






Care and the impact of aesthetic appearance on the social perception on a group of elderly women

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Abstract

Objectives: Describe and explore the care and impact of the aesthetic appearance of a group of elderly women. *Method:* Exploratory and descriptive study, of a qualitative nature, carried out through a sociodemographic questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, with 11 elderly women, participants in a social group. What emerged from the speeches composed the material for thematic content analysis. *Results:* The extraction in thematic units allowed the elaboration of two categories that intertwine and complement each other: Feeling good is the key word and Care for appearance. *Conclusion:* in the participants' perceptions, care and appearance is related to body, facial and capillary aesthetics, generating self-esteem, satisfaction, happiness, freedom, psychological well-being and social well-being and was conceived as an effective means of family, social, and professional integration, motivating them to face the existential vicissitudes. This finding is in line with the expression of freedom, dialogue, self-determination and self-knowledge, recognition and social insertion.

Keywords: Women's Health. Aesthetic. Freedom. Elderly Women.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, at a global level, there has been a change in people's lifestyles. There is a criticism of the traditional values of patriarchy, religions and morals and there is a search for values that aspire to the subject's autonomy, regardless of his economic, social and professional condition and education level. This revolution in the world of life also features elderly women, who are rebuilding their existential values, especially in the face of changes in new family configurations, social and sexual roles, the labor market, etc., mainly due to the influence of social groups. These groups provide spaces for the strengthening of their subjectivities, channeling and expressing a new way of being and acting, such as self-care¹. This attitude of social insertion is capable of "letting life enjoy the invention of singular ways of existence"². Thus, the groups promote leisure activities, study, travel, exchanges, volunteering, a spirit of welcome and team, spirituality, as well as physical and psychological well-being, extolling the art of living well and happy with autonomy, confidence, citizenship, self-esteem, dignity, that is, an aesthetic of existence^{3,4}.

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) conceives the aesthetics or art of existence and self-care as "subject's self-perfection and self-affirmation"⁵, through rational and voluntary practices and a set of rules of conduct attributed to oneself by the subject, with the purpose of transforming oneself into a singular being, bearer of "certain aesthetic values and that corresponds to certain style criteria"⁶. Still, it is centered on the individual's way of being and taking care of himself as part of a society, as a free citizen, with the opportunity to progress morally and intellectually, capable of achieving his personal, social and civic freedom.^{7,8}

From the historical and careful analysis of Greek and Roman ethics, such as stoicism, cynicism and epicureanism, Foucault extracted a philosophical ensemble focused on self-care and, consequently, on an aesthetics of existence or self-care. Even though it is an autonomous mode of existence aimed at privileged citizens of the ancient world², to which Foucault received harsh criticism, mainly from

Charles Taylor, Pierre Hadot and Richard Rorty, the aesthetics of existence can be extended to all contemporary people, from liberal societies, through their secular, immanent and historical morals. These morals enhance freedom, fraternity, equality, autonomy, happiness, beauty, physical and aesthetic beauty, in short, subjectivity. "They are modes of subjectivity, as Foucault understands them, [and] it is a production of ethical subjects"².

The aesthetics of existence is a form of subjectification, a work of art centered on asceticism, purification, spirituality, self-control that transcends the codes of conduct presented by society. It is not a way of being heteronomous, compulsory, metaphysical and strictly extrinsic, shaped by transcendent, rigid, dogmatic values, but intrinsic, deliberate, subject to choice and determination of oneself, as a rational subject to insert oneself consciously in the world, as a practice of self, "Conceived as a permanent combat. It is not simply a matter of forming a man of value for the future. It is necessary to give the individual the weapons and the courage that will allow him to fight his whole life"⁹. In other words, the person has the possibility to assign existential rules different from the standard, traditional and conventional, often market, consumer and alienated, sculpting, molding and taking care of oneself. It is taking care of oneself and then going back and inserting oneself into society as a modern citizen. It is not a selfish and narcissistic way of living, but shared by "individuals of different age, social status and activity"⁶.

The aesthetics of existence is anchored in self-care. From the Greek *epimeleia beaoutou*, this care is structured in the ethical dimension of the subject, of the *ethos*, that is, in the art of living well and happily, in the practice of freedom, autonomy and in the cultivation of the values of the soul, of the self, through a lifestyle with an attitude of self-government and autarchy. It is a way of being, thinking and acting in the world and caring for others¹⁰⁻¹³.

And this way of being and existing has awakened the care with the body aesthetics of elderly women. Feelings of freedom, security, satisfaction with life and happiness are conditions desired by the human being, as well as the possibility to choose and maintain a desirable aesthetic appearance^{2,4,6,7}.

