

Narrative workshop for elderly people

Taller narrativo con adultos mayores

Oficina de narrativa para os idosos

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ABSTRACT: Several psychoeducational workshops that promote social inclusion and participation - as well as being key instrument to promote health - have been created due to the changes in the assumptions and paradigms that address aging. These tools are increasingly varied and are carried out in universities, retirement homes, civil associations, or government agencies. The emergence of this vast educational offer takes into account an active aging and sustains the idea of education throughout life. This article aims to present the dynamics of a workshop that invites seniors to tell about and share their life stories. The basis of this proposal starts from a vital need, that is, to put into words significant life events. The intention of this paper is to share experiences lived in this workshop and to view its dynamics and methodology in order to show how older people redefine their stories through storytelling and sharing of memories.

Keywords: Elderly people; Narration; Workshop.

RESUMEN: Los cambios en los supuestos y paradigmas que abordan la vejez han generado el desarrollo de diversos talleres psicoeducativos que promueven la inclusión y participación social además de ser un instrumento clave para promover la salud. Estos dispositivos son cada vez más variados y se realizan en universidades, centros de jubilados, asociaciones civiles, o entes gubernamentales. La irrupción de esta amplia oferta educativa se inscribe en el marco del envejecimiento activo y mantiene la idea de la educación a lo largo de la vida. El presente artículo tiene como propósito presentar la dinámica de un taller que convoca a los adultos mayores a contar y compartir relatos de su historia de vida. La fundamentación de esta propuesta parte de una necesidad vital, que es, poner en palabras los acontecimientos significativos de la vida. La intención de este trabajo es compartir la experiencia vivida en estos talleres, exponer su dinámica y metodología, para que pueda vislumbrarse como los mayores resignifican sus historias mediante la narración y puesta en común de los recuerdos compartidos.

Palabras clave: Talleres; Adultos Mayores; Narración; Historias de Vida.

RESUMO: As várias oficinas psicológicas que promovem a inclusão e a participação social, além de ser um instrumento fundamental para promover a saúde, foram criados devido às alterações nos pressupostos e paradigmas que abordam o envelhecimento. Estas ferramentas são cada vez mais variadas e são realizadas em universidades, lares de idosos, associações civis, ou agências governamentais. O surgimento desta vasta oferta educativa leva em conta um envelhecimento ativo e sustenta a ideia da educação ao longo da vida. Este artigo tem como objetivo apresentar a dinâmica de uma oficina que convida os idosos para contar e compartilhar suas histórias de vida. A base desta proposta começa a partir de uma necessidade vital, isto é, colocar em palavras os eventos de vida significativos. A intenção deste artigo é compartilhar experiências vividas nesta oficina e, para exibir sua dinâmica e metodologia, a fim de mostrar como as pessoas mais velhas redefinem suas histórias através de histórias e partilha de memórias.

Palavras-chave: Oficina; Pessoas idosas; Narração; Histórias de vida.

Introduction

Being in contact with seniors, we have probably shared the experience of listening significant life story events, an anecdote, a story, a memory, or something that links the present with the past. Remembering and sharing those memories is positively valued by the elderly.

In Ricoeur's words (1999), the process of remembering gives meaning to life and makes possible the continuity of one's self in time.

Although, as Jelin (2001) mentions, the exercise of remembering and forgetting is unique, we find that evoking a memory and sharing it with someone who also knows what is being narrated, is much more meaningful.

These processes do not occur in isolated individuals but are embedded in social networks, groups and cultures; therefore, it is impossible to recall or recreate the past without resorting to these contexts. Then, we thought of generating a space where seniors could tell their life stories, and share them among peers.

During the development of these workshops, we found that this practice constitutes a tool of access to subjective experience and that storytelling gives new meaning to their life trajectory.

Why storytelling

We have all heard and told stories at different times in our lives; one could say that storytelling is a universal human activity.

Bernasconi Ramírez (2011) emphasizes that it is one of the first discursive strategies that we learn in childhood, and he also considers it as a form of understanding and communication we all use throughout life, regardless of age, social class or educational level.

Moreover, the narrative approach is a form of inquiry into the stories that people, groups and institutions make on social life.

According to Bernasconi Ramírez (2011), this approach arises from two fundamental facts. First, it recognizes that a basic form through which human beings give meaning to their experiences is by thinking about them as stories or tales.

