

PERMANENT EDUCATION, HEALTH PROMOTION STRATEGY AND PERSONAL PROJECT REFORMULATION

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1. Introduction:

The present paper intends to put forward some conclusions resulting from the research we have done with elderly people in the Elderly Permanent Education Program (PEPAM), pertaining to the Secretary Extension of the Faculty of Humanities and Education Sciences of the National University of La Plata, created in the year 1994 and the ad-hoc investigation carried out since the year 2003, called “ Identifying process and the effects of new knowledge access in activities shared by elderly people in La Plata and greater La Plata”. We shall illustrate the aforesaid through words and commentaries gathered during different moments of the task.

2. Foundations:

Among the novelties of the end of XX Century, we shall include the changes concerning the ageing issue. Precisely, it is not casual but unusual that a Vocational Occupational Guidance publication includes a research on elderly people.

We shall refer to permanent education considered as a health promotion strategy. Thus, we will talk about elderly people projecting or in some cases even reformulating their future, i.e. establishing new goals. The latter has a stimulating health effect, since we have observed and this was confirmed by the very elderly themselves, that the difficulties arisen from the unawareness of their possibilities leave stranded their potentiality, interests, expectations and time.

The achievement of an unexpected longevity and last decades’ cultural, scientific and technological transformation have produced both outstanding effects on elderly population and in society, as well as the astonishment of those of us who have not found yet an adequate way to call them. Many euphemisms arise at the moment of naming them: senior, old adults, oldster, oldies, grandparents, elders, old age young people. Such denominations confuse descriptive and conceptual categories with social and psychological positioning.

During our job with elderly people, both in Extension activities and during different research moments, we were witnesses of a true transformation process regarding old

adults expectations, requests and productions as well as the social representations concerning ageing, elderliness and its possibilities before the novelty of a lucid, active and extended elderliness. In this process of change, vocational guidance does not seem alien, since the metamorphosis undergone by elderly individuals pose them before the challenge of accepting one's old age and "doing something about it". Thus, this means being prone to question their desires and rethink their choices- loving, vocational and relational ones.

We begin by understanding ageing as an active process which, in a given moment, makes visible to both the individual and the rest the transformations of time, expressed through new questions, new expectations, new relationships, new conflicts, new meanings (regarding age and their position as subjects), new compromises and new requests. The individual that becomes conscious of his ageing process, looks for new spaces whereby he can express and fulfill his desires through means that are often rather different from those offered or even allowed by his prior history. Thus, the person of age moves forward creatively producing identity transformations, actively intervening in the self-transformation process, that of the reality and therefore, that of the social representations concerning ageing and its scope. The idea of growing older that we have today is different to the one they had when they began their ageing process; it currently opens an unbelievable scope of possibilities that for some people can mean "the second chance of their life"(Nelly, 77 years old).

3. Our project:

ELDERLY PERMANENT EDUCATION PROGRAM (PEPAM), created in the second half of the year 1994 pertaining to the area of Faculty of Humanities and Education Sciences of La Plata (UNLP) is integrated to the Secretary Extension and to the Psychology Department through the area of Psychological Guidance to the Community. It has been gradually growing, first in arithmetic progression and then in its geometrical dimension at the beginning of each forth-months cycle. Today we are overcrowded, with an enrollment list reaching 1238 students, 13% of whom are men. Though the general trend suggests a majority of women, during the last years a slow but constant increase of male population has been observed.

Educational action is oriented towards elderly people and it is proposed as a health promotion program. The requirements to participate are:

- A wish to learn
- A knowledge interest
- An aptitude for group work
- An aptitude to display personal potentialities

- The scope of *Preventive action*:
- It strengthens old adult possibilities and seeks to reduce age psycho-physic diseases resulting from passivity, isolation and marginalization.
- It anticipates depression crisis, psychological disorders and its impact on elderly people.
- It prevents violence and mistreatment situations, generated due to the difficulties of integrating an elderly person in the family.
- It modifies addiction processes (alcohol, psychopharmacological medicines) typical of marginalized elderly people due to lack of stimulus.
- It encourages the access to activities related to their wishes and choices.

Due to the aforesaid:

- It favors self-care and elderly people autonomy preservation.

Objectives:

- Develop new interests
- Stimulate vast and pluralist information
- Create cultural spaces
- Offer a place to go on learning
- Promote old adults social integration
- Reformulate a life horizon
- Actively participate in the community.

