(In)visible bodies: stories of interseccionality among costarrican elderly

Cuerpos (in)visibles: historias de interseccionalidad en las personas adultas mayores costarricenses

Corpos (in)visíveis: histórias de interseccionalidade na população idosa costarriquenha

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The aim of this article is to analyze the articulation/relationship between the "being/owning" an aged body linked to the various manifestations of violence, stigma and vulnerability in the contemporary Costa Rican society. Results/Development: Violence against the elderly constitutes a historically invisibilized and naturalized phenomenon. The analysis of the interaction between direct, cultural and structural violence allows to understand its work on the aged population. With the same veracity and historical transcendence, stigma and stereotypes are built upon Costa Rican older adults. Resulting in a tacit lack of understanding from society and the crystallization of discriminatory ideas that affect their daily lives. In this way, social stigma and violence are intertwined under a series of social schemes that subjugate older adults to a vulnerability that is sustained. Conclusions: To achieve deconstruction of the culturally established concept of old age it is necessary to visualize these processes of violence, stigmatization and vulnerability. With this purpose, aged bodies must

be removed from the individual analytic guideline and placed in a wider socio-collective sphere of political and social transformation.

Key words: Aging. Aged. History. Violence. Social Stigma

RESUMEN

Introducción: El siguiente artículo objetiva analizar la articulación entre el "ser/poseer" un cuerpo adulto mayor vinculado a las diversas manifestaciones de la violencia, estigma y vulnerabilidad en la sociedad costarricense contemporánea. **Resultados:** La violencia contra las personas adultas mayores constituye un fenómeno invisibilizado y naturalizado históricamente. El análisis de la interacción entre la violencia directa, cultural y estructural permite comprender su actuar sobre la población adulta mayor. Con la misma veracidad y trascendencia histórica se erigen estigmas y estereotipos sobre las personas adultas mayores costarricenses. Resultando en una incomprensión social tácita y en la cristalización de ideas discriminatorias que repercuten en su diario vivir. De este modo, estigma social y violencia se entrelazan bajo una serie de artimañas sociales que subyuga a las personas adultas mayores a la vulnerabilización sostenida. **Conclusiones:** Para alcanzar una deconstrucción del concepto culturalmente instaurado de vejez, es necesario visualizar estos procesos de violencia, estigmatización y vulnerabilización. Con este fin, los cuerpos envejecidos deben ser retirados de la pauta analítica individual y colocados en un ámbito socio-colectivo más amplio de transformación político y social.

Descriptores: Envejecimiento. Anciano. Historia. Violencia. Estigma Social.

RESUMO

Introdução: O seguinte artigo objetiva analisar a articulação entre o ¨ser/possuir¨ um corpo adulto maior vinculado às diversas manifestações da violência, estigma e vulnerabilidade na sociedade costarriquenha ao longo da história. **Resultados**: A violência contra as pessoas idosas constitui um fenómeno invisibilizado e naturalizado historicamente. A análise da interação entre a violência direta, cultural e estrutural permite compreender sua atuação sobre a população idosa. Com a mesma veracidade e transcendência histórica se constroem estigmas e estereótipos sobre as pessoas idosas costarriquenhas. Resultando em uma incompreensão social tácita e na cristalização de ideias discriminatórias que repercutem no seu diário viver. Deste modo, o estigma social e a violência se articulam numa artimanha social que subjuga às pessoas idosas a maiores vulnerabilização sustenido. **Conclusões:** Para atingir uma desconstrução do conceito culturalmente instaurado de velhice, torna-se necessário visualizar estes processos de violência, estigmatização e vulnerabilização. Com esta finalidade, os corpos envelhecem devem ser retirados da pauta analítica individual e colocados em um ambiente sócio coletivo mais ampla de transformação política e social.

Descritores: Envelhecimento. Idoso. História. Violência. Estigma Social.

INTRODUCTION

The dynamic process of aging is inherently human. Nevertheless, the conception of that procedural mechanism is linked to a complex social system which, in turn, is dependent upon the socio-historical and physico-temporal context in which it is located.

