ORIGINAL ARTICLE

PERCEPTION OF QUALITY OF LIFE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE AT SOCIAL RISK

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to identify the perception of quality of life among adolescents at social risk. Method: this is a study with a qualitative approach carried out with 86 adolescents from a social development center of the Program for the Eradication of Child Labor (PETI) in the town of Divinopolis, Minas Gerais, Brazil. Data were obtained through collage workshops and messages written on posters and they were submitted to Bardin’s Content Analysis. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Hospital Sao Joao de Deus, under the Protocol 103/2011. Results: one found out that adolescents’ perception of quality of life involves meeting their basic human needs and having the attributes appreciated by contemporary society, such as beauty and intelligence. Conclusion: health interventions should be ruled by the perceptions of quality of life, in order to improve living conditions, prevent diseases, and promote health. Descriptors: Quality Of Life; Perception; Adolescent.

RESUMO

Objetivo: identificar la percepción de la calidad de vida entre adolescentes en riesgo social. Método: se trata de un estudio con abordaje cualitativo realizado con 86 adolescentes de un núcleo de funcionamiento social del Programa de Erradicación del Trabajo Infantil (PETI) en el municipio de Divinópolis, Minas Gerais, Brasil. Los datos fueron obtenidos por medio de talleres de colagem e mensagens escritas en carteles y sometidos a Análise de Contenido de Bardin. El estudio fue aprobado por el Comité de Ética en Pesquisa do Hospital São João de Deus, sob o Protocolo n. 103/2011. Resultados: se constató que la percepción de los adolescentes sobre calidad de vida envuelve a satisfacción de sus necesidades humanas básicas y tener los atributos valorizados por la sociedad contemporánea, como belleza e inteligencia. Conclusión: las intervenciones en salud deben pautarse por las percepciones de la calidad de vida, para mejorar las condiciones de vida, a prevenir de enfermedades y a la promoción de la salud. Descriptores: Calidad De Vida; Percepción; Adolescente.

RESUMEN

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is the human development phase at which puberty occurs, with the emergence of secondary sexual characteristics. This moment is also marked by intense and specific socio-emotional characteristics, such as self-assertion need through transgression of rules, oppositional spirit, wish for experimenting unusual things, generational conflict, need to fantasize, magical thinking, identity crisis, curiosity, emotional intensity, and group trend. The latter aspect has been associated to the adolescents’ quality of life (QL), especially when she/he gets into formal groups.

QL is a highly human notion, related to the satisfaction degree found in the family, loving, social, and environmental life and to the very existential aesthetics. When evaluating the adolescent’s well-being, it becomes essential taking into account her/his subjective experiences. This is so because the relation between objective conditions and psychosocial status is imperfect, and it’s a must, for health promotion, meeting the subject’s expectations with regard to QL. In this context, knowledge on people’s perception of QL is related to the possibility of improving life conditions through actions along with specific populations, always considering physical, psychological, social, and environmental aspects.

Understanding and evaluating the adolescents’ expectation with regard to QL may contribute to better interventions aimed at health prevention and promotion among this group, favoring the a healthy growth/development. Thus, this paper aims to identify the perception of QL among adolescents at social risk.

METHOD

This is a descriptive study with a qualitative approach carried out with all adolescents enrolled in a social development center of the Program for the Eradication of Child Labor (PETI) in the town of Divinopolis, Minas Gerais, Brazil. In total, 86 subjects, within the age group from 10 to 14 years, participated in the study.

The choice for a qualitative approach was due to working with very specific issues, within a universe of meanings, motives, aspirations, beliefs, values and attitudes, something which corresponds to a deeper and more subjective space of human relations.

Data were collected through collage workshops and messages written on posters, which were processed according to Bardin’s Content Analysis; the first step was a pre-analysis, in which the material was organized in terms of meaning units. Thus, one gathered, in a document, the posters’ sentences and analyzed the images of collages made on them. Both materials were marked with asterisks, representing the number of times the images’ meaning was repeated.

During the analysis, for more clarity of what is a written or image product, one agreed to use the following codes: the letter “W” refers to writing and the letter “I” to image. Then, the meaning units were coded and grouped, in order to define the categories ruling the results and discussion.

