

OLDER ADULTS IN ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICES: AN INTEGRATIVE REVIEW OF BRAZILIAN THESES*

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ABSTRACT: This integrative literature review aimed to identify the contributions of ethnographies undertaken with older adults in theses of postgraduate programs in Brazilian Higher Education Institutions. Data collection occurred in June 2012 in the Scientific Journals Gateway of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel. A total of 11 theses was selected, using the terms ethnography and older adult, and inclusion criteria. Three categories emerged: The ethnographic methodology as a strategy for describing cultural aspects related to old age; Older adults and social participation, mobilizing research problems; and, Older adults' health in the ethnographic perspective. The methodology seeks to deepen the knowledge of the culture, through detailed descriptions of older adults' daily lives, relationships which are established, and meanings attributed to the experiences of health and chronic illness. Ethnography has contributed to the analysis of forms of the sociocultural context, which are reflected in the reading of the everyday and in the ways of experiencing and expressing old age.

DESCRIPTORS: Older adult; Culture; Review.

OS IDOSOS NOS ESTUDOS ETNOGRÁFICOS: REVISÃO INTEGRATIVA DAS TESES BRASILEIRAS

RESUMO: Trata-se de revisão integrativa da literatura com objetivo de identificar as contribuições das etnografias realizadas com pessoas idosas nas teses provenientes de programas de pós-graduação de Instituições de Ensino Superior nacionais. A coleta dos dados ocorreu em junho/2012 no Portal de Periódicos da Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior. Selecionou-se 11 teses, mediante os termos etnografia e idoso e os critérios de inclusão. Emergiram três categorias: metodologia etnográfica como estratégia para descrever aspectos culturais relacionados à velhice, idosos e participação social mobilizando problemáticas de pesquisas e saúde dos idosos na perspectiva etnográfica. A metodologia busca aprofundar o conhecimento da cultura, por meio de descrições detalhadas do cotidiano das pessoas idosas, relações que estabelecem e significados atribuídos às experiências de saúde e doenças crônicas. A etnografia tem contribuído para analisar contornos da realidade sociocultural, que repercutem na leitura do cotidiano e nas maneiras de experienciar e expressar a velhice.

DESCRIPTORES: Idoso; Cultura; Revisão.

ANCIANOS EN LOS ESTUDIOS ETNOGRÁFICOS: REVISIÓN INTEGRATIVA DE LAS TESIS BRASILEÑAS

RESUMEN: Esta es una revisión integrativa de la literatura con objetivo de identificar las contribuciones de las etnografías realizadas con ancianos en las tesis provenientes de programas de posgrado de Instituciones de Enseñanza Superior nacionales. Los datos fueron obtenidos en junio/2012 en el Portal de Periódicos de la Coordinación de Perfeccionamiento de Personal de Nivel Superior. Fueron seleccionados 11 tesis, utilizando los términos etnografía y anciano y los criterios de inclusión. Resultaron tres categorías: metodología etnográfica como estrategia para describir aspectos culturales relacionados a la vejez, ancianos y participación social movilizando problemáticas de investigaciones y salud de los ancianos en la perspectiva etnográfica. La metodología busca profundizar el conocimiento de la cultura, por medio de descripciones detalladas del cotidiano de las personas mayores, relaciones que establecen significados atrelados a las experiencias de salud y enfermedades crónicas. La etnografía tiene contribuido para analizar rasgos de la realidad sociocultural, que repercuten en la lectura del cotidiano y en las maneras de experienciar y expresar la vejez.

DESCRIPTORES: Anciano; Cultura; Revisión.

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INTRODUCTION

The ethnographic methodology was first used by anthropologists, since when it has been the object of reflection regarding the ways of making it more sensitive in the description and learning of culture. More recently, the techniques developed by these researchers have been used in various areas of knowledge, so as to seek to understand the human aspects, in particular the cultural aspects, which permeate ageing.

Culture influences how people age and perceive ageing. Along with gender, these are considered determinant, transversal factors of an active ageing, and influence the economic, social, environmental, personal and behavioral determinants, as well as the health systems and the social service⁽¹⁾.