On the other hand, it considers that the practice of storytelling or narrative writing is a vital form of human communication.

Linked to these arguments, Villar (2006) states that the use of a narrative approach with seniors is very valuable because the narrative is a key instrument through which people give meaning to their experience.

Thus, through narrative, we are not only able to explain our experiences, but we also understand the experiences of others as we apply the story and structure format to them.

From this perspective, life stories would be a particular type of narrative, that in which the narrator speaks of him/herself; i.e. the person becomes a narrator and protagonist of his/her own life story.

The narrative is a story where the narrator organizes and gives meaning to relevant aspects of his/her life, which helps not only to understand the changes the person has undergone over time, but also to understand his/her life situation and to integrate the meanings of his/her own evolutionary trajectory.

As suggested by Iacub (2012), the narrative function allows cohesive self-representation throughout the life course, trying to transform what was discordant into concordant and what was discontinuous into continuous. The story, then, through its narrative dynamic keeps a minimum of coherence and the needed continuity to maintain the sense of identity (Jelin 2011; Pollak, 1992).

It is clear, then, that there is a link between the narrative and the identity. Paul Ricoeur (1999), from the field of philosophy, articulates narration and some literary categories to the notion of identity.

Ricoeur, contrary to other stances of this field that supported the existence of an unchanging core personality, proposes the concept of oneself as the subject that we only have access to through the narrative activity (Nespolo, 2007). In this respect, he considered that identity is not static but is constructed, therefore it is necessary to consider the temporal dimension in the passing of human experience; this means that our identity is linked to a sense of permanence (of being oneself, of selfness) over time and space.

However, changes in our life span also occur, such as physical and emotional changes. Here, Iacub (2012) mentions that identity refers to the ongoing confrontation between what is the same and what is different, and therefore considers it important to investigate what happens to the identity of the subject in the aging process and to know how we give significance to the experienced transformations from the many physical, psychological, social and existential changes which imperil the representation of one self's continuity.

Identity refers to the meaning that we have of ourselves, and, conceived from the narrative, it allows for the integration of experiences lived, promoting an understanding and knowledge of oneself.

As Ricoeur (1999) pointed out, a narrative can be defined as the time sequence of events. The narrative can give sense to the experience; it gives meaning to what has happened to us in the past and gives us a version of ourselves in the present, which enables us to project the future.

This narrative process, as Villar (2006) mentions, can be especially important at the end of life where, due to the changes involved in the aging process, there can be an identity crisis and a negative evaluation of oneself.

The narrative approach in workshops with seniors

Villar (2006) holds that among the elderly, we can increasingly see the presence of older people in good health that may have many years of life ahead without disease or disability.

They are people with a lot of free time, with interests, that want to engage in activities and new challenges. They are interested in filling their leisure time creatively and to develop a much greater presence and social integration than it used to be for people after retirement.

For a long time, the elderly were imagined as passive and unproductive which led to link the elderly more to leisure than to the development of their capacities. Therefore, workshop offers were limited to only recreational or educational. In recent years, the elderly demand and ask for greater participation in social life. As a result, today several universities, retirement centers, civil associations or government agencies promote this type of participation.

This vast educational offer falls within the framework of active aging, and sustains the idea of an education throughout life, which holds that there is always an opportunity to learn and develop the skills of the individual.

As part of this offer that promotes positive psychoeducational interventions with older people, we thought about developing an area to summon the elderly to tell and share their life stories. In these workshops, each subject narrates his/her experiences and later a social reflection is made stemming from a personal account.

Our proposal is based on a vital need, that is to say, the idea is to put into words the significant events of life. We know that all people, especially the elderly, have a need to tell stories, experiences and events in their personal life.

Considering that the narrative function aims to unite the representation of oneself throughout life, we created a device that can contain these stories, trying to make understandable what sometimes is incomprehensible and to make continuous what sometimes is discontinuous (Iacub, 2011).

We seek, in turn, that these accounts can be related to their own historical and social moments, which give a framework and allows us to understand the dynamics that the various events had throughout life.

How the workshop is implemented

The workshop - coordinated by two gerontology psychologists- takes place in a quarter session in 16 2 - hour weekly meetings. In the first meeting, the proposal is introduced and the work dynamic is explained.

The next twelve meetings are divided into four stages: three meetings for recalling issues related to childhood, three for adolescence and early adult life, and the last three for adulthood - where working life, marriage and parenting are explored-. In the last three meetings, we discuss and reflect on life today.

