

5.3. Social and generational inclusion: the “Social Crochet Program”, from Coimbra

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Abstract

This article aims to raise a discussion about a theme not yet fully explored: artistic and cultural production by the elderly. We will therefore take a critical look at the “Social Crochet Program”, an urban intervention project coordinated by the Social Welfare Office of the Municipal Council of Coimbra in order to promote social and generation inclusion by fostering an artistic-cultural, productive, and creative intergenerational activity. This approach is based on a theoretical reflection on old-age conditions in current times from the following question: What is the place of the elderly population in the Western contemporary society in general? We will then focus the discussion on the supply and access to goods and cultural and artistic products for and by the elderly, respectively, and on the legitimacy and value of this elderly population as producers of art and culture. Our discussion ends with the concrete example of the “Social Crochet Program” whose limitations, in our opinion, cannot invalidate its qualities, but rather project new and future possibilities.

Keywords: inclusion, intergenerationality, old-age, culture.

Introduction

Population aging is a reality at an overall global level, even though it occurs in different forms and has different impacts on the various countries². In Europe and in countries such as Portugal, the number of elderly people (individuals of 65 years of age and above) has already exceeded the number of young individuals (individuals between zero and 14 years of age): in 2012, there were, in Europe, 115.5 elderly people for every 100 young people, while in Portugal the proportion was of 129.4 elderly people for every group of 100 young people³.

Changes in the age pyramids, the trend of which has almost been reversed, where the base of the pyramid has broadened and its top is narrow, happen basically for three reasons: declining fertility rate, increase in life expectancy, and migratory phenomena in some countries, where economic and/or political crises force the active population to travel and settle in other countries in search of new and better opportunities⁴ (Wilson, 2009).

These new age settings have been an overall concern, featuring as one of the top international items on the agenda of large worldwide entities and institutions, public and private. While they reflect the progress of civilisation in terms of health, basic sanitation and public hygiene over the two last centuries (Pereira & Pita, 2011), they nevertheless render the capitalist economies – based on productivity and profitable – more vulnerable. This vulnerability obviously drifts over the historically more economically, politically, and socially vulnerable, which, in a capitalist perspective, covers large numbers of the elderly population, the “inactive” and “unproductive”. Although the instructions given by the various bodies (United Nations, World Health Organisation, and European Community, for example) send a clear call to the promotion of solidarity between generations and to active aging, with the continued participation of the elderly population in community life, what can be noted is that the elderly are being held responsible for the alleged *social unsustainability*, caused by the imbalance between the proportion of inactive

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² According to the Executive Summary “Aging in the 21st Century: A Celebration and a Challenge”, published by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in 2012, aging has been more rapid in developing countries. Moreover, due to the major inequalities between countries, life expectancy is even greater in developed countries compared to the developing countries: 78 in developed countries, and 68 in developing. It is estimated that between 2045 and 2050, these numbers will increase to 83 and 74, respectively.

³ Source: PORDATA – Portal de Dados Portugal Contemporâneo, accessed on 10/01/2015 at <http://www.pordata.pt/>.

⁴ According to PORDATA, in Portugal the emigration rate increased from 1.1% in 1998 to 4.9% in 2012. Accessed on 10/01/2015 at <http://www.pordata.pt/>.

individuals and active workers who, looked at from this angle, would bear the expenses, causing a generation conflict and, consequently, completely inverting the logic of social solidarity (Marques, 2011).

So, despite the rapid growth and the changeover from a numerical minority to a numerical majority, at least when compared to the young population, elderly individuals have been treated with indifference or prejudice, and even ruled out, in many everyday life situations and even in politics and public activities. Another negative factor is the insistence on the standardisation of a category that is, *par excellence*, heterogeneous and plural⁵. So, many policies and social answers often serve only a portion of the elderly population, leaving out most men and women aged 65 and over. The establishment and the imposition of lifestyle patterns and behaviours⁶, in turn, also seem to exclude, often holding responsible those who do not fit in by lack of conditions or even interest or will in the established patterns, as someone who *does not know or does not want to age well*⁷.

The aging issue as a social problem should therefore be addressed in context. We will reflect on old age in the contemporary world based on a brief historical retrospection about the construction of this category.

The “place” of old age in the contemporary world

Built on natural foundations (physical, chemical and biological), old age is now widely acknowledged as a socio-cultural category, as its representations, imaginary and meanings significantly influence the experiences in this stage of life, changing over time and space, within historical, geographical, social, economic, religious, and cultural contexts, specific and different from each other.

This acknowledgement, however, only occurred in the early 20th century with the institutionalisation and universalisation of retirement as a right of inactive workers – for the most part elderly – and the emergence of Geriatrics⁸ as a medical science specifically tailored to this population. The two phenomena, however, eventually helped to consolidate a social imaginary of old age associated to inactivity (and, consequently, to the lack of productivity) and to disease (Debert, 1999).

The organisation of contemporary societies relies very much on the classification of individuals according to their age⁹. For example, school age, minimum age for legal and criminal accountability, minimum age for driving a vehicle, retirement age, among other age boundaries.

