

Presentation

Dossier

AGEING AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Myriam Moraes Lins de Barros

School of Social Service, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro/RJ, Brazil

Clarice Ehlers Peixoto

Social Science Institute, State University of Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro/RJ, Brazil

Andrea Moraes Alves

School of Social Service, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro/RJ, Brazil

Brazilian anthropology has embraced the topic of old age since the 1970s. The first publications focused mainly on family relations, the transmission of knowledge, emotions, inheritance and the world of work. These were followed by a proliferation of inquiries into urban sociability, the body, and violence against elderly people. Today the field of studies on sexuality is attracting new research. Looking back over this span of more than forty years we can observe that some aspects like gender relations and the inequalities between social classes have always been present and that there has been a predominance of research undertaken in the urban environment, with few studies on old age in rural spaces and fewer still on indigenous societies. One of the distinctive features of the anthropological literature on old age is its exploration of the diverse meanings and kinds of aging.

The study of old age raises questions that traverse the entire field of anthropological thought: from the classic – and today controversial – debate on the binaries of nature/culture and individual/society, to reflections on the status of experience in contemporary societies. Anthropological inquiries into old age have also contributed to ethnographic practice: participant observation, the use of biographies, individual trajectories and audio-visual narratives form part of the legacy of research produced in the anthropological literature on old age.

The dossier entitled ‘Anthropology and aging,’ presents readers with a set of recent inquiries into old age and the aging process that underscore the continuing relevance of the theme, while indicating paths for future investigations. But what exactly are we discussing here, old age or aging?

According to data from the Ministry of Education’s data base on Dissertations and Theses (<http://bancodeteses.capes.gov.br/banco-teses/#/>), the term ‘aging’ is widely used in areas of knowledge like gerontology and nursing. The category ‘old age,’ for its part, is more commonly employed in anthropological studies, although this area of knowledge is not the most productive on the theme. Education, psychology and gerontology itself show a higher number of dissertations and theses on the topic of ‘old age.’

Generally speaking, anthropology conceives of old age as a product of social classification that is therefore under constant dispute, while the term ‘aging’ tends to emphasize the notion of social process, something historically produced and never stable. In this dossier we deliberately adopt the term ‘aging’ in the title in order to emphasize this processual approach, avoiding any suggestion of replacing one term by the other. Old age or aging are both categories that ground the anthropological reflection on ways of living during this moment of the life course.

The article by Alda Britto da Motta, **Families of Centenarians**, presents data from research on aging carried out in the Brazilian state of Bahia, with a special focus on elderly people over a hundred years old. Her study shows how longevity has led to a new family experience – the presence in the same family of more than one generation of elderly people with different life experiences. With their own modest income, centenarians are depicted in the media as guardians of a secret formulae allowing them to live so long. The author shows life trajectories shaped by work and by different forms of family organisation. Caring for children and elderly people, cohabitation among more than two generations, and financial support from older people to younger generations all form a vital part of this research setting with centenarians in Bahia, the Brazilian state with the highest number of people aged over a hundred.

In their article **Too much Love: institutional care for old age**, Natália Alves Barbieri and Cynthia Sarti discuss the meanings and practices involved in caring for elderly people through an ethnographic study in a charitable care home in the municipality of São Paulo. The authors show that the recent introduction of a biomedical perspective in a hundred-year old care home led to the development of a double frame of reference in the professional practices of doctors and nurses, influenced on one hand by technical knowledge and on the other by the idea of donation and charity. The authors show how professional practices are related to representations of old age, including the idea of abandonment of the institutionalized elderly person. They also reveal how the institutional relations established between professionals and care home residents are marked by power differentials in which the person who is helped and receives care becomes subject to the donor’s intentions.

The article by Guita Grin Debert, **Les migrations et le marché de soins aux personnes âgées**, is based on fieldwork conducted in Bologna, Italy, with female immigrants from Latin America and Eastern Europe, and who work as carers for the elderly. The author shows how the labour market in care work for the elderly is expanding, driven by a substantial increase in the number of older people, by diverse social changes, and by migrations of women. The reorganisation of family relations and gender relations, the reformulation of social rights in European countries and the longer life spans of the population are fundamental elements in comprehending home care for the elderly. Who are these female carers, how do they define work with the elderly, how do they construct a field of competition between themselves, and what are they perspectives for the future? These are some of the points developed by the author in analysing the new profile of care workers for the elderly in Italy.

In **Negociaciones posibles: visibilidad, vejez y parentesco entre mujeres que mantienen relaciones sexo-afectivas con otras mujeres**, Andrea Lacombe explores a universe still little studied: sexual and emotional relations between older women. Based on the observation of spaces of sociability in the cities of São Paulo and Buenos Aires, the author assembles narratives from women about their homo-affective experiences and examines the potential variations existing between them, especially in light of the political and social changes that have been won over recent years with the advent of the civil rights agenda for the LGBT population.

Two articles, **Heterotopias of (un)desirable bodies: homoeroticism, old age and other dissidences**, by Mara Coelho de Souza Lago and Daniel Kerry dos Santos, and **Is old age always already heterosexual (and cisgender)? The LGBT gerontology and the formation of the LGBT elders**, by Carlos Eduardo Henning, study male homosexuality in old age. In the former article, the authors examine a space of homoerotic sociability in the city of Florianópolis, Santa Catarina state, and provide the reader with an analysis that combines territoriality, body, age-generation, gender and sexuality. Mara Lago and Daniel Kerry stimulate us to think about the old body and homoeroticism beyond the interpretative framework of exclusion, inviting us to conceive them as agents of desires and dissidences. In Carlos Eduardo Henning's article, attention is turned to the production of so-called 'LGBT gerontology'. Still incipient in Brazil, LGBT gerontology has become a fertile area of study in North American countries, especially the United States. The author analytically classifies this literature and points to its impacts. We can observe the emergence of a view that a 'successful' old age is possible for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

Ana Amélia Camarano's article – **Living longer: are we getting old or young for more time?** – discusses how life phases are being redrawn with the transformations in contemporary societies, social policies and new technologies. It examines the two dominant views of old age: the old age of losses and marginalization, and active aging, understood as a prolongation of adult life in a new ordering of the phases of life and their meanings. The author begins the article presenting the factors that have contributed to the world population over the age of 60 becoming increasingly more significant, depicting the current moment as a 'democratization' of longevity. However, the author signals that this same 'democratization' is accompanied by an intensification of social inequalities, particularly those related to gender.

Our dossier concludes with the article by Clarice Peixoto, which analyses the institutionalization of old age through a photographic narrative. In **Images et récits sur l'entrée en institution**, the author presents photographs and accounts of four residents of a public care home in Rio de Janeiro, showing how the institutionalization of old age is more closely linked to social and family isolation, rather than being a personal and voluntary decision.

The articles gathered here provide a panorama of the contemporary Brazilian anthropological literature on old age. A number of themes emerge strongly, including family, care, sexuality, the body and gender. In addition, the dossier brings together researchers who adopt a diverse range of research strategies: direct observation, life histories and trajectories, statistical data, and photography. In our view this dossier simultaneously presents what has become consecrated today in anthropological analyses of old age in Brazil and what is emerging as a new and fruitful contribution to this field.

Myriam Moraes Lins de Barros

School of Social Service, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro/RJ, Brazil
myriamlinsdebarros@gmail.com

Clarice Ehlers Peixoto

Social Science Institute, State University of Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro/RJ, Brazil
peixotoclarice@gmail.com

Andrea Moraes Alves

School of Social Service, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro/RJ, Brazil
andreamoraesalves@gmail.com