Community, Identity and Elderly. The Belonging of Elderly:
What Happens When "Us" Enhances "Me"?

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Abstract
We live in times where it is possible to observe three or four generations to coexist in the same family, but the members of the family are so busy and involved in their own activities, that there is no time to share experiences in daily life, and this is restricted to special dates, or occasional weekends. Authors have been studying the familiar cycle of life in some cultures, and noticed that the "empty nest" can have an impact on the family life. It is true that we may have to consider the individual stories of life, where we have multiple contexts, depending on the socio-cultural environment where the life develops, to understand how it affects the elderly. But we can clearly see that the counselling and practicing a variety of activities, including social ones, gives the seniors more interest in life, makes them feel connected again with something important, and be part of new projects in life. The wellbeing is associated with a high self- esteem, physical, psychological and mental health and it has characteristics that delay the time of the natural aging process. In addition, the physical autonomy and the financial independence are ingredients to enjoy freedom and to live life the way we desire. These facts can also create sometimes barriers in the family communication with elders, and we must give attention to the situation where we might treat elderly as if they were children, with no consideration to what they want, or how they feel. The objective of this study is to show the importance of the feeling of belonging to a community, and being part something in the elderly.

Keywords: Us and me in Elderly, Elderly and Community, Identity in the Elderly, Belonging and Identity in Elderly,

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Introduction

The Studies about Elderly show that people in many countries reach the longevity and it allows three or four generations to live together. However, this coexistence only happens in special dates or some weekends. People in developed countries have been getting older earlier than in the developing countries, and getting old shows itself as complex and heterogeneous matter.

Many different authors have studied the individual and familiar life cycles in several societies (MATTESSICH & HILL, 1987; FALICOV, 1991; CARTER & MCGOLDRICK, 1995; CERVENY, 1994, ERIKSON e ERIKSON, 1998; among others). Erikson (1994) studied the individual psychosocial development since the childhood until the complete maturity of the life cycle. Similarly, both familiar and individual life cycles show the phases that the Family and the individual person must complete in order to reach maturity in life, and this means for example, how to overcome the obstacles present inside these phases. When we talk about the family life, some societies may feel the "empty nest"-phenomenon that represents the moment when the children, already grown up, leave home, and they start another cycle away from the original one.

However, we have to note that the differences between Western and Eastern cultures are relevant, and such differences are particularly important when one is living life and getting older in these culturally different societies. Many authors agree that the social and the temporal views have an influence in the constructions of conceptions of elderly in society. These constructions have some ethical and contextual implications that are influenced the way of the elders are frequently seen and treated (Schneider e Irigaray, 2008; Tótora, 2008; e Uchoa, 2003; Helman, 2005; Hall, 1983; among others). There are two different ways are explain the cultural differences in life by the authors; one of them is the polychromic concept (the Asian's country societies), where the time is designed as a cyclic, a repetitive and an ascending spiral of human experience. In these societies, man believes in the concept of reincarnation, *samsara,* a complete cycle, which includes some births, deaths and rebirths[1]. On the other hand, and totally different from the former, in the Western societies, the conception of time is linear, a *Christian Jewish time*, a monochronic and continuous time, in which the initial term is the creation; and the final term is the coming of Messiah. In this last concept, there are no repetitive performances. Helman (2005) says that these concepts impregnate the meaning of the elderly, so therefore, the social and temporal constructions we may see reflected in the behavior of the elders of these societies.

Bauman (2001) is an author, who alerts us about the time of the "liquid modernity", where the youth is overvalued by the society, as if it would last forever; and the image associated with the elder is ugly and outdated. The values of this society are "to have" and "to consume". In this concept, the feeling of "to be part of", "the belonging", or the importance on how other people can be a mirror of ourselves in the construction

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[1] The conception of samsara is a belief from certain religious philosophies, like Buddhism and Hinduism, for example.

of who we are, is not important (Mucida, 2006, 2009; Winnicott, 2011). However, when we get old, these above matters have considerable importance, and they give sense to the elderly.

The advances in Sciences and Technology and the emergence of a new paradigm (Theory of Complexity), have affected our lives, because both families and society are seen as open systems. These effects are seen every day life in the organized: work, the family and the social life. Some events like migration, social and personal relationships, women entering the labor market and the control of sexuality and procreation have affected they family dynamics. The discovery of new drugs and methods that allow living the parenthood later in life have changed the decision to have (or not have) children, or the better time to have them. All these have caused changes in the structure of the family (Galano, 2001).

Elderly and Identity

Santos, Moreira & Cerveny (2016); Santos & Cerveny (2013); Marques (2009); Debert (2004); Mannheim (1982); Martinelli (1995); Toni (2011), Santos (2003); Cerveny (1994, 2000); Green (1993); and Bowen (1976, 1978) among others, are authors that have been studying the family under different subjects.

