

Body image in older adults: a review

Imagem corporal em idosos: uma revisão

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ABSTRACT

Aims: To review the literature on body image perception, especially among the older adults, and its effects on the general self-esteem and, consequently, on quality of life for this age group. Gerontophobia and ageism are also discussed concerning their interference in successful aging.

Source of data: Scientific original and review articles from the Medline/PubMed and Lilacs databases, using the key words body image perception, older adults, aging and ageism, were searched.

Summary of findings: Aging is a continuous process that comes with a variety of losses from physical to functional and social, that all individuals will go through. These losses may promote a dissatisfaction with one's body image as well as a lowering of overall self-esteem, sometimes leading to major morbidities such as depression. The concept of body image is defined as a psychological feeling that one has about his/her appearance and body functioning. As such, body image is a dynamic concept: it alters itself along the life course according to external and internal influences. Body image also bears a moderate relationship to self-esteem and psychosocial adjustment.

Conclusions: Aging is a process that embodies many losses, leading frequently to lower self-esteem and thus a poorer quality of life. Body image distortion triggers feelings of worthlessness and lowers self-esteem which, together with the existing rejection of the aging process, contributes somewhat to a worse quality of life at a stage of life already full of uncontrollable losses.

KEY WORDS: BODY IMAGE PERCEPTION; OLDER ADULTS; AGING; AGEISM.

RESUMO

Objetivos: Fazer uma revisão sobre percepção da imagem corporal, especialmente entre os idosos, e sua contribuição para a auto-estima geral e, conseqüentemente, para a qualidade de vida nessa faixa etária. Gerontofobia e ageismo também são abordados em relação à sua interferência com um envelhecimento bem sucedido.

Fonte dos dados: Foram utilizados artigos científicos originais e de revisão das bases de dados Medline/PubMed e Lilacs, e as palavras chave percepção da imagem corporal, envelhecimento, idosos e ageismo.

Síntese dos dados: O envelhecimento é um processo contínuo, acompanhado de uma variedade de perdas tanto físicas como funcionais e sociais, pelas quais todos os indivíduos irão passar. Essas perdas podem promover uma insatisfação com a imagem corporal, bem como uma diminuição da auto-estima global, algumas vezes levando a morbidades importantes, como depressão. O conceito de imagem corporal é definido como uma experiência psicológica que se tem sobre a própria aparência e funcionamento do corpo. Como tal, a imagem corporal é um conceito dinâmico: ela se altera ao longo da vida de acordo com influências internas e externas. A imagem corporal também tem uma relação moderada com auto-estima e ajustamento psicossocial.

Conclusões: O envelhecimento é um processo que incorpora muitas perdas levando, com frequência, a uma baixa auto-estima e, conseqüentemente, a uma pior qualidade de vida. A distorção da imagem corporal desencadeia sentimentos de inutilidade e baixa auto-estima que, juntamente com a rejeição existente do processo de envelhecimento, contribui para uma pior qualidade de vida em um estágio da vida já cheio de perdas incontroláveis.

DESCRIPTORIOS: PERCEPÇÃO DA IMAGEM CORPORAL; ENVELHECIMENTO; IDOSOS; AGEISMO.

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INTRODUCTION

Aging is a very well-known process. Recent research points to an increase in life expectancy, not only in developed countries, but also in developing ones. All individuals without exception will go through the aging process. Invariably, this process comes with a variety of losses, from physical to functional and social. These losses can promote dissatisfaction with one's body image as well as a lowering of overall self-esteem, sometimes leading to major morbidities such as depression.¹⁻³

Knowing the relationship of the older adults and their body and the implications of this relationship to self-esteem is crucial for health professionals dealing with this age group to better understand and stimulate better aging practices.⁴ In this paper, the authors review the literature on body image perception, especially among the older adults, and its effects on the general self-esteem and consequently, quality of life for this age group. Gerontophobia and ageism are also discussed in regard to their interference with successful aging.

METHODS

The Medline/PubMed database from 2005 to 2012 was searched for articles using the key words "body image perception" with 6286 articles found, and when limited to aged 65+ in English, 356 articles were found. When limited for no surgery, cancer, or neurological diseases, 152 articles were left. A review was performed on the titles and abstracts and only 80 were related to body image perception among the older adults. A new search using LILACS data base was performed using the keywords "body image perception" with 183 articles found. When limited to body image as the main topic, 9 articles were left, which were already part of the 80 found in Medline/PubMed. A close review was conducted in the 80 articles and those dealing with post-surgical reports and neurological diseases, as well as those with repeated data were excluded, leaving 54 articles on body image perception and the older adults. One article, published in 2013, has been added to the manuscript as suggested by peer reviewers.