Observations were conducted during the workshops and the information was recorded in a field diary, in order to obtain a better social contextualization of the research subjects. They referred to the young people’s behavior, as well as to their lifestyle, housing scenario, socioeconomic and cultural conditions, and family situations. This material was also useful as a means to analyze the study object.

This investigation complied with the Resolution 196/96, from the National Health Council, which regulates the researches involving human beings. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Hospital Sao Joao de Deus, in Divinopolis, under the Opinion 103/2011.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From data analysis two categories emerged, described below.

1. Quality of life: basic human needs met

This category consists of issues related to the needs regarded as essential to live with dignity and it was divided into six subcategories.

a) Safety, protection, and health maintenance

The material analyzed has shown that adolescents recognize health preservation as an essential factor for QL. This was evidenced through the writings and collages related to the locutions “being healthy”, “don’t use drugs”, and “use condom”, among others. Furthermore, they revealed a need to take personal attitudes which may strengthen them for a “good living”, in the present or future, as one can see in the locutions: “Invest in oneself” (W), “Happiness” (W), “Joy” (W), “Products which are good for the body” (W), “Physical activity” (W), “Sport is good for health” (W), “Cycling is good for health” (W), “Health and sport” (W), “Healthy feeding” (I).
The subjects also demonstrated the importance of safety and protection with regard to the social issues involving drug addiction. One notices that a considerable part of these young people live on a daily basis with drug users or traffickers, in close vicinity, or live along with them. This justifies the strong presence of this concern to protect oneself from the imminent and constant danger of drugs to guarantee their QL. It was possible to conclude that there’s an awareness that QL involves personal attitude to avoid the use of licit and illicit drugs as a strategy for self-protection, health maintenance, and vital safety, as shown in the following record units: “Enjoy life without drugs” (W), “Instead of using drugs, seeing a movie” (W), “Safety” (I). That is, these subjects know their social vulnerability to drugs, they realize how exposed to them they are, and, therefore, socially unprotected.

Combined to the issues indicated above, some transformations inherent to adolescence, such as the anguish arising from the multiple mourning events experienced at this phase, make them even more vulnerable to smoking and alcohol and drug consumption. It’s highlighted as another adolescents’ characteristic the tendency for imitating parents, close people they admire, and friends. In fact, studies point out that the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs by parents and friends are risk factors for adolescents to try them.9 Some scholars investigating adolescence10 claim that this imitation is underlaid by an attempt to assert themselves as adults or reflect themselves on a model. Regarding friends, they take the same attitudes than their peers as a way of identifying themselves with the group.

Another major aspect at this stage is the awakening of sexuality.1,10 This component was shown through images of people dating, exchanging caresses, having children, and the condom. The latter image was interpreted by the authors as “Practicing safe sex” (I). It’s worth stressing that people participating in this research were born after the onset of the AIDS epidemic, which started in the 1980s, and they grew up amid a plethora of information on their risks and prevention ways. This occurred due to the possible influence of the media and the need generated by the rapid spread of HIV.

b) Nutrition and hygiene

In this subcategory, the material analyzed revealed the understanding that the concept of QL is related to the maintenance of hygienic standards regarded as adequate and balanced nutrition. Regarding hygiene, the material revealed that “Bathing is good for our hygiene” (W) and “Hygiene” (I). The importance of hygiene for people’s QL is widely reported by the mass media, schools, health care services, books, and magazines, including those aimed at the lay population. One notices, therefore, that there’s a knowledge framework concerning this theme, accessible to the entire population. From the earliest ages, children, either in nurseries or through songs in children’s programs, already have contact with reports about the importance of hand washing, care for their own body to prevent being smelly and having ectoparasites, safe handling of food to avoid contaminations which lead to diseases. As their social contacts expand, there’re also new opportunities to obtain other information on this theme. In face of what was exposed, it’s believed that social relations may act as health determinants, since the relationships between people favor monitoring behaviors, encouraging many personal activities which are associated to better QL.11

In this context, it’s worth observing that the center of PETI where the subjects of this research are included there’s the development of professional and educational activities related to the theme concerned. On these occasions, young people practice toothbrushing under the supervision of oral hygiene technicians, who also promote health education on this subject, something which may contribute to the adolescents’ perception of hygiene related to QL.12

