



OBSERVATORY OF AGEISM: FIRST EXPERIENCES IN BATTLING AGEISM

OBSERVATÓRIO DO IDADISMO: PRIMEIRAS EXPERIÊNCIAS DE COMBATE AO PRECONCEITO ETÁRIO

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Manuscript received on: May 15, 2022.

Approved on: February 14, 2023.

Published on: March 21, 2023.

Abstract

Introduction: Ageism is a phenomenon associated with creating and spreading stereotypes and discrimination based on age. When related to aging, ageism has damaging effects on older people's physical and mental health, affecting the entire social fabric. **Objective:** This article aims to report the experience of the first year of the Outreach Project "Observatory of Ageism" – born as a response to confront ageism. **Methodology:** Present its operation, reflecting on the actions carried out and its methodological approaches. The reported experiences concern monitoring news, developing audiovisual products, and anti-aging formative activities, such as examining newspaper articles and news on the subject, publishing specialized content on social networks, elaborating a manifesto, and organizing workshops and group conversations. **Results:** These activities provided a deepening of the understanding of ageism and its effects, enabling the participants of the activities and the project's members to question their discriminatory and reductionist attitudes about aging. **Conclusions:** Considering the challenges inherent to outreach work and the complexity of the theme, it is concluded that this report aims to serve as theoretical-methodological discussions that can support the development of different strategies to face ageism.

Keywords: Ageism; Aging; Health Observatories; Older People's Health.

Resumo

Introdução: O *idadismo* (uma das possíveis traduções do termo "ageism") é um fenômeno que promove a circulação de estereótipos e a discriminação a partir da

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propagação de discursos com base na idade. Quando relacionado ao envelhecimento, o idadismo traz efeitos negativos, para a saúde física e mental de pessoas idosas, que repercutem em todo tecido social. **Objetivo:** Relatar a experiência do primeiro ano do Projeto de Extensão “Observatório do Idadismo”, que nasce como uma resposta de enfrentamento ao idadismo. **Método:** Apresentar seu funcionamento, refletindo sobre as ações realizadas e seus expedientes metodológicos. As experiências relatadas dizem respeito ao monitoramento, à elaboração de produtos audiovisuais e de atividades de formação anti-idadistas, tais como o acompanhamento de notícias sobre o tema, a publicização de conteúdo especializado em redes sociais, a elaboração de um manifesto e a realização de oficinas e rodas de conversa. **Resultados:** Estas atividades propiciaram um aprofundamento da compreensão do idadismo e de seus efeitos, o que possibilitou que os participantes das atividades e os integrantes do projeto pudessem questionar suas posturas discriminatórias e reducionistas acerca do envelhecimento. **Conclusão:** Considerando os desafios próprios de um trabalho de extensão e da complexidade da temática, conclui-se que este relato pode servir para discussões teórico-metodológicas com vistas ao desenvolvimento de estratégias diversas no enfrentamento do idadismo.

Palavras-chave: Idadismo; Envelhecimento; Observatórios de Saúde; Saúde do idoso.

INTRODUCTION

Ageism is a phenomenon associated with the creation and spread of stereotypes and discrimination based on age: while aging is associated with negative images of diseases, disability, and death, older people are infantilized and protected under an ableist bias. At the same time, the imaginary of a youth "full of health and invincible" but "irresponsible and reckless" (World Health Organization, 2021) is reinforced.

Ageism affects both physical health and longevity itself. Studies show, for example, that an excessively negative belief about the aging process is related to decreased longevity and that positive self-perceptions of aging are related to a lower risk of death (Kotter-Gruhn *et al.*, 2009). As addressed by Levy *et al.* (2002, p. 261): "older individuals with more positive self-perception of aging, measured up to 23 years earlier, lived 7.5 years longer than those with less positive self-perceptions of aging."

