

‘Good Living’ and the education of older adults

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Abstract. This article deals with the notion of Good Living - Living Well, deeply rooted in critical Latin American thinking. Its aim is to revise some theoretical conceptions inherited from the prevailing gerontological tradition having centre-European origin. First of all, an epistemic framework is established in order to consider how the cultural dimension influences ways of making up scientific knowledge on old age and ageing. Secondly, we discuss the concept of Good Living or Living Well as a theoretical and political contribution that may allow us to re-think meanings, policies, and gerontological practices located in the Latin American region and its various realities. Then, we describe some topics, generated by ancestral visions of the world that make up the social construction of old age in contemporary societies. Finally, on the basis of principles of critical intercultural gerontology we produce some guidelines on the concept of Good Living that may contribute for the education of older adults.

Keywords: cultural Ageing, critical gerontology, education for older adults, gerontology, Good Living.

Introduction

By the end of the 20th century the education for older adults (older adults) became a sociological novelty, (Glendenning, 1985; Hiemstra, 1998). Some recent scholarly works mention this new phenomenon that burst into education that challenges stereotypes and prejudices governing modern capitalist societies (Yuni & Urbano, 2008b; Jarvis, 2011; Formosa, 2014). Findsen and Formosa (2016) made a thorough analysis of the educational situation among older adults, the scope of their research covered 42 countries, i.e. globally. Attempts made to delimit and justify the principles of gerontological education on the basis of Peterson’s programme (1976) have led to a deeper knowledge of a large number of multiform practices that have prevailed over four decades. One consequence was an

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expansion of educational opportunities for older adults and their potential contribution to promote development in older age (Withnall, 2002). However, the development of these experiences on an international level did not generate theoretical categories. This production of categories, from the epistemic perspective of education, may have improved ways of thinking and the language used to report on this phenomenon (Lemieux & Sanchez, 2000; Formosa, 2002). This work deals with a concept of critical Latin-American thinking named Good Living or Living Well. Its purpose is to start an intercultural dialogue that may enrich ways of learning, thinking, and doing in older adults' education. Our concern is to discuss the notion of Good Living as a conceptual resource by addressing hegemonic conceptions about old age, ageing, and education of older adults; within an epistemic framework. Therefore, we discuss the main features of Good Living and its potential contributions to social and educational gerontology, mainly in a Latin American context.

The cultural dimension: A forgotten discussion around older age

During the 20th century, the various disciplines constituting social gerontology have shown deep transformations concerning conceptions of old age and ageing (Bengtson, 1997). Theoretical and epistemological development of gerontology is mainly hampered by the neglect of its cultural dimension. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2006) holds that this deficiency could be understood as an epistemic 'absence'. It appears that ways of gerontological production ignored the role of cultural processes in the social construction of ageing and in seniors' production of subjectivities. In fact, related investigations are limited. They are mainly concerned with ways of social representation, symbolization, and ritualization. These features become signals of acknowledging power and social status towards seniors in societies considered as 'primitive'. This kind of study becomes a rich source in the field of ethno-gerontology as a specific branch of the anthropology of old age (Morgante, Martínez & Remorini, 2008).

Investigations on older adults consider them as a social group clearly differentiated from the rest of social ages such as childhood, youth, and adulthood (Fericgla, 2002). Thus, these studies have concentrated on the analysis of older adults as consumers of culture. Likewise, cultural dimensions connected to the ontology of old age and ageing are very scarce. Cultural structure strongly influences individuals long before they become seniors. The human experience of becoming old is achieved through language, rituals, and belief systems that convey full meaning to this state (Yuni, 2015). Ageing is a vital human issue derived from the existing conditions of a community and the symbolic resources used to understand it, (Calasanti, 2003; Moya, 2014).

Nowadays, western societies keep representations and popular imagination as useful tools for representing old age and ageing of their members through history. Golpe (2011) points out that ageing usually has negative connotations in the social imagination of Western societies; it is seen as an area of alienation and radical otherness; thus, it is difficult to recognize and assess it positively. The concern for the relationship between culture and ageing cannot be exhausted by an analysis of ideas that abound among different groups and societies. This relationship also allows us to approach the discussion of a central issue in gerontology:

interpretation of time and temporality (Lalivé D'Épinay, 1988) that each society develops on the basis of its own historical dynamics through which the passing of time achieves meaning. But in the contemporary social imagination old age is open to a wide range of meanings on the basis of a linear conception of time. Nevertheless, some of its main features must be mentioned: biological decline, obsolescence with an outdated cultural basis, rejection of aesthetic imagination, silencing as a signal of the loss of power, and hopelessness, whose basis is the loss of vital motivation. A further 'absence' within this cultural dimension is the theoretical consideration of educational gerontology. Every educational practice for all ages of life is defined by its predominant cultural nature.

