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POVERTY AND ELDERLY:
THE SIZE OF SUBJECTIVE AND EXISTENCIAL PHENOMENON

Ana Isabel Lapa Fernandes - PhD in Social Service, Polytechnic Institute of Beja/Pt

ABSTRACT

This article intends to conduct a review about the way older people experiencing poverty, and to reflect on the subjective impact that the experience of this phenomenon in the first person brings to the existential dimension of the human being. Aging translates an outstanding achievement of human development. Numerous speeches also configure aging as a social problem, not leaving to be, cannot overshadow this undeniable civilizational progress. When configured as a social problem, there are various facets, one of which the poverty of the elderly. Not forgetting the important angle of poverty analysis as a failure situation of material resources, we intend to add as a line of reflection, the subjective and existential dimension of poverty of the elderly. Configured as a social phenomenon, there is no consensus that the older people, “live or feel” poverty in the same way. The conditions of life are not homogeneous, because not all have access to the same rights. In this light, social inequalities help you set up a social dimension of aging, which requires a multiplicity of perspectives on how these elements come together for the subjectivity of experiences and life stories of older people. It is therefore essential to analyze the poverty contours, centered in the first person, as a contribution to the realization of non-standard and humanitarian responses, contemplating the view of poverty and aging phenomenon as “felt and lived.”

Descriptors: Aging; elderly; poverty; poor; subjectivity

INTRODUCTION

We intend to conduct a critical analysis in this article about the social phenomenon of poverty of the elderly. Standardized and mixed views about this population fringe, and simultaneously about the phenomenon of poverty, can lead to social interventions rather focused on the real needs of people who feel and experience poverty in the first person.

Thus, this article follows an analytical orientation which includes as a first angle aging as a social problem, by putting the focus on the development achieved by humanity, based on the conquest of more years, and at the same time addressing the other side of the coin, the recurrent social problems of aging poor without access to resources and basic services.

Next, the focus is on the subjective and existential dimension of the experience of aging and poverty. There is the assumption that there is no consensual in the form of “living and feeling” both situations. Understanding the effects of the loss of financial resources in old

age, that is a material and economic dimension of the problem, which represents only one side of the matter. The multiplicity of poverty senses does not leave out of this debate the existential dimension of older people.

Aging as a social problem

Aging is the clear result of development achieved and the continuing increase in life expectancy of human beings. Despite some speeches transform aging in to a social problem, which does not cease to be in certain situations, this is:

“An undeniable achievement of civilization. Live a long life, in conditions of material well-being and physical and mental health, is a pleasant experience of millions of people worldwide. It is an indisputable gain for each of them, their families and the societies in which they live. It makes sense, therefore, consider that this development is a problem for companies and people” (Machado & Roldão, 2010, p. 21).

However, to put the social dimension of aging and poverty in debate, the reflection uncovers four major analyses of these prisms:

- i) The fall in the birth rate, not being concerned the increase in the number of elderly people, but the decrease in the number of children and young people;
- ii) The financing of social protection systems, in aspects such as pensions, retirement or other benefits (Machado & Roldão, 2010);
- iii) The dependence of the elderly, in that “... in 2020, countries such as Finland, Italy or Japan, the elderly dependency ratio, that is the ratio of people aged 65 or more years and people of 15 after 64 years it will be more than 50%” (Machado & Roldão, 2010, p. 22);
- iv) The inadequacy / ineffectiveness of responses and social facilities, based on the “... need for appropriate social and family responses to a growing number of people, although later and later, end up being dependent.” (Machado & Roldão, 2010, p. 22).

It is therefore to consider the social dimension of aging, since different groups of older people have different needs, which should be supported.

Traditional models of nursing homes, now renamed as residential structures, may not always be the alternative more humane and appropriate, to the different conditions in which there are the people of this population fringe and is therefore to consider:

“Decentralization of providers through local institutions, in the context of local services, respecting their connections, knowledge and adaptability, enhancing the scarce

resources available ... on the other hand, to prevent the uprooting of the person in relation to his family and friends, is necessary to keep the elderly at your home ... and involve the family in providing care to their elderly, creating a more economic response on social policy and more human as regards the natural environment of the elderly” (Carneiro, 2012, p. 15-16).