Finally, in the last meeting, all seniors give their opinions on experiences in the workshop, how they felt, what it has meant for them to remember the past and if there has been any change due to the experience.

In the first meetings, the seniors are invited to remember their childhood in a broad way. We ask about their memories from childhood; here is where they narrate aspects of their own birthplace or their parents', their arrival in the country or city, how they were received, what their lifestyle was like, habits, relationships with parents, their first day of class, a significant teacher they had, games they played, mischief they made.

When recalling these childhood experiences, not only the generational gap becomes more evident between them, their children and grandchildren, but they also perceive the process of adaptation that they have experienced throughout life.

With regard to adolescence, seniors tell about their school life, friends, first love, relationship with siblings and parents. They also recall their first work, if they were disappointed or not with the choices they made.

Both at this stage as in the former one, they continuously compare what happened before in relation to what is happening now, emphasizing the respect for their parents in contrast with what happens nowadays. The elderly remark on the difference in the education that they used to have to the one their children and grandchildren have.

Participants are invited to bring pictures and objects deemed significant to share with the rest of the group, such as images of their city, family, clothing, toys, among others. These life stories mean delving into the world of values, imaginary and subjectivity, which let us discover the abandoned, ignored or forgotten everyday life activities.

In the stories of adult life, issues related to work, marriage, parenting, moving or migrations appear. Topics such as affective bonds and parental care, children leaving home and in some cases their 'significant other' may show up. It is the stage of life in which the subject delves in less, perhaps because what they recall is related to problematic issues or because it produces discomfort.

Finally, as regards current issues, the elderly reflect on the relationship with their children or friends, their life with or without their partner, achievements in this vital stage, how they adapt to new technologies and new family configurations and they place emphasis on future projects.

In the narrative story, the person creates and evaluates his/her own historicity. When experiences are told, funny, emotional, meaningful anecdotes appear. Then an individual path that integrates these anecdotes is built, becoming something significant. The possibility of sharing one's own life story allows peer identification with those who have gone through similar life situations.

Halbwachs (1992) states that individual memories are always socially framed in such a way that one does not remember alone but with the help of the memories of others, even when personal memories are unique and singular.

The person who tells his/her story has control over many of the details of that story, that is, when preparing to narrate he/she decides whether to tell something and how he/she will tell it. This shows that whoever tells a story organizes and gives meaning to relevant aspects of his/her lives and enables us to understand the changes that have been experienced during a particular period of his/her evolutionary trajectory (Villar, 2006).

In many cases, we see that the biographical accounts are well kept secrets or memories that eventually seemed forgotten. The life story evokes those memories and gives them meaning, so that the life story can integrate meanings about ourselves and give meaning to the changes we have experienced over time, offering a sense of unity (Mc Adams, 2001). The subject places him/herself as someone who observes his/her life from outside, and tells the story explaining, understanding and organizing the events.

Villar (2006) explains that the sense of unity can support a version of ourselves that brings some stability, that is, it establishes a central core that remains even though we behave differently. The story gives us a version of our life story in which the changes and transitions do not occur randomly, but are explained as something coherent, logical, with a rationale.

Through the stories of the subjects participating in the workshops, different vital moments are narrated, which express a personal development that may be common to the experiences of others. However, this may show how each subject defined a particular life course or evolutionary path, in a sense, unique.

Conclusions

The workshops provide many benefits to the elderly, from socialization, development of skills, the possibility of incorporating new learning, to increased self-esteem.

In particular, the narrative workshop enables the elderly to develop skills as narrators of their personal story revaluing the events in their life. It also helps them to value and pass on a legacy of experience and knowledge to other generations.

Not only can seniors interpret their life events, which facilitates a coherent view of themselves but also they find a group environment where to be listened to and supported, which gives them the opportunity for reflection.

For many participants, narrating their life story makes them analyze their life path. If this path is somehow satisfactory, there is a continuity, acceptance and this is projected into the present. In other cases, where the evaluation is not so positive, we have seen changes stemming from their accounts in these workshops, which enable them to speak of those negative experiences to integrate them into a life story with the intention to modify or change aspects that do not allow them to consider a positive evaluation.

Thus, we see that although in the last years of our lives, our life stories are likely consolidated, they are not fully closed. In some cases, this workshop has opened possibilities of finding new meanings to this vital stage.

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