with death itself, hidden in the speech "no, because we want to grow old".<sup>9</sup> Aging is irremediably attached to living and dying. The difficulty of dealing with death is perceived between the lines of the students' discourse, justified by the fact that the human psychosocial body is engaged in a constant and daily struggle with the biological, chronological, and finite being that, in a premeditated and intentional way, refuses to accept mortality.

In this way, there is a need to situate the aging process in time and space, since the elderly of the current days is surely different from their ancestors, since each age produces the subjectivity pertinent to identity and culturally valued models. From this perspective, the constitution of the individual cannot be detached from the society where she/he emerges, since she/he bears the marks of the socio-historical times that she/he lives in.<sup>10</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of the results obtained in the two moments of the research led to the conclusion that the view on the elderly and old age has different meanings when Nursing students complete the subject Geriatrics and Gerontology and, parallel to this, when they start seeing themselves as participants in the phenomenon. When thinking of themselves as elderly individuals, the undergraduate students bring to mind ideas that relate them to their old age with predicates that bring them closer to youth. This inference takes along with it an emphasis on the need to maintain contents that stimulate the discussion, in the academy, about the aspects of aging, old age, and the elderly, since these professionals will engage in activities in different contexts, finding an increasing number of elderly individuals with this demand for care.

The study had as its limitation the research strategy used, since an exploratory study aims to check what is proposed in the predefined population, limiting the amplitude, but not the validity of results obtained. As a positive factor, we highlight the possibility of replicating this study in similar populations, allowing greater comprehensiveness of results.

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