Old age and retirement are dissociated. “Old age begins later - some people age earlier and others are old later” (Machado & Roldão, 2010, p. 23). This can operate in the subjectivity of the human being when at the time of retirement, against other vital signs than complain, we can begin “to feel old.” This is an issue that can be associate with retirement towards i) a change in social status and economic disruption and with a professionally active role; ii) to a feeling of worthlessness; iii) to people connection loss of the professional world; iv) the decrease in contact with children or loss of spouse; v) to institutionalization without material conditions and decent social integration; vi) the gap between the feeling of capacity and skills of the elderly and the absence of active roles to play (Machado & Roldão, 2010).

The different facets of aging are often guided through the prism of social inequalities, because the conditions of life are not homogeneous, not everyone has access to the same rights of levels.

The only homogeneity can be described as a age point of view, because the elderly might be covered in the same age group, however the singularities are many particularly in terms of employment status, exercised profession, education level or own social support. In this sense, the access to certain rights as well as the context and life history, can mean fewer opportunities, less interest, less status (Machado & Roldão, 2010).

Aging, subjectivity and poverty

In the extreme situation of inequality are the poor elderly, which an objective dimension can translate into low pensions and low income. That is to consider that this group of people i) is constituted as an ancient and numerous social category in Portugal; ii) is characterized by having earned weak earnings during working life; iii) has a history of irregular and late discounts to the Social Security System; iv) have living conditions that reflect the failure of state protection systems (Machado & Roldão, 2010).

It is considered that “... the financial resources play a compensatory effect on the losses of old age” (Neri, 1993 in Martins, Albuquerque, Gouveia, Rodrigues & Neves, 2007, p. 6). This may be a support in the access to health, leisure, giving a sense of greater security against aging losses.

However, the nuances can be numerous addressing social contexts. In a study by Albuquerque, Lobo and Raimundo (1999) in Brazil, quoted by Martins et al. (2007, p. 6) it was found that for older people in social vulnerability, to gain a pension equivalent to the national minimum wage, has an immense benefit for self - esteem of these people.

“As much whimsy that is, in a condition of poverty, this value means often the only source of fixed income of the whole family. This gives the elderly a strong social duty towards his family and his community, so he can have including credit to buy furniture and appliances” (Martins, 2007, p. 6).

There are numerous situations where the elderly are the providers, in financial terms, of the livelihood of many families whose elements in working age are unemployed. Many seniors work to survive or to help younger family members.

Among the various horizons of poverty, there is an existential situation by which are considered not only material needs, but dimensions of psychological, social and cultural conditions, whose dissatisfaction produces effects on aspects such as the personality, relationships with others and society in general.

It symbolizes the beginning of serious deprivation, including the existential dimension of “being a person”. That influences the loss of self - esteem, affects the social relations of the person, existing in many cases, a decrease of people’s participation in community life. The beginning of a downward social path is explained in large part on these factors.

Please also note, that the consequences of poverty to the existential level may be associated with a type of persistent poverty that encompasses not only the monetary dimension, but also the concept of deprivation “... that is, the extent of access to basic goods and services.”ⁱ

Most of the analyzes on poverty leaves aside more subjective dimensions, however this phenomenon cannot be reduced to:

“A purely financial reality. The lack of income leads to a situation where basic needs cannot be met, which in turn creates an existential situation that affects the most diverse and profound aspects of life and human personality” (Bruto da Costa, Baptista, Perista & Carrilho, 2008, p. 30).ⁱⁱ

In this light, the loss of basic rights does not allow access to other rights, based on this framework should be remembered the paragraph 1 of Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, strongly contradicted upon the occurrence of poverty:

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate to ensure you and your family’s health and well - being, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).

One of the faces of poverty is its relationship to social inequality, incident phenomenon worldwide and associated to the unequal distribution of the fruits of progress (Alves, 2011).

