

Skin aging: interlocutions between nursing care and corporeity in Merleau-Ponty

Envelhecimento cutâneo: interlocuções entre o cuidado de enfermagem e a corporeidade em Merleau-Ponty

Envejecimiento de la piel: interlocuciones entre el cuidado de enfermería y la corporeidad en Merleau-Ponty

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to reflect on the possible interlocutions between nursing care and corporeality regarding skin aging in the light of Merleau-Ponty. **Content:** theoretical-reflective study based on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, with emphasis on the work Phenomenology of perception and nursing care about elderly people who experience skin aging. The above is organized into the categories "The phenomenon of embodiment in the elderly in the light of Merleau-Ponty" and "Interlocutions between Merleau-Ponty and nursing care on the skin aging process". **Final considerations:** when conceiving the interlocutions, it is understood that the objectification of the body envisions the intentionality of returning to the jovial physical body and when considering self-knowledge, appreciation of your body and the experience of corporeity, a better understanding of yourself and the other is possible through intersubjectivity that contributes to the unveiling of changes in the being itself.

Descriptors: Nursing; Health of the Elderly; Aging; Skin Aging; Philosophy, Nursing.

RESUMO

Objetivo: refletir acerca das possíveis interlocuções entre o cuidado de enfermagem e a corporeidade no tocante ao envelhecimento cutâneo à luz de Merleau-Ponty. **Conteúdo:** estudo teórico-reflexivo fundamentado na fenomenologia de Merleau-Ponty, com ênfase na obra Fenomenologia da percepção e ao cuidado de enfermagem acerca de pessoas idosas que vivenciam o envelhecimento cutâneo. Organiza-se o exposto pelas categorias "O fenômeno da corporeidade na pessoa idosa à luz de Merleau-Ponty" e "Interlocuções entre Merleau-Ponty e o cuidado de enfermagem sobre o processo de envelhecimento cutâneo". **Considerações finais:** ao conceber as interlocuções, compreende-se que a objetivação do corpo vislumbra a intencionalidade de retorno ao corpo físico jovial e ao considerar o autoconhecimento, valorização do seu corpo e a vivência da corporeidade é possível uma melhor compreensão de si e do outro por meio da intersubjetividade que contribui com o desvelar de modificações no próprio ser.

Descritores: Enfermagem; Saúde do Idoso; Envelhecimento; Envelhecimento da Pele; Filosofia em Enfermagem.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: reflexionar sobre las posibles interlocuciones entre el cuidado de enfermería y la corporeidad en relación con el envejecimiento de la piel a la luz de Merleau-Ponty. **Contenido:** estudio teórico-reflexivo fundamentado en la fenomenología de Merleau-Ponty, con énfasis en la obra Fenomenología de la percepción y del cuidado de enfermería acerca de las personas mayores que experimentan el envejecimiento de la piel. Se organiza el estudio en las categorías "El fenómeno de la corporeidad en el anciano a la luz de Merleau-Ponty" e "Interlocuciones entre Merleau-Ponty y el cuidado de enfermería en el proceso de envejecimiento de la piel". **Consideraciones finales:** al concebir las interlocuciones se entiende que la objetivación del cuerpo vislumbra la intencionalidad de volver al cuerpo físico jovial y al considerar el autoconocimiento, la apreciación de su cuerpo y la experiencia de la corporeidad, una mejor comprensión de ti mismo y el otro a través de la intersubjetividad que contribuye al desvelamiento de cambios en el propio ser es posible.

Descriptores: Enfermería; Salud del Anciano; Envejecimiento; Envejecimiento de la Piel; Filosofía en Enfermería.

INTRODUCTION

The older adult population has been growing in Brazil and in the world, mainly due to better healthcare and quality of life. The Ministry of Health, in line with statistics from the World Health Organization, estimated that the number of older adults in the country will increase 15 times in the period 1950-2025, and thus Brazil will register about 32 million people aged 60 or more. As far as the world is concerned, the global number is projected to reach the mark of 1.4 billion in 2030 and 2.1 billion in 2050, when every region of the world except Africa will have 1/4 or more of its population aged 60 years or older¹.

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The skin aging process presents a change in the stratum corneum characterized by impaired proliferation and differentiation of keratinocytes, lipid content, hydration, pH and sebum production, which causes dryness and itching. Cutaneous xerosis appears as the most common skin alteration. The decrease in the synthesis and functional capacity of cells causes global cutaneous atrophy, with the flattening of the dermal-epidermal junction and disruption of the dermis, resulting in thin skin with reduced renewal capacity².

An older adult usually has a body image constructed as an object through meanings given by senescent changes with a negative outcome as they age, highlighting the wrinkling of the skin and old age as something difficult. In this light, they portray a physical impairment, and can also reveal psychological consequences and thus the desire to have a youthful physical body, which corroborates with the distance of looking at oneself as a being in totality, as a subject of perception before the world³.