CONTENT OF THE REVIEW

Quality of life

Since quality of life is a multidimensional construct, a wide range of variables, including socio-demographic, psychosocial and health-related ones potentially influences it.⁵ Life expectancy has increased

all over the world in the last 30 years and will continue to do so in a fast rate. In addition, the oldest old (aged 80 years and over), comprising more frail people, is the age group that is expected to grow the most. In order for this aging population to achieve their later years healthy, aging should not be regarded as a negative social phenomenon, and older adults should be able to enjoy a healthy, prosperous life through social participation and contribution. Factors that forbid the older adults from leading a healthy life include various psychological and social problems occurring in older age, as well as a high incidence of diseases.⁶

Older adults are at high risk for developing chronic illnesses and related disabilities. These chronic conditions include diabetes mellitus, arthritis, congestive heart failure and dementia, to name a few. Many experience hospitalizations, nursing home admissions, and low-quality care. They also may lose the ability to live independently at home. Chronic conditions are the leading cause of death among older adults. Preventive health care are crucial for maintaining the quality of life and wellness of older adults.⁷

The ability to complete basic daily activities may decrease if illness, chronic disease, or injury limit physical or mental abilities of older adults. These limitations make it hard for older adults to remain at home. Early prevention and physical activity can help prevent such declines. Unfortunately, less than 20 percent of older adults engage in enough physical activity, and fewer do strength training.⁸

Behaviors such as participation in physical activity, self-management of chronic diseases, or use of preventive health services can improve health outcomes. Sonati et al.⁹ found a lower acceptance capacity of physical appearance (body image) in older adults over 70 years-old when compared with younger individuals (from 60 to 69) and it was positively associated with quality of life and self-perception of health. The age group from 64-69 years of age showed the highest acceptance of physical appearance (body image) and it was also positively associated with quality of life.⁹

Body image

Body image is the cognitive and subjective representation of physical appearance and sensations experienced by the body.¹⁰ The concept of body image is defined as a psychological experience that one has about his/her appearance and body functioning.^{10,11,12} Body image perception reflects the way we see and perceive our body. As such, body image is a dynamic

concept: it alters itself along the life course according to external and internal influences. According to Mosquera,¹³ if there are no adaptations to these changes, there will be an intense dissatisfaction not only with body image but also with life itself.

According to Thompson,¹⁴ body image involves a series of components, among which are weight satisfaction, accuracy of size perception, body satisfaction, body esteem, body perception, ideal body and body image disorder. Body image bears a moderate relationship to self-esteem and psychosocial adjustment (e.g., eating disturbances, depression, social anxiety, and sexual functioning).¹⁵

Body image is formed by four dimensions: cognitive, affective, behavioral and perceptual.¹⁶ In an attempt to evaluate how the individual perceives the shape and size of his/her body, the perceptual dimension has been frequently used in health research.¹⁷ Secord and Jourard,¹⁸ early in 1953, defined body image as the group of “perceptions, beliefs and knowledge that individuals have about the structure, functioning, limits and appearance of their own body”. Image has an unconditional power. All the body perceptions and experiences are rationally interpreted and emotionally lived under the influence of beliefs and attitudes culturally determined.¹⁹

An individual’s experience of body image, either positive or negative, has some bearing on their behavior. Individuals who have a negative body image may choose clothing that is not revealing, or retreat from social events and physical intimacy. In addition to its influence upon behavior, body image can also impact individual’s self-esteem.²⁰

Body image and the older adults

The older adults population in Brazil has been increasing steadily, and the growth of this age group is expected to exceed that of all other age groups in the next years.²¹ The changes associated with the aging of the body most likely have an effect upon body image.²² The majority of the older adults population are women (IBGE, 2010)²³ and with the growing concern over aging and an increasing social pressure on women to retain physical attractiveness and sexuality through a slim figure and young looks as they grow older, body image satisfaction is an important issue to be studied when quality of life is to be granted.²²

Body image is a dynamic concept. The concern with body image has always been an object of study in younger populations, especially women. It is only recently that researchers have turned their attention to older women populations, and they have concluded

that more than 60% of women between the ages of 60 and 70 years, and around 80% of women 54 years old are not satisfied with their own bodies.^{24,25}

Body image during old age can suffer distortions, since there is a negative view about aging in society, based on the false association of aging and incapacity and incompetence. Western society also demands that women should be forever young and beautiful in order to guarantee their place in it.²⁶ For a long time, it was thought that these socio cultural demands applied only to young people. Researches now days show that in a somewhat lesser degree, it also happens to adults and older individuals, with a higher prevalence in women. In the older adults, in particular, this body image distortion triggers feelings of worthlessness and lowers self-esteem which, together with the existing rejection of the aging process contributes somewhat to a worse quality of life at a stage of life already full of uncontrollable losses.^{27,28}

