

The living experiences of elderly people facing loneliness and solitude: a phenomenological-existential Reading

As vivências da pessoa idosa diante da solidão e solitude: uma leitura fenomenológico-existencial

Las vivencias del anciano frente a la soledad y la soledad: una lectura fenomenológico-existencial

 Felipe de Souza Areco¹,  Denise de Carvalho Ferreira²,  Lisley Soares Gallo³
 Wilson José Alves Pedro⁴

Received: 31/07/2024 Accepted: 16/12/2024 Published: 28/12/2024

Abstract:

Objective: to understand the role and importance of the phenomenon of loneliness and solitude from the perspective of the elderly and their feelings of being-in-the-world. **Methods:** qualitative research based on the phenomenological method, with unstructured interviews guided by the question: "What is it like for you to experience moments of loneliness and/or solitude?". Interviews were used, initially by indication and later by the snowball technique. The narratives were transcribed, analyzed phenomenologically and organized into thematic categories. **Results:** four elderly people participated and four categories emerged: *Perception of solitude and loneliness in aging; Role of social relationships in being-in-the-world; Recognition in the face of aging, with the resignification of physical and emotional changes;* and *Search for meaning in existence*. **Conclusion:** the experiences revealed challenges related to senescence, such as significant losses, bodily changes and the perception of finitude. Loneliness and solitude, although marked by moments of pain, also proved to be liberating, with reflection and resignification of experiences, broadening the understanding of these experiences in aging.

Keywords: Aging; Loneliness; Aged; Philosophy.

Resumo:

Objetivo: compreender o papel e a importância do fenômeno da solidão e solitude a partir dos idosos e os sentimentos de ser-no-mundo. **Método:** pesquisa qualitativa baseada no método fenomenológico, com entrevistas não estruturadas guiadas pela questão: "Como é para você vivenciar momentos de solidão e/ou solitude?". Utilizou-se entrevistas, inicialmente por indicação e posteriormente pela técnica de bola de neve. As narrativas foram transcritas, analisadas fenomenologicamente e organizadas em categorias temáticas. **Resultados:** participaram quatro pessoas idosas e emergiram quatro categorias: *Percepção da solitude e solidão no envelhecimento; Papel das relações sociais no ser-no-mundo; Reconhecimento diante do envelhecimento, com a resignificação das mudanças físicas e emocionais;* e *Busca por sentido na existência*. **Conclusão:** as vivências revelaram desafios relacionados à senescência, como perdas significativas, mudanças corporais e a percepção da finitude. A solidão e a solitude, embora marcadas por momentos de dor, também se mostraram libertadoras, com reflexão e resignificação das experiências, ampliando a compreensão sobre essas vivências no envelhecimento.

Palavras-chave: Envelhecimento; Solidão; Idoso; Filosofia.

Resumen:

Objetivo: comprender el papel y la importancia del fenómeno de la soledad y la soledad desde el punto de vista de los ancianos y sus sentimientos de ser-en-el-mundo. **Método:** investigación cualitativa basada en el método fenomenológico, con entrevistas no estructuradas orientadas por la pregunta: «¿Cómo es para usted experimentar momentos de soledad y/o soledad?». Se utilizaron entrevistas, inicialmente por indicación y posteriormente mediante la técnica de bola de nieve. Se transcribieron las narraciones, se analizaron fenomenológicamente y se organizaron categorías temáticas. **Resultados:** participaron cuatro ancianos y surgieron cuatro categorías: *Percepción de soledad y soledad en el envejecimiento; Papel de las relaciones sociales en el ser-en-el-mundo; Reconocimiento ante el envejecimiento, con la resignificación de los cambios físicos y emocionales;* y *Búsqueda de sentido de la existencia*. **Conclusión:** las experiencias revelaron desafíos relacionados con la senectud, como pérdidas significativas, cambios corporales y percepción de finitud. La soledad y la soledad, aunque marcadas por momentos de dolor, también se mostraron liberadoras, con reflexión y resignificación de las experiencias, ampliando la comprensión de esas vivencias en el envejecimiento.

Palabras-clave: Envejecimiento; Soledad; Anciano; Filosofía.