Anthropology has shown the different images of old age constructed socially. In this perspective, if – on the one hand – Western society values productivity and youth, in such a way as often to associate old age with the loss of social roles and functional capacity, ethnography allows ageing to be studied in the perspective which the older adults themselves have of their life; and reveals the subjective experiences⁽²⁾.

From this perspective, the richness of the data revealed in an ethnographic study considers the interpretation which the persons make regarding the reality experienced, becoming closer to the routine experience. As a result, ethnography may be considered as a cultural description from the point of view of the natives, allowing the researcher, the direct, experiential knowledge of the culture, through his/her participation in activities. To this end, the researcher poses questions, takes part in ceremonies, learns new languages, keeps notes in a field diary, observes the cultural scenes and interviews key-informants⁽³⁾.

The investigations have the culture as the study object, and through the dense description of the context and of the interpretations of the meanings presented by the subjects in their social practices, contribute to the construction of knowledges in the area of Nursing⁽⁴⁾. Anthropology's theoretical frameworks are used in studies in the various areas of health. In nursing, what stands out is the aim of interpreting the meanings which the subjects express regarding the context of health and illness.

This integrative review brought together and summarized the ethnographic studies directed at the population with advanced age, and aimed to identify the contributions of ethnographies undertaken with older adults in theses of postgraduate programs in Brazilian Higher Education Institutions (HEI).

METHODOLOGY

An integrative review of the literature was undertaken, following the five methodological stages⁽⁵⁾: elaborate the question for review; define the criteria for the selection of the studies; undertake the literature search; analyze the data; and interpret the results. For this work, the following guiding question was considered: What is the contribution of the ethnographic studies undertaken in theses from Brazilian HEI, focusing on the older adult population?

Data collection was undertaken in June 2012, using the Scientific Journals Gateway of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES in Portuguese), in the CAPES Thesis Database, which publishes the abstracts of theses and dissertations defended in Brazilian postgraduate programs.

Access to the thesis database occurred using the subject descriptors 'ethnography' and 'older adult' in the search tool, and the theses were selected using the following inclusion criteria: to present ethnographic research with a focus on older adults; to have been defended in the postgraduate programs of Brazilian HEI in the period 2004 – 2011, and available in full on the Internet. The reviews period was defined in order to obtain more recent theses.

Using the term 'ethnography', 5,971 theses and dissertations were identified, of which 1,478 were theses. Combining the term 'older adult' as a subject, a total of 22 theses was defined. Five of these were excluded as they predated the period defined for inclusion, three did not focus on older adults, and three were not found in full on the Internet. As a result, 11 theses were selected.

The data were collected using an instrument elaborated by the authors, containing the title, author, teaching institution, area of knowledge, thesis, study object, objective, methodologies, results and final considerations. The analysis of the

data was undertaken identifying the similarities between the studies, and elaborating categories which responded to the guiding question.

RESULTS

The results present the characteristics of the 11 theses selected for this integrative review, and the analytical categories summarize the main contributions identified in the recent ethnographies undertaken with older adults. A larger grouping of theses on older adults and ethnography was observed in the years 2008 and 2010; there were none in 2007, and the other

years varied between one and two theses.

Table 1 shows the use of ethnography in different areas of knowledge, and the study object referent to older adults. The production is distributed between one and two theses among the eight institutions identified, predominantly in the south-east region. In the area of nursing, three theses produced in the period studied stand out.