Education for older adults shifted traditional conceptions of education (Yuni & Urbano, 2016) related to the four dimensions on which the modern process of schooling rests:

1. Education for older adults is not an asymmetric relationship between older adults and the younger generations. Nowadays, older generations are learning from the younger ones a body of knowledge whose expertise is dominated by them; it may also become a meeting point among peers of the same older generation (Findsen & Formosa, 2011).
2. Education at this level not only provides knowledge and skills that may be useful for ageing but also stresses transmission of knowledge to deal with the present.
3. The nature of the pedagogical content emphasizes scientific knowledge leaving aside knowledge related to visions of the world, social practices, cultural and religious traditions. Studies have demonstrated the capacity and motivation of older adults to learn, in a systematic way, about further kinds of knowledge. International experiences report this feature as an important one in the education for older adults (Schuller & Watson, 2009).
4. Older adults may assume various potential positions during the learning process. They may then become transmitters, creators, and cultural producers as a result of previous knowledge acquired in the course of life; such a wealth of knowledge is often enriched and transformed by new experiences gained in educational spaces (Urbano & Yuni, 2013; 2015). Older adults as learners may occupy different positions as subjects who reconstruct and re-signify themselves through the learning process.

Investigations of gerontology produced a standardization effect in Western capitalist societies. Thus, production has been influenced by American, Anglo-Saxon, and Centre-European traditions. Approaches to critical gerontology, feminism, post-colonial and post-modern studies have pointed out biases displayed on account of this way of production of gerontological knowledge (Yuni & Urbano, 2008a; Formosa, 2011; Yuni, 2015). Theoretical developments in contemporary gerontology are focused on older adults belonging to a white and urban middle-class; their active participation in public or private institutions reflects values, ideologies, and utopias from a modern Western model of civilization. A number of critical authors (Lander, 2000; Quijano, 2000; Castro Gómez, 2005) posited that this process can be characterized as a sort of epistemic colonization of professional and academic communities whose practices differ considerably from the socio-cultural context in which gerontological theories originate. Present theoretical approaches defend a scientific work of decolonization from the Latin American position.

Approaches to 'Good Living' as a theoretical and political notion

The concept of Good Living, as a contribution to critical Latin-American thinking allows us to re-think meanings, policies, and gerontological practices concerning different realities of the region (Huanacuni Mamani, 2010). Our aim is to analyze the concept as a divergent and complementary theoretical resource that can be potentially useful for reflecting on the limitations imposed on our ways of thinking, naming, watching, and considering the social structure of old age (Mejía, 2012). Good Living is a ubiquitous notion. Different authors consider it in various ways; some of them say it is a paradigm, while others interpret it as a vision of the world, a discursive metaphor, a political utopia, and even an ideological plexus (Delgado Ramos, 2014). This wide range of ideas entails the resistance of groups, societies, and social movements against old and new forms of colonialization or a theoretical notion that backs up an alternative episteme (De Sousa Santos, 2010). We consider it is an eclectic notion whose origins belong to the ancestral knowledge of Latin American indigenous peoples. But the last two decades have produced a re-elaboration from the perspective of philosophy, politics, and society.

Estermann (2012) pointed out difficulties in translating the concept of Good Living, derived from indigenous languages, without suffering loss of its connotative meaning. The concept of Good Living - to 'live well' - derives from indigenous languages Sumak Kawsay (Quechua) and Suma Qamaña (Aymara). Although both expressions differ in their translations, they have a similar meaning. To 'live well' means to lead a peaceful life in the community by keeping a good balance with nature; that is why it is also considered as 'to live well together'. Good Living also expresses relational logics as the basis of indigenous thinking. It is different from the Western conception that categorizes, classifies, and organizes reality in such a way that indigenous visions can be clearly differentiated. Indigenous people consider that things exist because of their relationship with other things and beings. The Cartesian principle stating that knowledge must be oriented to the creation of different and clear ideas cannot be applied to relational logics. For instance, some authors consider it as trivalent logics because it accepts contradictions as a kind of truth.

