

Ageing Society: A New Psychosocial Concept

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Abstract

This presentation attempts to discuss some of the challenges facing the so-called ageing society, with an emphasis on two axes of analysis. One refers to the fact that it is not enough to indicate demographic, social, population or other trends to ensure acceptance in the social imaginary of the ageing society. The quantitative aspect is a necessary but not sufficient condition for accepting the remaining challenges in the ageing society. This point is highlighted by another axis of analysis, which has to do with the “resurrection” of ageism since the health and political events surrounding the coronavirus, which have once again placed older adults in stereotypical roles of decrepitude and ruin. All of the above indicates that hard work of social, governmental and state intervention is needed to create the minimum foundations of the ageing society.

Keywords: Ageing society, Gerontology, Ageism

1. Introduction

When we think of an “ageing society”, the word is generally associated with older adults, without being able to extrapolate the concept to a whole series of changes that will take place in society and in the way in which bonds, the family, the urban, labour processes, among many other processes, will be configured in the short and medium term.

To further complicate this situation, older adults continue to be stereotyped as decrepit and vulnerable. However, the new generations of older adults can effectively position themselves as part of a movement for change that claims citizenship rights and demands that the political and cultural framework, and more structurally, the social imaginary, profoundly revise the image that is maintained about them.

However, this attitude of change on the part of older adults does not correspond to a progressive awareness in society that we are invariably and irreversibly entering a new type of society, where in addition to many older adults, there will be many, many centenarians and where there will be few, very few children. And where there will also be family figures and roles that will tend to disappear, such as “brother”, “cousin”, “uncle”, “nephew”, among others. Intergenerational links will be strengthened between grandparents and grandchildren, between great-grandparents and great-grandchildren, and even between great-great-grandparents and great-great-great-grandchildren. New, complex and sudden realities (Widmer, 2006).

In other words, an unsuspected, unthinkable, unknowable society, of which little or nothing is said, of which little or nothing is done by governments. Thus, there is neither awareness, nor preparation, nor development of the necessary measures and policies to adapt society to ageing. At this point, we are facing with a society that runs the risk of losing the opportunity to be a radical alterity in the history of humanity, and instead becomes a thanatic mutation of humanity.

2. Method

For the selection of articles, the electronic databases Google Scholar, Crossref, Medline, ISI were consulted. Thirteen studies were selected for the systematic review using the descriptor “ageing society”, focusing also on the descriptor being interdisciplinary enriched with psychosocial and relational concepts. The time frame used for this review was from 2014 to 2021. Subsequently, the review was subdivided into six categories according to the parameters of the content analysis: ageing society; ageism; birth rate and population replacement rate; family, inheritance and transmission.

In this way, the conclusions attempt to suggest some hypotheses that may shed light on the field of social, generational and family changes present in the new ageing processes. It also warns of the need for gerontology to maintain an interdisciplinary perspective that can integrate these factors, taking into account the new emerging models of old age.

3. Results

3.1 Quantitative Data: Europe

It is increasingly evident that a new form of society is taking shape, which since the advanced demographic transition has been referred to as an ageing society. One of its consequences is that the population of older adults is increasing while the population of children and young people is decreasing (WHO, 2017; UNFPA and HELP-AGE International, 2012).

Thus, by 2050, 21.8% of the world's population will be older adults (United Nations, 2008). Between now and 2050, the 60-year-old population will increase from 667 million to 2008 million people, in percentages of 10.2% to 21.8% of the total population in the more developed countries. In less developed regions, the increase will be from 63% to 79%. Similarly, by 2050, the population aged 80 will increase from 87 million to 395 million in the more developed countries, ranging from 1.3 per cent to 4.3 per cent of the total population. In less developed regions, the percentage will increase from 48% to 69% (United Nations, 2018; 2019).

