

## The experience of others and becoming a senior citizen

*A experiência do outro e o vir a ser cidadão idoso*

*La experiencia del otro y el tornarse un ciudadano anciano*



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### ABSTRACT

The study aims to describe the perception of seniors on the exercise of citizenship in the light of the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, based on the notion of the sexed body and the other's body. Disclosed was from the participation of 13 elderly, members of acquaintance groups in the city of Jequié/BA, which produced experiential descriptions in three focus group meetings, during the month of April in 2012. Such descriptions were submitted to ambiguity analytics, a technique that consists in suspending the theories and notice the ambiguities inherent in them. From this analysis, two categories have emerged: being an elderly citizen in the expression of the sexed body and being an elderly citizen in the expression of the other's body. The reflections have shown that the inclusion of elderly women in acquaintance groups and their desire to exercise citizenship occur, primarily, by the need to be accepted in society and recognized as subjects of law.

**Descriptors:** Aged. Citizen participation. Philosophy, Nursing.

### RESUMO

O estudo objetiva descrever a percepção de idosas sobre o exercício da cidadania, à luz do pensamento de Maurice Merleau-Ponty, com base na noção de corpo sexuado e corpo do outro. Desvela-se a partir da participação de 13 idosas, integrantes de grupos de convivência na cidade de Jequié/BA, que produziram descrições vivenciais em três encontros de grupo focal, durante o mês de abril de 2012. Tais descrições foram submetidas à analítica da ambigüidade, técnica que consiste em suspender as teses e perceber as ambigüidades que lhes são inerentes. Dessa análise, emergiram duas categorias: *o ser cidadão idoso na expressão do corpo sexuado e o ser cidadão idoso na expressão do corpo do outro*. As reflexões mostraram que a inserção de idosas em grupos de convivência e seu desejo de exercer a cidadania ocorrem, principalmente, pela necessidade de serem aceitas na sociedade e reconhecidas como sujeitos de direitos.

**Descritores:** Idoso. Participação cidadã. Filosofia em Enfermagem.

### RESUMEN

El estudio tiene como objetivo describir la percepción de las personas mayores en el ejercicio de la ciudadanía, a la luz del pensamiento de Maurice Merleau-Ponty, basado en la noción de cuerpo sexual y el cuerpo de otro. Revela se con la participación de 13 ancianas, miembros de grupos de convivencia en Jequié/BA, que produjeron descripciones vivenciales en tres reuniones de grupos focales, durante el mes de abril de 2012. Tales descripciones fueron sometidas a la analítica de la ambigüedad, técnica que consiste en suspender las teorías y observar las ambigüidades inherentes a ellas. A partir de este análisis, dos categorías surgieron: *ser ciudadano anciano en la expresión del cuerpo sexuado y ser ciudadano anciano en la expresión del cuerpo del otro*. Las reflexiones demostraron que la inclusión de ancianas en grupos de convivencia y su deseo de ejercer la ciudadanía se producen, principalmente, por la necesidad de ser aceptadas en la sociedad y reconocidas como sujetos de derechos.

**Descritores:** Ancianos. Participación ciudadana. Filosofía en Enfermería.

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## ■ INTRODUCTION

Due to the aging population, senior citizens have become a significant part of the population, with the potential to influence the political life of the country, which is represented at different levels of society <sup>(1)</sup>. Some, faced with the need to interact with other seniors, join support groups connected to associations.

As part of these groups, most seniors realize that the routine of their lives begins to change, especially in relation to the reconstruction of social ties and decreased loneliness <sup>(2)</sup>. The effects of this participation have been so significant that it is possible to see that the issues related to the physical, psychological and social well-being of seniors has been of interest to researchers and policy-makers in health, education, labor and social security.

Thus, several elements can be indicated as determinants of well-being for this segment of the population, among which can highlight longevity, biological and psychological health, satisfaction, social competence, productive and leisure activity, social *status*, improved income, continuity of family roles and informal relationships in groups of friends <sup>(3)</sup>.