Considering that the human aging process generates anatomical-physiological, psychological and social changes, and, consequently, of care with body aesthetics, image and self-esteem, there is a need to expand studies on the theme, identifying perceptions of satisfaction with physical appearance, life, acceptance and adaptation with the body and age, social, family and social contact^{2,8}.

The aim of the article was to describe and explore the care and the impact of aesthetic appearance on the social perception of a group of elderly women.

METHOD

It is a study of qualitative approach, exploratory and descriptive, through the application of a sociodemographic questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, with 11 elderly women, participants in a coexistence group of the Elderly Care Coordination (DATI), constituted by women, carried out from August to October 2018, linked to the integrated research project *Aging, Education and Health*, developed in a stricto sensu Human Aging Program, in a municipality in southern Brazil.

The selection of participants was by convenience and the definition of the sample size determined by data saturation.

With the authorization of the group's management and prior contact, the meetings were scheduled, with date and time, according to the preference of the participants, in a reserved environment in the space where the group meetings take place. The inclusion criteria were being 60 years old or older, to attend the coexistence group and be available to participate in the research and exclusion, not being present at the time of data collection. The interviews were conducted individually and lasted 30 minutes each, with the following guiding questions: What is aesthetics or beauty for you? What are your usual cares with appearance? Does the opinion of others about your appearance interfere with your participation in the social group? Does caring for your appearance influence the social and emotional aspects of your life?

The information was analyzed qualitatively, using Bardin's content analysis¹⁴, through fluctuating reading in pre-analysis, exploration of the content and interpretation, "trying to discover what is hidden under the selected documents, in search of understanding the phenomenon investigated". Then, it was synthesized, by inference, into units of significance, considering the completeness, representativeness, relevance and homogeneity and elaboration of thematic categories, based on semantic criteria based on the objective of the study.

To preserve the identity of the participants in the excerpts of their reports, E (elderly) and the Arabic number indicating the sequence of the interview were used. The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University, with under opinion number 2,628,706.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participants are between 60 and 83 years old, with an average age of 72. Most are retired, with personal income between one and three minimum wages. Six have up to three children, four have more than three and one does not. Ten elderly women live with family members and one lives alone. Five have 5 to 8 years of study and six, with more than 8 years. Six are widows, four are married and one is separated. From what emerged from the participants' speeches, it was possible to construct two categories: Feeling good is the keyword and Care for appearance.

Feeling good is the keyword

The participants mentioned that body aesthetics provided self-esteem and confidence, making them feel good, with encouragement to seek happiness from the inside to the outside, with physical beauty as the means, the path, and not the main objective, according to the lines:

"I feel confident, happy, even to come to class I feel better, praised" (E 3).

"It is important for every woman. There are days when we feel good, feel happy, beautiful" (E 9).

“Appearance is from the inside out” (E 10).

“We are happier, we feel better” (E 11).

In Goldenberg’s view¹⁵, old age reveals itself, more and more in the last decades, as a time to take care of yourself, health, friendships and grandchildren, to laugh, dance, travel, study, date, it is not necessary to “answer, desperately, to the expectations of others”. With aging, there is a change of purpose, of focus, where the elderly person starts to take more care of themselves, creating spaces for the development of autonomy and freedom, a theory corroborated by the statements above. In the same sense, for Foucault¹⁰, when a person manages to develop his own style, investing and producing in self-care, he becomes an artisan of his beauty, making, in his way of being, a work of art. Thus, the ethics of the Greek and Roman world had as principles that the citizen did not submit to the power of the authorities, nor was he a slave, a foreigner, much less, let passions be dominated, which should be rationalized through exercises, such as meditation, contemplation, examination of conscience and exchange of correspondence, and seek happiness as a greater, supreme good, taking care of life as a whole^{6,9-11}. To achieve a balance between the body, the soul, relationships with the other (otherness) and divinity, it was necessary to occupy oneself with the practice of asceticism (*askésis*), by modifying and extolling his subjectivity, in relation to the body, thought and conduct, to become a moral subject.

The perceptions of elderly women in relation to physical and aesthetic appearance are associated with the daily care of beauty and vanity and this way of being significantly influences self-care, relationship and behavior. They conceived aesthetics related to daily life, capable of contributing to family, social and professional adaptation and integration, improving confidence and self-esteem. However, a person does not agree with appearance to be used for ethnic discrimination and social status:

“I already noticed that people make a difference between treating people who look better or not, which I think is sad” (E 9).

“We are happier, we feel better, we are often treated well. [...]. I’m not ashamed to be with someone better dressed than me” (E 11).

“It all depends on your self-esteem. If you are well dressed, sometimes you go to a place, but the clothes are not in accordance with the location, it depends on whether you got it right or not” (E 5).

“When people meet me and say I look fine, I’m happy” (E 8).

“If I am not feeling well with my appearance, I am feeling kind of left out” (E 1).