Corresponding Author: Felipe de Souza Areco – felipearecopsicologo@gmail.com

1. Centro Universitário Barão de Mauá and Science, Technology and Society Program of the Universidade Federal de São Carlos. Ribeirão Preto/SP, Brazil

2. Psychologist. Ribeirão Preto/SP, Brazil

3. Centro Universitário Barão de Mauá. Ribeirão Preto/SP, Brazil

4. Department of Gerontology of the Universidade Federal de São Carlos. Postgraduate Program in Science, Technology and Society, Postgraduate Program in Management of Public Organizations and Systems and Postgraduate Program in Gerontology, São Carlos/SP, Brazil

INTRODUCTION

The human life cycle is characterized by distinct phases, which include birth, growth, reproduction (which may or may not occur), aging, and death. In the 21st century, especially in developed countries, there is a notable phenomenon of prolonged life expectancy, with an increasing number of individuals reaching and exceeding 100 years of age, as highlighted by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the World Health Organization (WHO)¹. This increase in longevity reflects significant advances in areas such as medicine, nutrition, and socioeconomic conditions. According to the Brazilian Statute of the Elderly (*Estatuto do Idoso*)², an individual is formally recognized as elderly when they reach the age of 60, which implies certain rights and legal protections specific to this age group.

The transition phase to adulthood, which extends from approximately age 18 until the beginning or end of the third decade of life, is often seen as a period of experimentation before taking the roles and responsibilities typically associated with adult life. Traditional activities, such as getting a stable job and establishing lasting relationships, are often postponed until the age of 30 or later. Nowadays, many young adults have been extending their formal education and postponing the decision to have children³.

The concept of middle age is a social construct that emerged with the increase in life expectancy, leading to new roles in this intermediate phase. Middle adulthood is characterized by a combination of gains and losses. Most people in this age group are in good physical, cognitive and emotional condition, with several responsibilities and multiple roles, and feel capable of managing them. For this reason, middle age is considered an appropriate period to reflect and make important decisions about the years of life still to come³.

Aging is a process in which, for each person, physical, behavioral and social changes develop at a different pace, with chronological age being just one of the aspects among others that may or may not affect the well-being of the elderly person⁴. As life progresses, some people maintain the ability to be integrated and active in social life.

Loneliness can be understood both as the pain and suffering resulting from loss and as the ability to be alone even in the presence of another person. It represents an emotional absence of the other person, because even if the person is physically close, there is no psychological connection, lacking interaction and emotional communication, while the concept of solitude is treated as a positive experience of being with oneself, in contrast to loneliness, which generally carries a negative connotation⁵.

This study aims to understand the role and importance of the phenomenon of loneliness and solitude from the perspective of the elderly, and the feelings of being-in-the-world.

METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative approach, based on the phenomenological method, with the aim of understanding the experiences reported by the participants in their individuality. This method allows the researcher to access the lived experience, seeking, through deep reflection, to grasp the essence of the phenomenon under investigation⁵.

In phenomenology, the meanings of situations do not exist independently; they emerge from the relationship between the individual and their experiences, linking themselves to their way of being. Thus, the analysis requires the researcher to reflect on the experiences of the participants in an existential way, concretely examining the ways in which these experiences manifest themselves⁵.

The phenomenological framework emerged as an alternative to the predominant positivism, which valued objectivity and sought to eliminate subjectivity from science. In this context, phenomenology offers an analytical and reflective approach, focused on understanding the phenomena in their original essence⁵.

The phenomenological method allows the researcher to come into contact with lived experience, through which, from deep reflection, it is possible to reach the essence of the phenomenon to be studied. This is because situations do not have meanings in themselves; they only acquire meaning for those who experience them, and this meaning is therefore related to their way of existing⁶.

Furthermore, when investigating experiences lived in certain situations, it is necessary to turn to one's own experience, aiming to reflect on it, in order to then grasp its meaning in the individual's experience, thus enabling an existential analysis of concrete forms of existence⁶.

Phenomenology established itself as a philosophical current during a time when positivism predominated. Positivism was an approach that defended the supremacy of science over other forms of human knowledge⁷. In this context, psychology aspired to follow this trend, seeking to establish itself as an exact science similar to the natural sciences, with the objective of eliminating subjective aspects⁸.

As an alternative to these views of the phenomenon, there is phenomenology, which offers a method that involves adopting an analytical and reflective stance when examining the phenomenon, with the aim of accessing its original essence⁹. This research is based on the theoretical framework of qualitative research, where a qualitative analysis of the aspects considered most relevant by the researchers was carried out, information collected through an unstructured interview based on the phenomenological method, seeking to understand the individuality of the experiences reported by the participant.

Thus, a phenomenological interview was conducted with the guiding question: "What is it like for you to experience moments of loneliness and/or solitude?" This method was used to obtain a broad collection of information addressing the proposed research theme and leaving the interviewee open to their possibilities.