The latest research also indicates that the fastest growing group of older people is centenarians. By 2050, the global population of centenarians is expected to increase from 324,000 to 4.1 million people. For more developed countries this represents an increase of 1,119% and for less developed countries an increase of 1,716% in the total population of centenarians (Jopp, 2016; United Nations 2008, 2018).

Also, in 2050, in the more developed areas, the proportion of children will be 15.4% compared to 32.6% of older adults. In less developed regions, while in 2005 the proportion of children was 31% and that of older adults 8%, in 2050 the proportion of older adults will be 20.2% and that of children 20.3% (Leeson, 2009).

These are the quantitative data, but as we will indicate below, they are accompanied by qualitative changes that imply, on the one hand, a “disobedience” of older adults to their traditional roles, socio-demographic and political changes and the emergence of new social scenarios, with processes that reveal profound and probably not yet fully understood changes.

3.2 Quantitative Data: Latin America

From today to 2050, the 60-year-old population in Latin America will increase from 63% to 79% of all older adults. Likewise, by 2050, the 80-year-old population will increase from 48% to 69% of all older adults (CEPAL 2019; CELADE/CEPAL, 2009).

But the most impressive percentage is that in the same period the population of centenarians will increase substantially. In Latin America, from 2005 to 2050 there will be an increase from 97 people to 1613 centenarians, which implies a percentage increase of 1716% of the total population. Of course, in net numbers, we are talking about very low figures, but the percentages clearly indicate a trend towards a society of centenarians (Leeson, 2009).

Thus, Latin America's older adult population is irreversibly growing at a staggering rate. Between 2000 and 2025, 57 million older adults will be added to the 41 million older adults

already counted today. And between 2025 and 2050, this will increase to 86 million people. The countries with the largest populations in the region (Brazil and Mexico, together with Colombia, Argentina, Venezuela and Peru) will account for most of this increase, but in the smaller countries this increase will also be significant, especially from 2025 onwards (Celade, 2002, CEPAL, 2019).

Population ageing is therefore accelerating. In 2000, one in ten people were aged 60 or over, and by 2050, one in five people are expected to be in their 60s. Also, the number of people aged 80 and over, which was 11 per cent in 2000, will reach 19 per cent in 2050 (Villa & Rivadeneira, 1999; Villagómez, 2009).

This transition also implies a change in the correlation between the population of children and older adults. While in 2005 in Latin America the proportion of children was 31% and that of older adults 8%, by 2050 the proportion of older adults will be 20.2% and that of children 20.3% (INEGI, 2011; CONAPO, 2013).

It should also be noted that the vast majority of Latin American older adults reside in urban areas. It is possible to state that 70% of this age group is concentrated in cities, and the trend is for this percentage to increase. It is estimated that by 2025 this proportion will have increased to more than 80% (INEGI, 2011).

3.3 Qualitative Data: Extrapolations to Ageing Society.

The data presented and the consequences derived from them make it impossible to continue to speak simply of an ageing global society. The concept of ageing society (10 to 15% of the population over 65) does not account for the quantitative increase in the age group of older people, let alone the qualitative aspects that need to be analysed (Klein, 2022; Neugarten & Neugarten, 1986).

It seems that we will approach almost 30 % of older adults in the years 2050-2100. Can we still speak of an ageing society with this percentage, or is it something else? On the other hand, we are talking about “old people” with an increasingly prolonged old age. This is the age of octogenarians and centenarians. Ages that were not foreseen (but as extravagances) in the ageing processes. Therefore, they are no longer ageing: they are death processes postponed indefinitely. It is not a problem of old age, but a reality that people do not die (Klein, 2015, 2013).

At the same time, the birth rate is an irreversible constant. There is no replacement rate. The population replacement rate is 2.3 children per couple. It is currently 1.8, 1.7, 1.3 children, depending on the country concerned, and tends to decrease (Leeson, 2009). Either one waits until the biological limit to have one's first and only child or one does not have one at all. Hence the need to reconsider the need to launch a massive, legal and organised migration, at least in Europe, to obtain a labour force that will become increasingly scarce. Indeed, we might suggest that the great war of the 22nd century will not be over water, resources or territory. The countries that manage to attract the largest number of migrants will be the winners (Minujin, 1993).