The major contradictions and inequalities of contemporary society make up the multiple factors involved in the subjective and existential level of poverty. Being poor means to live an experience of heterogeneity, not always able to be understood in its fullness, but that must be reflected.

There is no single logical to act, live social experience of poverty. There is no single or recommended way. A first approach to the meaning of this experience can translate it as something personal and subjective, a second level sends us to the ‘lived’, in itself ambiguous and ambivalent, almost irrational, and at the same time mirror of an individual consciousness of experiences in society. Another significance of the social experience of poverty lies in the level of cognitive activity of real concern, able to build a particular interpretation of the world (Dubet, 1994). Thus, the world is shaped by a variety of scenarios of unequal experiences of older people:

“Those who occupy the time in gardens banks, shopping centers or passively watching television; the elderly who attend universities, visiting museums and exhibitions and are regular users of other cultural products, those who travel the world in luxury leisure, and even those who are forced to work on a piece of land that take a thin yield are all older, but differently” (Machado & Roldão, 2010, p. 25).

The principle of subjectivity leads us to this way, for a centrality in what is the subject, translates the authenticity of the account of his “experiences” on poverty.

Touching the lives “lived” of the poor in the first person, that’s a source of challenges to whom who shares their lives and to whom who want to portray and interpret. It is the unveiling of worlds sometimes hidden.

CONCLUSION

The aging phenomenon allows considering two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, as an important achievement of science in the service of the human being, which resulted in marked increase longevity and from another standpoint as the mirror of social inequalities, that leads that this stage of life where associated to poverty.

To be poor when it is old reflects the existing nonsense, in societies where progress would symbolize the abolition of social vulnerability conditions, that put older people on the margins of compensatory resources of old age losses. These features symbolize the possibility of obtaining duties imposed as access to health, leisure and security and are representative of the progress and development of more equitable and just societies, visible in the support given to the poorest and most vulnerable.

This line of thought leads to the need to break with standardized responses and interventions, which tend to compress group needs of the “older” as equal and uniform. This is further verified in the definition of own poverty indicators, which gives the measurability of this phenomenon almost always a monetary or material version.

The diversity of the human being, the contexts and the social groups, draws attention to the analysis of poverty of older people based on their connection to the world of subjectivity and variety of life paths. Thus, the individual consciousness of poverty and how it can configure the identity of an elderly can only be understood in the account of his experience, in the analysis of his life story. In conclusion, it is essential to appreciate what is subjective, including more qualitative and existential dimension of which can mean “being poor”.ⁱⁱⁱ

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ENDNOTES

ⁱIndicators glossary removed from the site <http://observatorio-das-desigualdades.cies.iscte.pt> accessed April 6, 2011

ⁱⁱThe Deprivation Index Relative Monetary there is a case to indicate “... for every individual, the prevalence of deprivation of 24 non-monetary items provided by the ECHP (European Community Household Panel). They are divided by 5 dimensions: a) Do not have one of the following, only for lack of economic resources to purchase - car or other vehicle, color TV, VCR, microwave, dishwasher and telephone; b) Lack of basic items - bath or shower, toilets properly wired collector sewers and hot running water; c) Problems with housing and surroundings - tiny living space, neighborhood noise or abroad, lack of natural lighting, roof without sealing, excessive moisture in the structure of the house, damage to window frames or floor, pollution, dirt or other environmental problems caused by traffic or industry, vandalism or crime in the surrounding area to housing; d) Lack of monetary capacity to support basic requirements - keep the house at a suitable temperature, pay at least a week’s holiday a year out of the room, furniture replace worn / used, buy new clothes instead of 2nd hand clothes, eating poultry and fish alternately invite friends or family for a meal at least once a month; e) Debt - difficulties in scheduled payments, such as mortgage, rent, monthly expenses (water, light, ...).”

ⁱⁱⁱIndicators glossary removed from the site <http://observatorio-das-desigualdades.cies.iscte.pt> accessed April 6, 2011.

Correspondence: afernandes@ipbeja.pt