However, this conception of old age and the elderly (using a term with inclusive language that respects the anthology of *being*) has not been shared in a consensual manner. It has been coined with the passage of time, based on an association between ageing and senescence, seen as a mechanism of decline, with death as the ultimate goal, followed by a conceptualization of old age as a form of control over pleasures - and therefore a transcendence of corporal limitations[1].

The foregoing, points out a focal point of analysis: corporality as one of the shaping axes of culture, which is also determinant - and determining - of the behavior of groups and the identities of individuals. This concept has evolved from a magic-religious vision [2], to a more social and material linkage -current culture- in which the body constitutes the first form of symbolization for individuals[2].

This means that the form of expression of older adults is anchored and objectified - in moscovician words - not only in their bodies, but also in the politics, social norms, social expectations and behaviors[2].

However these bodies, coupled with a possible deterioration, are far from the hegemonic archetype of young adults in a productive age. A western culture under a system of "cult and hypervaluation of the body" is observed, constructing a vision of old age as a stage of losses.

In addition, one of the main characteristics of the aforementioned western culture is that the capitalist system constitutes its spinal cord. Which, by definition, is centered and sustained by (re) production processes, and it is from its capacity to respond to these processes that it takes its value[3-4].

What role do older adults assume then in this western, capitalist and post-colonial reality? It seems to be, that this population escapes –or is compulsorily segregated- from both qualities, which are key to be considered as belonging to society. Therefore, it is stripped of its possibility of worth despite having an experiential baggage, probably greater than that of other individuals, simply because of its lower production capacity.

Starting out from this relational position, in line with the vision of Fournier-Pereira[5] who drinks theoretically from Lugones (2008, 2012) and Grosfoguel (2011, 2013), older adults could be classified within a sub-human category (less than human) that allows them – under the vision of what is considered being human – to be victims of violence in the broadest sense.

This is due to the fact that their bodies, their moment in the life cycle and their living conditions intertwine to form a broad and dense fabric on their heads that increasingly separates them from that category of socio-human expectation[5].

However, the question arises as to how the bodies of the elderly have been symbolized before? It is clear that during the first half of the twentieth century, and prior, an almost indissoluble relationship between aged and senescence was visualized. A link between the socio-political reality of the elderly and their biological aging normalized their functional decline.

Consequently, the theory of detachment or disengagement arose, which responded to this vision that aging would imply a natural desire to dissociate from society. But - fortunately - a questioning of this naturalness began in the second half of the 20th century, due to an increase in the relative proportion of the older adult population -particularly in the western hemisphere, but also globally[6].

Starting out from this historical point and based on the current national situation, there is an inexorable phenomenon of which we are all participants: the population ageing. It refers to a substantial demographic change linked to the reduction in the mortality and birth rate, determining changes in the relative weight of the different age groups[7].

Due to this increase in the older adult population, during the second half of the 20th century a transition process was carried out in which the older adult became a biopolitical subject, as described by Foucault[8], now his life is managed from the political space[6]. However, its vision as weak, poor, and dependent population, among others, has been perpetuated.

This global phenomenon is addressed in depth in the I Report of the State of Affairs of the Elderly in Costa Rica. However, we could question the perspective from where the report is being written. Starting from a simple analysis axis: language.

In this regard, it could be observed that the document refers to "the elderly person", which may indicate that, from the conception of the production of the Report, a highly heterogeneous population is being categorized into a single unit (homogenized) of analysis. As conceptualized by Rodríguez[9], the universalization of the population and the homogenization of their needs occur when, starting from an intention of benefit, they are transformed into objects - not subject - vulnerable and uniformed.

This does not necessarily call into question the quality of the information provided in the Report, but seeks to contextualize its point of origin and intentionality. We could think that if this perspective appears in the guidelines of an institutional governing body, it is likely that it will also be reproduced in the majority of the Costa Rican population and to a greater degree, imprison the elderly in a process of invisibility and vulnerability of their individuality.

As an essence of the above, through this analysis we aim to reflect on the articulation between the "being / possessing" of an older adult body linked to the diverse manifestations of violence, stigma and vulnerability in contemporary Costa Rican society.