Regarding mental health, prejudiced experiences, and discrimination are also associated with depression and other mental and psychiatric disorders. Chang *et al.* (2015) have demonstrated, for example, that about 6 million cases of depression are associated with ageism, with the largest share (about 5 million) present in less developed countries.



Concerning social well-being, the World Report on Ageism, prepared by the World Health Organization and published in 2021 as part of the worldwide campaign against ageism, shows that it also negatively impacts the quality of life, provoking taboos regarding sexuality and intensifying the feeling of loneliness and social isolation. In addition, it is related to increased insecurity and fear of being a victim of prejudice and violence (World Health Organization, 2021).

In addition to these aspects, the demographic increase of this population, observed in recent decades in several countries, has become increasingly associated with expenses related to social security and health care, which contributes to reinforcing the unfounded discourse that older people are a 'burden on the economy.' The Minister of Economy of Bolsonaro's government, Paulo Guedes, complained that "Everyone wants to live 100 years" (Kuhl, 2021), as if the desire for a long life were illegitimate, in a complete reversal of values. Similarly, during one of the most dramatic moments amid the Covid-19 pandemic, we are caught up with the statement of the superintendent of the Superintendence of Private Insurance, Solange Vieira: "the death of older people by Covid-19 improves social security accounts" (Lindner and Vargas, 2020).

Although the first studies on ageism date from the end of the 1960s, with the pioneering work of Robert N. Butler in the United States, and despite the Brazilian advances to ensure the rights of this population, with the enactment of the National Policy for Older People (1994) and the Statute of the Older Person (2003), in the Covid-19 pandemic, speeches like these, associated with discriminatory and violent practices, point to the intensification of prejudice against this population, given what many researchers considered gerontocide (Kalache *et al.* 2020). In Brazil, the Bolsonaro government reinforced the social perception of older people as "useless and disposable" by stating, for example, that "older people should be locked up and not the rest of the population, who need to work" (Sakamoto, 2020). In the context of the pandemic, the Prevent Senior scandal stunned the country as the health insurance company allegedly altered medical records to manipulate deaths of Covid-19, conducted research without consent, and distributed medication without proven efficacy, leading to an investigation by the Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry (Silveira, 2021).



It was a response to the discomfort caused by the intensification of ageist discourses and discriminatory practices during the pandemic that, in May 2021, the “Observatório do Idadismo” was created. As an Outreach Project linked to the Federal University of Bahia, it proposes to be a space in favor of democratizing information and social participation in constructing and promoting critical thinking about aging and ageism. The observatory aligns with the Global Campaign to Combat Ageism, launched by the United Nations in 2021 as part of the actions that comprise the Healthy Aging Decade 2021-2030. The campaign promotes the development of three main act: (i) investing in science-based strategies to prevent and combat ageism; (ii) improving data and research to improve understanding ageism and how to reduce it; and (iii) building a movement to change the discourse around age and aging (World Health Organization, 2021).

In this way, the Observatory of Ageism promotes activities based on three axes: (i) media monitoring of publications that deal with aging and ageism including investigation, reflection, and analysis of observed discursive movements; (ii) publicizing qualified knowledge about aging and ageism; and (iii) anti-ageism training activities based on workshops and group conversation . Currently, it is comprised of professors, health professionals, and undergraduate and graduate students. The observatory's activities are discussed and planned fortnightly in synchronous virtual meetings through the Google Meet platform.

Considering the context of the emergence of the Observatory of Ageism and the urgent need to confront ageism, this article aims to report the experience of the first year of the project, describing its functioning and reflecting on the actions performed and their methodology. To this end, we present an account of the activities developed in this first year, highlighting the actions carried out and discussing their relevance to combat ageism and for critical training on the subject. Next, we present the conclusion of this work, highlighting the learnings and the possibility of expanding the understanding of ageism and coping actions, as well as how this work might serve as a reference for similar proposals.