The theses were grouped in three categories which describe the contributions identified: 'The ethnographic methodology as a strategy for describing cultural aspects related to old age', which is configured in the researchers' search for a framework which covers the older adults'

Table 1 - The study object of the theses which addressed ethnographies with older adults, the respective areas of knowledge and Higher Education Institution. Curitiba, PR-Brazil, 2012

Study object	Areas of knowledge	Higher Education Institution
Reconstruction of the relationships of older adults with chronic mental disorders in therapeutic residential centers	Collective Health	Rio de Janeiro State University
The experience of being a family carer for an older adult with cancer receiving chemotherapy	Nursing	University of São Paulo
Construction of the meaning of risk in the light of the epidemic of HIV/AIDS by older adults	Nursing	Federal University of Ceará
Meaning of the biodance in the life of older adults who are part of a group studied	Nursing	University of São Paulo
Perceptions and meanings of hypertension and diabetes, formulated by hypertensive and diabetic older adults who participate in counselling group meetings	Public Health	National School of Public Health
The meaning of food and the role performed by the routine of eating in the life of older adults resident in a long-term care facility	Medical Sciences	Rio de Janeiro State University
Voluntary work undertaken by American and Brazilian older adults	Education	State University of Campinas
Older adults' verbal and non-verbal participation in literacy classes and re-signification of speech in society's public spaces	Education	Federal University of Paraíba
The relationship between the older adults' protagonism in Brazil and in Spain with the Internet	Sociology	University of Brasília
Relationships of intergenerational family support in domestic units made up of a minimum of three generations in the rural and urban environment.	Anthropology	State University of Campinas
Autobiographical narratives in oral and written language, produced by an older adult	Languages and Literature	Federal University of Paraná

culture; 'Older adults and social participation, mobilizing research problems', in which there is a predominance of studies addressing the social questions of the older adults' relationships with their surroundings; and 'Older adults' health in the ethnographic perspective', with studies referent to the experiences and meanings in the process of health and illness.

DISCUSSION

The discussions originating in the three categories are presented below:

The ethnographic methodology as a strategy for describing cultural aspects related to old age

Ethnography has been used as a methodology for studies which seek to deepen the knowledge of the culture through detailed descriptions of the daily life of the older adults. The choice of the ethnographic research strategies is explained by the need to obtain a closeness to the understanding of the objects studied, in a contextualized form, and based in the culture.

In the cultural perspective, older adults' experiences in the family context were explored, directed towards the relationships between the generations' routine co-existence in distinct social spaces⁽⁶⁾. The language was addressed by its social uses and cultural meanings in specific situations of time and place, and related to the aspects which make up this scenario of the construction of a text, such as identities and roles, interactions, norms and actions⁽⁷⁾.

Through participant observation, 30 older adults with chronic mental disorders were observed in their routine life inside and outside of therapeutic residential centers, in their relationships among themselves, with members of the team, and with the territory, aiming to investigate how they reconstruct their relationships and ageing in these residential centers⁽⁸⁾. In long-term care facilities, the socio-anthropological approach was used to encompass the subjectivity and the human components in the food-related issues, in which the author⁽⁹⁾ observed internal codes and standards of behavior, and highlighted that the eating routine does not take into account the older adults' cultural identity and individuality.

The issues related to the participation of the researcher in the study field constitute a challenge in the ethnography of the World Wide Web, in which the object of study was the older adults' relationship with the Internet in Brazil and in Spain. In this study, the author undertook participant observation in a virtual space, and identified the users' social interactions between themselves and with the online correspondents; the communities studied were virtual, and their meetings, exchanges and relationships were mediated by a technological component⁽¹⁰⁾.

In one of the theses in the area of Nursing, the theoretical framework proposed by Leininger was used, and the O-P-R method (observation, participation, reflection) was adopted, as a systematic form of investigating the context and the cultural aspects of the individual, family and society studied. With the intention of seeing the world from the view of the other, the author collected the data in four phases: primary observation (nonparticipant); observation with limited participation; primary participation and continuous observation, with the undertaking of thematic workshops; and reflection and a reconfirmation of the findings with the informants⁽¹¹⁾. The researcher's immersion in the context studied during a period of time, through participant observation and ethnographic interviews is known as a characteristic of ethnographic research, and in the studies analyzed, it permitted the description of the cultural aspects in old age.

From the cultural perspective, authors⁽¹²⁾ have analyzed the meaning of old age for older adults with disabilities, resident in the outskirts of the urban area of the city of Bogotá, and observed that the social and cultural construction of these meanings is influenced by religious and social factors and by heterogeneous values. From this perspective, the Nursing care in post-modernity is linked to broader aspects of society, occurs in unique conditions, and involves elements such as political, philosophical and anthropological elements⁽¹³⁾.