Associations were found between body image and mental health in seniors. Self-esteem was associated with body image preoccupation among 148 Australian elders by Baker and Gringart.²⁹ Miller et al.³⁰ found body image dissatisfaction to be related to psychological distress and depression among 183 American seniors over 70 years of age. Oberg and Tornstam³¹ acknowledge that within our youthful, sexualized, consumer culture, older adults are marginalized with regards to their bodies. They implied that modern images of older bodies are limited to either problem bodies or those that are youthful in nature, leading active lifestyles, dieting, and dressing and behaving in what can be considered a youthful manner.

Body image and gender differences in the older adults

Considering the influence that body image may have on many aspects of an individual’s life, it is important to know if body image can be changed throughout the life course. In her literature review of research involving body image of both older males and females, Tiggemann²⁰ found that body dissatisfaction remained relatively stable across the lifespan in women. She indicated that some studies have found that older males also experience body dissatisfaction; however, there exists a gender difference since body dissatisfaction occurs more often among women. Interestingly, Kaminski and Hayslip³² found that being older had a more negative relationship on the Body-as-Object Esteem scores of males than females.

Damasceno et al.³³ described the ideal body type and level of body satisfaction among a group of 186 individuals (87 female and 98 male) joggers. They concluded that men preferred stronger bodies with less body fat, whereas women preferred a slimmer body. They also found that few people have the body they desire, leading to body image dissatisfaction both among women and men.³⁴ However, several authors found that males may have a more positive body image than females and that this gender difference also persists throughout the life course.^{11,12}

With increasing age, women move further away from basic features that tend to be most valued in a woman: beauty and youth. Conversely, men are “allowed” to appear their age, and in fact, signs of aging may even enhance a man’s attractiveness. As a result of the devaluation of older women in our culture, older women tend to view themselves more negatively with increasing age. This differential treatment of aging, in which women lose value and see themselves more negatively with increasing age, whereas men maintain or gain value, has been labeled as the double standard of aging. Women are judged to reach middle age and old age at younger chronological ages than men. Women are judged to become less sexual and less attractive than men as they advance from middle age to old age; and women are judged to become less feminine with increasing age, whereas men’s masculinity is unaffected by age.^{35,36}

Some studies also suggested that, even though body image in relation to physical appearance remains important with age, this aspect of body image decreased proportionally because body competence, an area of body image specifically important to seniors, significantly increased with age. These results suggest that among older adults, well-being is tied more to satisfaction with body functioning than it is to satisfaction with appearance.^{29,12}

Society strains influencing body image

The perception one has about his/her body is influenced by concepts and values imposed by the society and is built through social interaction. The individual makes up this image from his/her sensations but he/she is greatly influenced by what the society thinks and idealizes about an “acceptable body”.^{37,38,39} According to Tavares³⁸, in order for a body image to be truly related to a real body, one needs to transcend certain socio cultural elements.

Among the external influences, the one that mostly influences body image is socio- cultural pressure, which demands of all individuals but mainly women,

a frenetic search for the ideal body, an ideal created by the socio cultural environment itself. Since early in life, girls’ education involves caring for the body, food, clothing and hygiene. Physical development is socially and culturally conditioned to stereotyped models of beauty. This often generates frustration, social alienation and severe nutritional disorders. The growing importance given to body image and physical appearance give origin not only to physical, but also psychological, disorders that will ultimately affect one’s overall wellbeing.⁴⁰

The interest of researches in body image and health perception results from the fact that many of the problems and needs of individuals seeking medical care derives from the influence of factors beyond their concrete pathology, such as psychological, environmental and socio demographic ones.

Gerontophobia and ageism

The world is experiencing an unprecedented increase in average life expectancy and population aging, described as a revolution in longevity. In primitive societies, old age was frequently valued. Older persons often provided knowledge and experience. However, when society shifted from an agrarian to an industrialized economy, older land owners lost their authorities and old age became a burden to families and society.⁴¹

Older women, in particular, experience the impact of ageism. Living longer and alone and making up for some 80 percent of the residents of nursing homes in the USA, they are more vulnerable than men to abuse and poverty. Becca Levy et al.^{42,43} demonstrated the adverse physiological effects of ageism, showing that older individuals who are presented with negative stereotypes of aging over time experience detrimental changes, such as a decline in memory performance and a heightened cardiovascular response to stress. In western society, women are consistently judged based on their physical appearance and relationship status, while men are measured more by their accomplishments and wealth. The constant messages demanding eternal beauty and youth especially affect older women and may eventually also affect their self-perception. As they get older, women become more concerned with comparisons to the ideal thin body type. They confront their own fears of their aging body and society messages that are telling them that they are getting old.⁴⁴⁻⁴⁶