Thus, the phenomenological method is an empirical method that seeks the central meaning of phenomena, constituting a descriptive approach that is based on the assumption that the phenomenon can speak for itself, reaching the meaning of that experience by the person who experienced it, since only they are able to give a comprehensive description of it, thus making a structured interview impossible, since the interviewee and interviewer need to be open to the phenomena that will be revealed in the meeting¹⁰.

The interviews took place from July to September 2023, and lasted approximately forty minutes, during which the participant was able to talk about their experience and their feelings of loneliness and solitude.

An initial participant was indicated by one of the researchers. The non-probabilistic technique known as snowball sampling was then used, in which this initial participant indicated other possible candidates with the characteristics necessary for the research until these first indications gave new indications, thus forming a network of candidates¹¹.

This study followed the principles established by Resolution 466/2012, and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee under No. 6,057,430 and CAAE: 68733123.5.0000.5378. The interviews were audio-recorded so that no details or information were lost. All participants authorized the recording.

The interviews with the participants were analyzed in such a way that the initial step was to read the full transcripts of each of the interviews in great detail, with a view to recognizing meanings in the speeches, without making any type of interpretation. In step two, there was a new reading of all the full transcripts of the interviews in which units of meaning were established in the participants' reports.

In turn, in step three, there was a reflection to identify categories and then the change of common language into psychological language was carried out. The concrete aspects of the expressions of each researcher were also considered.

The last step consisted of making a summary of the units of meaning in accordance with the units of sense, constituting the focus on the phenomena and their dispositions. After carrying out the procedures, the participants' experiences were organized with a view to understanding in a succinct and characteristic way the reports on the research topic¹².

RESULTS

Four elderly people participated in this study: Adhara, 98 years old; Bellatrix, 78 years old; Berenice, 70 years old; all female; and Sirius, 69 years old, male. It is worth noting that the “star names” were chosen for their similarity with the meaning in the life of each participant in the study. The star Adhara, which in Arabic means “maiden”, a 98-year-old participant who taught us a great lesson in life and hope. Star Bellatrix, “warrior”, a participant who underwent 3 cancer surgeries, and showed us that after the calm comes after the storm. Star Berenice, “the one who brings victory”, a participant over 70 years old, is a fighter, despite her age, working two jobs to support herself. Star Sirius, “brilliant”, a 70-year-old participant, carries out brilliant projects in architecture, and dreams of a better future.

The phenomenological analysis identified four thematic categories based on the narratives: the *Perception of solitude and loneliness in aging*, marked by the lack of meaningful encounters and dialogues; the *Role of social relationships in being-in-the-world*, highlighting the influence of affective bonds on belonging and support; *Recognition in the face of aging, with the resignification of physical and emotional changes*; and the *Search for meaning in existence*, reflecting on losses and vulnerabilities as ways of redefining life.

Regarding the *Perception of solitude and loneliness in aging*, it was found that the participants expressed themselves about the lack of personal encounters and dialogue:

I get really upset when people try to snub me. I get really upset when people ignore me. The word ignore means a lot to me. (Sirius, 69 years old)

I feel really lonely, really lonely, right? It's normal because I lost my brother, my adoptive daughter, my young daughter and my adoptive granddaughter. (Adhara, 98 years old)

And I don't feel really lonely because I try to fill my time, and besides, I have my pets, I have a puppy, I have a kitten and I talk to them all the time and they became my companions. I'm not alone. When I feel sad, it's mostly because I miss someone. (Bellatrix, 78 years old)

In the category *Role of social relations in being-in-the-world*, the subject's path of existence is observed, with a profound and striking expression of possibilities:

She was worried and said that there was no way she could have this child, but I said, yes, you can. You will have the child with my support. So much so that when she went to the maternity ward, I was the person who was at the door of the maternity waiting for the birth. (Sirius, 69 years old)

I brought M. to live with us and it was great because M. only improved our experience, both my parents' and mine, and she became like a daughter to me. (Sirius, 69 years old)

We went to the daycare and she adopted this two-year-old girl. But I was the one who raised her, I took her swimming, took her to school, did everything for her. (Adhara, 98 years old)

I had a major surgery, I had 25 stitches, but it was benign, today I am friends with the doctors, two 32-year-old kids who operated on me. Today we are friends, I love them. (Berenice, 70 years old)

We will all have someone, you have someone, I have someone, you will certainly have someone that left a mark on us, that left a mark on us and that will stay. This is true, it is my own experience. So, I am always in communion with him, he is also already deceased. So, I am always talking to him, like, through letters, I write letters to him. (Bellatrix, 78 years old)