Methodology:

The program curricula are organized according to a three articulated axis base. Each activity poses objectives, develops content, resorts to a methodology and evaluates its development.

a) General knowledge area:

A wide scope of possibilities is opened so that students can choose according to their interests. Literature seminars, history, ecology and environment, art, philosophy, computing (more precisely computing workshops).

Groups are quite heterogeneous at the beginning. First, this level imbalance seems to be an obstacle not only for the teacher but also for the participants, but then it turns to be a common interest organizer. There begins the exchange of both the knowledge brought by each student and that which may spontaneously come up, producing a real content circulation. Diversity means enrichment and transformation within a solidarity and

comradeship atmosphere (those who know more do not hesitate to help those that may have some difficulties). They not only help but also encourage and accompany each other. They accept the “I don’t know”, “I made a mistake” upon the basis of humor: “(...) the witticism of some, the fun of many, the laugh of all”. (Yanina, Computing teacher).

Those who participate in this experience endure the challenge of “learning to learn”, healing narcissism wounds by allowing themselves to overcome difficulties.

Humor and sharing difficulties (the same happens to me), turns the other into a kind mirror that acquires therefore the category of a similar other, assistant, reinforcer of the self, in those moments when image upsets them before the recognition of disadvantages and, by diminishing underestimation before the other, makes possible the access to what is new, the transformation of what is old and even the recovery of what belongs to them.

a) Approach to ageing transformations area:

It is organized in seminars, workshops and reflection groups where they study, work and reflect about social, psychological and biological changes. It also deals with the idea of how it is that we grow older; how body, interests, relational ways, assigned and occupied places in the family, groups and society change, and the possible strategies before transformations.

We firmly believe that recognizing our own changes and discovering possibilities is the front door to adequately outline a project of the future.

a) Expressions area:

If we start by recognizing the plurality of expressive languages, the positive effect of finding our own and supposing that -as in any transformation process- expressive possibilities may be blocked, the fact of providing different alternatives awakens that creativity which was thought to be lost and recovers the pleasure it gives. It is a space where you can take up some “unfinished business” or discover new unknown potentialities that can surprise elderly people producing positive and restructuring psychic effects.

Expressions regarding creativity and development, coming both from teachers and participants are multiple. Martín, the art teacher, during this fourth-months period assessment says:

“The progress is outstanding, specially regarding the control, in a relatively short time, of drawing as a fundamental plastic language tool. They efficiently solve important issues such as the construction of objects in space... the truth is that all of them go through a rewarding experience at the end of which they feel that their

drawing level is perceivably superior.”

We include here sound creation and exploration workshops, drawing, painting, drama, poetry, physical expression, Argentinean popular dances, choir, photography, vitraux, etc. Our experience with such expressions has been really stimulating since it has allowed them go beyond the walls of our Program and participate in different plastic and writing contests achieving, in some cases, important awards.

The aforesaid goes together with our “*Afternoon Meetings*”, which take place every two weeks with the free participation of teachers, students, directors and guests. It works as an open forum whereby we discuss the situations arisen from the project development, we invite different area experts so they can tell their experiences, we organize trips, etc. In short, it is a meeting space for those of us who participate in the activities. Likewise, we have put into practice a reflection group that is not part of the Program, but that anyway pertains to the area of Psychological Guidance to the Community, called: “*When parents get older*” oriented towards those relatives that face both the difficulties posed by elderly dependant people integration or the problems derived from intergenerational coexistence, producing real clashes and the expected uneasiness of them all.

4. Analysis of our project:

The overall activity is supported by a permanent and constant teaching-learning process follow-up, performed in each course by teachers responsible for the task and supervised by the Director and Coordinators of the Program Area and checked during the body of professors’ meeting every four months. This has resulted in the development of an investigation area that has produced many paper presentations and publications done by members of the team. We have recently published “*New ageing dimensions. Theorizing from practice*”, a book compiled by Director Psychologist Graciela M. Petriz that includes: The theory and its reflections:

- From the individual:

Ageing – a process that in its biological perspective begins with life itself - in relation to the psychic functions is associated to the process that the individual goes through to elaborate, symbolize the marks that are produced by the pass of time and, at a given moment, are manifested both in the intra-psychic aspect as well as in the inter- and trans-subjective one, signaling a break between past and present and demanding a psychic elaboration and symbolization work.