The manuscript was built with the support of national and international authors with significant experience in the areas of anthropology, psychology, sociology and public health. They presented some theoretical-conceptual considerations with the purpose of contributing to the debate in the social and health sectors.

In this way, we emphasize that the selection process of the authors was intentional and not exhaustive and the reflective analysis was born as a result of the critical reading of the texts conducted by all the authors.

Violence against the Costa Rican older adult: historical and conceptual perspectives

Processes of violence against the elderly tend to be invisible and even naturalized in the social imaginary. Deliberation on this topic is relevant, due to the increase in the gross population of older adults and the polysemic manifestations of the violence to which their bodies are exposed in multiple areas of daily life.

In addition, the World Health Organization[10] provides a definition of violence that could be used relationally with older adults, which is described as an act (or more) that may impair the person and represent a violation of human rights.

A relevant aspect that complements the previous conceptualization is that society cannot, nor should it be excluded from its responsibility to resolve these processes of violence. Therefore, it is not only about the violence that occurs at the family or institutional level, but it also refers to those manifestations of violence impregnated in the culture which makes the bodies of elderly people and their environments vulnerable, targets of discrimination and saturates them with stigmas.

To reach a greater understanding of the phenomenon of violence, it is relevant to highlight what Galtung[11] envisages in his Theory of Violence when he mentions three typologies: direct, cultural and finally, structural violence.

Direct violence refers to behaviors that make violence perceptible physically, verbally or psychologically. Structural violence includes violence generated by social, political and economic systems that govern societies. Cultural violence includes aspects of each culture - ideology, religion, communication and language, art, education, stereotypes and stigmas - used to legitimize direct or structural violence[11].

Accordingly, Galtung[11] proposes a triangle that explains this phenomenon. At the upper vertex, direct violence is identified, which is more obvious and visible. Subsequently, structural (socio-economic and political) and cultural violence are found at vertexes of the base. Regarding the latter, they may go unnoticed because they permeate everyday life in society. They are then comparable with a lethal and odorless gas that, despite not being perceptible, causes vulnerability and death.

Due to this, it becomes important to contextualize violence toward the elderly people within the Costa Rican reality. The Costa Rican governing body -from the creation and execution of public policies- for the aging and old aged, Consejo Nacional para la Persona Adulta Mayor (CONAPAM, in its Spanish acronym)[12] determines a typology of abuse; said typology exemplifies the direct and structural violence contemplated in Galtung's theory[11].

Initially, physical violence refers to an action aimed at causing physical harm or injury to the older adults; sexual abuse involves any contact that is sexual in nature and occurs without their consent; psychological violence is conceptualized as verbal aggression that leads to their emotional damage; patrimonial mistreatment corresponds to acts of robbery or illegal use of their resources [13].

Continuing the typology of violence, neglect and abandonment specifies an act of intentional or unintentional omission that does not cover the basic needs of the older adults; in addition, it includes the institutional abuse caused by the staff of institutions, public and private organizations responsible for the care of the elderly people[13].

Finally, structural violence – as conceptualized by Galtung – toward the elderly and identified by CONAPAM, is defined as the background for the other forms of violence and represents the legal, social, cultural and economic norms that are leading society. The results are a lack of social/health policies and resources, as well as a failure at enforcing current laws, social, community and cultural norms, thus diminishing the image of this population,

Continuing with the Theory of Violence, Conti[14] interprets Galtung proposed triangle of violence and explains the interaction among the three types of violence. He indicates that violence can initiate in any of the vertexes and be transmitted to the others. In this case, the elderly can be under the influence of various types of violence, less visible (structural and cultural) before they become more visible (direct).

Conti then proceeds to emphasize that direct violence is an event- whether physical, psychological, financial abuse or negligence- and in general understands the phenomenon as an aggression characterized by being direct and intentional[14]. Added that it is being perpetrated over time, it is inserted within the social fabric as structural violence and is culturally justified.

On the other hand, structural violence, far from being an individualized action, is a process that has its foundations in history and manifests itself through marginalization, discrimination, the consideration of second-class citizens and alienation, phenomena which highlight the differences in the quality of life of a person.