In this context, support groups are included as opportunities aiming to promote *empowerment* of seniors by raising awareness, so they become subjects of law <sup>(4)</sup>. Thus, many groups created in recent years have enabled the strengthening of social movements for seniors, progressively demystifying the prejudice constituted around the elderly, in order to establish in society a conception according to which they are treated with respect and dignity and ensured the effectiveness of their rights, in the form of protection policies.

However, in a literature review on the issue of public policy for seniors in Brazil, we understand that, despite the current decade appearing as a period of creation, coordination, integration and consolidation of plans and networks for protecting and guaranteeing the rights of such people, there are still major gaps in policies implemented in the country, which deserve attention and prominence from the social movement especially <sup>(5-6)</sup>.

These concerns led us to reflect on the ambiguities in the process of becoming participative citizens engaged in movements in the search for respect for rights already attained and the implementation of specific policies for this age group, with the following question emerging in the research process: how do senior members of support groups perceive citizenship? Thus, this article aims to describe the perception of seniors on citizenship in the light of the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, based on the notion of the *sexed body* and *the other's body*.

In his book *Phenomenology of Perception* the author states that we can only "understand the function of the living body except by enacting it myself, and except in so far as I am a body which rises toward the world" <sup>(7:114)</sup>. This body whose conception the philosopher would subsequently deepen, establishing the notion of the body-subject, unlike the anatomical body, refers to the dynamics of the perceptive experience, which occurs through the operation of the human senses interlinked with the world, which the philosopher denominated *flesh*. Thus, human perception or experience of the *body-subject* implies openness and *inter-corporeality* with what is similar, with things and the world, a process that occurs in five dimensions: *the habitual body, the perceptive body, the talking body, the sexed body and the other's body*.

In this article we focused on establishing a dialogue involving the descriptions of elderly women's experience in relation to their citizenship, the notion of *the sexed body* and *the other's body*, and studies dealing with the issue of aging and citizen participation in old age. Thus, the study provides a new contribution to the direction of the relationship between being elderly, support groups, and citizenship.

## ■ METHODOLOGICAL TRAJECTORY

This is a phenomenological qualitative approach based on the ontology of experience of Merleau-Ponty, which describes perception as the essence of human beings – dialog and intersubjective experience – which is expressed as generality <sup>(7)</sup>.

The research scenario were the Friends Associations, Support Groups and the Open University for the Elderly (Aagruti) that integrates seniors connected to support groups living in the city of Jequié/BA, a city that has approximately 17,330 seniors citizens, equivalent to 11.4% of its total population, but has not advanced in the implementation of public policies to meet their socio-cultural and health demands <sup>(8)</sup>.

13 seniors participated in the study, aged 60-77 years, and members of support groups connected to the Aagruti. To obtain experiential descriptions (data collection) the focus group technique was used, which occurred at three meetings scheduled in advance and lasting two hours on average, in the month of April 2012.

In the meetings, we valued playfulness with the presentation of the issues to be addressed through the Subject Tree, which were ordered in sequence: What is the role of the association? What does it mean to you to participate in seniors' association? Before you joined and participat-

ed in support groups of what changed your world view? Do you consider yourselves senior citizens? What does exercising citizenship mean to you? How have you contributed to exercising citizenship?

At each meeting, we presented a report summarizing the above, except the first meeting, in which the order of the topics was discussed. After discussion the seniors assessed the stage in order to plan the following one. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed.

The descriptions were submitted to ambiguity analysis, a technique developed by Sena<sup>(9-11)</sup> for the analysis of empirical descriptions in studies with a phenomenological approach. The theoretical basis is the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and the ontology of experience of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The focus is not on the interpretation of experiences, but the identification of the ambiguities that are shown in the intersubjective experience between researcher and participants in the study<sup>(10-11)</sup>.