Thus, this category showed the use of ethnographic research for investigating aspects of ageing and of the contexts in which the ways this is experienced develop. The characteristics of the reality experienced denote the ways of experiencing and expressing old age. These

knowledges have particular relevance for Nursing care, as they can help in the overcoming of a fragmented vision, being reflected in care practices which recover the totality of the human being, in such a way as to value their subjectivity.

Older adults and social participation, mobilizing research problems

In this study, the ethnographic studies which focused on the social participation of the older adults stood out, examples being the relationships which are established in groups, in the community, and in the family. The participation is proposed as one of the pillars of active ageing, besides health and safety⁽¹⁾, and the actions of gerontological nursing care can be undertaken in order to favor older adults' participation in society, taking into account their abilities and wishes.

The issue of how to promote a more healthy life, keeping the older adults motivated and participatory, permeated the ethnography, which investigated the meaning of the biodance for one group of older adults⁽¹⁴⁾, and observed in their discourses: existentialist renewal, the wish for, and happiness in, living, which is awoken by participation in and feelings of inclusion in the biodance group. The ways in which the older adults participated in society were analyzed in the theses and contrasted with the negative stereotypes of old age: dependence and social isolation. The studies observed, in many cases, the re-signification of old age, in which the older adults are active, productive, and socially participative persons⁽¹⁵⁾.

The terms used, such as third age and older adult, in detriment to others, such as 'old', support values attributed to this age range. In this regard, third age is linked to the construction of an identity category which is publicised as a specific lifestyle and associates old age with positive values, such as continuing activity, happiness, autonomy, personal realization and travel^(10,16). However, one should be alert to the extreme valuing of third age, the coexistence of other identities of old age, and the possibility of experiencing it through resting and inactivity⁽¹⁶⁾.

The term protagonism of the older adult is used in retirees' movements and third age associations to refer to the participation of older

adults in activities proposed by them, and was analyzed on the Internet, according to the levels of participation as passive or active users and as co-producers⁽¹⁰⁾. This study showed the playful, relaxed and informal character of the participation of the older adults in the Third Age website, in which poetry, messages in personal columns, chronicles and life histories were frequent postings, and the action limited and controlled by the producers and technical tools was what did not allow for the full exercising of active participation.

In the analysis of the spontaneous autobiographical narratives, it was possible to observe that the older adults enjoy telling of what they have experienced, and report and give meaning to their life experiences and, in describing them, recreate the experience⁽⁷⁾. The author observes that the older adults' discourses are loaded with explanations and details, and when reported to a young audience, provide information of terms which they do not know.

Considering that older adults continue to re-elaborate their learning over their lives, and can broaden their opportunities to experience socio-communicational practices, the benefits for daily life of participating in literacy classes were investigated. The participants reported a broadening in their relationships in society, in the family context and in their inter-generational relationships, as with one older adult who referred to coping with the public space of the bank with greater autonomy⁽¹⁵⁾. Similarly, in an ethnographic study undertaken among residents in popular urban zones of Medellín and Valle de Aburrá in Colombia, in which the majority were adult and older adult females, it was observed that the process of becoming literate using the pedagogy of the text led the people to value their knowledge, recognize their abilities and to interrelate in other ways in the routine spaces⁽¹⁷⁾.

The exercising of voluntary work was also considered an opportunity for education and self-development, stimulating the abilities and contributing to coping with the loss of older adults' identity roles. The study showed the relationships of interdependency established with the clientele and the institution which interacted with the volunteer, contrasting with the idea of purely altruistic action⁽¹⁸⁾.