Finally, he explains that cultural violence naturalizes and justifies violence through language and is reflected in adultism, etarism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, classism and racism[14]. Contextualizing this interaction of the types of violence in the older adults, direct violence can be caused by the discrimination of society, generated by an erroneous social conceptualization about aging or etarism.

However, faced with the above scenario, Costa Rican society has created sociopolitical measures that reduce these problems. According to the Political Constitution of Costa Rica, the State provides special protection to the mother, the child, the underprivileged and the elderly people. However, for the older adults, the determination of a responsible institution watching over this population is non-existent[15].

As a result of the previous fact as well as the increase in the aging of the population, in 1999 the Integral Law for the Older Adult was decreed N ° 7935[16]. Linked to this law, the same year, the Consejo Nacional para la Persona Adulta Mayor (CONAPAM) was created, an institution that guarantees and ensures the enforcement of the law.

Likewise, the law establishes the application of the measures and procedures ordered in the Law against Domestic Violence N ° 7586 as a measure to prevent violence in its various forms; similarly, it specifies penal sanctions depending on the aggression committed against the elderly people.

Our interest in understanding this social phenomenon and the role played by the structure and culture of a society, is not to generalize and homogenize their experiences, expressions and circumstantial realities. But to show the acts of violence, discrimination, stigmas, labels, vulnerabilities, marginalization and exclusion that impact on the quality of life of this group.

Stereotypes and Stigmas in the bodies of the Costa Rican elder

Throughout history, the concept of late adulthood has been shaped and understood in multiple ways. Due to this, to understand the current social vision of adulthood, it becomes necessary to recognize the deficiencies that the structure of the collective organization around it presents.

This collective organization is permeated by stereotypes and social stigmas. In spite of this, to visualize and recognize these elements, it is useful when it comes to identifying, correcting and preventing the crystallization of discriminatory ideas in the society that have an impact on the daily life of the older adult. And unfortunately this kinda of ideas can be reproduced, unconsciously, by ourselves.

Therefore, it is valid (as well as necessary) to ask oneself -as well as the one reading this- Do I have any prejudice against older adults? And if so, What is the impact that this generates in the relationships established between myself and them?

It is important to highlight the contributions of Erving Goffman when he indicated that society by itself educates for the classification and determination of a person's abilities according to a defined characteristic -for example, their age[17].

We are then taught, to characterize what escapes from intelligibility, therefore, it is everyone's responsibility, to be a rebellious student of this *Society College*, and to stop attending these classes of intolerance as Stigma-101: The good, the bad and how to judge it.

On the other hand, continuing with the present times Chnaiderman adresses that we live in a hypermodern society, where dynamism becomes vital[18]. No value is taken for the old, the only

valuable is that which is new and modern. In this way, the 21st century, as the favorite son of Capitalism, rejects everyone that finds and preserves the value in past identities.

Much on the contrary, it privileges those who possess the greatest capacity to "flow" - taking the words of Bauman[19] - in other words, those who adapt quickly and constantly to the stream of innovation, technological emergence and consumption in which they are inmersed[20].

In consequence of the aforementioned, prejudices continue as prevalent realities nowadays and, instead of lightening up the social panorama of adulthood, they cloud it up by the heavy yoke of indifference and cruelty towards this population that prejudices create.

However, to conceptualize the terminologies immersed in their semantic core of stereotyping, we count on the contribution of Andreoletti, Leszczkynski and Dish[21] when they state that stereotypes are perceptions, which can be positive or (mostly) negative, provide defined characteristics to people who have a specific attribute.

In addition, Goffman[17], identifies the stigma as a discrediting attribute, related to physical characteristics, alterations that escape the intelligibility - if any - also alterations of the character or passions such as homosexuality, drug addiction, and unemployment, as well as those related to biological inheritance such as race, nationality and even religion.

In a way, these two factors previously mentioned correlate, one factor is gunpowder (stigma) and the other one is the spark (stereotypes), none of them is lethal - maybe dangerous-, however, together they unleash a chain reaction which results in the constant vulnerability of the Older Adults. On the other hand, it is important for the development of this reflection, to contextualize or better to "tropicalize" these stigmas and stereotypes regarding the Older Adults of Costa Rica.