It’s known that education enables access to the information needed for appreciation and incorporation of healthy habits (active prevention), besides promoting a peace culture, appreciating not only the individual and her/his abilities, but also the collective, empowering them to solve personal problems and those of the community.13 One highlights, this way, the importance of health education, since adolescence is also the phase at which the young person may acquire a learning related to positive attitudes and behaviors that will persist in the future, representing a key moment for health promotion.11

Regarding a balanced nutrition, the subjects expressed their ideas as follows: “Feeding” (W), “Good feeding” (W), “Feeding with fruits and vegetables” (W), “Healthy feeding” (I), something which shows an awareness of the importance of this theme for health. This understanding corroborates the claims of the Adelaide Statement15 which has the erradication of hunger, malnutrition, and health problems related to overweight as a crucial goal to improve the communities’ QL.
Besides, diet and nutrition constitute fundamental human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights\textsuperscript{15} and they’re basic requirements for health promotion and protection, enabling the full potential of human growth and development with QL and citizenship.\textsuperscript{16}

On the other hand, feeding also constitutes a major source of human pleasure. The participants in this study showed this perception through the words “Flavor” (W), “Tastes” (W), “Eating good things” (W), besides the images of people tasting dishes with an obvious well-being feeling, suggesting the pleasure obtained through the sense of taste.

Still in the context of quest for health and, simultaneously, the pleasure of living well, one emphasizes the relevance of practicing sports, which will be addressed in the following subcategory.

c) Physical aspects of quality of life: daily life activities (sport, leisure, and labor)

In contemporary times, the practice of sports started playing an essential role for promoting health and, as a consequence, for what people mean by QL. Added to this, there’s the “health discourse” lauding the positive consequences arising from the practice of sports. This way, the body becomes an object of investment. This demonstration permeates the various social layers\textsuperscript{17}, including the young people’s perception on the issue.

In fact, the testimonies and collages revealed that the adolescents understand that for having QL it’s essential to practice some kind of sport. This becomes evident in the words and inferences extracted from the material produced by adolescents, in this study: “Health and Sport” (W), “Cycling is good for health” (W), “Sport is good for health” (W).

Corroborating the study subjects’ perception about physical activity as an action which favors health, it’s known that body care through some sport contributes to shun vices such as smoking and drinking, as well as the consumption of other illicit drugs.\textsuperscript{17} Besides, changes in the lifestyle of contemporary society, such as decreased physical activity, increased body weight, and excessive consumption of alcohol beverages are associated to chronic degenerative diseases and adults’ poor QL.\textsuperscript{18}

In addition to the health promotion and protection issues, sport is also regarded by the study subjects as a playful activity. This was evidenced in the material produced by the adolescents through the expressions: “Sport” (W; I), “Play with a ball” (W), “Physical exercise” (W), “Practice sports” (W), “Physical activity” (W). It’s worth stressing that the testimonies were always associated to images of people during their relaxation and leisure time, and, usually, in groups, in a clear demonstration of the socializing nature of practicing sports.


It’s worth highlighting the importance of physical activity to have QL and the prerogative of the Ministry of Health to establish and regulate the Health Academy Program Within SUS, whose main aim is contributing to the population’s health promotion through the implementation of poles with infrastructure, in order to guide bodily practices and physical and leisure activity, as well as healthy lifestyles.\textsuperscript{19} It’s worth stressing, however, that the social environment where the young people participating in this study doesn’t provide any kind of leisure besides those available at PETI itself. There’s a lack of public squares, parks, and suitable areas for sport practice in the region where they live. Also, public initiatives for encouraging the practice of arts, such as dance and music, among others, specific to this public, are virtually null. In the central area of the town, there’s theater whose ticket is paid, free music school, and public squares, but the financial barrier to pay for tickets and transportation hinders the access to these services.

