

Social Psychology

# Poeticizing after sixty: An experience on aging

Camila Maria Chiquetto<sup>1</sup>

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3743-9992>

Claudia Stella<sup>2</sup>

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7363-7748>

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1 Unimed Jundiaí, Jundiaí, SP, Brazil.

2 University of British Columbia (UBC), Vancouver, BC, Canada.

### Abstract

The stigmatization of aging by reducing it to losses is due both to the denaturalization of the phenomenon and to the influence of cultural ideas on aging that disregard their subjective aspects. The aim of this paper is to present research participating in a poetry workshop, from a group of older adult women (aged over sixty years) reading and writing poetry. The research monitored whether reading and writing poetry helped in the production of new meanings about aging, as well as the reflection that the older adults had about the aging development phase and its aesthetic, social and cultural ramifications. After reading the poems produced and the descriptive notes of the meetings, the following categories of analysis emerged: the meetings as an area of appropriation, conviviality and reflection for the participants; society and the possibility of an active position in aging; the appropriation of the body in aging: experiences and criticism of the aesthetic model; and memory: recollections and meanings. As a result of the poetry workshop, a space was established for creation, sharing and social recognition; recovery of memories and reflections about the stigmas.

**Keywords:** aging; developmental psychology; mental health; older adults; poetry.

## POETIZANDO APÓS OS SESENTA: UMA EXPERIÊNCIA SOBRE O ENVELHECER

### Resumo

A estigmatização do envelhecimento reduzindo-o às perdas se dá tanto pela desnaturalização do fenômeno quanto pela influência do ideário cultural sobre o envelhecimento que desconsideram seus aspectos subjetivos. O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar uma pesquisa participante em uma oficina de poesias, verificando se a leitura e a produção poéticas auxiliam na produção de novos sentidos sobre o envelhecer. Dos materiais produzidos nas oficinas, bem como dos relatos descritivos dos encontros, emergiram as seguintes categorias de análise: a oficina como espaço de apropriação, convívio e reflexão das participantes; sociedade e possibilidade de uma postura ativa no envelhecimento; a apropriação do corpo no envelhecer: vivências e críticas ao modelo estético; memória: recordações e significados. Como resultado, a oficina de poesias possibilitou um espaço de criação, partilha e reconhecimento social, de retomada de memórias e de reflexões acerca dos estigmas.

**Palavras-chave:** envelhecimento; psicologia do desenvolvimento; saúde mental; idosos; poesia.

## SESIONES DE POESÍAS DESPUÉS DE LOS SESENTA: UNA EXPERIENCIA SOBRE EL ENVEJECER

### Resumen

La estigmatización del envejecimiento reduciéndolo a las pérdidas se da tanto por la desnaturalización del fenómeno como por la influencia del ideario cultural sobre el envejecimiento que desconsideran sus aspectos subjetivos. El objetivo de este artículo es presentar una investigación participante en sesiones de poesías, identificando si la lectura y la producción poéticas auxilian en la producción de nuevos sentidos sobre el envejecimiento. De los materiales producidos en los talleres así como de los relatos descriptivos de los encuentros, surgieron las siguientes categorías de análisis: sesiones como espacio de apropiación, convivencia y reflexión de las participantes; sociedad y la posibilidad de la postura activa en el envejecimiento; la apropiación del cuerpo en el envejecimiento: vivencias y críticas al modelo estético; memoria: recuerdos y significados. Como resultado, las sesiones de poesías posibilitan un espacio de creación, compartir y reconocimiento social, de la retomada de memorias y de reflexiones acerca de los estigmas.

**Palabras clave:** envejecimiento; psicología del desarrollo; salud mental; ancianos; poesía.

### 1. Introduction

Aging is intrinsic to the course of human development and is experienced uniquely by each subject. Due to better living conditions, there has been an increase in the older adult population in recent decades both in Brazil and in developed countries, which calls for different disciplines to think about strategies for improving quality of life and functionality during this stage of development (Araújo, Ribeiro, & Paúl, 2016; Ribeiro, 2015).