"In the shade I was born from your palm, in your savannah I ran as a child and that's why my tender love, you cultivated forever more". *The Patrótica Costarricense*, the ode of the *Tico* – Costa Rican person – to his beloved country, despite this, we could ask ourselves: What happens when that Costa Rican child becomes an older adult?, well, it´s simple -yet concerning-, he is forced to disappear.

The Older Adults suffer processes of invisibility in terms of the problems that live in Costa Rican soil and discrimination sponsored by a society focused on the enjoyment of the here and now and of course it values the "eternal" youth.

It is for this reason that CONAOlder Adults of Costa Rica provides useful information to address the issue of stereotypes and stigmas in the Older Adults, in the first place, accepting the reality of the few - or null - investigations in the country in terms of stereotypes concerning the Older Adults and in the second place pointing out stereotypes such as: ageism, infantilization, intellectual deterioration, loss of autonomy, presence of the bad character, cancellation of sexuality, institutionalization, social isolation and depression[22].

In relation to ageism, Nelson conceptualizes it as the set of negative value judgments directed at an individual which are based on their age[23]. Ageism can generate (as previously addressed) direct violence against the Older Adults, being cataloged in that social framework where the spectrum of intolerance is mixed with the one of disrespect.

Another important consideration when talking about stereotypes is taking forr a fact the intellectual deterioration in the Older Adults. For Barber, the experience on the part of the Older Adults of this cognitive stereotype is based on self-conceptualization[24]. This happens due to the multiple social stigmas regarding the cognitive loss in this stage, the Older Adults then begins to believe that they functions of cognition are in fact, declining.

It is clear then that the discrimination absorbs even the self-image and the person itself, feeding the historical processes of stigmatization in order to stablish this cognitive disability that is placed in the Older Adults. However, is it that the disability is linked to the Older Adults?, or rather, to the society with clear signs of incomprehension and vulnerability to the different populations?

With this situation that we are now all facing, it is up to us, to be entities of desmythification and destigmatization. This means, thatit is up to us to unravel and explain these stereotypes, with the aim of achieving a better understanding of the Costa Rican social picture.For this reason, the stigmatizing information and education must begin in microspheres to subsequently reach much more wide contexts.

Social Vulnerabilizations in the elderly people: Intersectional Dialogues

The social vulnerabilities in the elderly people have presented significant changes over time. From a historical point of view; until the 20th century, elderly peple in the western world were valued and socially represented as carriers of experience[25]. Therefore, they obtained as a response a behavior of respect, integration and admiration on the part of society and its oikos.

Continuing with the same line of thought, it is possible to affirm that the foregoing has changed considerably as this acquisition of experience has been resignified through the development of life. Which subsumes the elderly people in a time of greater vulnerability[25].

In this same sense, contemporary societies have considered production as the primary value of life, and this generates, as an irrefutable consequence, a profound disvalue for those who are outside it. Observing elderly people as an economic burden, since it represents a significant expense associated with a lower financial contribution. Condemning them to an exclusion that besides being symbolic, is clearly tacit.

In the words of Jodelet[26], these changes have restructured the forms of social thought that are anchored in the group and are translated into a real and tangible discrimination response. That is to say, a series of meanings that pass through the older adult bodies materializes, in this case, destined to their vulnerability.

However, if we consider the economy and technology as uniquely responsible for the processes of exclusion and subordination of the elderly people, we would bias our thinking, in a very limited position in front of this reality. The processes of vulnerability in the elderly people include politics, gender, sexual identity of desire (according to Caravaca-Morera it must be understood as the process of emotional and sexual attraction and self-identification towards another person. Be of the masculine gender, feminine to both or other identities not contemplated by the intelligibility), health, race, class, ethnic group, religion, work, education and migration.

Therefore, starting from the situations described above, and intertwining them with the characteristics of the aging process -co-morbidities, pluripathologies, disabilities and therefore processes of dependency and care-, the elderly people and their bodies suffer before society, from social vulnerabilities.