Bowen (1978) said that the family memories are under construction over generations. This gives us the memories, the sense of belonging, the family's values, the myths that we worship, the place where our identity is created and where we learn the language of the ancestors, and the respect given to them.

Cerveny (1994, 2010); and Green (1993) are authors who observed that in the elderly, the events that happened in the familiar life, have some impact in the longevity. They cite, for example, that the migrations is a shortage of the support network, and it gives a sense of uprooting (GREEN, 1993), and sometimes involuntarily distances us from the family origins.

Green (1993) says that the beginning of the construction of our identity starts before we are born by our parents, family, relatives and friends. They project and imagine good qualities, hopes, personality and certain phenotypes for the unborn child. Even the name chosen by them reflects a message or a blessing for the rest of our lives.

Cerveny (1994) studied the cycle of Family life and she refers to Elderly as its last phase. In it a lot of loses may happen, and sometimes it is also characterized by dependence and inverted roles in care. If lucky, the couples live the elderly together, but when only one of them survives, he or she has to manage the longevity alone, or depend on external care.

Identity and Belonging.

To be part of something may be difficult, when there are no opportunities available. Neri (2004) and Ferrigno (2009) think about the necessity of a process of regaining the subjectivity and the reconciliation of concepts in late life. These may assemble the social developing and the formation of new skills and allow the rare coexistence between generations to happen. Unfortunately, lack of communication in familiar life,

or in public spaces in the times of technological communication is visible. Castro (2015) also refers to *ageism,* in the field of Health attendance as a lack of respect given to elders.

When we research the subject of living alone or with relatives, Stuart- Hamilton & Veronese (2002) says that the elders living on their own or with the children, stay alone most part of the day, as the relatives are working or studying or busy with their activities and the contact with the exterior world is made through the television, an excellent social organizer. Fortes (2004) says that the elder's emotional stability only happens, when there are interchanges by familiar relationships and social activities. When these interchanges do not occur, the television may be the only "voice" during their days. The news reported by the media may cause insecurity and fear; or the seniors may easily adopt a very passive behavior in order to be accepted into our society. Even though to be accepted may promote the integration, but it also brings depression, which is not desired. We cannot forget that the importance of the integration is to keep the seniors safe from the risk of depression.

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2008) stablishes the importance of the sensation of staying in movement, the well- being, and the affection on elderly. Waldinger & Schulz (2017) use neuroscience to show by tomographic images that the sensation of wellbeing and affection promote stimuli in the same cortical regions. This study proves that the emotions should be taken into account when talking about Elderly Care and their well-being.

It is fundamental to take part in group activities and meetings, where the elderly can share love, affectivity and care. Santos & Cerveny (2011) use a term *credential family* to express phenomenon, where the lonely elders find new friends with common interest to replace the lost relationships and they can even consider the most special ones as their new family.

In addition, Neri (2004) and Ferrigno (2009) refer that new friendships also stimulate the acquisition of new talents and the coexistence with new generations, which are necessary to the continuity of the subjectivity process in the elderly. Fortes (2004) states that the emotional stability and the real personal growth of the elder is possible only beyond the relationships that are constructed in the familiar and/or social daily life activities.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study based on one of the collaborative practices (White & Epston, 1993; White 2012), particularly the *definitional ceremony*[2]. (Andersen, 2002, 2005)[3] This study was held in a private school building with ten participants, one (1)

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[2] Definitional ceremony is a term created by Myerhoff to describe forums held in the 70s , where the old-aged Jews and immigrants used to re-act and tell stories about the past events of their lives.

[3] Tom Andersen (2002) talks about practices of collaboration; he believes that the inclusion of multiple voices is a practice of equality in the relationship. It is a propitious field to make reflexive process and to develop a collaborative work, with increase of sensibility to listen multiple realities. To participate in the ceremony this author recommends the adoption of an active listening, putting yourself in the other's

man and nine (9) women, between the ages of 70 to 94 years. All the women take part in a private Program of Education dedicated to elderly (Third Aged College)[4] three times a week in this same location. The male participant was a guest to the program: he is married with one of the women and came to a birthday celebration that happened the same day. He expressed his wish to participate in this study.

All the participants are residents of the city of São Paulo, capital of the estate of São Paulo, Brazil. Ethical recommendation were followed as well as the agreement of privacy. Here are some of the narratives from the study:

"I am 82 years old and I think of myself as a happy person… I believe that I am what I am... I am independent…and I don't have financial problems at all... When my children had already left home and my husband died (we had been together for 44 years), I realized that my daughter and my daughter-in-law wanted to take care of me and my life… But I didn't want this, so I looked for a Third Age Educational Program …I think that this is my life, the last phase, isn't it? … It is good to be alive, to get old and it is important to be in peace…I don't want to depend on someone else. I made a promise to myself: I want to be happy, kind and every day I make an effort not to depend on anyone else."