REPORT

In this section, we describe the experience of the observatory with the development of activities throughout this first year of work, offering theoretical and methodological counterpoints to the actions presented. The report is based on recalling the lived experiences from the participants' discussions and considering the meetings' minutes and conversations about the products developed.

Initially, the main activity was reading and sharing a discussion of the extensive report by the World Health Organization (WHO), "Global Report On Ageism." Given its importance in informing and alerting about ageism, considering the few discussions on the subject in Portuguese and the absence of a translated report at the time, it was decided to publish, in audiovisual format, the main discussions of each chapter, as a way of contributing to the dissemination of scientific information on the theme.

To this end, it was necessary to create profiles on social networks (Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter), which enabled, during the measures of social distancing imposed by the pandemic, the circulation of the information present in the report and the dissemination of the other actions of the observatory, in addition to news and conferences, for example. The continuous publication of the document required a collective effort to synthesize the views, arguments, and data presented and provide interlingual, cultural, and semiotic translations for the desired genre (Figure 1). Lexical choices, the translation of concepts necessary for the discussions, as well as the spatial organization of images and texts were designed to articulate both the crucial information and data and their apprehension by non-specialized audiences, which required a constant process of linguistic and semiotic (re)elaboration that ensured the understanding of the publications created by a heterogeneous audience.



Figure 1: Examples of productions created for the publicization of the WHO report on Ageism. **Source:** Prepared by the authors

It is worth noting that the collaborative reading and the discussions allowed the group to come into contact with current international scientific studies, improving the comprehension of extent of the work developed by researchers worldwide. While this increased understanding of the scale of the aging process in cross-cultural terms, it allowed the group to explore new interests of study and research. For undergraduate students in Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology who participate in the group, the complexity of the theme and the need to advance the articulation between different areas and sectors of society to combat age prejudice is evident.

In addition, the publication of scientific material has a fundamental because it enables civil society to learn about academic and scientific work, acquire knowledge about research and science, and recognize its daily presence. The dissemination of scientific work to the population increases the dialogue between different sectors of society, which can convert into the development of public policies. In this regard, Lima (1999, s/p) states:

(...) the activity of the scientific community should be understood not as centered on itself but in connection with the whole society that finances and preserves it, waiting for the results of its research. Thus, the scientific enterprise has an eminently social character.

It makes scientific information, especially for the untrained, a necessary goal as much as specialized information because many decisions, evaluations, and actions of profound social repercussions will be generated by non-specialist citizens (Lima, 1999, s/p).



In this sense, the developed work of scientific dissemination gains relevance beyond the explanatory and educational aspects. In the case of ageism, the emphasis on the joint action of all sectors of society to advance the understanding and combating of ageism, carried out by the WHO report, reinforces the importance and urgency of the critical publicization of scientific work produced on the subject.

In addition to disseminating the report, the observatory continuously monitors news published in major newspapers in the country, such as Folha de São Paulo, O Globo, and Correio da Bahia. Monitoring aims to find and discuss ageist discourses that circulate in these media and that influence and document meanings associated with the aging process and old age, either by a bias that is still markedly negative or through the news that treats aging as a part of life that must be respected and not rejected.

In this regard, Moraes (2019) argues that journalism is a fruitful source of research since, in a semi-conscious way, it acts as an organizing principle of social reality. Thus, the author emphasizes the influence, often decisive, of article news for spreading meanings about the facts disclosed and consequent memory records on a given subject. For the observatory, therefore, monitoring the circulation of the news about aging becomes a relevant methodological path for understanding the circulation of stereotypes, stigmas, and positive changes in the treatment of topics related to aging and old age. It is worth noting, therefore, that an observatory can be understood as

an instance of participation, considering this concept as a process of development of critical awareness and acquisition of power according to Bordenave and also a form of power, a way to intervene in reality, stimulating the participation of citizens and contributing to a democratic environment, especially in a context of "post-truth" and disinformation (Parente, 2020, s/p.).