The discussion was predicated on the theoretical framework of Merleau-Ponty regarding the approach to the perception in the perspective of the body-subject, specifically the dimensions of the *sexed body* and *the other's body*.

The research is part of a the work derived from the dissertation entitled "Perception of members of support groups on the living/aging citizen", linked to the Graduate Program in Nursing and Health (PPGES/Uesb)<sup>(12)</sup>. It began after approval by the Ethics and Research Committee of at the University (CEP/Uesb), under registration number 9760. Participants signed a statement of free and informed consent (IC). To preserve the anonymity of the participants names of fruits were chosen as code names.

### The senior citizen in the expression of the *sexed body*

Although we formulated theories that belonging to an association of seniors means getting involved in a mechanism of social mobilization that involves the enforcement of rights and improvement in living conditions and quality of life, this study shows the ambiguities that surround the dynamics of human perception, which implies awakening to new possibilities for configuration in the context of citizenship and integration in support groups.

The operation of the *sexed body*, was shown in the study to be an effect on the behaviors and attitudes of seniors faced with the movement generated by the demographic transition process, characterized by an increase in the elderly population and the emergent demands of the phenomenon, thereby relating to an opening to the experience of the other, i.e., the experience of transcen-

dence. Thus, the *sexed body* has nothing to do with the genitals, but with the desire for satisfaction in life and developing various social roles with pleasure through intersubjectivity with similar people, involving the fullness of the senses, i.e. perception<sup>(7)</sup>.

The intersubjectivity included in the lives of the elderly members of support groups continually expresses a new possibility for life, with a meaning in the phenomenal field that is revealed by integrating with the group. In this sense, it is possible to understand that a body that lives alone and in restricted environments has compromised its health and vitality, as it requires space, movement, and especially the relationship with the other. "Private exclusion favors the process of disembodiment, the disappearance of the person, because without the body there is no existence, leaving room only for diagnosis"<sup>(13:146)</sup>.

The fact of meeting new people and new peers with which to identify brings a sense of belonging, along with friendship ties that are fundamental in the autonomy process and construction of new life projects. This relationship is a way to renew vitality, live longer and better, giving meaning to life which, for some, had become empty during old age<sup>(14)</sup>. This finding resonates in the statements of the seniors participating in the study:

*The Aagruti is a very good thing for the elderly, because they feel younger [...] The confidence of the elderly (Grape).*

*Nowadays we see really happy seniors: are you going to the demo? I say: I'm going! I mean, it's given purpose to the person, right? [...] I also need to go on marches (Peach).*

*Today I spent the whole morning in bed, but I say: I'm going, I have to go! Now I'm not even feeling anything. Look at the difference, isn't that it? (Pineapple).*

The statements show that a body that approaches the world in search of something, finds in the groups a chance to open up to the *other*, to exercise the *sexed body* as a projection towards a new reality, something that provides pleasure in being and doing, which is different perspective from that historically established for being a citizen.

The possibility of being part of a group, in a space where you can perform different activities and at the same time, talk, smile and be with other people, is referred to in the statements as a refreshing experience among seniors. This scenario favors an increase in self-esteem, personal value and makes seniors freely exercise their citizenship<sup>(4)</sup>.

However, as all bodily experience is ambiguous and is always on profile, we can reveal the feelings that go along

with the feeling of pleasure of being in the group. When **Grape** says *the elderly feel younger*, this shows the need to feel young, attributed, perhaps, to the search for social value that seniors themselves do not recognize. After all, how can we view the citizenship of the seniors in this study if, rather than identifying themselves as seniors, we personify them as young?

Scholars comment that when discussing old age in a country like Brazil, which preserves the ideals of being a young nation, this is no easy task because although science has contributed to the delay inherent in the biological aging process, this is not enough to transform the stereotypes culturally assigned to this phase of life <sup>(15)</sup>. In this context, seniors experience the ambiguity between accepting and denying aging, which was shown in the statements through need to feel younger in an attempt to comply with a social representation.