Trivalent logic means a way of thinking that challenges the principles of Aristotelian bivalent logics, an important feature of Western civilization. Estermann (2012) remarked that in indigenous languages 'well' (suma, allin, sumac) describes the fact and process of living. 'Living well' in Andean communities conveys the idea of relationship. Western logics define a concept on the basis of relationships between similarities and differences whereas indigenous languages have an affixation system to convey different meanings. Thus, the notion becomes a polysemous expression used to convey many ideas according to the context of situation. Therefore, the core of Good Living is 'life' itself. However, 'life' and the ideal of 'living well' do not only refer to living beings but includes 'nature', comprising both humans and non-humans, and the whole universe along with the spiritual and religious world. Then, we come across a cosmic perspective in which relations among beings, things, and gods constitute 'life'. Life is just the result of a harmonious exchange among beings. This metaphysical conception of the universe is expressed by Pacha, Mother Earth. The latter is a living organism in which all parts are interrelated through a permanent interdependence and

exchange. Therefore, the ideal Good Living, for human beings, aims at living together harmoniously within a natural environment, along with the spiritual world, and future generations. The idea of harmony not only refers to human beings but also to nature and sacred things. It can also be applied to living and dead human beings, because the souls of the latter must be worshipped. The search for harmony is based on the achievement of balance while living together with others, with present and future generations as well as ecology (Acosta, 2012).

The implicit anthropological conception of this notion changes the Western anthropocentric concept, since it holds that the human species is only part of the cosmos. That is why people share rights with Nature. The prevailing idea of the need to protect Mother Earth's rights led governments and organizations to take measures for the protection of both human and nature's rights. The conclusion is that human beings are not the owners of nature; they have no right to exploit its resources and change it for their own benefit. On the contrary, they should be 'caretakers', 'cultivators', and 'facilitators'. Human beings are 'transformers' of those processes that do not depend upon them. Thus, the basic relations making up life are those of nurturing and care. However, they achieve full sense when they function on the basis of reciprocity and correspondence (Gudynas, 2009).

Correspondence implies a relationship of interdependence between beings and things - that is why nurturing and care get intertwined in a chain that holds cosmic order. Mother Nature behaves in the same way as human beings do. Then, in order to guarantee their survival, individuals renew their total commitment with Nature in the act of caring for persons, animals and plants, in their relations with others, in their contribution to community care, and with future generations. Correspondence also demands reciprocal care, a moral obligation of giving and receiving. It is a gift to be cared for but this benefit implies the responsibility of returning care to whom it provided or others who did (Andía, 2015). Both care and nurturing are structuring principles of life. They function differently according to the life course of human beings, communities, and nature. Therefore, we play two roles at the same time; we are both caretaker and cared for, not only of the members of our families but also of those of the community. This community character constitutes the basis of the notion of living together. Good Living is an improvement of every human being's life that can only be achieved when all community members become involved. Responsibility for future generations implies the obligation for looking after natural resources, collective remembrance, and ways of life. To 'live' depends, above all, on 'living together' from an anthropological, ecological, and cosmic viewpoint (Vanhulst & Beling, 2014).

Western tradition upholds a lineal conception of time (Gastrón & Oddone, 2008), whilst modernity brought about an irreversible concept of time that is always being projected into the future as a platform for the achievement of any utopia such as religious salvation, civilization, and so on. This idea of time contributes to thinking of the future as based on metonymical reasons in which future is already known. To live is to walk towards the future. Good Living is based on a cyclic concept of time having many transitions of a heterogeneous nature and of a qualitative character. Unlike Western tradition, objective and quantifiable, measures time; vision in Good Living is like a winding cycle in which every new step displays

life again and again; as a result, time is cyclic and reversible. From this viewpoint, utopias are rarely ahead of time; they accept the possibility of broad horizons. Western tradition views the horizon as if it were ahead, whereas indigenous people consider the horizon next to and even behind individuals and communities. Personal or collective projects do not only imply an unknown future but they may also be in a past that has to be conquered. Whereas what was lived or happened may represent better harmonious situations than those of the present or coming years. Consequently, in indigenous culture “the human being walks backward towards the future but looking at the past in order to find the utopia” (Andía, 2015:319)

Ageing in the imagination of Indo-American ancestral cultures

Latin American investigations indicate that indigenous peoples are undergoing seriously vulnerable conditions, particularly older adults. They are stigmatized for being poor and they suffer limitations in securing basic goods, especially of possession and the use of land. Their cultural identity has become strongly influenced by processes of acculturation produced by migrations, by information technologies, by urbanization under modern planning and, last but not least, by public policies (OISS-Organización Iberoamericana de la Seguridad Social, 2015). Nevertheless, older adults have kept, through generations, the concept of Good Living as ancestral knowledge updated in modern times as a theoretical and political notion. Various investigations, from the perspective of ethnology and gerontology, show that most Latin American indigenous cultures lack specific terms to refer to ageing and to old people. The term ‘old’ is generally used to refer to things. Some indigenous languages use metaphors to refer to old age, such as ‘time that falls on the running life’.