For Cerqueira¹⁶, when old age becomes a natural and welcome stage, appearance, despite being important and promoting physical and psychological well-being, does not need to obey and follow the standard of beauty required by society. In this sense, a study carried out with elderly women, who attend a social group linked to a Basic Health Unit, in southern Brazil, showed that, with advancing age and the natural marks of aging, the elderly do not feel intimidated because they dress and act pleasantly with the intention of feeling satisfied with their body image¹⁷.

Self-practices, such as self-care and the aesthetics of existence, are linked to the rules of the social environment. If the subject breaks abruptly and builds a way of being independent of these norms, he feels out of touch with his outside world. Therefore, it is up to the person to seek a balance in social relations, maintaining their autonomy and adapting what is convenient in a society “associated with knowledge and power relations”¹⁰. Foucault stresses the value of uniqueness and the degree of independence achieved by the individual in the sphere of private relations to which the subject belonged in the Greek and Roman world, such as family, domestic activities and “patrimonial interests”. This aesthetics of existence made it possible to intensify relationships with oneself, as an object of knowledge and a field of “action to transform, correct oneself, purify oneself, and promote one’s salvation”¹⁰. Well, the time spent by the participants of this study in self-care, through appearance, highlights this uniqueness.

Still, in relation to the influence of appearance in the daily lives of the interviewees, they reported that they take the time to care for and maintain their body beauty, such as going to the hairdresser, the manicure, to dress well, because there is a concern with the vanity to feel elegant, sensual and beautiful. Thus, there is an aesthetic perception in the aging process aimed at self-care, acting in a positive way, with self-esteem, to live and face existential vicissitudes:

“I always take time to take care of myself, go to the hairdresser, the manicure, because women need it” (E 1).

“It positively influences” (E 7).

“I think this care is important, because you feel good” (E 2).

“If you see that you look fine, your day is nice” (E 5).

“If you look at yourself and like yourself, the day is different. Self-esteem is everything for the person” (E 6).

“When we don’t feel well, we don’t feel beautiful” (E 11).

According to Goldenberg¹⁵, in Brazil, the cult of the young and slim body is considered “true capital”, as an asset to be managed, preserved and cared for. It is a means of achieving freedom and happiness and maintaining a social identity. Still, in the question what do you most envy in other women, “they answered: body, beauty, youth, thinness and sensuality. The body envied by them is young, thin and sensual”. Goldenberg praises the time that Brazilian women use to take care of themselves and an emancipation from the “old sexual, procreative and clothing easements”, however, always accompanied by anxiety, due to the imperative aesthetic constraints coming from society.

Care for appearance as aesthetics of existence

The care that the participants reported is related to physical appearance and body aesthetics, with an association between health and beauty. This

relationship is initially linked to physical well-being, such as maintaining weight, adequate and balanced nutrition, physical exercises through walking, gymnastics and pilates classes, but with repercussions on psychological well-being, self-esteem, confidence and satisfaction and social well-being. Here are some lines:

“But when someone talks about how thin or fat you are, I don’t like it, I feel bad” (E 8).

“It is well worth taking care of myself, taking care of my appearance. I always took care of myself, in food [...], especially after the age of 60. I don’t like to put on weight, I demand to be well” (E 5).

“When I get a little fat, I already start cutting the carbohydrate [...]. For me, feeling good is important, more than the appearance (E 1).

“It is not about appearance. I’m like this. Anyone who likes me has to like me as I am” (E 4).

Foucault¹⁰, paraphrasing Socrates, considered by the Greek and Roman tradition as the master of self-care and the aesthetics of existence, highlights that care for the body and physical appearance, as well as wealth, external goods and money, is something healthy and essential condition to satisfy biological and material needs. However, based on these conditions and care, we seek to achieve and develop the values of the soul, “of taking care of oneself”, in “a form of an attitude, a way of behaving”. This way of living requires reflection, improvement and practice and has repercussions on intersubjective relationships, promoting social well-being. If, on the one hand, there was a concern for self-care, on the other, there were strong local and family connections “of clientele and friendship relationships”¹⁰.

In a similar sense, Fin et al.¹⁸ ensure that beauty in old age is perceived as a process that demands care for oneself and social relationships. It consists of a thoughtful look at the body and the soul, which follows rules, behaviors and principles, such as exercising, maintaining a good mood, dancing, getting a lot of movement, looking for a doctor when you feel unwell and, even, occupying yourself with social causes.

Most elderly women said that, among the usual care with appearance, are the haircut, followed by coloring and manicure. This self-care with aesthetics brings a feeling of youthfulness to the woman, as well as the enhancement of her physical beauty and aesthetic care. This dedication and looking at themselves are anchored in capillary, facial and body aesthetics, elaborated from tastes and everyday experiences, as shown in the statements below:

“If the hair is no longer straightening up, then, I go there, schedule the cut, do the highlights, try to change, change the cut and the clothes that don’t look right, I discard.” (E 2).