Thus, Maurice Merleau-Ponty postulates that perception is related to bodily attitude. By breaking with empiricism, Cartesianism and intellectualism, in the phenomenological conception of perception he considers that apprehension of meaning, or senses is done by the body, being a creative expression from the different perspectives on the world. The sensitive depth of bodily experience, a theme developed in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/1999), brings up the problems of aesthetics in the domains of social and intersubjective life. With that, it comes across that one does not have a body, but one is a body, and one finds corporeity in this bodily experience^{4,5}.

Nursing professionals have shifted in recent decades in order to overcome the biologicistic and fragmented view, recognizing the complexity that involves care knowledge and practices. The contributions of phenomenology to nursing science are innumerable, and above all through the humanist and existentialist approach. Although Maurice Merleau-Ponty did not write about care in his works, the resumption of contexts focused on perception and intersubjectivity constitutes a new look at people, and the entities involved in care⁶.

In view of the above and considering the complexity that involves the perception of older adults regarding skin aging, the objective of this study was to reflect on the possible interlocutions between nursing care and corporeality in the light of Merleau-Ponty.

CONTENT

This is a theoretical-reflective study based on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology with emphasis on the work *Phenomenology of perception*. A systematic search to explore and read texts on the subject was conducted during the months of May and June 2022 for articles, books and documents through the words corporeity, skin aging, elderly person/older adult, aging, Nursing and phenomenology, which were crossed through the Boolean operator AND as a strategy in the Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences databases (LILACS), Nursing Database (BDENF), EBSCOhost Research Platform and the *Portal de Periódicos da Capes*.

It should also be noted that theses and dissertations were consulted in the Bank of Theses and Dissertations (BTD) of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (*Capes*) in postgraduate programs in philosophy. The explanations and reflections were presented from interpretations of the literature, and also reflective impressions of the authors. The text was organized into two thematic categories: The phenomenon of corporeity in older adults in the light of Merleau-Ponty and Interlocutions between Merleau-Ponty and nursing care on the skin aging process.

The phenomenon of corporeity in older adults in the light of Merleau-Ponty

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was a historian and professor of philosophy, and was born in Rochefort-Sur-Mer, France. As a young man, he approached Edmund Husserl's phenomenology which postulated among its proposals that thinking should occur from things by themselves. When considering the phenomenon, he describes that consciousness is always an awareness of something, with the object always being the object for consciousness; in this context, it corroborates that consciousness is interconnected to a body which interact with the world through intentions from the mind; this can be defined as corporeity⁷.

The philosopher postulates that human beings are not in the world, but are the world itself, involved by tradition, history and the world of others; thus, existence precedes essence. For the philosopher, we are concrete human beings living in a specific time and place and we find meaning in objects as we deal effectively with them. Therefore, understanding concepts can never be separated from understanding the world⁸.

By assuming an existential phenomenology of reflections, corporeity, or corporeal mind, it is a term which fits into the perspective of Merleau-Ponty, whose philosophical thinking considers the physical universe, the universe of life and

the anthroposocial universe as inseparable entities. Furthermore, the theme of the body emerges in its assumptions as a central element in the genesis of the awareness that there is an I established in the world, whose transcendent dimension will always be revealed to the person through verbalized experiences⁹.

Therefore, the Philosophy of Existence proposed by this philosopher embraces corporeity and intersubjectivity in an original way, with fundamental knowledge about human existence. The first refers to the way we place ourselves in the world through our bodies. On the other hand, intersubjectivity exposes the question of human beings living together in a complex relationship called collectivity, including the way in which man relates to the world, and the ways in which the world manifests itself to man and determines his possibilities⁸.

The objective body is only a moment in the constitution of the object. Removed from the objective world, it will drag the intentional threads that connect it to its environment, and finally it will reveal to us the perceiving subject, as well as the perceived world. For Merleau-Ponty, the objective and physiological body is what can be observed, studied, researched, divided into parts such as tissues and organs with specific functions. The lived body is the conductor of the being and is in the world just as our organs are in our organism, maintaining the spectacle, giving visibility to life, nourishing it from within and forming a system. When communicating through the body, the being has passage to the world, as it reaches those who represent the reason for all experiences that can be lived through a perceptive process¹⁰.

In this sense, when reflecting on corporeality and skin aging, it is understood that the issue of aging has taken on new taboos, which has ended up converting this life stage as something that must be hidden, a bodily state which refers to embarrassment, and in turn the possibility and even the right to be old is denied. Wrinkles, skin fragility and dryness are evidence of failure to remain young and become reprehensible and indecent in which the word old age is not allowed. An older adult begins to experience two faces: one of them appears as a horizon of infinite possibilities, while the other limits them, showing them the face of approaching finitude. In this process there is an interweaving between freedom and facticity that are articulated in old age: the future, phenomenologically evident in this body located in the world, and in contrast the facticity restricting freedom and announcing finitude¹¹.

