

Body Identity of the Elderly: reflections on their own body

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Introduction

As people age, negative aspects may arise due to physical, psychological and social losses, which are common in this process (Spiriduso, 2005). On the other hand, if there is no adaptation and capacity to deal with this reality, there are great possibilities of generating depreciative sentiments and a negative body image in the elderly, which may cause changes in the body identity in the face of a persistent situation.

These and other experiences that occur during the process of an individual's development leave their marks on the body and propagate throughout all of the individual's life process, from the moment of birth, through adulthood and elderliness.

Our body represents the reality of what we are and how we live. It tells the story of our lives, our marks and scars, common in the natural transformation of our evolution and development, from birth to old age.

Therefore, to speak of the construction of the body identity of the elderly necessarily reminds us to the subject's precocious experiences.

Authors such as Winnicott (1983), Klein, (1975), Dolto (1984) and Tavares (2003), among others, agree that, at birth, the interaction of the mother figure and the baby is a determinant in the formation of the individual. The total dependence of the baby to have its necessities satisfied and the predisposition of the mother figure in attending these desires is what will direct the formation of this individual's personality.

According to Albornoz, (2003), the amount of affection employed by the mother figure in the identification of and attention given to the child's necessities develops a symbolism in the baby and permits the constitution of a subjective identity.

After the first indications of identity and personality structuration, the individual remains in a continual process of development. Our identity continues to be

built through sensations and perceptions that our body registers, from our earliest age to our elderliness.

The occurrences experienced throughout life, whether positive or negative, constitute the “I” of each individual. In this sense, knowledge of the alterations that occur in the body identity of the elderly, through experiences during their life, becomes an important tool in the care of this population, since this knowledge could offer professionals in the health area adjustments in their interventions, which could favor the integral development of the elderly.

In the face of these reflections, we ask: What identification do the elderly attribute to their own body? How do their life history and experiences influence their body image?

To answer these questions, the objective of this study is to know the body identity of an elderly individual in an asylum, based on this individual’s own body conception.

Methodology

This research is characterized as the case-study type. Data collection of transversal and qualitative character occurred by means of an interview, which, aside from obtaining information on personal characteristics, had the following generating question: How do you feel about your body?

The answer was recorded and later transcribed and analyzed according to the Content Analysis: Elaboration Technique and Analysis of the Units of Meaning, proposed by Moreira, Simões and Porto (2005), which captures the ingenuous accounts of the subjects, identifies the indicators and establishes the units of meaning based on the discourses, considering that this process helps in the comprehension of the meaning of the subject’s words.

The sample of this study was constituted by an elderly man who was a participant in research of a broader ambit, carried out by Ferreira (2006), which investigated elderly individuals residing in a public asylums in the interior of the State of São Paulo, questioning the body concept of this population. Among the participants, this particular one called attention by saying: *“Excuse me for talking about my life, [...] but I can’t talk about my body without talking about everything I’ve lived, because everything that happened in my life is in the body that I feel today, it’s stamped there”*.

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Results

The man interviewed is 74 years old, a widower, and concluded the former low secondary school. In his youth, he played soccer and, after terminating his career as an athlete, worked as a truck driver until he fixed residence in an asylum in the interior of São Paulo, at least 7 years ago. Presently, he maintains very little contact with his family.

Based on the man's discourse about his body, we established the indicators and, later, four units of meaning: 1. Old; 2. Excluded; 3. Unhappy and 4. Experienced, tracing by his words the connection between the experiences he lived and the development of his body identity.

The man feels that his body is Old and debilitated, limited in the execution of the things he used to do, not by the aging process per se, but by the living conditions to which he is submitted.

During his youth, he enjoyed a favorable financial condition that gave him pleasure, status and satisfaction and that now, in his old age, this is no longer the case. *"I would like you to know that I'm only here because I'm not well, and that my financial condition is bad, not because I'm old. I know that my body has aged but I can still do a lot of things alone"*. We emphasize here that the limitation is not only physical. So, an individual can feel limited by the annulment of his desires, by his financial situation, or by the absence of the social roles that he played in the past.

This reality is related to the unit of meaning Unhappy, which indicates sensations of depression and unhappiness. *"There's no more motivation. I'm not happy"*.

The option to live in the asylum is justified by his financial condition, not by his incapacity to take care of himself alone. At the same time, the possibility of living with his family is discarded by the absence of privacy that he could cause to his children. However, he says: *"my daughter, who is a teacher, could tell her husband that she would like for me to stay at her house, a daughter's request for her father, but she wants her privacy with her husband"*.

In this way, during his discourse, the elderly man identifies his body as Excluded. The idea of exclusion is associated with solitude, both at the asylum

and in his family. He states: *"I have grandchildren, children, but I practically live alone. I feel very lonely, even here. Even here, surrounded by people, I feel lonely"*.

This sentiment of loneliness is reinforced even more by the social stigma and negative connotation of some long-permanence institutions due to their structure of functioning, which generalizes and collectivizes the individual, as stated by elderly man himself: *"the personnel here are preoccupied with the building, if it's going to look pretty, but it's not the building, it's the elderly. No one comes to ask me if I'm eating well. If the food is tasty. If the food is healthy. I'm not talking about quantity, I'm talking about quality"*.

Despite feeling that during his whole life he had accumulated many experiences, contributing to a more Experienced body today, he states: *"since the moment I wound up here I lost everything I'd accomplished, my diploma in living experience, I lost it"* and he continues *"I think this is the end of the line. A person who winds up here has his ticket bought. Can you understand what this means? It's logical that it means it's a ticket to death. Just the moment to embark is reserved"*.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to gather knowledge on the body identity of an elderly man in an asylum, based on his own concept of body. The results of the study led us to conclude that body identity changes, not because of our age, or by old age per se, but by the experiences we live during our life that leave their mark.

The marks inscribed on the body interfere in the behavior and in the relationship of the subject with the world. Therefore, the manner in which we deal with these experiences is determinant is promoting the integral development of a human being.

The strategies of confrontation that the elderly have available are singular and unique, linked to the identity of each individual. So, it is not the age that changes the body identity of an individual, but the manner in which each person deals with the adversities of life.

Our intention here was not to present a conclusion regarding body identity, due to its dynamic and complex aspect, but to reflect upon the subject during the aging process, given that we continue to develop up until the moment of death

and this process, from birth to death, is experienced through the body, which all during life constructs a memory.

According to Schilder (1999), body and world are interconnected experiences. We, therefore, recognize the wisdom of this elderly man when he says: “*Excuse me for talking about my life. It wasn’t even this that you asked me but I can’t talk about my body without talking about everything that I’ve lived because everything that happened in my life is in the body that I feel today, it’s stamped there*”.

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