The stigmatization of aging based on age chronology, reducing it only to the loss of the physical, productive strength and relational space, contributes to isolation practices and interferes with the subjects' perception of their own aging. This stereotypical view created two distinct groups among the gerontology scholars: one that spread aging as a period of loss and another one that put forward the new concept of active aging (Cunha, 2018; Ribeiro, 2015).

The emergence of the lifespan perspective changed this scenario, bringing a continuous perspective of the development from childhood to old age, with a multidimensional nature, integrating gains and losses, normative and non-nor-

mative factors, as well as the influence of history on the cohort. Thus, the co-influence of biological and sociocultural factors in the aging process was highlighted (Ribeiro, 2015).

By contrasting the stigmatization of aging with losses, Healthy Aging and Active Aging approaches are gaining ground in Europe. The first focuses on the promotion of healthy behaviors and the reduction of risk factors, in order to maintain the subject's functional capacity; while the second enables opportunities in contexts of health, participation and security for higher quality aging (Araújo et al., 2016). The concept of Successful Aging by Rowe and Kahn (1987 as cited in Araújo et al., 2016, p.4) proposes the presence of three aspects: a low rate of disease and disability; high physical and cognitive functionality; and active involvement with life.

Studies and practices with older adults have shown a transition to a positive representation about aging. In a study on the meanings of old age and subjective well-being in older adults, an assessment of positive satisfaction was highlighted, so that in addition to physical health, the importance of psychological well-being and family, and social interpersonal relationships gained prominence as one of the indications of healthy and happy aging. Therefore, the multiple factors involved in the qualification of aging must be evaluated (Mantovani, Lucca, & Neri, 2016).

In interventions to promote the quality of life of the older adult population, psychology, in conjunction with other areas of the humanities and health sciences, has used intermediary resources such as poetry, letters, objects and photographs in the processes of development and recognition of relational, cognitive and affective potentials, as well as the resignification of memories (Amodeo, Netto, & Paz, 2010; Gil & Tardivo, 2011; Melo & Domingues, 2012).

The use of literary resources is of great value in the comprehension of oneself and others through the relationship between words, reality and fantasy. Literature has its most peculiar form in poetry, since it demands from the reader an apprehension between intellectuality and affect. In addition, the poetic image is formed through the combination of words by sound, syntax, meaning and rhythm, which allows the apprehension of different meanings at each reading (Amodeo et al., 2010; Goldstein, 2006).

From this capacity for continuous apprehension of new meanings, poetry helps in the subjective creation, because "just as the poet creates a new form when

writing a poem, the reading of one triggers processes of creation and recomposition in the one that reads it, as effects of this mixture between the body of poetry and the body of the reader “(Melo & Domingues, 2012, p. 73).

Accordingly, the aim of this article is to present an action research study conducted in a poetry reading and creation group with older adults, verifying whether poetic reading and production help in the production of new meanings about aging, as well as in the reflection that older adults have of this stage of development and its aesthetic, social and cultural ramifications.

## 2. Method

This study is the result of a course conclusion paper named *Poetizando após os sessenta: uma experiência grupal de criação subjetiva*. The researcher was also a participant coordinator of the workshop, using the reading of poetry as a mediator instrument for expressions and reflections, as well as the creation and sharing of poems by the participants, configuring the study as action research (Gori, 2006).

### 2.1 Participants

Ten women that were members of an Older Adult Social Center (Núcleo de Convivência de Idosos – NCI), located in the west of São Paulo city, the state capital, participated in this study. Their ages ranged from 60 to 86 years. The names of the participants were changed to preserve their identity and ensure the confidentiality of the information. All the study participants signed a consent form.