“I care about how I look, because I can meet someone and look sloppy. Only when I go to an event, I take longer” (E 8).

“I always try to be in order, hair, nail, a little makeup, get dressed, take care of the whole” (E 3).

According to Goldenberg¹⁹, nowadays and in an increasingly accentuated way, it is possible to live old age with beauty, autonomy, happiness and freedom, because “aging is a verb, action, continuity. [...] We were different in the past and we will be different in the future”. A study carried out with ten elderly women demonstrated that there is a concern with body aesthetics and being healthy, with skin, hair and nail care, always accompanied by physical activity, in view of freedom and autonomy and as social recognition²⁰.

Regarding the opinion of people of the same age about their aesthetic appearance, the elderly women reported that they feel, on the one hand, uncomfortable and challenged, especially when they look in the mirror, and, on the other hand, motivated, with self-confidence and self-esteem. For them, aesthetic care is linked to thoughts, feelings and perceptions, derived from their experiences, and socio-cultural influences of the environment in which they are inserted:

“Feeling that my appearance is pleasing does me good” (E 10).

“It’s everything, it’s my self-esteem” (E 6).

“ It’s important! I like to always be kind of matching colors” (E 7).

“Somewhere more important that we go, I look [referring to the other elderly women], but not that I feel inferior. It’s just an assessment. I usually assess myself in the mirror [...]. Especially before leaving” (E 4).

“I have to look in the mirror and I have to like myself. I will not dress for you or anyone. I dress for myself” (E 2).

“I don’t care much about looks. But I notice that on a party day when I dress nicer, I feel better” (E 11).

Foucault¹⁰ emphasizes the need for the person to examine oneself, their own conscience, as a judge of oneself before the acts and customs performed and what others say and think. This aesthetics of existence does not aim to investigate culpability and generate remorse over self-wits, but to encourage the person to progress morally, intellectually and achieve “wise conduct”, similar to the perceptions of care and the aesthetic appearance of elderly women. Thus, the process of thinking about oneself, also called by Foucault as a culture of oneself, has the function of effecting a “permanent filtering of representations: examining, controlling and sorting them”¹⁰. Still, starting from the exterior beauty, the participants showed concern to enhance the interior beauty, improving their identities, autonomies and social roles.

The study by Marinho and Reis²¹, with 10 long-lived elderly women, aged 80 and over, showed and synthesized that the words most used by the participants were “I feel young, wonderful, eighty, I am beautiful, hair, tidy, beautiful, cream, lipstick and care”. Among the findings, elderly women considered themselves to be cheerful long-lived, aging in a healthy way, in good health, in good mood, “autonomy, independence, conserving the young spirit”. Foucault¹⁰ calls this aesthetics of existence as a “conversion of the self”, a practice of self towards the cultivation of identity and happiness, results of a long journey of knowledge, self-knowledge and self-care.

Research by Elfving-Hwang²², in South Korea, with twenty elderly women, from the metropolitan area of Seoul, with the aim of exploring the aesthetic

appearance, demonstrated that body care is a daily concern, capable of generating self-esteem, autonomy and social engagement. Another study, by Cameron et al.²³, by systematic review, in order to identify women's perspectives on aging, health and body image, highlighted that there is a constant concern with the body and the aging process, such as the loss of beauty, youthfulness and identity. Most women reported dissatisfaction with their body image and this perception generates emotional suffering and social isolation.

Finally, the aging process is also a period of life to conquer and praise freedom, security, charm, recognition²⁴, respect, independence, pleasure, "self-knowledge and much more"¹³. Foucault¹⁰ conceives this improvement and politeness of the subject of aesthetics of existence, which is the search for freedom, self-esteem and self-affirmation reported by the participants of this study. In view of the above, it is suggested to improve the methodology with focus group discussions and establish connections based on self-care and body aesthetics with subjective well-being and quality of life.

CONCLUSION

The participants reported that the care for body, facial and hair aesthetics provided self-esteem, confidence, satisfaction, happiness, freedom, psychological well-being, and social well-being. Still, a good body appearance was conceived as a means, an effective path of family, social and professional integration and capable of generating motivation to face existential vicissitudes, because it is intrinsically linked to thoughts, feelings and perceptions, arising from their experiences, and socio-cultural influences.

According to the statements of elderly women, the expressions and perceptions that emerged highlighted the search for self-care, with an emphasis on caring for physical appearance as an expression of freedom, dialogue, self-determination and self-knowledge, recognition and social inclusion. All these expressions of care for physical appearance demonstrated a fruitful dialogue between elderly women with themselves and with each other.

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