"I am 80 years old and I was born in the northeast of the country. I was a journalist and I made many good things in my life... To get old is good … but I do not like the image reflected in the mirror... Elderly bring us a sensible way of seeing things. I have been in this college for 18 years…I feel like it is my new family …It is a long time, and I am the oldest in this class. It is a great privilege to have this coexistence, share experiences, and do so many activities… This group has existed since 1999, for nineteen years already. I was abroad for two years, because I got ill, and I was glad to come back... Nowadays, living with this group is one of the best things in my life. We all get dressed up like dolls only to meet our colleges here, or somewhere in the city. The friendship is sincere, and here is a place where we feel well…I love each one of them…The kind of affinity we have moves me... I have learned a lot with this group and all achievements I keep in my heart! I don't want lose this coexistence that we have achieved…I want to keep this moving forward… Love, Friendship, Honesty, Family, Loyalty, Religiosity, Gratitude, Solidarity, all this we can find here."

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place: do not judge, do not theorize or give your opinion about what you heard. All contribution has the same weight, importance and value, and it represents the individual dimension of someone's world. It is an informal, comfortable and open space, free of prejudice, where we can feel affectivity stimulate the group's contribution, and this influences everyone recursively. It is an important practice to stimulate the connection of the group and the creation of new ideas, to deconstruct negative stories, which can destroy self-esteem and favor isolation and invisibility.

[4] The Open University for the Elderly is a private initiative teaching institution that has as a mission: 1. To actualize the knowledge of the elder population; 2. To promote reflecting elderly as a process; 3. To make possible to project new targets of acting in life; 4.To promote integrated personal growing; 5. To exercise mental health; 6. To promote continuity of the elders social life.

Final Considerations

During this study, we could note that the elders are telling and retelling stories of how they understand that being old means to face themselves in life. They feel free to express what they feel, and are in peace with themselves. They are worried to cause too much work to the children and relatives, and they hope to have autonomy, independence and liberty to be happy each day of their remaining lives, to live as they wish to. They want to see the continuity of their lives in the seeds that they brought to existence: their children and their grandchildren, but they have a wish to pass away before any of them do.

After the *Definitional Ceremony* the ten participants realized that they are like a family, like a community of equals and they want to preserve and take care of the group. The ones, who enter in this family, do not want to leave it. It is as if each one has adopted one another and the valued moments of friendship, love, empathy, and solidarity are present to make all the members of the group stronger and happier than before. This shows that "us" can really enhance "me". The participants also concluded that it is not only important to exercise your body, but also your mind. Affection, Love, Friendship and Belonging are ingredients that bring elderly health and wellbeing in this phase of life. The authors of this study noted that this was the best-unexpected discovery of the research.

Life time by Arlene Moreira

Kronos and Kairos are gods of time
Who shows us the leaves
On trees of life,
What is written on them.

So, white is the color
Of the baby´s story
On the clean sheet of life.

But this sheet is
Also a receiver
Of the possible sceneries
That are waiting for the actors
to perform.

Time asks readers
And the papers sheets fly
With the wind
On the boundaries
Looking for different faces.

The actors on stage,
Act to create stories
Which will be written and read.
All these are like constellations
Of stars in the sky…

The planets, the galaxies
And the universe combine
The circles of evolution
In the lifetime.

This remain
On the human skin,
In the internal organs
And in the brain,
Printing the memories,
Like sinuous wrinkles
Around the eyes.

The performance
Creates the identities
And belonging
To exist and to make sense.

The time is the god
Who carries
What is remaining in life
And inscribes it
in our souls.

The Elders' Thoughts about the Participation on Definitional Ceremony:

"I loved to take part on this research. To be lucid and share information, I think that it is wonderful. I am 84 years old and, I realize that sometimes we say some foolish things. It was very nice. It is important for us to enjoy the present moment. There is no point to complain, we must stay well in this phase of life, and enjoy the moment…
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"As I said to a friend of mine, I want to have a great end. It occurred to me, that we had great and beloved friends, and they are no longer with us; this is the worst part of life. I am the only old man here today and the ladies said many things … I was happy to hear what I heard. My only discomfort is not doing, what they said that they are doing here in this Third Age College… Therefore, I am a heretic! All of them accepted me to participate and it was very good, indeed."

"You can think that your time to learn is finished, but this is awful. When I used to be part of one group of mothers, if someone said that she was too old to learn something, I always disagreed. To learn is to exercise your mind. We are a bunch of nice people, but we are also boring ones, because no one is perfect. This type of experience is an opportunity to think some subjects that are inside us, but without a stimulus, maybe we would never think about..."

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