In equivalence to leisure, labor is pointed out by adolescents as an important factor for QL, something which was revealed as follows: “Honest labor” (W), “Work” (E; I). One deduces from it the importance that paid activities have on the perception of QL of this young people. However, it becomes needed that these subjects are supported and followed up by trained professionals in search for and experience of the first job, aiming at the protection and guarantee of the rights of this group, as well as to avoid exploitation of the young person’s work.\textsuperscript{20}

From another perspective, the adolescents showed that, for them, QL permeates, besides the practical issues discussed above, those with an existential, relational, and emotional nature, as presented below.
d) Psychosocial needs: friendship, love, family

During adolescence, participation in groups is the mainspring for accepting oneself/being accepted by the fellows. With this, friendship acquires a greater importance among adolescents. It’s also at this stage of human development that there’s the awakening of sexuality. Thus, courtships emerge, the “making out” and other kinds of romantic relationships. However, family still occupies a prominent place for the growth of these beings.1,10

Meanwhile, the participants in this research showed to recognize these relational components as important facets of QL, something which was shown as follows: “Family” (I; W), “Having a family” (W), “Having a partner in life” (W), “Love” (I; W), “Having friends” (I; W), “Trusted friends” (W), “Going out with friends” (W), “Having a friendship” (W), “Communicating (with) the family” (W), “Family’s joy” (W), “Staying with family” (W). The analysis of these communications, through the subjects’ social context, revealed a need for interaction with peers, including what regards sexuality, lack of affection, and recognition of the family’s importance. A study with Portuguese adolescents corroborates our findings, insofar as one observed the relevance of the family affective dimension for conceiving the study subjects with regard to positive health.21

In face of what was exposed, one realizes that the group’s need permeates the search for new experiences, including the sexual one, with love relationships. Family remains as the needed basis for exploring the unknown which is presented to them and needs to be experienced.

In contrast, being not accepted by the family and community in which one lives is something extremely negative for human beings, especially for young people.22 The subjects of this research showed spontaneously, and with a relative frequency, feeling rejected at that home by some person who she/he lives with.

Thus, depending on their context, young people may attribute more or less importance to their families and to the emotional autonomy with regard to parents. In this sense, it was possible to glimpse in the study subjects a deficiency deriving from the fragile family structure and they also showed to be detaching from their parents on an early basis. It may be inferred that this is, at least partially, a consequence of little affectionate relationships, marked by violence, struggle for survival, revealed by absolute priority to ensure the most basic human needs, such as food, employment, and housing.

Yet, when it comes to the issue housing, it’s worth stressing that this constitutes an element of great relevance to these young people’s QL, since a large part of this social vulnerability portrays the environment where they live. This way, the environmental aspects will be addressed in the following subcategory.

e) Environmental aspects of quality of life

Currently, in the new scenarios of family diversity, cohabitation is no longer a synonym for family group; moreover, it doesn’t guarantee the quality of contact between inbred people.22 In the study group, one observes that many adolescents don’t live with their parents and brothers, since a considerable part of them have divorced parents, or one of these parents left home, is unknown, or, also, is imprisoned. Thus, many of these young people live with stepfathers, stepmothers, grandmothers, uncles and have a daily interaction with brothers and nephews from various unions. Others experience conflicts within home, mainly originated by other kind of deficit and the lack of space, something which facilitates promiscuity and violence.

Through this context, one realizes that a household which offers adequate living conditions is an important factor for these subjects’ QL, something which could be inferred through images that have been translated into the phrase “Having a good place to live in” (I).

In addition, the environmental issue covers the protection and ecological awareness aspects which refers to citizenship. The adolescents showed to be aware of the importance of having an intimate and careful relation to nature through images that were decoded into the following phrases: “Taking care of nature” (I) and “Contact with nature” (I). It’s worth emphasizing that in the center of PETI, as well as in programs of several schools, and in the media, this theme is observed and this may have collaborated to create this ecological view that adolescents showed. In fact, a research on the environmental perception of adolescents at social risk showed that these subjects have their own view on environment, above all for the concrete and natural goods which are directly visualized by them.23

Currently, another aspect of QL which has been highlighted in the media, as a result of...
charismatic movements and the strengthening of new beliefs, is spirituality/religiosity. It was also revealed in this study and it’ll be discussed next.

f) Spirituality/religiosity

The adolescents pointed out the relevance of religiosity/spirituality through their conception of what QL is, explained by means of the following locutions: “Having a religion” (W), “Jejuvá” [Jehovah] (W), “Saint” (W), “Religion” (I). This concern with religiosity may unveil a claim for inner balance, since, according to some authors, when analyzing the impact of religiosity on the different domains of QL, one observes that this may be positively associated to most of them, i.e. religiosity acts as a protective factor against suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, delinquent behavior, psychological distress, among others.