Most indigenous languages contain terms whose connotative meaning implies social roles (grandpa) or moral authority because the person is a grown up (older). Andía, (2015:321) contended that being ‘older’ does not depend on chronological age but on gaining wisdom that provides personal security - “it is a firm and secure walk in every walk of life that strengthens his identity”. Social recognition of being older means that wisdom has been gained and it can be seen that an old person embodies Good Living in its strict sense. It is the happiness of the wise person who knows that everything is interrelated and honours life. The older persons’ wisdom expresses Good Living in that this ideal conveys happiness, and inner peace; a perfect balance with oneself, with the community and with nature. Wisdom is not considered an acquired quality just because the person is old but rather an accomplishment process of self-comprehension on the face of transformations taking place while walking life. Morgante, Martínez and Remorini (2008) point out that while Pachamama (Mother Earth) is socially represented as an old woman, Andean cultures ignore aesthetic models of beauty, particularly youth models. On the contrary, wrinkles on the face, as a sign of ageing, give those who bear them higher social respect. On the other hand, Zerda (2015:338) stated that in the Aymara culture some idioms connected with old age make metaphorical reference to the process of changing into an old man or woman; they stress the gradual shift into old age as a natural and permanent process. In this sense, ageing is not seen as a break with the rest of ages but as a continuity of life characterized by its counterpart of life/death. An individual’s life is just a cycle within a successive series of cycles, of generation after generation who are interrelated and interdependent.

Several investigations confirm the observation that chronological age is not the main signal of transition to old age as a social phenomenon. Transition is signalled by changes in productive and family roles produced by the reduced ability to perform everyday activities. The passage from adulthood to older adulthood is perceived by changes in physical ability. This passage connects to the performance of new activities that may enable an older individual to participate in community life (Guzmán, 2014). Therefore, work is the central occupation throughout life and does not stop in old age. Andean cultures consider that frailty in old age is associated with becoming weak that is, lacking strength for self-sustainment. The situation demands collaboration of other societal members so as to sustain life. It is the time of giving and receiving, particularly by those who have been cared for and raised by elders; it is based on the principle of reciprocity. This moral obligation is not only within the scope of near relatives but it also includes further members of the community with whom there was a relationship in the past (Golpe & Yuni, 2012). In spite of the loss of physical or mental abilities, Andean culture respects older adults' social value, since their full wisdom and sanctity are appreciated at this stage of life. The condition of being a little old man/woman is acknowledged by the demands for help. Besides, the caregiver has an opportunity of being next to a quasi-sacred individual.

Socio-cultural representation of old age has a positive evaluation in an indigenous community; symbolically, deterioration is made up by conferring him/her a different spiritual condition. Older adults are considered as mediators between the supernatural and the real world. They are also recognized as intergenerational mediators not only among members of their communities but also with souls of the dead and natural beings (González Cordero, 2015). Further mediating functions include knowledge between older people and the community, older people and the future. That is why various research shows that seniors continue performing roles connected with religious, medicinal, and productive practices (Reyes, Palacios, Fonseca & Villasana, 2013). Productive roles continue even in old age, akin to community service activities. Old age is not understood as a time of harvesting and receiving care; it is a moment in life in which individuals assume responsibility within the community. Old age as transformation is a walk, walking with others, and walking for others. In the meantime, walking is accompanied and assisted by the community during this last life stage (Vázquez, 2007).

Good Living as a contribution to critical inter-cultural gerontagogy

The concept of Good Living is a good one for re-thinking education for older adults. It represents another epistemological place while it holds a different way of considering and understanding that is based not only on reasoning and rational knowledge but also a holistic comprehension supported by the ecology of knowledge. This ecology involves several types of knowledge and practical experiences as a result of interaction with others and dialogues with other beings and with oneself. Knowledge within a modern Western conception is acquired not only by understanding but also by contemplation, meditation, practice, reminiscence, observation, and dialogic interaction with the knowledge of others, memories, and dreams. However, from the viewpoint of Good Living, the goal for knowledge acquisition

is gaining personal wisdom so that decisions derived from knowledge are guided by ethical choices, whose highest value is its contribution to Life. Therefore, education becomes a process and a means to reproduce and change subjects and society through cultivation, care, and transformation of Life.