### 2.2 Instruments

Poetry was chosen because it requires a particular intellectual and affective exercise from the participant for the artistic manifestations. In addition, it can lead to the creation of new perceptions and meanings and to breaking with consolidated representations (Amodeo et al., 2010). Following is the list of poetry and poetic resources used in each meeting, with the names indicated with an asterisk indicating poetry authored by the participants:

- Workshop 1: “A idade de ser feliz” (The age of being happy) (Mário Quintana); “O mar e o rochedo” (The sea and the rock) (\*Beatriz)

- Workshop 2: “Me deixa ficar velha” (Let me get old) (Mirian Goldenberg); “Tempo” (Time) (\*Catarina); “Natal” (Christmas) (\*Cecilia); “Ser avó” (Being a grandmother) (\*Cecilia); “Fica Senhor Comigo” (Stay Lord with Me) (Gioia Júnior);
- Workshop 3: Poetic production; “Pássaro” (Bird) (\*Cecilia); “Ensino” (Teaching) (Adélia Prado);
- Workshop 4: Poetic production; “Para ser grande, sê inteiro” (To be great, be whole) (Ricardo Reis)
- Workshop 5: “Esperança” (Hope); “Emergência” (Emergency) and “Os poemas” (The poems) (Mário Quintana – all)
- Workshop 6: Poetic production; “Soneto de Fidelidade” (Sonnet of fidelity) (Vinícius de Moraes)
- Workshop 7: “A idade de ser feliz” (The age of being happy) (Mário Quintana)

### 2.3 Procedures

This study was conducted after approval through CIEP process No. T013/05/15 of the Internal Research Ethics Committee of the Center for Biological and Health Sciences of the Mackenzie Presbyterian University.

The workshops were held in seven weekly meetings, each of with one and a half hours of duration. Each meeting began with the reading of a poem that would serve as a mediator instrument for the group’s reflections, dialogues and creations. For the participants that wanted, space was opened for the creation of poetry and its reading for the group. Those who produced some poetic creation outside the workshop could bring it to the meeting to be read and shared with the other participants.

The meetings were later recorded in a descriptive report. At both the first and seventh meetings, a workshop was proposed with the theme “meanings of aging”. Based on the participants’ reports, an analysis was made of the implications of the poetry workshop on their experiences.

Subsequently, the participants’ reports were subjected to content analysis, according to the thematic categories that emerged from the discussions and reflections on the poetry worked on (Bardin, 2003).

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1 The workshop as a space of appropriation, conviviality and reflection for the participants

Analyzing the dynamics of the poetry workshop, it becomes clear that it became a space that was appropriated by the participants with the minimal intervention of the researcher. According to the methodological principles of action research, the participants starred in the workshops suggesting activities, bringing texts and poetry of their own, as well as opening space for all to participate in their unique ways.

Similar dynamics were identified by Lourenço & Massi (2016), who performed operative groups with a task aimed at the construction of writing, which enabled social interactions among the older adults marked by respect for the speech of others, an active position and support of their desiring voices through the authorship. Using writing, the older adults could outline new subjective positionings regarding aging, in search of more quality and meaning.

A group dynamic of sharing, reflection and problem solving regarding the experiences shared is established. The experiences presented by one participant mobilize similar content in another, as well as raises the acceptance of those who listen. According to Bosi (2003): “The narrator takes what he narrates from his own experience and transforms it into the experience of those who listen to him” (p. 85). Thus, the subject’s view turns to themselves as they listen to what comes from the other, in a process of resonance and transformation (Melo & Domingues, 2012). For example, after Joana shared issues involving her daughter, Beatriz shared a similar experience, which she had been overcoming through writing:

*Grace:* It’s so good that you can write. Imagine what you would do if you didn’t have the writing?

*Beatriz:* That’s right. The sea is the way, but there are storms. With the writing I’m getting closer to my daughter.

Attentive to the lines that emerged, the participants reflected among themselves on the meanings of aging breaking the stigma of limitations and unproductivity, using their own poetic manifestations as devices of support for reflection.

When Catarina had difficulty understanding the poetry “Teaching” by Adélia Prado, the other participants readily offered to help her, seeking their own examples:

*Cecilia:* Love is in the little things. For example, despite having a car, my husband was walking to work. When it rained, I worried and went to meet him with an umbrella. This is love like in the poetry.