Gerontophobia is an individual’s negative self-perceptions of his/her aging bodies, leading to a fear of growing old, which may cause specially women

to evaluate with great criticism their aging bodies. When compared to thin young bodies, this evaluation may trigger feelings of diminished self-worth and lower self-esteem.⁴⁷ Ageism is society's stereotypical perceptions of older adult individuals, imposing standards of beauty most of the times impossible to achieve without serious health hazards, causing mainly eating disorders and depression.

Businesses that promote “anti-aging” cures and miracles reinforce the idea that beauty is synonymous with youth.⁴⁸ People from all over the world spend a lot of money on anti-aging products each year with the promise to keep them from growing old. Doctor Levy notes: “It is possible to overcome stereotypes, but they often operate without people's awareness. Look at all the talk about plastic surgery, Botox – the message is, “Don't get old”.”⁴³

Attributing physical decline to age is not only detrimental to older persons but to the population as a whole. It erroneously assumes that age itself is the cause of decline when in fact illness is often the cause. And it fails to recognize that some diseases that manifest themselves later in life are caused by behavior and environmental exposure early in life. Prejudice against older persons can be seen as arising from complex attitudes and fear of mortality.⁴⁹ Ironically, most people consider living a long life to be an achievement and they strive to live as long as they can. So at the same time as long life in and of itself is considered a victory, as a group older women and men are considered physiological failures.⁵⁰

Despite significant research, stereotypes of older persons as physically, mentally, and emotionally unfit and incapable of providing aesthetic beauty to the world reinforce the belief that they lack the ability to be part of the active community. The myth that older persons add little or no value to the community has led to the conclusion that they should be viewed as a burden and deserve minimal services.⁵¹

Evaluation of body image satisfaction

Some of the methods used for evaluating self-body image are the Body Image Satisfaction Questionnaire (BISQ)⁵², and the Nine Figure Scale of Stunkard⁵³, among others. The BISQ was developed by Lutter et al. in 1986 to evaluate body image satisfaction, as the name implies. It has 22 items on a 5-point Likert scale, varying from very unsatisfied (1) to very satisfied (5). The higher the value obtained the greater the satisfaction with one's body. Lutter et al.⁵² validated this instrument in a diverse population, including the older adults.

The Nine Figure Scale,⁵³ created in 1983, measures the body image self-perception with varying pictures from figure 1 (undernutrition) through 9 (severe obesity). The use of this scale is a simple, efficient and quick way to evaluate body image perception. A series of silhouettes of different body sizes is presented to an individual and he/she has to choose first which one is more similar to her/his real body. Next, the individual is asked to choose which of the silhouettes represents his/her ideal body. When the ideal image is subtracted from the real one a score different from zero indicates body image dissatisfaction.

Using the Nine Figure Scale, Powell et al found a body size misperception, that is, an ideal image different from the real image, surprisingly prevalent among obese adults from the general population. In this study, body size misperception was associated with an overestimation of health and underestimation of risk, lower utilization of the health care system, and inadequate physician counseling, suggesting that a multifaceted intervention may be needed to counter the effects of body size misperception. According to the authors, physicians must not only identify and counsel patients with body size misperception in the clinical setting but also partner with public health and community advocates to develop treatment programs that reach these individuals in their own communities.⁵⁴

In another study concerning body image satisfaction in women, body dissatisfaction was found to significantly decrease across older age, but the association was attenuated and no longer significant after stratifying by BMI. The authors found particularly two groups of women who may be especially vulnerable to body dissatisfaction: middle-aged women and obese women.⁵⁵

CONCLUSIONS

Aging is a process that embodies many losses leading frequently to lower self-esteem and thus a poorer quality of life. Body image distortion triggers feelings of worthlessness and lowers self-esteem which, together with the existing rejection of the aging process contributes somewhat to a worse quality of life at a stage of life already full of uncontrollable losses.

Body image perception is a concept that should not be overlooked when dealing with the older adults. Body image during old age can suffer distortions, since there is a negative view about aging in society, based on the false association of aging and incapacity and incompetence. Besides, women are advised by society that they should be forever young and beautiful in order to guarantee their place in it.

Associations were found between body image and mental health in seniors. Self-esteem was associated with body image preoccupation and body image dissatisfaction has been related to psychological distress and depression.

There is a lack of research on this field that should be resolved by population studies, especially multicenter ones, so we can learn and improve our care for the older adults.

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