Life should be the source and end of education. However, this conception of life overflows into biology and covers everything in the universe including the spiritual, socio-cultural, and Nature's order. Life, as the core and meaning of education for older adults, is the condition and aim of the possibilities of their existence. Some Brazilian researchers, inspired by Paulo Freire's ideas, hold that education for the elderly should be education for life (Cassia, Silva & Scortegagna, 2010; Cassia, 2012). His theory states that we cannot talk about a life project or life quality without considering the possibility of life itself. He also considers detrimental conditions that characterize the life course of the majority of the older population. Ethical demands in education for older adults go far beyond the aforesaid features; they are oriented to sustain human dignity in terms of Good Living. Education means to enjoy a decent and harmonious standard of living in good balance with the universe, living beings, and gods. In this respect, the aim of education for older adults should be to contribute to the growth of their vitality and liveliness in old age (Yuni & Urbano, 2016). Vitality is understood as a quality of living beings that is shown in the capacity applied to creativity so as to care for and keep the past, the present, and the future. Liveliness means to reaffirm the strength of life for changing the world, the community, and oneself. Education for older adults focused on life means education for life, in life, and with life.

Education for older adults also reinforces their memory as well as the overall project. In fact, Lizarazo, (2011) held that Good Living contributes to keeping memory of our culture and also that of the future, because it keeps within itself the best aspirations of a more humane future. Education furthers the creation of new practices by which the OA can live the present and face the new demands of the modern era. Accordingly, education for older adults must contribute knowledge of the past in order to reinforce personal identity and community affiliation. At the same time, it should also stimulate hopes and dreams so as to extend projects for the future and underpin the present in order to understand the demands and complexities of modern society. The present approach to educating older adults assumes enabling them with skills that may facilitate interaction. These capacities play an important role in the transmission, reproduction and creation in social life of intergenerational practices. The principles of reciprocity, of giving and receiving become very important for older adults to transmit their knowledge and learn from other generations so that they can walk together while living in the present. Education is a social practice of caring and cultivating human capacities for the improvement of the community. Its practice with older adults, from the Good Living approach, implies education with elders, for elders, and among elders. It represents a culture of caring for others. The concept of Good Living stresses the ecological and intergenerational idea of caring; it is based on reciprocity and frequent interaction. Therefore, institutions are not in charge of the social regulation of caring practices but in charge of the subjects themselves. They are both objects and recipients of care of other human beings, spiritual powers, and nature. The focus of education is perceived as a collective construction of ecology of knowledge that leads to harmony among human beings and

generations (De Souza Silva, 2013). Thus, this approach oriented to older adults can contribute to overcome the existing gap in Western societies. The tendency is to exclude them as unproductive, fragile, and vulnerable objects to be cared for.

Interdependence between generations upholds community life as a living being. A common practice in the processes of cultural transmission is the application of various strategies. They can range from narrations to talking circles; thus, decisions are taken or collective agreements are made while narrating or talking (Villagómez & Cunha de Campos, 2014). These ancestral practices provide material for recovering gerontagogical strategies in order to approach newly generated needs in the education of older adults. As a result, we come across the need to construct a critical intercultural gerontology. The proposal would represent a step forward in human, social, and spiritual collective development. It would consider humans as social, cultural, and spiritual beings who learn by inter-ethnic interaction on the basis of democratic and intercultural dialogue in their own context. Education for older adults sustained by Good Living suggests a utopia and a dream of a different society. The difference relates to a fair, egalitarian, peaceful society based on solidarity. This entails an atmosphere in which, human and non-human beings can live together harmoniously in fullness. The aforementioned notion recognizes human beings as a mediating bridge. This mediation consists in the contribution to constitute and restore harmony and universal balance on the basis of knowledge and actions in its own context. It also states that there are no processes of collective or individual knowledge without an acquisition process. Besides, carelessness in the preservation of common knowledge threatens liveliness of individual and community life.

One can therefore state that gerontology, as underpinned by the notion of Good Living, should integrate and sum up the four dimensions that guide and organize life. These dimensions show the distinctive human features of every stage of life, including old age (Aguirre, cited in Mejía, 2012). They are manifestations of the capacities of its caring and transforming nature embodied in such practices as:

- Material production (connected with the idea of having) whose aim is access to the creation and enjoyment of goods.
- Spiritual production (connected with being) whose manifestations express affective and subjective fulfilment along with collective expressions in feasts and leisure.
- Knowledge production (connected with knowing) entails the recognition that culture has its own system of categories and languages.
- Sociability production (connected with decision-taking) refers to patterns of behaviour for living together and it is designed collectively in the community.

Finally, we must re-assert the character of this essay as just a proposal, an exercise of dystopian hermeneutics. Our concern was to discuss the notion of Good Living as a conceptual resource by addressing hegemonic conceptions about old age, ageing and the education of older adults. The field is open to future and deeper studies so as to advance the construction of gerontology.

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