According to Parente (2020), the observatories, which increased in number during the Covid-19 pandemic, are also relevant in overcoming the "denouncism" prevailing in the journalistic context when they develop intervention initiatives in the contexts in which they operate.



As the journalist's work shows, in addition to monitoring, organizing, analyzing, and disseminating information about their acting focuses, it is up to the observatories to advocate and condemn. It was considering this role that the Observatory of Ageism prepared a manifesto letter entitled "Who will gain from the transformation of old age into a disease?," contrary to the inclusion of the term "old age" to replace "senility" in the eleventh update of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Health-Related Problems (ICD 11). The document is positioned in line with other groups that fight for the rights of older people and with the position of the National Health Council that recommended, directly to the WHO:

- I - To reconsider and amend the name of the code MG2A-old age, inserted in the ICD-11, for a consensus term from the consultation with its member countries, including in this consultation representatives of older people, specialists, associations, universities, and institutions that act in the field of health of the older person and the aging demographics ; and
- II - That the new term, to be used in the substitution of old age, is in line with the Decade of Healthy Aging and the WHO's own statement in the Global Report on Age Prejudice, which "gathers the best available evidence on the magnitude and nature of age prejudice, its determinants, and its impact" (Pigato, 2021, p.3).

The observatory considered that including the term inclusion would worsen the process of pathologization and medicalization, which could result in increased prejudice and violence against older people. This confrontation also unfolded into a round-table entitled "Old age is not a disease," held at the Federal University of Bahia 2021 Virtual Congress, with the participation of the observatory coordinators and other researchers. Movements such as these reveal the efforts of various groups and collectives to dialogue with the WHO, pressuring and moving the national and international community on the subject, which resulted in the removal of the term and the substitution by "ageing-associated decline in intrinsic capacity" at the end of December 2021.

The preparation of the manifesto and the organization of the round-table required the coordinated work of the observatory members and translated into a consequential moment of strengthening in the first year of work because it showed us the capacity of the group to articulate with other parties and researchers so that the knowledge produced could circulate in different instances.



Finally, the last axis of action of the observatory, which we discuss in this work, turns to the training activities on ageism and aging designed through workshops and group conversation aimed at professionals in health and education with a view to anti-government training.

The first activity was the participation in the process of an educational meeting for the Outreach Course "Engaged Multiliteracy: curriculum as (trans)formation," organized by researchers of the Research Group Language and Activity in School Context (GP LACE, PUC-SP). The meeting, called "For the right of aging," was held in October 2021 virtually through the Zoom platform and had the participation of about 30 public and private school teachers from São Paulo enrolled in the course.

The training activity comprised three moments. The first made it possible for participants to an *Immersion in Reality* (Liberali, 2022); that is, an immersion in the issues of the universe of aging. Welcomed with the song "Conversa de Botas Batidas" (Camelo, 2003), the teachers were invited to participate in a theatrical game to look at and observe the physiognomies and particular aspects of their traits. Looking at each other, the educators then drew, with a pencil, the marks on their hands, necks, and faces. In the end, they exaggerated the expression for a photo. Participants then played "statue," making statues of a baby, an active and healthy child, a busy executive, and an older man. The two activities aimed to sensitize the participants, allowing them to connect bodily, affectively, and cognitively to the theme (Liberali *et al.*, 2023).

During this process of *Immersion in Reality*, when participants experience different circumstances connected to the theme and use their funds of perezhivanie (Megale & Liberali, 2020) to relate to the situations presented, educators watched short videos and read clippings of posts, memes, and reports in the padlet entitled "The Wall of the Forgotten" (Figure 2). Thus, they were able to grasp and connect cognitively and affectively with the oppressions suffered by older people in different contexts, such as through the sharing of memes in WhatsApp groups, domestic violence and neglect, hate speech shared in the public sphere, and the scandal of the health insurer Prevent Senior, accused of



reducing the oxygen level of patients hospitalized in Intensive Care Units (ICUs) to accelerate the release of beds during the Covid-19 pandemic, as previously presented.