Social life was divided into distinct periods marked by age difference in the mid-19th century, when the need was felt for a social organisation that would enable the establishment of duties, rights and prohibitions in a particular stage of life (Freitas Silva, 2008). Age therefore appears as “an explicit form of social control and a way of manipulating and regulating all areas of life” (Lima, 2010, p. 128-9).

Although it is still being used today, social organisation based on age classification was accompanied by some social changes. Industrial societies, for example, anchored in production relationships, eventually reshaped the cycle of life, establishing three major milestones: “... childhood and adolescence – a time for training; adulthood – a time for producing; and old age – a time for resting, non-working time” (Peixoto, 2000, p. 61). According to authors such as Moody (1993, *apud* Debert, 2004, p. 57) the outlines of the contemporary age limitations are more blurred and flowing because, in their opinion, Western contemporary economies, while highly capitalist, focus more on consumption rather than on productivity.

⁵ Because this is the social age category more likely to show differences, due to the very different individual pathways and life experiences, more visible in this stage of life than in others, such as childhood and adolescence, for example (Paúl, 2005), old age is still regarded as a unit by society in general and by public policies.

⁶ The imposition of active aging as a pattern to be followed by all old women and men can also carry the risk of homogenisation and exclusion of many of these individuals. As a free participation, spontaneous and citizen activity, it presupposes the possibility of choice and, as such, is a right and cannot be imposed as a duty.

⁷ This individual responsibility of the elderly for aging well or poorly is what Guita Grin Debert (2004) calls reprivatization of old age and aging. It can be considered as a reflection of a society in which the neo-liberal logic prevails.

⁸ The medical specialty in geriatrics appeared after Gerontology, in the early decades of the 20th century. Although they both gave incredible visibility to the phenomena of old age and aging, both sciences were largely responsible for the homogeneous view of old age and its individuals (Debert, 1999).

⁹ This process of categorisation according to age combined with the notion of expenditure with aging as a threat to economic and social stability and to the predominance of a youth culture was at the base of ageism against old people, that is, the prejudice in relation to old individuals (Marques, 2011, p. 36).

The construction of old age as a social category, the representations and imaginary it embodies, combined with this new demographical and economic pattern, that reflects directly on social life, reveal some inconsistencies when we address the issue of the position of the elderly in our societies.

However, while the universalisation of retirement allowed some kind of economic and social mobility to some of the elderly, who in some cases became the main providers in their families¹⁰, becoming one of the target audiences as potential consumers, on the other hand the crisis affecting the social security and health sectors in many countries –Portugal included –, often transforms old age into a period of hardship and needs.

Note also the rapid technological obsolescence, in particular in the information and communication requirements, in contemporary societies. This feature eventually affects the elderly directly. In the vast majority of cases, these individuals cannot keep up with the pace of changes taking place, and are themselves seen and treated as obsolete (Mendes, 2009). Although the importance of the workforce, typical of active individuals, has been replaced by the supremacy of knowledge, where, supposedly, the elderly would be at a vantage point, what we do see is that the previous logic, encouraged by industrialisation, the overvaluation of work as a promoter of economic capital and profit, continues to exist (Rosa, 2012).

So, the crystallised image of old age appears shrouded in prejudice and negativity. The fact that it is associated to deprivation, poverty, vulnerability, risks, obsolescence and proximity to death eventually drives people away from any of these signs in that stage of life. Although longevity is celebrated and desired, everyone darts from old age, and it eventually is described as a negative lifestyle as opposed to positive youth (Debert, 2004). Lima (2010) stresses this sad fact:

(...) As if we had not yet awoken to this new reality of older people – aged, with a longer life expectancy than a few decades ago and with successive generations showing both mental and physical gains – we continue to judge them based on beliefs and outdated prejudices. (...) (Lima, 2010, p. 129).

Although some work has been done to reverse this situation, contemporary Western societies have made some uncomfortable space for its elderly population. Its recent fast growing numbers is viewed as a problem, a real social nuisance. And old age thus continues to be stigmatised and excluded.

Cultural consumption in old age

When we think about supply and access of older people to cultural products and goods, what comes to mind is that despite the new demographical configurations, this population is very much ignored by agents, promoters and disseminators of culture.

This is mostly due to the imaginary built around the category of "old age", insistently viewed in the singular, and, consequently, to the invisibility and/or discomfort that Western capitalist societies assign to their old individuals.

There are still relatively few research works that associate old age with culture, that care about the over 65 age groups¹¹. Most research work and reports¹² on cultural practices define very broad age categories, beginning at 50 years old or more. Some authors¹³ whose studies focus on old age and aging, however, emphasise the importance of generations and of aging for establishing differences and characterizations more in line with the diversity in the real world.

Another issue addressed by researchers (Rosa, 1999; Lopes, 2000) is the limitation of the very category "age". As a relational category, its autonomy in relation to other variables, such as sex/gender, level of education, professional pathway, among others, is inevitable.

¹⁰ The crisis is a major contributor to this situation in a significant number of people in the employment sector, felt mostly by the young population in working age.