**Peach** talks about the experience of participating in a support group: *it's given purpose to the person, right?* And, as is characteristic of intersubjective relationships, Pineapple corroborates Peach's statement with the expression of a sense of coexistence: *now I'm not even feeling anything. Look at the difference, isn't that it?* These descriptions unveil a new feeling experienced by the senior members of support groups, which favors reframing how to be citizens. They seem to replace the suffering caused by disease and feelings of sadness with feeling of happiness, personal satisfaction and ability to become the *other*.

Thus, the study leads us to the reflection that, in support groups, seniors elaborate a sense of social autonomy by sharing universal intersubjective experiences that favor openness to the *other* and the operation of the *sexed body* providing them with pleasure, satisfaction, increased self-esteem and, in turn, citizenship in old age.

### The senior citizen in the expression of the other's body

Reflection on what leads older people to join support groups and what changed in their lives since their membership in the groups led us to the realization that the event occurs from the need for social interaction, more specifically, with peers. With this, the majority of seniors perceive a change in the routine of their life, in particular a break from the loneliness and alienation of the social environment <sup>(2)</sup>.

The redefinition of life perceived by seniors enables the experience of the *other's body* especially with the recognition and appreciation by society. The collective spaces of support groups are indispensable strategies for becoming

a senior citizen, in that it provides an opportunity for inter-corporeal experience.

When reading the experiential descriptions of the seniors, we realize the ambiguity inherent in perception, mobilized by two dimensions of human nature. On the one hand, the elderly seek to share feelings of coexistence with peers, which constitutes an experience of impersonality. On the other, belonging to the groups in order to have greater visibility and social acceptance in the sense that they are required to be active and healthy seniors, and which is configured as a reflective or personalized experience, highlights the fact that the two motives contribute to the experience of the *other*. The statements below corroborate the ambiguous experience:

*[...] Sometimes we see a party in the street, and it's all represented. You can see, here is the senior group being well represented (Persimmon).*

*[...] these movements undertaken in square is already an example, it is an admiration for the elderly. Another thing is the choirs that perform at parties and festivals. All this is already a presentation to society and a means for it to value these seniors (Guava).*

*[...] so, we had nothing like that. We parade in the street, each of us with a towel on their head, all full of balls, united, right? Everybody taking photos (Mango)?*

*[...] much has changed right [...] because we he have rights for a lot of things that we didn't have within society (Melon).*

*[...] Today we have our rights wherever we go, no one can criticize us, because now we have rights in society (Watermelon).*

*[...] Today I talk in line, I ask some people. I mean, I'm feeling secure, right? (Pear).*

Rereading the descriptions based on the figure-ground relationship allows us to understand the ambiguity of the movement of the dimensions that make up human nature. In the statements by **Guava** the figure is the expressiveness of the seniors provided by the intersubjectivity of the groups, which lead them to become mobilized in various social settings – parks, parties and festivals – and the background, as profile, reveals the need to perform these activities not only for personal satisfaction, but to be recognized and valued by society.

The experiential descriptions also made us see that if the majority of seniors condition citizens to recognize them in society, the ability to help others, to present themselves as active, young and supportive could contribute to such recognition. Such capabilities are unveiled as a synthesis drawn from the intentional process involving: intuition, operation of language and objectification <sup>(16)</sup> Thus, membership of groups allows them to reflect on the attribute of solidarity, which is effected in the collective citizen action, fulfilling the duty of contributing to social development:

*I think that citizenship in my mind, to my thinking [...] I think the best citizenship a person can have is to help others, to help society (Orange).*

*[...] I can say that exercising citizenship is like me, who has helped many people in this way, bringing people to retirement, getting hold of people, doing favors. [...] (Strawberry).*