The living body always manifests itself to the subject's consciousness, especially through touch and vision, thus conceiving the external perception in which it is evidenced as belonging, meaning as part of oneself. This objectification of one's own body takes place in the midst of a sequence of appearances that today is in constant harmony and refers to the sentient aspect of one's own body that is still being unveiled in a construct of abstractions constituted by oneself in the perception of this own body¹².

In the light of Merleau-Ponty, the definition of older adult corporeity is structured in a perceptive integration in three orders: 1) physical or material; 2) vital; and 3) human or symbolic. The physical order would be matter itself, tangible concreteness, governed by physical, immutable, and concrete laws. The vital order refers to the physiological, life and creation acts of organisms in the world in an attempt to satisfy their needs. Finally, the human or symbolic order refers to the ongoing production of meaning in the human perception of the world. According to Merleau-Ponty, the human being is an organism that creatively adjusts to the possibilities that the physical, vital and human world offers them, affirming an inexplicable relationship with the world, which exists before them, and in the act of existing it requests them¹³.

Therefore, the perceptive experience of the subject emerges through the presence of their body in the world; in turn, the scope of understanding skin aging beyond the gaze of judgments, limitations and losses can contribute to a (re)construction of another vision, which will make it possible to reorient older adults so that they perceive themselves as subjects of their own history, through self-knowledge and appreciation of their bodies and thus their corporeity.

Interlocutions between Merleau-Ponty and nursing care on the skin aging process

This is understood by care for special attention, restlessness, concern, zeal, errand, responsibility, occupation. It is characterized by a social dimension, implicit in the interaction between subjects, a mutual relationship of help, of affective involvement, of feelings of empathy, of affection with the other. As a professional exercise, it occurs through contact between professionals and users/patients/clients through interaction, meeting, listening. Each encounter or disagreement involves producing affection, bonding, relief from suffering, the search for biopsychosocial well-being, autonomy and security. It implies intimacy, feeling, welcoming, respect, offering peace and rest to and for the other¹⁴.

Care has evolved over time by breaking away from Cartesian fragmentation and reductionism, then turning to comprehensiveness, complexity and humanization, and is understood as the essence of some professions, especially

Nursing. Therefore, it suggests a philosophical, ontological and complex reflection involved in care that must go beyond empiricism, improving knowledge in the field of health through everyday human experiences. As a truly human practice, care needs to be seen beyond a materialized body; therefore, the body itself as a living experience can be inserted in the movement of changes in attitudes of care practices⁶.

For Boff¹⁵, care is intertwined with an important commitment from someone to another and goes beyond just a moment of attention and zeal. Furthermore, it presents itself as an act of occupation, concern, responsibility and affective involvement, and is therefore part of the nature and constitution of the human being. Care is present and part of human life from birth to death, without it the human being withers, loses meaning and dies.

When this care is unveiled in a phenomenological perspective, it presents itself with ambiguity and happens in intersubjectivity, meaning in a reverse relationship between the one who cares and the one who is cared for, and capable of influencing both parties. Therefore, from a Merleau-Ponty perspective, there is a chiasm between those who practice and those who receive the action of caring. Chiasma refers to the intersections, interweaving or interlocations that question the boundary between the body and the world, which brings into question the idea of intertwining bodies: at the same time that we touch and feel the world, we are touched and perceived as a presence, or as another object in the midst of all visible and invisible things in that same world¹⁶.

Older adults feel, perceive and perpetuate a multitude of concepts among themselves formulated based on aspects considered as negative or limiting about the aging process. As the skin is the largest and most exposed organ, changes to it are always considered. Without envisioning a change in the look, the objective constructed image is linked to the desire to return to the jovial physical body without conceiving an experience that would make it possible to consider oneself a subject of one's own history through self-knowledge and appreciation of one's body, and thus of one's corporeality¹².

In this sense, when nursing care is intertwined in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological terms, it can contribute to comprehensive care, perceiving the being-there as well as the being-with of this total being, and not only physical or fragmented aspects, but also metaphysical ones, those which go beyond what the senses can capture. Caring and being cared for phenomenologically is to assume a responsibility before the other and be thrown into this responsibility, and therefore to see the other in a unique, singular way from the perceptive horizon of existence and why not also say of (co)existence¹⁷.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This reflection sought to promote similarities between the concepts of corporeality in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and nursing care for older adults who experience the skin aging process. The objectification of the body envisions an intentionality of returning to the jovial physical body to the detriment of carrying out an experience that would enable considering self-knowledge and appreciation of one's body and thus of one's corporeity. This (re)construction of the look aims at a better understanding of oneself and the other through intersubjectivity which contributes to unveiling changes in one's own being.

When reflecting on nursing care for older adults from a proposal of dialogues of individual and collective dimensions that occur in encounters and disagreements, it is expected that it will also be possible to share sensitive and sometimes unreflected worlds, in addition to the horizontal approach to reflective knowledge.

There is timid production regarding the possible interlocations between nursing care for older adults and the Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Despite the considerations about corporeality and phenomenology, there is a need for other studies which can contemplate this theme, as well as other aspects which are inherent in providing care for older adults.

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