Understanding these forms of vulnerabilities, such as those that refer to the lack of protection of a group, when facing potential damage to their health, satisfaction of needs and validation of rights[27]. However, when talking about elderly people, as vulnerable beings, they are observed as if old age were synonymous with disease.

Now, up to here everything indicates that vulnerability is something that belongs to the stage of adulthood. However, in agreement with Cerri[28], it is mentioned that this is a characteristic feature of all human beings, and not just an "accident" that reaches certain people and groups. We understand by "accident" the proper state of the people who are in a social condition of risk and difficulties, which will hinder the satisfaction of their well-being.

We agree with the previous statement, because, during the life process, we are exposed to situations that make our bodies vulnerable to the physical, social and psychological meso-environments. So, the social vulnerability in the elderly people; it is derived from a set of situations-low income, unemployment, gender discrimination and low schooling-that, by acting synergistically and intersectionally, place the elderly in situations of vulnerability[29].

Therefore, in line with the thinking of Tisnes and Salazar[30], we consider that situations of vulnerability are defined based on social, economic, cultural, family, genetic, gender and age circumstances. And although, most types of vulnerability are shared by all the elderly people, we must not forget the idea that the aging of each person is different; and the same circumstances may or may not occur.

With respect to the types of vulnerability, we think that the health of the Costa Rican elderly people is affected by situations of violence (previously exposed), family disintegration, loneliness, isolation, social marginalization, reduction of the economy and little satisfaction of basic needs. They are also exposed to multiple risk factors, such as insufficient social protection, inadequate eating habits, sedentary lifestyle, and fundamental rights[31-32].

On the other hand, education is another important factor in social vulnerability; visualized in that the current elderly people that we found in day centers and care homes did not complete their

primary studies, and this has impacted their income, because of the difficulty to find a high-paid labor field[33].

So, what are the consequences for the elderly people, losing a social role, having low self-esteem, being dependent on someone else and having low income? We consider that the above determines the degree of vulnerability of the elderly people, forcing them, sometimes to live with other members of the family or to depend economically, physically and socially on them.

Taking into consideration the previous point, we question ourselves, is it the family dynamics, the cause of the other processes of vulnerability? Clearly, there is a wide range of social markers of differentiation -explained above- that enhance a process of systematization of the vulnerability to which the elderly people are subjected.

However, processes of discrimination at the family level do contribute directly and negatively to a social ruse of vulnerability. Which consequently could trigger situations of loneliness, negligence, abuse of power, omission of care and overload of work.

Of course, as mentioned, the population group in question is highly heterogeneous, and we do not wish to incur an error of generalization. However, it is clear that there is a highly widespread positioning, where the Costa Rican elderly people are perceived as less productive and less self-sufficient, causing processes of victimization and mistreatment at the family and social level, such as abuse, exploitation, isolation and violence[34].

Faced with this reality, the conjunction of the elements described so far has the effect of vulnerability, and consequently social exclusion, abandonment, low self-esteem and depression of the elderly people; because their participation, as well as decision-making, is diminished. In the same way, their little economic autonomy makes them a (supposed) burden for the home, causing their dependence, diminishing their quality of life and accelerating their deterioration.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In recent years, the critical perspective, but mainly the holistic approaches of Costa Rican aging have (timidly) favored the emergence of a consensus on the need to visualize the dynamic cycles involved in violence, stigmatization, stereotyping and myths creates around elder people, with the intention of deconstructing the culturally established concept of old age.

In this context, we proceed to question the alarmist attitude and its (more than) basic foundation on a negative and homogenizing vision of being / owning an aged body. It emerges then, from this post-structuralist notion -of the wrongly named third age- a transforming movement of representations and social practices associated with the processes of aging and old age in Costa Rica.

Likewise, it is evident that in the secular imaginary, old age was always thought of as a burden and family threat and; consequently social to the contemporary transformations of a (merely) capitalist and neoliberal scenario.

For its part, aging as a phenomenon on which there is still little reflection, needs, for its understanding from a constructivist perspective, in which the theories and proposals contemplate the very actors for whom they are created.

Finally, taken as a matter of public health, the aged bodies must be removed from the individual analytic pattern and placed in a broader socio-collective environment of political and social transformation.

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