Older adults' health in the ethnographic perspective

The ethnographic studies which addressed older adults' health sought to describe the meanings of the experiences linked to chronic illnesses such as hypertension, diabetes, cancers, mental disorders and HIV/aids. The analysis of the narratives formulated by hypertensive and diabetic older adults who participate in meetings of the Hypertension and Diabetes Counselling, Guidance and Control Groups sought the meanings attributed to these diseases, the knowledge regarding them, life histories, and the ways that they found to interpret the context. It is highlighted that the culture allows one to know the peoples' experiences of illness and suffering, and to contextualize the explanations which they produce⁽¹⁹⁾.

The people elaborate explanations for the health problems' causes, according to their culture and social groups. Bearing in mind that culture influences the construction of the meaning of risk regarding the HIV/aids epidemic, it is considered that the efficacy in the health education programs for prevention of the disease in the older adult age range entails knowing this population's cultural context⁽¹¹⁾.

Experiences' meanings, beliefs and what the people define as risks for health influence the changes of behavior which the health professionals, often, propose for preventing chronic diseases and complications. In the rural environment of the city of Jordão in the State of Ceará, the older adults reported histories of times of drought and of lack of food and mentioned that stopping eating what they like signifies suffering. It is considered that the forms of food are valued as symbolic capital, which evidences the need to analyze the specific characteristics and to establish a dialog between scientific and popular knowledge⁽⁶⁾.

In addition to this, chronic illness, mainly when associated with physical disabilities, requires participation and collaboration from components of the family and from the social circles⁽¹⁹⁾. From this point of view, the biodance is considered a resource for promoting the older adults' health, as it provides coexistence and social integration, and the older adults' narratives indicated it as a

source of positive encouragement and affective support for coping with illnesses⁽¹⁴⁾.

The analysis of the meanings of the experience of being the family caregiver for an older adult with cancer receiving chemotherapy showed the extremely negative repercussions on people's lives, which lead to suffering. Living with the older adult receiving chemotherapy treatment brought difficulties in the routine of family life, and was seen by the caregivers as an opportunity for becoming closer and for reflection. The ethnographic study evidenced the solitary path of the older adults, including two elderly women who, with few people available for involvement in their care, experienced feelings of insecurity, conflicts and unpreparedness⁽²⁰⁾.

The narratives of older adults with cancer receiving outpatient treatment showed the family as support, functioning as encouragement for the attitudes of facing the disease⁽²¹⁾. Furthermore, the ethnographic approach showed among 10 older adults and their respective family caregivers that the act of caring for persons with an advanced age is influenced by values, beliefs, previous relationships and the conceptions of old age and of care, in which reciprocity was observed as a central theme⁽²²⁾.

The methodological and theoretical frameworks which make it possible to investigate popular wisdom are used by nurses as a basis for the planning of care actions which are congruent with each individual's culture⁽²³⁾, uniquely, aiming for their well-being⁽²⁴⁾. Ethnographic studies show aspects of the forms of health care which the older adults adopt, the explanations which they develop over their lives, and bring dialogue between the different knowledges closer.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis of the works showed ethnography's contributions to Nursing in the description of the cultural aspects, and the immersion in the context, through participant observation. In addition to this, it has contributed to analyzing the specific forms of the sociocultural context, which are reflected in the reading which older adults make of daily life; the knowledge obtained provides a broad prospective, in relation to older adults, revealing aspects such as subjective, unique and collective aspects.

In contrast with the known negative stereotypes of old age, the current theses seek ways to value the older adults and increase their participation in society. As a result, one could observe the attribution of positive values to old age, such as it being an age which is appropriate for learning, activity, happiness and self-development. Emphasis is also placed on family care, intergenerational exchanges and the relationships which the older adult establishes, which are permeated with constructed concepts, and which sometimes translate into reciprocity and the coping with illnesses, others in suffering and conflicts.

In focusing on older adults' health, the ethnographic studies emphasize the heterogeneity, reinforce the contributions of the ethnographic view of the health professionals for the specific characteristics of the sociocultural context, and value the influence of the older adults' culture and popular knowledge in the prevention of chronic illnesses. Besides this, they reveal how the meanings of the experiences of old age are expressed in discourses and interactions, and how they involve family members, health professionals and society in a general way; these being aspects which can contribute to the practices in the health area.

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