As a result of the fulfillment of duties, particularly with regard to humanitarian aid, a greater gain in social value is expected, which can contribute to raising self-esteem and increasing concern with self-care. This reflection resonates with assertions by scholars in the subject, indicating the need to overcome the stigma historically constituted in the popular imagination, which associates aging with lonely, unpleasant looking and unkempt people, different from that considered beautiful, nice and happy <sup>(17)</sup> looks. The following descriptions reveal the experience of the *other* with respect to breaking down stereotypes attributed to the elderly:

*[...] I was once a person reserved person. Today I'm very daring (laughs). I travel alone with my group [...] And we're like that, different, right? We have a totally different view of life [...] I think the face of the elderly is different [...] look how we're younger, right (Banana)?*

*[...] It changed for me, because I did everything all my life, but I was afraid because I was repressed, both by the laws and the population itself. But now we have more openness. We did things, but it was hidden, and today we do things and many people criticize. But we do so without fear (Apple).*

Researchers emphasize the importance of groups as environments for social interaction and integration, in which participants perform multiple activities including crafts, exercise, dance and travel, enabling dialog, socialization of information and knowledge, and helping to dispel loneliness <sup>(2)</sup>.

However, in the social environment, the elderly cannot always overcome stereotypes. When **Apple** reports that: *it was hidden*, and **Banana** corroborates saying they *have a totally different view of life*, it seems that repression is still present in their feelings and that inclusion in support groups leads them to experience an ambiguous existence: on the one hand, the happiness of the groups given the socialization they provides, and on the other, the sense of social repression that is assigned to the elderly.

The study shows how stereotypes can affect the impersonality of the elderly, since, as social beings, they experience the ambiguity between what they feel about themselves and the thoughts of the other in relation to themselves, i.e., the perspective of the cultural world which results in social prejudice is always perceived by seniors, even if reflexively they do not feel that way. Being old in our country means being invalid, incapable and useless.

The seniors participating in the study revealed that the changes resulting from their inclusion in support groups are related to the ability to feel *renewed* and this *renewal* appears through the resumption of their youth. Thus, from the perspective of Merleau-Ponty, in relation to the *other's body*, the *other* is shown from the integration in the group which, owing to intersubjectivity, enables transcendence.

## ■ FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study allowed us to describe the perception of citizenship by elderly members of support groups in the light of the thought of Merleau-Ponty on the *sexed body* and *the other's body*. It showed that membership of groups and the desire to exercise citizenship occurred, among other reasons, owing to the need to be accepted in society and recognized as senior citizens.

In this perspective, health professionals need to understand the elderly under a logic that demystifies the ideology of contemporary Western society that attaches a pejorative meaning to the word *old*. They strengthen the inclusion of older people in groups existing in the community that support their recognition as protagonists in their own lives. Thus, they can contribute to building a society in which it is not necessary to represent the image of the young senior in order to be accepted by other age groups, a society in which older people are respected and valued as citizens, regardless of the social roles they play and the difficulties inherent in their age.

We believe that studies of this nature in the context of gerontology enable the elderly to be valued, as they seek to understand experiential descriptions that provide assistance to planning actions for more humanized care in



the scope of public health and social policies in order to strengthen their social integration as subjects of law.

As limitations to the elaboration of this research we can highlight the difficulties in conducting the focus group meetings. One of the reasons was due to the meeting times being different to the usual times of the respective support groups, which caused initial resistance to scheduling. Another factor occurred at the meeting times when we noticed a certain apprehension on the part of some members when giving opinions in front of other seniors. At the same time, we believe that the methodology has awakened a dialog between the group, bringing us the feeling that there is still much to be uncovered.

Finally, when understanding the dynamics surrounding the experience of the *sexed body* and the *other's body* like the unfinished construction of knowledge, in which phenomena never show themselves in full, we accept that it is not be possible to reach all of the perspectives in this study, presenting this limitation as the basis for future research in the area of gerontology with a focus on the phenomenological approach.

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