So, has the time come for the utopia of a humanity of open borders, of free movement of people? Of course, it has. But at the most inopportune moment, hatred, xenophobia and suspicion against foreigners resurface, making the necessary migration impossible. This is a culture of temper tantrums that should be horrifying. Society leaves essential problems unresolved without realising that it is making them unsolvable, bewildered by bewilderment, fear of paranoid “looting” and a generation of politicians without audacity, without capacity for radical radical initiatives and so dismayed by their politically correct viral image that they lose their capacity for leadership (Laurell, 1992; Bauman, 2017; Lewkowicz, 2004; Mosca, 1965).

On the other hand, it should be noted that the low birth rate is not just about women postponing the age of conception or choosing not to have children. The essence of the zero birth rate is that couples no longer want to have children and no longer understand the point of having children. Perhaps it is related to the fact that the sense of transcendence and offspring is exhausted. One way or another, there is no more generational continuity. The cultural climate imposes the idea that the new generation has to build everything anew. There is no precedent and no future. Everything is present. Everything starts all over again. We insist: it is not a biological problem of gestation or of new female roles. It is a structure of generational arrest and paralysis. Therefore, all these new contexts cannot be explained only by the processes of demographic transition. There is no relation of determinism but of correlation with new identity processes, new emotional processes and new bonding processes (Klein, 2013, 2016).

But, surprisingly, instead of tackling this issue in a complex way, it is agreed that the urgent and fundamental issue of the ageing society is strictly focused on the “urgent” need to delay the retirement age. But this leads to the absurdity that if ageism persists, whereby people are not given work after the age of 60 (if not before), instead of generating continuity in work, it will generate unemployment and, therefore, more applications to the state unemployment offices, with the result that the state, instead of saving, will only spend more. On the other hand, even if the retirement age is raised to 67 or 70, what progress will be made if people will live to be 100, 120 or 150 years? These are therefore stopgaps that reveal the inability, once again, to understand the real challenges of ageing society (Sader & Gentili, 1999; Sader, 2008).

Governments, however, focus on an agenda around older adults where in reality there is no need for their presence. For example, the politically correct approach that the issue of ageing involves the promotion of their human rights is no doubt extremely sensitive and sympathetic, but in reality, it is something that older people are already doing for themselves. The politics of empowerment is part of their new subjective agenda. They do not need help from any government. Moreover, this approach again minimises and centralises the issue of societal ageing on the age group of older adults, when it is about radical social transformation. Older adults are seen as emergent, when the processes are more structural and decisive and encompass the entire population (Baek, 2016; Barros & Castro, 2002; Barslund et al., 2019).

3.4 Qualitative Data: The Profound Challenges of Ageing Society

The ageing society could be approached, at first glance, by three facts: that people will take indefinitely long to die (which could be put - although it is not the same thing - as people practically becoming immortal), that practically no children will be born and that population growth will practically cease to exist (which is the same as saying - if things do not change - that Humanity has an extinction date) (HELP-AGE International, 2000).

As we have already indicated, these indicators are the most overt and epidermal, but ageing of society implies more and something more: unprecedented and unprecedented change in all social spheres. Paradoxically, however, there is a reverse movement: the greater the degree of what is going to change (and is changing), the less public debate about it and the less, or no, action by governments and states (Maestre, 2000).

In this way, and in a way that deserves our attention: as the ageing society advances, it becomes increasingly invisible in public agendas, in social policies and in people's daily lives.....