Even though we cannot evenly categorize the ageing process –since it is individual- what we can do is to investigate its constant features, the mechanisms that underlie the

diversity with which each individual assumes ageing. Our attention is focused on the psychic mechanisms at play that underlie subjectivity transformations; in the ways in which elderly people face a given reality: a reality of a limited time, that is not longer all the time, but the time of present and near future, a time that bears in mind that the end is a possible reality now, by means of which the temporal dimension is modified; a reality of a physically changed body, wrinkled, with prosthesis, with body functions deterioration, and sometimes illnesses, an unknown image that demands from the individual its re-appropriation; the reality of another place: regarding the social place (from active worker to retired), regarding the family (from father to grandfather, from reproducer to guarantor). *“Before, it was a long-term planning, now I have to think carefully what to do, I can’t and I don’t want to leave the course, I want to know what I want to be able to chose properly, because if not I get disorganized”.* (Marta, 74 years old).

Changes, acquisitions and losses that confront the individual with a complex elaboration work to give meaning to this novelty regarding their psychic structure, history, body, and socio-economic cultural reality. It is an intense process –sometimes traumatic in the psychic aspect- that signals the individuality with which each individual symbolizes his ageing and elaborates his “own” elderliness time representation. It is a transformation that reaches each and every one of the subjectivity aspects, the narcissist structure, the identifying project, his position as individual regarding parenthood and society. *“In spite of the experience granted by the pass of the years, I have the vital necessity to analyze the present (to approach it, understand it). I need to be able to understand what I see, what I live, what I read and not merely repeat it”* (Carmen, 68 years old).

However, there are new demands to be satisfied, a new image to lust after, new possibilities, longed-for projects or still unknown ones, time to attach meaning to. The challenge of the self is to stand up to life demands, up to the last consequences. “To be condemned to invest” what is new, even when it refers to suffering (P. Aulagnier, 1984). The self, through memory, reexamines its possessions, its self-memories and its achievements, giving new meanings to current things; if not, there is nostalgia as shelter in the past, or as repudiation, rejection of a present turned negative. It is a self that assumes itself finite, but that does not give up, assuming, on the one hand, the reality of mortality and, on the other, separating a part of the self that rejects that destiny and vindicates “a small portion of immortality” (P. Aulagnier, 1979) to ensure survival in that image, that trace of the self that will persist in the “world scene” when that body is not longer there. Elderly people think this way; they project turning that crisis moment not only into nostalgia for the past but also into a concern to lay foundations for future generations’ development. According to P. Aulagnier (1979) “The self wants to believe –and I would say, needs to believe- that its existence is meaningful”. This gift presupposes that the

consequence of the set of acts that have constituted its existence (maybe I should say its future life) do not reveal that they only constituted the wasted aspect of a history “narrated by a foul that meant nothing”. This transcendence aspiration –that also means a projection capacity- is the engine and cause of its challenges, and is frequently heard in elderly people’s expressions. It is projected as a contribution that is going to give results with the pass of time. *“It is going to be other people the ones that will be able to enjoy it, but we cannot stay here forever” (Elsa, 78 years old, making reference to a conversation she had with her husband).*

The representation-body symbolic elaboration that enables changes processing and acceptance, as well as the finite character of human condition, is going to make possible that the old adult look towards other representations regarding this new identifying position. It is a metamorphosis from which he emerges re-signifying his/life project and the willingness to occupy “his” place, making room to new productions. (Petritz, 1996).

These new requirements’ subjectiveness work is accompanied by transformations that – from the social imaginary and representations- are already taking place. As a novelty, we find ourselves living with a great number of active elderly people, that grab hold of a longevity that belongs to them, and that surprises us with their creative potential, their productivity. They invest new objects, fulfill desires yet unsatisfied and solve issues that were not part of their imagination but are now imposed by current times: survival insecurity, or social vulnerability. They are paradoxically demanded to respond to young generations moratoria that require economic support from its elders as a result from employment and production uneven distribution. Elderly people who make an effort to integrate themselves in the new relationship system, who are illiterates before the improvements of technology, who answer to new challenges that are put forth by the new realities and its strategies, who try to be included in new logistics, and who try to remain integrated and to enrich the relationship with new generations, neutralizing the fear to oblivion.

They are also doomed to conceptualize, cohere and integrate the information vastness collected in their many years, establishing categories, forging links with other versions. It is a real “metabolism” process (P. Aulagnier, 1975). We interpret, from a psychoanalytic point of view, that the need to “establish order and make a synthesis” is related to the personal history revision process in that moment of re-signification and re-capitulation when it is necessary to separate what is important from what is not, when they recognize themselves as elders and make room to new things to be learned (Petritz, 2001).