### **3.2 Society and the possibility of an active position in aging**

During the workshops, the need that participants had to learn about poetry and especially to show their creations was observed. Activities at the NCI itself, caring for family members and looking after the home were highlighted by the older adults as evidence of an active position, different from the cultural ideas of inactivity in aging. In telling her story, Maria highlighted her productive capacity even after leaving the profession of truck driver:

*Maria:* There are people who say that I should write a book. I've traveled this country so much. I know the whole of Brazil to the borders of Venezuela... Colombia. So I've seen a lot of things on these roads. They were talking about organization, I already organized an event for several children, some without parents, and some with absent parents. We filled five buses to take them to the park with candy and popcorn. [...] I was even called here at the White Water Park to talk about the event! I can't speak, but I went there (laughs). They were impressed on how I managed to do it. [...] We see a lot and cannot say. So, at least we have to do something.

For this category of analysis, Erikson's (1998) theory of developmental stages will support this reflection. Although most of the participants are in the eighth stage of the dynamic “ego integrity vs. despair” conflict, we noted that aspects pertinent to the previous phase of “generativity vs. stagnation” were still present.

According to the same author, in the eighth stage, there is a retrospective review, in which the subject can evaluate their experiences and how much they lived with satisfaction. Conversely, the dystonic pole of “despair” makes the individual lament what has been lost. Given the finitude, time seems limited to live what could not be lived until then. Thus, wisdom emerges as the virtue to balance

the meanings of the lived experiences and/or frustration with missed opportunities, added to the time that seems to fade away (Lima & Coelho, 2011). As an example of emotional integrity, we highlight Cecilia's statement:

*Cecilia:* When I turned 60 I stopped to write my timeline. I put down everything I had done, just left out the 50 years with my husband. At the time, my son asked: "Mother! What did you do until you were sixty?", and I answered: "I loved you!" [laughs]. It is not? I loved everything and everyone!

Cecilia summarized her story in a timeline and expressed it positively as "love". It is worth mentioning how this participant liked to show her countless poems, to say that after becoming a widow, she entered the college for older adults, and to show photos of the delicacies that she prepared for her grandchildren.

According to Erikson (1998), even with the reduction of energy, the generativity of the previous stage, focused on family commitment, care and production, can be present during old age as a grandparent, as well as acting as a defense against the despair of the eighth stage, keeping them away from the sense of worthlessness and frustration at mistakes, and active in their social relationships. However, generativity in old age has its particularities: besides caring for children and grandchildren, it involves looking outside oneself, while at the same time inside oneself, using one's resources for the development of wisdom (Lima & Coelho, 2011).

Throughout the workshops, the participants were able to learn new poetry, create their own and show them to others. They turned to their lives and stories, sharing their productions in the group, in order to get to know each other. Bonds were formed through the similarity of events, empathy, listening, and encouragement. According to Lima and Coelho (2011), activities such as these, aimed at productivity and creativity, make older adults feel alive.

Despite the situations that place the older adult in an unfavorable social position, Blessmann (2004) points out a paradigm shift towards the social place of the aging subject. According to the author, with the increase in life expectancy and survival rates, a new image emerges of older adults that have their potentialities recognized at the expense of idleness. The social role of the older adult as a subject of generativity has emerged through the mark of activity and through the bond in social participation.

The workshop participants showed that they were integrated with this new social position of the older adult, but did not disregard having to cope with the still existing stigma. After hearing the poetry “The age of being happy” by Mario Quintana, Cecilia and Beatriz responded to those that identify with the dystonic pole of despair and stagnation:

*Cecilia:* There are people who complain about life, say they can do nothing for this... that ... that they are old. Or just stay here [imitates someone fiddling with the cell phone]. People just think about this! What is worrying is not the cataract of the sight, but that of the soul!

*Beatriz:* Despite age bringing some difficulties, we have today!

### **3.3 The appropriation of the body in aging: experiences and criticism of the aesthetic model**

In our society, in which the body is valued as a commodity that obeys the media standards of youthful beauty, old age can be experienced by the subject as a negative stereotype or as a moment of resignification of one’s identity with the reaffirmation of gains in this stage of development. The issue of the body and aging was recurrently brought up in the group by different participants. It was even the central theme of the workshop, in which Beatriz shared the article “Let me get old!” from Mirian Goldenberg’s column in the Folha de São Paulo newspaper (07/14/2015). The participants showed criticism of the normative of what is socially expected for the corporeality of the old:

*Catarina:* This charge does not come from individual to individual: there are economic and capitalist interests involved. There is the cosmetics industry... the pharmaceutical industry. There is a monetary interest. [...] They want to put a blemish on each age’s own things. It is a constant massification!

