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Feature Article

A hermeneutic phenomenological explorations of living in old age

M^a. Ángeles De Juan Pardo, RN, MSN, PhD^{a,*,1}, María Teresa Russo, PhD^{b,c},
María Victoria Roqué Sánchez, PhD^{d,e}^a Department of Nursing, Universitat Internacional de Catalunya, Sant Cugat del Vallès, Barcelona, Spain^b Department of Educational Sciences, Roma Tre University, Rome, Italy^c Institute of Philosophy of Scientific & Technological Practice, Campus Bio-Medico University, Rome, Italy^d Department of Humanities, Universitat Internacional de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain^e Department of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universitat Internacional de Catalunya, Sant Cugat del Vallès, Barcelona, Spain

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ABSTRACT

Although there have been some studies that explore the meaning of aging and give voice to older people, the impact that the aging experience can have on them justifies continued research in this area. In this study, with a hermeneutic phenomenological design and an interpretation method inspired by the philosophy of Ricoeur, we conducted in-depth interviews with 14 elderly people at a social day center in Rome (Italy). The analysis revealed three central themes associated with the experience of being old: changes and limitations related with being aged, the experience that comes from having lived a long life, and an awareness of death. The findings could help health professionals, families and caregivers to achieve a deeper understanding of what old age entails, and may also serve as a platform for interventions that seek to enable older people to experience aging as a meaningful and positive process.

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Introduction

The world's population has aged significantly in recent decades. Currently, around 12% of people worldwide are over 60, although this figure is expected to surpass 21% by 2050, meaning that it will have more than tripled since 2000.¹ Alongside this increase in the number of older people one must also consider the phenomenon of longevity:² the size of the over-80 age group is increasing markedly, and new terms such as 'old old', 'oldest old'³ and 'fourth age'^{3,4} are now commonly used to refer to advanced old age. The achievement of greater longevity has, of course, been accompanied by the consequences of biological aging. One of these is the increased prevalence of age-related chronic diseases such as dementia and vascular disease, which in many cases lead to disability and dependence.⁵

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* Corresponding author. Department of Nursing; Universitat Internacional de Catalunya Josep Trueta s/n, 08195 Sant Cugat del Vallès, Barcelona, Spain. Fax: +34 935042001.

E-mail address: mdejuan@uic.es (M^a.Á. De Juan Pardo).

¹ SARX (Research group in anthropology of embodiment - 2014 SGR 835).

Predominant values of Western society, such as autonomy and productivity, may generate an extremely negative social perception of aging.⁶ Ageist attitudes of this kind can place older people in a highly vulnerable situation and heighten the risk of social exclusion. Furthermore, with age, people may end up internalizing these negative stereotypes, and as a result of these internalizations may actually begin to present signs of, for example, failing memory, cognitive confusion or physical frailty.⁷ Older people also frequently perceive themselves to be a burden on their families and on society.^{8,9} It should be noted, however, that there are also salutogenic perspectives^{10,11} which highlight the positive and enriching aspects of aging. Although there have been some studies that explore the meaning of aging and give voice to older people the impact that the aging experience can have on them justifies continued research in this area. In this respect, the present study focuses specifically on the aging experience of semi-independent old-old and oldest-old adults.

Literature review

The meaning of aging has been studied from a range of perspectives. More than 300 biological theories have been proposed to explain the etiology of cellular aging in the organism.^{12–14} All of them seek to identify the factors that stimulate the morphological

and functional impairment associated with aging, the overall aim being to slow or even prevent this process. An analysis of these theories suggests that the causes of physiological aging, at least as we know them today, are multifactorial.¹⁵

Psychosocial theories of aging apply a broader perspective to the aging process, considering other dimensions of the person and making proposals for helping older people to adapt positively to aging. Among these theories, Erikson's stages of development theory¹⁶ and Tornstam's gerotranscendence theory^{17–19} stress the new perspective that can be achieved in old age, which they regard as a possible stage in the process of growth toward maturity and wisdom. However, as the founders of these theories point out, this wisdom and maturity can also be achieved at other stages of life, and therefore the question of what the specific meaning of old age is remains unresolved.

To date, few studies have focused on the overall experience of being old.^{20–24} Nevertheless, and despite the fact that they are mostly descriptive, they provide interesting insights into the phenomenon. In particular, they indicate that living with loss, life experience, increased religiosity and spirituality, and uncertainty about the future are all aspects to be considered when caring for older people.