We thus propose the hypothesis that as it becomes invisible, ageing society becomes a mutational society unable and powerless to focus, become aware of and solve its problems and crossroads. What should be semantised as a desired change is thus transformed into a feared scenario, in which the societal is stereotyped around the terror of imminent collapse, i.e. the feeling that disorder may rule us or may spread at anytime, anywhere and inevitably. If in our society the great terror is the sensation of danger (of unemployment, pollution, violence, virus), in the mutational society, the gravitational centre of terror will be between paralysis and the morass of applying measures and laws that today we consider politically and socially reprehensible and incorrect (Klein, 2022; Durkheim, 1951, 1968).

This mutational society will become even more entrenched the less the unprecedented, bold and creative decisions that need to be taken (urgently) in the face of an ageing society are taken. This is what we are seeing: doubt, hesitation, ambiguity and denial. At the limit, we understand that this paralysis will give rise to a mutational society where the sense of collapse will begin to brew as a fearful and terrifying scene (Lyotard, 1987).

Indeed, ageing society remains a disconcerting society. In this sense, we have not yet created even the minimum social imaginary that allows us to foresee the meaning of what the ageing society will be. Certainly, human beings are not ready for these changes. But it does not help that the solutions to ageing of society are for the moment solely and exclusively of the postponement order: more years of work, higher retirement age. These are probably the wrong solutions, but they may give the impression that at least something is being done (Lukes, 2001).

It is true: there are no preconceived formulas that will "solve" the "problems" of ageing society. In some cases, it will be necessary to be bold, in others to dare to suggest things that go beyond political correctness, or, in other cases, solutions will simply be denied, nothing will be done and the unpostponable will be postponed again (Sánchez, 2007).

Ageing society, therefore, will go through situations of collapse, others of violence and others of confusion, depending on the awareness that is acquired or the will that is maintained to confront its problems.

3.5 Qualitative Data: Europe and Covid-19

The situation generated from and through the coronavirus has deepened the processes described above, but, at the same time, it has shown that decades of literature, publications and academic activity in the field of gerontology have done little or nothing to prepare or raise awareness of the implications of ageing society (Ayalon et al., 2021).

The renewed image of a strengthened, agile and strong person able to continue making vital decisions (the workhorse of modern gerontology) has not helped much. The proposed new stereotype in terms of the vital and resilient older adult has not prevented prejudice, hatred and suspicion from prevailing (Coibion et al., 2020; Cole, 1997).

The alarm of Covid-19 was enough for old people to be confined, isolated, stripped of their citizenship rights and locked up in residential homes, asylums or others, mimicking experiences of genocide and concentration camps. However, gerontology does not consider itself self-critical. As far as possible, it has ignored the perverse social effects of the coronavirus, and if it has not been able to do so, it has only reinforced its message that we must continue to strive for a new image of old age. Nothing could be further from the truth (Brooke & Jackson, 2020; Monahan et al., 2020).

We insist that the events that deepened and were triggered by Covid-19 indicate that society is not prepared, cognitively, intuitively or emotionally, for ageing society. It wants nothing to do with it, rejects its possibility, and barely understands its consequences. All this will only deepen its mutational aspects (Golubev & Sidorenko, 2020).

3.6 Qualitative Data: Latin American and Its Vulnerable Seniors

In a place diametrically opposed to their population and demographic relevance, all data on the social and cultural situation of Latin American older adults indicate a social neglect with marked overtones of violence, helplessness and vulnerability that cannot fail to attract attention (Abusleme & Caballero, 2014).

For example, the educational levels of older adults are extremely deficient. So much so that it is estimated that older adults living in urban areas have barely completed six years of schooling, i.e. they practically do not go beyond primary school (4.6 years in Colombia and Paraguay, around 3 years in Venezuela, Dominican Republic, Brazil, Honduras and El Salvador). Only in Uruguay, Argentina, Chile and Panama do averages exceed this threshold (Arango & Peláez, 2012).

This structural “illiteracy” is compounded by alarming poverty rates. More than half of Latin American countries keep their urban old people at a poverty line of 30%. This percentage is even higher in rural areas. In at least 4 countries this urban poverty rate rises to 50%. But also in Bolivia and Honduras this percentage rises to an incredible 70% (Barbosa et al., 2017).