In fact, religiosity is currently pointed out as an important factor of QL by people, and this perception varies according to the cultural and value context where the individuals are included in. It may help to accept hard living conditions, and overcoming the problems requires a strength and energy which are often beyond the concrete possibilities.

On the other hand, besides the attributes of spiritual order, other ones with a material nature were also shown in the adolescents’ productions. They’ll be addressed below, in a new category consisting of two subcategories.

2. Quality of life: attributes appreciated by the contemporary society

In this category, one unveiled elements appreciated not only by the adolescent, due to their intrinsic characteristics, but also by the contemporary capitalist society, such as the exacerbation of attributes such as beauty, intelligence, and material goods. Its two subcategories are intertwined and connected to some additional subcategories from the first category, although they have very different meanings and, sometimes, even contradictory.

a) Beauty and intelligence

Body image is an attribute highly valued by the contemporary society. With the same proportion as beauty, intelligence is perceived as an important attraction, since both significantly increase the possibilities of professional achievement and success, which are items regarded as essential to happiness. Thus, the participants in this research expressed the appreciation of beauty and intelligence as follows: “VIP Magazine” [VIP = very important people] (W), “Beautiful” (W), “A lot of beauty” (W), “A female model” (W), “Advertising” (W), “Beauty” (I), “Investing in oneself” (W), “Study” (W), “Reading” (W), “Read” (W).

Moreover, the adolescent goes through transformations of physical order which generate other emotional transformations and she/he experiences a mourning period due to loss of child’s body, and others. This way, she/he shall adapt these losses by learning to live with this new body that will be a source of discoveries; now, it’ll bring shame and, so, she/he’ll try to hide it; then, it’ll bring pride and she/he’ll try to display it.

On the other hand, the need for physical, sexual, and social adequacy of young people is dynamic and it presses them to seek acceptance by their groups of peers and they do that by identification through the way of dressing, regarded as beautiful or “cool” by pairs, by the pursuit of the perfect body, well-designed, “strong” and seductive.

The attribute of intelligence is also highly appreciated, since it grants status, increases the possibilities of attracting one or more sexual partners, and it may also provide greater social acceptance and increase the chances of obtaining well-paid jobs. Adolescents showed that, for them, QL pervades intelligence as follows: “Study” (W; I), “Reading” (W), “Read” (W), “Acquire knowledge” (I).

However, these wishes may, at the same time, be a source of frustration and distress, because the expectations with regard to them are, often, besides the human condition itself. In the dogged pursuit of impossible standards, young people may also develop certain behavioral disorders, such as bulimia, anorexia, among others. Furthermore, daily life frustrations have currently contributed to an inadequate feeding behavior, causing, nowadays, eating disorders related to overweight and obesity.

Still in the item status, another element observed in the material prepared by them was the possession of material goods, which will be discussed next.

b) Material goods

Currently, the possession of consumer goods has been translated as a certificate that the person is successful and this, as in a cycle, facilitates social acceptance, something which, on its turn, is relevant to the adolescent. This appreciation emerged in the material produced by the subjects through the following writings and images: “Advertising” (W), “VIP Magazine” (W) “Possession of material goods” (I), “Money” (W). In fact, the...
study reveals that happiness, for adolescents, involves concrete feelings and needs. Girls are more likely to relate happiness to affectivity, whereas boys relate it to material goods and living conditions.29

One obtains, therefore, through these testimonies and images, that QL interconnects and weaves the fabric between meeting concrete goods, objective and essential to the maintenance of a healthy life with appreciation of human existence. This means that it’s imperative that the community/society provide opportunities for personal achievement, both at the psychological, social, and spiritual levels and in order to live a minimally acceptable and dignified life.

CONCLUSION

This investigation has shown that the adolescents’ perception of QL involves meeting basic human needs and attributes appreciated by the contemporary society. Objective aspects, such as safety, adequate nutrition, hygiene, sports, and satisfactory living conditions, as well as subjective constructs, such as affectivity in friendship, in love relationships, and in family were regarded as a must by the adolescents to have QL.

Therefore, it becomes clear that achieving QL, for these young people, involves their position as subjects with rights in their family and social context. This fact highlights the need for health professionals to think through their interventions along with this population, starting to ground health actions on people’s perception of what is QL for her/himself, aiming to achieve improved living conditions, prevention of diseases, and promotion of health.

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