In the Brazilian society, the body gains the status of physical and symbolic capital in the market of ideal beauty (Goldenberg, 2011). Added to this scenario is the fact that we are in the information technology age, in which networks of production and control of desire arise in the consumer subject (Blessmann, 2004). According to Catarina’s critical statement, the logic of consumption disregards the

singularity of the aging subject, and suppresses the vicissitudes of this phase of development that, in addition to including biopsychosocial changes and/or losses, also includes emotional and cognitive gains (Jorge, 2005).

According to Blessman (2004), the body characterizes the presence of man in the world. Thus, the changes experienced in the aging body reflect new ways of acting with its limits and challenges. However, the body image and the meaning given to it drive the subject to be of desire in an experience that can be of satisfaction.

*Cecilia:* We have to grow old without rotting! I feel good about my age. For me, I carry all ages: I was a child, a teenager, an adult ... it's not because I'm old that I have to be sad! I once looked at myself: varicose veins, wrinkles... marks ...! I even made a poem for myself! (laughs). I feel good as I am!

It seemed that Cecilia had appropriated the new identity, despite the difficulties and stigmas she faced. According to Jorge (2005), despite the ambivalences between gains and losses pertinent to old age, the degree of satisfaction also depends on the quality of previous experiences and the way the subjects insert themselves in the external world: the way of relating and projecting themselves in the future.

However, according to the participants, there is still ambivalence regarding issues pertaining to the body and aging. Although there seems to be integration with the new body identification, there is the presence of stereotypes that postulate which positions are allowed to older adults. This was the case for Francisca, who was surprised during a trip to Rio de Janeiro: "Older ladies, like me, use a bikini without worry". Thus, public policies aimed at the conviviality of older adults and the diffusion of active aging also contribute to self-care (Franco & Barros, 2011):

*Beatriz:* Social conviviality helps a lot in appearance! The conviviality here, for example. See, we take care of ourselves more... We dress up for a meeting like this one of ours.

Despite the widespread stigma of the old as unproductive, limited and ill, Goldenberg (2011) pointed out that the older the age of their interviewees, the

more positive aspects were mentioned in relation to aging: the desire itself outweighed the cultural patterns that place the older adult in a negative role. We may think that the new social place of the older adult, added to public policies aimed at older adults, have contributed to the creation of healthy social bonds that have an impact on the meaning and care of the body.

### **3.4 Memory: recollections and meanings**

The use of poetry as an affective-symbolic mediator instrument helped to recall experiences and apprehend new meanings within the group dynamics.

Reminiscences were triggered, which consisted of the process of remembering significant past experiences. Participants were able to occupy their subjective places within their life narratives through the analysis of autobiographical memory, with the rescue of sensations and the integration of new meanings to past experiences related to childhood, affective family relationships and work (Gonçalves, Albuquerque & Martín, 2008).

The workshops began with the reading of a poem brought by the researcher or the participants, as well as the exhibition of literary creations that guided the reflection on memories and meanings.

During an activity in which the participants were able to choose a word to write freely about whatever they wanted, various memories emerged using the writing as a means of expression:

– Word: joke (Cecilia)

Today, me, Cecilia, I'm 86 years old. But I remember my childhood dearly. Every night [I] would go out of my house to meet my little friends and then we would play shuttlecock, ball and ring until my mother [wouldn't] let me stay anymore, I always wanted more. I never finished the games of my own free will. And so, the next day we'd meet and it would start all over again.