In the third category, *Recognition in the face of aging, with the resignification of physical and emotional changes*, it was found:

Getting old really isn't cool for me. I don't like that kind of thinking, no. Of having to... There comes a time when... When we can't live on our own anymore, right? (Sirius, 69 years old)

The only problem with the elderly is that sometimes they want to do things but don't have the strength and can't do them. Because you can't. If you're going to squat down to clean the furniture with your little feet down there, that day I squatted down, I said, 'Well, I'm going to clean this here.' Well, I wouldn't get up, I'd even ask God to get up. My legs can't handle it. So that's it, it makes me feel helpless and sad sometimes. Because I say, gosh, man, I can't do things that I used to do easily. That's it, just more sadness. (Bellatrix, 78 years old)

My plan is to live, work, live and live. I don't want to die. That's it, but there's nothing else. In 70 years, there won't be. (Berenice, 70 years old)

In the fourth category entitled: *Search for meaning in existence*, there were the following reports:

I like to work with plants, I have a lot of plants, so I spend a lot of time doing that. It's something that gives me a lot of pleasure, and as they say, it keeps the demons at bay. (Sirius, 69 years old)

It's been good here, but it's not the way I want it to be. Because I want... I want, as soon as the house is cleaner, I feel better, you know? When I run my finger around the places that are supposed to be clean and they aren't, I get nervous. So that's what I still need to do to for the well-being of the home, the well-being of the house. (Adhara, 98 years old)

I love watching the game. I only turn on the TV on game days. I watch Corinthians and Palmeiras games, I go to the field for every game of the Botafogo soccer team, I'm a die-hard Botafogo fan, I don't miss a game. Soccer is my passion (Berenice, 70 years old)

DISCUSSION

Questions related to feelings of loneliness were revealed with different meanings at different points in the interviews with participants. In this sense, it is important to point out that scientific literature sees an increase in the number of elderly people in the Brazilian population. In view of this, two distinct scenarios can be found, where it is observed that many elderly people deal with this situation and even make old age the best phase of their lives: they go out dancing, travel and do physical activities in groups, not giving space to loneliness¹³.

New public policies for the elderly are essential, especially in developing countries. Although population aging is global, it manifests itself in unique ways in each country, with distinct characteristics in developing countries. It is essential that government and social

spheres articulate and manage public policies that promote this phenomenon with minimal harm, and in a way that guarantees conditions for the population to age with health and quality of life¹⁴.

However, many elderly people are unable to overcome certain circumstances due to changes in their bodies and feelings of uselessness, leading to social isolation¹³. In this sense, although the feeling of loneliness can be experienced at any stage of human development, it presents several consequences in elderly people, such as the possible onset of depression, reduced quality of life and possible risk of suicide.

As previously mentioned, loneliness can be experienced at any time in the life of an elderly person, and is directly related to the problem of freedom¹⁵. Loneliness is the fundamental condition of every human being, and each of us experiences ourselves from this loneliness, experiencing existence from the perception of being alone in the world^{15, 16}.

It was observed that the role of relationships as being-in-the-world was very striking in relation to the production of meanings constructed in the shared world, thus⁶, the immediate daily experience is the scenario within which our life unfolds, being in the world is its fundamental structure.

When phenomenological psychology explores the relationship between man and being-in-the-world, it states that one needs the world to know where he/she is and who he/she is, since it is in relationships that meanings and senses are created. Humans are beings with intentionality, their consciousness is always directed towards something, and it is through this relationship that the construction of meaning arises⁶.

It was noted that the issue related to aging and recognizing oneself in the face of this process was emphasized at various times, revealing the meaning of senescence. Aging is described in the literature as a sequential, individual, irreversible, non-pathological process of wear and tear of a mature organism, typical of all members of a species, so that time makes it less capable of coping with environmental stress and, therefore, increases its possibility of death¹⁷. It is a continuous and progressive process, in which morphological, functional, biochemical, social and psychological changes occur. Therefore, in the statements of the deponents, an understanding of aging and its concerns that permeate existence was observed.

The answer is to consider the singularity of people as subjects of experience, and these people are in a state of absolute freedom, because, as Beings, they are able to properly assume their "having to be" elderly, that is, they assume the responsibility and the burden of being thrown into the world, living their aging¹⁷.

Their experiences and projects were found to be appropriate and authentic in this stage of their life cycle. On the other hand, there are ambivalences in the conception of being-old, which is conceived as wisdom and senility. Aging is something inevitable, it is part of the life cycle, and the bodily experience of this temporality related to aging is felt in different ways, being related to the situation of the body itself¹⁸.