Figure 2: Cutout of the padlet created for the formation, entitled "The Wall of the Forgotten." **Source:** Brincadas Project

At the second moment of the meeting, during *the Critical Construction of Generalizations*, the participants were divided into two groups to act in two dilemmas (an older person who feels helpless in medical care and a family decision about medical action). In each group, educators had the opportunity to prepare to stage the dilemma. To this end, the participants read public documents on aging in São Paulo, a scientific article on mortality rates among older people with Covid-19, watched a video about demographic aging, read news about the practice of infantilization and silencing of older people in medical contexts, about the role of geriatricians and gerontologists in promoting health and about how varied activities help maintain cognitive health. They also read scientific papers describing different theories about the biology of aging and multidimensionality and came into contact with dissemination material prepared by the observatory. Thus, they could reflect on the information and relevant issues addressed in the support materials to construct the characters' views (doctors, older people, companions, and family members) in the dilemmas.

After socializing the planned performances in each group, the participants moved on to the last activity, the *Production of Social Change*. At that time, encouraged by previous discussions and reflections, they prepared a



"Manifesto for the Right of Aging" in response to the 11th revision of the ICD, as discussed earlier. In the manifesto, participants presented ideas they defended and supported and those they rejected to ensure the right to aging.

The work carried out – part of a broader training project designed by GP LACE, which seeks to support teachers to act critically and collaboratively in different school disciplines – allowed participants to identify ageism and discriminatory practices, expanding their knowledge about issues and struggles of aging, as well as their pedagogical practices by developing their teaching repertoires (Liberali *et al.*, 2023). For the observatory, it was also an excellent opportunity for insertion in the field of teacher training, which is fundamental in the fight against ageism since teacher training does not cover these issues in a critical and systematized way. In addition, this influenced the creation of a workshop with health interns, giving us resources for its elaboration and development.

The second training activity developed by the observatory had, as its target audience, health interns from the State University of Bahia. The workshop was held in April 2022 when face-to-face activities were allowed at the university. As in the educational meeting with educators, the workshop consisted of a series of activities, following, in an adapted way, the moments of *Immersion in Reality* (awareness of the subject), *Critical Construction of Generalizations* (discussion and collaborative construction of knowledge) and *Production of Social Change* (intervention actions), carried out through conversation groups with the presence of the observatory members and students of the university's health residency.

Initially, the interns participated in a theatrical play to observe and trace hand lines and marks. The participants observed wrinkles, changes, and expression marks in their bodies, connecting cognitively and affectively to the theme of aging. Then they drew an older person on plain sheets delivered by the organizers. The drawings were exhibited for visualization by the whole group and discussed (Figure 3). In particular, participants were invited to observe the similarities and differences present in the illustrations. In this activity, residents were able to evoke stereotypes related to aging to start the discussion on the subject.



Atividades de sensibilização: traçando linhas de expressão e desenhando idosos

Figure 3: Awareness-raising activities. **Source:** Prepared by the authors

In a third moment, still during the sensitization process, a video with ageist situations was displayed for interns to engage with and share their impressions. Elaborated by the observatory in collaboration with GP LACE for the outreach course described earlier, the video featured a scene from the novel "Women in Love" (2003) in which a granddaughter mistreats her grandparents and news programs in which older people are interviewed about the abandonment suffered during the pandemic and about the preference for allocation of artificial respirators to younger patients during that time. The purpose of this activity was to present experiences of violence against older people, both existing and staged, as well as experiences of older people who analyze the complexity and injustice present in accessing mechanical respirators. Regarding this interview, it is worth highlighting the argument raised by the interviewee, which stresses the abandonment and disregard suffered during the pandemic, "I wear mine (the mask), protect myself, protect them [referring to young people's refusal to wear masks]. Tomorrow, I'm going to fight them for the mechanical respirator back at the hospital. He, as he is young, will have the preference." According to Oliveira and Mazuchelli (2021, p. 49), this disregard is based on ageism and t "the primacy of youth culture, in the belief that the ag(e)ing does not understand the situation of the pandemic, and that their eventual deaths are understandable, either because of their advanced stage in life or because they have already reached a chronological mark that would justify the losses."