– Word: father (Beatriz)

Dear father, when I was a child, I would look at you and find you so strong and so far away. You didn't like physical contact or cuddling – you thought it took away your parenting authority and withdrew at every opportunity. I wanted to hug you so much and missed you so much: I didn't understand

why. I just wanted to kiss your cheek. I could only do that to you on Christmas Eve, when I was 35 years old. We were thrilled, because it was so sudden, even you didn't expect it. We hugged without saying anything, I kissed your face, you accepted it. It was a victory for me, a barrier overcome. I felt at that moment that a daughter's love finally triumphed.

The memory articulates the present and the past through a desire for explanation that the subjects employ in integrating their experiences in the search to give meaning to their histories. Thus, when evoking memories and images, the subject relives and updates the content of the experience (Bosi, 2003, 2013).

In his studies on time and memory, Bosi (2003) highlights the existence of successive milestones that focus on the biographical meanings of the memory. Therefore, while Beatriz recalls the difficult times of the war, Cecilia refers to the same period as the time that she dated her late husband:

*Beatriz:* These days, I remembered my dad listening to the radio and saying to us: "The war is over!"

*Cecilia:* It was in 1945! I was dating at that time... I remember!

*Beatriz:* I was a child! I remember my mother putting dark cloth on the window, so we wouldn't see the planes. There are people who don't like to remember these things [...].

The biographical objects also carry the vicissitudes of time. According to Bosi (2003, p. 26), "the things that grow old with us give us a peaceful sense of continuity". In one of the workshops, smiling, Cecilia showed a souvenir book in which she kept all her notes and letters. At the same meeting, Beatriz confessed to having a "draw of nostalgia" that she opened in intimate moments with herself to elaborate the pain of loss.

Through objects and recollections, memory traces a line that links the present and the past with consciousness (Bosi, 2013). In the group sharing, the subject gives life and meaning to what remained hidden.

#### 4. Final considerations

Taking into account the results obtained, we saw that the poetry workshop provided a space for creation, sharing and social recognition. Memories of important moments, reflections on the stigmas, the poetic creation and listening itself could lead the older adults to think about their life trajectory, the possibilities existing in the present, as well as to rethink the social place that is culturally given to older adults, in search of their own meaning circumscribed by the history of each participant.

The group bond played a very important role in the reflective processes and in the performance of the workshop itself. The group took on the active position that the participants seemed to have in everyday life: they made suggestions, raised questions and resolved them among themselves, as well as respecting the different forms of thought and expression.

The use of poetic language favored the expression of the singularities existing in the group. The same poetry or word allowed access to what was particular to each participant's life story and gave rise to a plot of complementary stories.

Poetry invited the older adults to the plan of creation and spontaneity, serving as a mediator of group reflections. According to Alfredo Bosi (2013, p. 43), "in the poetry lyric, the expression of subjectivity is woven from images excavated from the subconscious and saved from forgetfulness. They are pure memories stripped of all conventionalism". Thus, the stigmatizing cultural idea is set aside in favor of what is unique in each subject.

Among the limitations, we can cite the difficulty of having a stable number of participants present in the workshops for a more diverse group experience, which would allow the other extensions of this resource to be discovered. Another suggestion for further research would be to use a tape recorder for the accurate recording of the interactions and content expressed, or even the presence of someone solely responsible for recording the meetings.

Despite the limitations, it was found that the poetry workshop in the NCI contributed to the creation of a subjectivity less affected by social stigma and closer to creative spontaneity. Poeticizing after sixty made the consolidation of bonds and social participation possible, which is important in constructing healthy aging. Through the analysis and discussion developed in this study, we can verify the applicability of the poetry workshop in different contexts that are concerned with the

quality of life of older adults and the importance of empowering these citizens. The workshop can be used as a device in the production of new skills and subjectivities, as, according to the participant Beatriz, poetry is beyond books and formal analysis: “poetry is within us”.

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### Authors note

**Camila Maria Chiquetto**, Home Care Service, Unimed Jundiaí; **Claudia Stella**, Child Studies Lab – Psychology, University of British Columbia (UBC).

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Camila Maria Chiquetto, Rua Santiago, 26, Vila Helena, Jundiaí, SP, Brazil. CEP 13206-701.

E-mail: camilachiquetto@gmail.com,