This situation of poverty is combined with the fact that less than half of urban older adults receive social protection coverage. This situation of extreme vulnerability is again exacerbated in rural areas. In a few countries (Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Chile and Uruguay), social protection reaches more than 50% of older adults. In contrast, in Bolivia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Paraguay and Venezuela, it does not even reach 25% of the older adult population (Villagómez, 2009).

Plagued by chronic illiteracy, structural poverty and vulnerability to social protection, these urban older adults are forced to work, in very precarious and unprotected situations. Their wages are below the average wage, with no social benefits. Thus, it is estimated that more than 30% of Latin American older adults are inserted in the labour market, referring once again to a cycle of poverty and discrimination that proves to be perverse and extremely hostile (Villa & Rivadeneira, 1999).

At the same time, gender specificity is an important feature of Latin American ageing. The greater longevity of older women leads them to face greater situations of widowhood, loneliness, helplessness and others, suffering situations of social, wage and labour inequality, with little or no impact on economic participation. Hence, there is a close relationship between high levels of poverty and female heads of household. To aggravate the situation, women are excluded from social security even more than men, maintaining their dependence on the male figure, be it the husband or the children (Barbot, 1999).

All of the above implies the impossibility for Latin American older adults to maintain the independence of an autonomous household. Recurrent economic instability makes them dependent on children, grandchildren or other relatives in often multigenerational households. But the opposite is also true: families depend on the pension or retirement of old people for their own survival. Moreover, it is estimated that in one in four (urban) households there is at least one older person; therefore, it is possible to affirm that in Latin America the family continues to be the main protection device for older people (CEPAL, 2019).

It should be noted that another vulnerability factor is the fragility of social networks and social organisations of Latin American's older adults. The constitution of national networks of organisations, sports and social clubs or others of older adults is poor or almost non-existent, which makes it difficult to fight for their civil and citizens' rights. However, in countries such as Chile, Uruguay and Argentina the reality seems to be more auspicious (CEPAL, 2019).

Although not generalisable to all of Latin America, data from the results of the National Survey on Discrimination in Mexico (INAPAM, 2010) reveal that 27.9% of people over 60 years of age have felt that their rights have not been respected because of their age, 40.3% rate economic problems as their main problems, 37.3% illnesses, access to health services and medicines, and 25.9% employment problems. To these percentages must be added the lack of life policies, the exhaustion of social integration processes and the miserable retirement conditions that are not guaranteed by the current social security systems (CEPAL, 2000). In this way, Latin America's ageing population suffers from various processes of discrimination (Viveros, 2001).

A society that should protect its most vulnerable members only abandons them and condemns them to processes of exclusion and social violence. Hence, Latin American older adults can only be considered as one of the most vulnerable groups in the region (Huenchan, 2009).

3.7 Qualitative Data: Expecting Ageing Society

We insist that the events that deepened and were triggered by Covid-19 indicate that society is not prepared, cognitively, intuitively or emotionally, for ageing of society. It wants nothing to do with it, rejects its possibility, and barely understands its consequences. All of which will only deepen its mutational aspects (Klein, 2020). It is no longer possible to ignore the fact that demographic changes, demographic data, the irreversible trend towards overliving and the relentless fall in births are, for the relevant majority, nothing more than data and predictions that do not connect with ageing society. Everything that portends, predicts and points to ageing society is split and dissociated from the ageing society. People are not and will not be ready for it, no matter how solid the data, censuses and statistics are.

The philosopher Taleb (2010) has used the term “black swan” to describe the unforeseen and disruptive event that comes to disrupt a supposedly predictable landscape. This is, for the moment, ageing of society: something that already exists, and we fail to see it in time and play it down, without considering it in all its potent dimensions. Explaining this situation is not easy, and yet it cannot be postponed. The traditional resource of pedagogical gerontology has become unsustainable, as the paradigm of decrepit old age that was thought to have been overcome and eradicated has returned with more strength and legitimacy than ever.