In the fourth activity, the participants began to deepen the discussions initiated in the awareness-raising actions. They were divided into groups to discuss texts previously selected by the observatory for reading and analysis. At that time, the interns could confront their knowledge, as specialists and students, about information and news published in newspapers and scientific articles. As the course was held with the educators, the selected material comprised diverse textual genres. For this workshop, were selected: a chronicle about aging, an editorial that discussed the suicide letter of actor Flávio Migliaccio, an interview with a scientist who considers old age as a disease and who seeks a cure for aging, and a conversation with readers of a newspaper, who debated "old phobia," denialism and hate-speech on social networks. We also selected an article on scientific dissemination about the infantilization of older people, an opinion article about the meanings associated with "older people" and "old," a news about aging in the city of Salvador, as well as articles from newspaper columns about aging, the labor market, and architecture aimed at this population.

In addition to offering several points of view on themes related to aging and ageism, the activity seeks to enable participants to construct, critically and collaboratively, new knowledge and experiences that allow questioning beliefs and stereotypes associated with old age. It thus aimed to create conditions for interns to take a stance and elaborate practices of social change at the last moment of the workshop.

Thus, after the awareness experiences and discussions, the participants were invited to position themselves from the question, "What about you, intern, what will you do to combat ageism?" At that moment, then, they produced a poster listing the actions to combat ageism they wished to perform: "Guaranteeing autonomy;" "Respecting wishes;" "Raising society's awareness;" "Complaints, notifications;" "Promoting intergenerationality." It is a relevant moment since the workshop aimed to engage the participants to seek to transform their working spaces.



The training activities provided interns and observatory members with a rich opportunity to expand their understandings of ageism and question possible discriminatory positions since the interns brought their clinical experience about how ageism manifests itself in their working spaces and their reactions within the clinical environment in case of prejudice; a crucial dialogue for the enrichment of the center's future actions.

CONCLUSION

This article reflects on the experiences and strategies to combat age bias – a partially invisible problem associated with decreased longevity and mental disorders that harms various spheres of life – carried out by the Observatory of Ageism during its first year of operation. It is worth mentioning that these are the first efforts of a university outreach project that, as such, values the collaborative work of its members and the articulation of multidisciplinary research, teaching, and intervention. It operates in a two-way process: the connection with society oxygenates the knowledge produced at the university, fostering it to return to the community in a renewed way (Forum of Pro-Rectors of Extension of Brazilian Public Universities and SESU/MEC [FORPROEX], 2012).

This dialogical construction, free of pre-established scripts, is challenging. The Observatory of Ageism deals with the lack of research on the subject, especially concerning the national scientific literature, which does not always understand it as relevant and pressing. It translates, for example, into the difficulty of receiving the theme since the criticism of ageism is contrary to discourses strongly present in society that erase the multidimensionality of aging, such as those of eugenic roots coated with the desire for eternally young and healthy bodies, or those who, in conceiving old age as inevitable, argue that there is nothing to discuss. Such discursive practice worsened in during the pandemic of Covid-19 (Oliveira & Mazuchelli, 2021; Mazuchelli *et al.*, 2021), demanding us, as scholars of aging, to act.



Finally, we expect the reported experience serve as material for theoretical-methodological discussion, considering the beginning of a work of reflection and action that can support other fronts of action. The experiences described in this work point to other paths and other possible aging experiences while looking at the social, historical, and cultural aspects that constitute the trajectories of life. They also point to the need to expand the reflection on the interaction of ageism with other "isms" (racism, ableism, sexism, among others) and to creatively develop different methodologies and strategies for battling prejudice.

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