Their self-representations are opposed to and differ from those they have of their own grandparents and elder ancestors. Current identifying models propose being active, busy, participating in groups, preventing illnesses and enjoying spare time. Going through

produced changes opens a broad scope of possibilities when projecting oneself in future times. Elderly people state that the present time is the time of doing what has been postponed by demands, responsibilities and obligations; the choices are supported by the pleasure of compromising with the feeling of accomplishing and responding to the extra pleasure obtained in each activity. *“We used to learn in childhood and youth. Afterwards, there came a time in which we wouldn’t listen nor read attentively, we were focused on other things. And now, I’m doing what I like, now I have consciously learned... It makes me happy...”* (Jorge, 68 years old).

- From the social aspect:

We take the concept of social imaginary (Castoriadis 1975/77) as the significance universe by means of which a given society, a group is constituted as such. This group of imaginary social significances operate as the sense organizer of each socio-historical period, establishing what is allowed and what is prohibited, what is valued and what is undervalued, the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, etc. This group provides with the attributes that delimit what is legitimate from what is not, it reaches consensus and settle disagreements, it acquires identifying emblems functions and offers models of existence to a given group in a given time.

Several authors make reference to values, myths, representations, and western society typical projects cracks that gives place to the so called “modernity crisis” (Lopovetsky, G., 1986, 1994; Casullo, N., 1990; Castoriadis, C., 1975).

Castoriadis, C. (1996) tells us: “...contemporary society crisis produces the identifying process crisis, and the latter is produced and aggravated by the former”. This social significances crisis –added to elderly people increase in population- has worked as a novelty, defying the individuals’ creative capacity before changes (radical imaginary, Castoriadis, C.; 1975), the production of new significances.

Current social representations about ageing create attitudes, ways of thinking, communicating and of innovative self-denomination; they account for the disappearance of age as a parameter, establishing a pleasure-governed culture in which desire is ranked as a value in the framework of diversity recognition, enlargement of what is possible, as a stimulant for personal searches in which the idea that “nothing lasts forever” rules. It is a search that implies the value of life quality linked to welfare, leisure, care for image and lucidity preservation.

Differences are more significant in the subjectivity of elderly people that participate or have participated in PEPAM and those who go to get enrolled –who we call beginners.

5. To conclude:

The remarks of PEPAM experience are confirmed with the data obtained so far in the research, and allow us to state that through the performance of intellectual, creative, artistic, reflecting activities developed in a group, a meaningful learning space can be constructed as it triggers participation, expression, enriching exchange of ideas on the part of elderly people among themselves as well as in the relationship with other generations, deepening their interest and resources to keep themselves vital before their personal future.

Group learning allows them to get a greater exchange, pleasure and enrichment, a space where they manifest their similarities, the identification with the other, as well as the challenge of making place to differences. To think, move and express oneself with others provides elderly people with the task of making sense, given that it offers different viewpoints to think about ageing while allowing them to find in other's body and words the differences with themselves, as well as those things that belong to them and could not yet be internalized. Simultaneously with the meeting hours, the surprising effect of the capacity of working and thinking in groups arises, of finding the place where listening is possible, where one can recognize the other and the self while being active in a learning process; where the belief on maturity as something that is achieved once and for all is questioned. Shared learning with fellows –an identity support- turns out to be witness and guarantor of a new construction. The others account for what has been transformed and extended to the family and society: *“you are not the same since you came here, you made a lot of achievements. My daughter and the physician can't stop repeating that” (Delia, 72).*

After PEPAM, elderly people incorporate the possibility of attending seminars, workshops and, basically, they include learning with mates in their life project. When talking about health and illness, they include in advance PEPAM's support to grow old in a healthy way, *“it makes good for health. Prevention is good”, “I am more attentive, concentrated, agile, etc.” (Mercedes, 72 years old).* As P. Aulagier (1984) puts it: *“Before future changes and transformations the self projects in advance”.* New experiences, new encounters are associated to the individual history, producing inaugural senses in the self-subjectivity that enable the projection of the future, a new sense for their existence.

To conclude, we add some illustrative words of María del Carmen (student, 64 years old) regarding the appreciation from all those that participate in this educational project towards elderly people health promotion: *“Don't tell me that I don't accept ageing. Elderliness comes from not knowing what to do. Think about what you would like to do from now on, because that is something that did changed, now you can do what you feel like doing. Of course, sometimes it's difficult, isn't it? That is why I say, go to PEPAM, become a pepamist”,* making reference to the positive effect produced by participating in

the course.

Therefore, ageing, elderliness and –when conditions are appropriate- second chance is a moment of re-election, is a moment to search new horizons, a moment that also questions Vocational Guidance.

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Received: September 2004.

Revision received: October 2004.

Accepted: November 2004.