Many gerontological initiatives aimed at combating ageism are based on the acceptance of the view that stereotypes are the result of ignorance of the facts and employ strategies to inform people of the evidence that refutes the particular assumption of ageism. In other words, society and the social imaginary are assumed to be governed by rational criteria and common sense (Green, 1993).

However, we believe that these strategies contribute little to changing beliefs, attitudes and practices because they ignore the interests, emotional burdens and invisible pacts that sustain the unquestionable legitimacy of so-called common sense. Common sense which, as a social and psychosocial construct, tends to be compulsively reproduced because it calms, pacifies and allows scenes of fear, panic or paranoia to be denied. Common sense does not enable thought but articulates unconscious pacts that allow us to deny, reject, exclude (Kaš, 1993).

From this perspective, we suggest that the exponential explosion of ageism produced by the coronavirus does not indicate the need for better studies, research and sustained outreach efforts. Quite the contrary: they are there and they are more than abundant. Instead, we should opt for another avenue of reflection that allows us to understand the failure of knowledge, science and academia to eradicate prejudices, clarify hatreds and foster tolerance and empathy in society.

It should be understood in this sense that again ageism can in no way be approached as a pedagogically “extirpable” evil, but on the contrary, it operates structurally as an emergent of society’s need for the old in terms of depositing in them fears, anxieties and paranoias

(Pichon-Riviere, 1981; Freud, 1917).

Thus, the only way to generate favourable conditions for the ageing of society, since it is imminent and irreversible, involves working with society as a whole, in order to prepare the best conditions for its advent. In other words, it is not necessarily working with older adults, but with the children, grandchildren and neighbours of these older adults. Working with adults, young people, non-governmental organisations, professionals, technicians, even with the State and all forms of civil and religious organisations, to explain and socialise what ageing society is and what it implies, and especially one of its versions, the centenarian society (Oreg, 2002; Dent & Galloway, 1999; Anzieu, 1971; Gallardo-Peralta et al., 2016; Avendaño, 2010).

The best lesson from the situation generated since COVID-19 is that neither the demographic trend, nor life expectancy, nor the new cultural and identity climate are sufficient for people to accept the fact, and the consequences, of an ageing society. It will not be accepted either tacitly or implicitly (Monahan et al., 2020).

4. Discussion

We can conclude that the changing society generates fears, rejections and denials. It is probably paradoxical, but the social structure is also sometimes a structure of paradoxes. We probably have to work in two directions. One is to decrease resistance to change. The other is to help foster processes of mourning for a society that is changing and to which there is no process of return.

We know that resistance to change involves different factors: intense fear, blockages, denial, anger, depression and even moments of paralysis, in order to gradually reach acceptance of the new social, cultural and life contexts. It is a process that has to be maintained and by no means occurs naturally or automatically. Taking for granted what the demographic trend implicitly shows, but not the cultural and social structure, can, if these resistances to change are not worked through, give rise to persecutory fantasies, of the order of invasion and social and emotional desolation without the possibility of mediating transformation (Anzieu, 1990).

But, at the same time, working with resistance to change must be accompanied by a process of mourning, capable of re-signifying generational and cultural history. It is, in short, a mourning for a certain type of society that no longer exists or is ceasing to exist, but to which, nevertheless, experiences of protection and care are associated. From this, the social forms that are emerging convey a sense of fragility, catastrophe and borderline experience.

In this way, we suggest that developments in relation to ageing society are, at the same time, inseparable from an awareness of the scapegoat position of older people in today's social structure. Becoming aware that they operate less as an age group and more as a stigmatised group in which is deposited that which falls into the category of the unthinkable, the unspeakable, the socially unmentionable, around the threat of helplessness, panic, social group anxiety (Tisseron, 1997).

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