Understanding the experience of being old from the point of view of older people, and exploring the meaning of old age, is crucial to the provision of patient-centered-care. In this study we aimed to address these goals by considering the following questions: a) What is the nature of old age? b) How is old age experienced by those living it?

Method

We carried out a hermeneutic phenomenological study inspired by Paul Ricoeur's theory of text interpretation,^{25–27} as described by Lindseth and Norberg.²⁸ This approach was chosen for two reasons. First, in his theory of the hermeneutic arc between explanation and understanding, Ricoeur describes a three-stage process of analysis (initial or naïve reading, structural analysis, and comprehensive interpretation) in which the interpreter moves from a naïve to an in-depth understanding of a text. This process will be illustrated later. The second reason for drawing upon the work of Ricoeur has to do with his discussion of the relationship between narrativity and temporality.²⁹ According to Ricoeur the purpose of interpretation is not to explore a person's psychological intentions with regard to a particular experience, but rather to reveal the meaning of that experience through an analysis of discourse. Thus, in the texts considered in this study (both the interview transcripts and the results of the structural analysis) the discourse follows an order, a new temporality that produces what Ricoeur refers to as 'refiguration', that is, the transformation of lived experience through narrative. It is this that gives meaning to experience and which enables a more in-depth understanding of a phenomenon to be reached.

Participants and setting for the study

Participants were recruited by means of convenience sampling from the "blinded for review", a social day center (SDC) in Rome (Italy). Purposeful sampling was also carried out, with the aid of the social worker at the center, in order to obtain some variability in terms of the social class and educational level of participants, and also to obtain 'good informants' able to provide a sufficiently 'complete' description of their experience of being old. Inclusion criteria were: a) age 75 or above; b) ability to speak Italian or Spanish; and c) provision of informed consent to participate. Exclusion criteria were cognitive inability to participate or a major

acute pathology at the time of the interview. During data collection the main researcher acted as an outside observer and facilitator, helping participants to narrate their life experiences during the interviews.

Data collection

Data were collected through phenomenological interviews with older people regarding their lived experience while advancing in age. Data collection was stopped once the authors considered that further interviews would not yield any additional comprehensive data for understanding the phenomenon. A flexible interview guide was used (see Table 1), with questions designed to help the interviewee narrate his or her experience of being old. This guide proved useful for avoiding digressions (e.g., long accounts of the individual's personal biography, general thoughts on the subject of old age, or comments about changes in society). Field notes were also taken during the interviews and during visits to the SDC regarding non-verbal language, the environment, and the context.

Analysis

Ricoeur's theory of text interpretation.²⁶ proposes three stages or levels of analysis. The initial reading of a text produces a first 'naïve' interpretation of the phenomenon under study. For this stage we did several readings with an open-minded approach in order to identify expressions and words in the interview transcripts that referred directly to the experience of aging. It was here that the first conjectures about the meaning of the experience of being an older person emerged.

The second stage is the structural analysis, a systematic method that identifies and explains the issues and the main structure of the essence of the phenomenon. For this stage we performed a content analysis of each transcript. We began by identifying units of meaning, which were then grouped and condensed to form categories. Main themes were then identified by analyzing the relation between the different categories. In this way we identified the structure of the phenomenon under study: the lived experience of being aged. Transcripts of interviews and field notes were analyzed simultaneously with data collection from subsequent interviews, thus enabling more questions to be added to the interview guide as the study progressed.

The aim of the third stage of analysis is to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and its possible

Table 1
Interview guide.

<i>Main questions:</i>
I would like to know about your experience of being xxx years old. Could you describe what your days are like? For example, what did you do yesterday?
Can you tell me what it means to you to be old?
What changes do you associate with this stage of life, compared with previous stages?
What do you think is the best thing about old age? And the worst thing, or the most difficult thing?
How do you feel at the age of XX?
Thinking of the last two weeks, can you remember a situation that struck you particularly regarding the issue of old age?
In your answer to the previous question you talked about a positive (negative) situation. Can you now tell me about a negative (positive) situation caused by old age?
Has anything happened in the last week that has made you feel old?
What advice would you give others about life from the perspective of someone who is x years old?
On the sign in the entrance it says "Health Center for the Elderly"... What comes to mind when you hear this expression?

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