The Being then reveals itself as the being-in-the-world, is aware of its reality, can signify and assume a position in the face of it. And it is inserted in the world of facticity that it did not create^{19,20}.

Human existence must be understood taking into account the three simultaneous aspects of the "world": the surrounding world, which requires adaptation and adjustment; the human world, which is realized in the relationship or in the reciprocal influences between people; and the self, which is characterized by thought and transcendence of the immediate situation. In this sense, the relationships of the significant experiences reported and the way in which these transit between the surrounding world and the self were verified, becoming activities that bring meaning to the being-there^{6,21}.

It was verified that the environment is delimited and determined, while the body is not restricted to its physical limits, since it expands into the world, since it has the capacity for transcendence, through human awareness of the situations that it has experienced, is experiencing and may experience. Furthermore, there is reciprocity between man and the world. Human beings need to adapt to the surrounding world, but they can exercise action and control over nature and their body, albeit temporarily, since these have the power to impose themselves on man⁶.

Human beings are not static; they are in a continuous process of development and transformation. The experiences they have lived offer significant elements for their self-knowledge, but they do not rigidly define their way of being, since they can evolve and improve. A person's identity encompasses their past, their present, and their future aspirations in their existence in the world^{6,22}.

On the other hand, the being in its totality is taken in such a way that it is truly only a being, to the extent that it is before and fixed by the man who represents it²⁰. The being of the existing in its totality seeks and finds itself in the condition of being represented. The world as an image does not mean, therefore, only a copy of the world, but that the world itself is an image, as representational objectivity.

This existential sense of the world is, therefore, in agreement with the transcendental problem, as a search to determine what is the way of one's being in which the real world is

constituted. The answer is that of the worldly way of existing as its very essence; that of the human essence as its worldly existence. Here and only here, on and from this ontological phenomenal ground of human existence, can we speak of a real world^{23,24}.

CONCLUSION

In revealing the experiences of the participants, it was possible to come into contact with the existential universe of each being in the world. The difficulties faced in the face of senescence, the limitations experienced socially and in relation to their corporeality, such as the loss of significant people, perceiving bodily changes and their own finitude.

The feelings of loneliness and solitude in this study permeated the layers of their relationships and meanings with different meanings attributed to this phenomenon, including impersonality at certain times. The confrontation with loneliness and aging was present in the face of the losses suffered over the years, providing a new meaning to the experiences lived.

Furthermore, because this is a research from a phenomenological perspective, the results found broadened the understanding of the studied theme, however, they cannot be generalized in a simplistic way to other contexts, which would imply denying the uniqueness of the participants' experiences. At the same time, this work offers a detailed and contextualized understanding of the phenomena investigated, based on the experiences and perspectives of the researchers.

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Associated Publisher: Rafael Gomes Ditterich

Conflict of Interests: the authors declared there are no conflict of interests

Financing: none

CONTRIBUTIONS:

Concept– Areco FS, Ferreira DC, Gallo LS

Investigation– Ferreira DC, Gallo LS

Writing – first draft – Areco FS, Pedro WJA

Writing – revision and editing – Areco FS, Pedro WJA

How to cite this article (Vancouver)

Areco FS, Ferreira DC, Gallo LS, Pedro WJA. The living experiences of elderly people facing loneliness and solitude: a phenomenological-existential reading. *Rev Fam, Ciclos Vida Saúde Contexto Soc.* [Internet]. 2024 [cited in *insert day, month and year of access*]; 12(3):e7824. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18554/refacs.v12i3.7824>.

How to cite this article (ABNT)

ARECO, F. S.; FERREIRA, D. C.; GALLO, L. S.; PEDRO, W. J. A. The living experiences of elderly people facing loneliness and solitude: a phenomenological-existential reading. **Revista Família, Ciclos de Vida e Saúde no Contexto Social**, Uberaba, MG, v. 12, n. 3, e7824, 2024. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18554/refacs.v12i3.7824>. Access in: *insert day, month and year of access*.

How to cite this article (APA)

Areco, F. S., Ferreira, D. C., Gallo, L. S., & Pedro, W. J. A. (2024). The living experiences of elderly people facing loneliness and solitude: a phenomenological-existential reading. *Rev. Fam., Ciclos Vida Saúde Contexto Soc.*, 12(3), e7824. Retrieved in *insert day, month and year of access* from <https://doi.org/10.18554/refacs.v12i3.7824>.



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