¹¹ This concern begins to appear in some marketing areas or in research on the profile of a certain consumer (Motta & Schewe, 1995). Research work on the elderly is still insignificant when compared to other age groups.

¹² Including the "Eurobarometer", a research instrument of the European Parliament, and the "Culture Statistics", published by Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE) based on the Portuguese Censuses.

¹³ Debert (2004), Peixoto (2007), Rosa (2012), among others.

The little use made of urban cultural facilities and of the so-called “cultural outings”¹⁴ (cinema, shows, clubs) by old people can be interpreted in many ways.

Rosa (1999), in a survey about leisure time of Portuguese pensioners, notes the prevalence of activities within the homes of respondents aged 65 or above, showing a low degree of sociability in this age group and a preference for activities that cannot always be described as “cultural”, for e.g., organising the house. Her interpretation of this reality shows, first and foremost, the low levels of education and the poor urbanity of most pensioners aged 65 or over, who, for the most part, live on the outskirts of cities or in more rural places. Most pensioners surveyed by Rosa (1999) used distance from their homes to the cinemas or shows, for e.g., as one of the main reasons for hardly attending or not attending at all. By analysing this data, the author noted that the so-called distance was not actually the reason, thus concluding that this “distance” could represent a lack of a sense of belonging, or of “not being invited” to attend a certain space.

In the same line of reasoning, Lopes (2000, p. 99) noted the “juvenility of cultural practices”, and found that they are imbued in a “juvenile model”. As Lopes (2000, p. 227) added, “the very social fabric adopts symbolic references common to the prevailing image of youth”. These references can be seen from the little research work on the practices, tastes, and cultural trends of the elderly – which should in fact subdivide old age into different age groups and establish relationships between other variables –, even advertising, targeted most insistently to a younger audience.

Moreover, we note that the elderly with more purchasing power begin to appear as the target of some cultural products¹⁵, in particular religious tourism¹⁶ and tourism for senior citizens, and some literary publications intended more specifically to an older audience. The lower classes and the older people¹⁷ are also excluded from accessing many cultural goods and products, especially those elected as “the high”¹⁸ cultural products. This exclusion is directly or indirectly felt by these people, who eventually refrain from going to or enjoying certain cultural spaces and products. The stereotypes and prejudices about older people are also obstacles to the access to culture. The emphasis on the overlapping of elements needed for human survival, such as food, health and hygiene conditions favourable for art and culture transforms the latter into a smaller and dispensable dimension. The taste and/or practice of elderly individuals for and cultural activities seen predominantly as being young activities transforms them into atypical, unusual, bizarre beings, attracting curiosity and even ridicule¹⁹.

The elderly as cultural producers

If the elderly still remain strangers to cultural contexts whilst consumers, this “strangeness” increases even more when we think about older people as producers, “makers” of culture and art.

Obviously, the protagonism of some elderly individuals in artistic, cultural, and creative contexts exists and there are many examples of it. Taking Portugal as reference, we can name a few: the fado singer Carlos do Carmo, who, at the age of 75 became the first Portuguese to ever win a Latin Grammy Award for his entire music achievements in the last ceremony in Las Vegas, United States, in November 2014; the writer António Lobo Antunes, 72 years

¹⁴ Although the younger population compared to older people attend more the cultural activities outside the home, “the cultural practices of the Portuguese people are, according to various studies, focused on the leisure time home-outdoors, especially marked by extremely high rates of television viewing.” (Lopes, 2000, p. 86).

¹⁵ Some market scholars see in this fringe of the population a “differentiated and special group of consumers” (Motta & Schewe, 1995, p. 24).

¹⁶ Dedication to religious activities was decisive for the pensioner women questioned by Rosa (1999): 47% of these women said it was a common practice.

¹⁷ As in Portugal a considerable portion of the aged population belongs to the economically disadvantaged bracket, these two categories are almost confused. While this “confusion” generates and feeds a series of stereotypes, does not happen in vain. According to the research carried out in 1998 by the Centre for Research and Studies on Sociology, of the Lisbon University Institute, under the coordination of Luís Capucha, “the elderly, in particular those marked by the lack of economic resources due to their low pensions, loneliness and family disintegration” would be more vulnerable as social categories (Rodrigues et al, 1999, p. 71).

¹⁸ According to Lopes (2000, p. 19), the opposition “elite culture/high culture/cultivated culture versus mass culture/low culture/common culture” became more clear in the 20th century.

¹⁹ There are many examples in “interesting” videos published online: the “grannies” capable of physical feats, dancing away; the “grandpas” attending rock festivals, and many others.

old, known worldwide for his unique literary style and the recipient of many prizes; and even the oldest filmmaker still active, Manoel de Oliveira, at the age of 106. Moving away from the male protagonists, we can also name the Portuguese actresses Eunice Muñoz, 86 years old, who only interrupted her career at the age of 83 when she fell during a play rehearsal, Margarida Carpinteiro, 71 years old, who recently starred in the very famous Portuguese television mini-series, “Os Filhos do Rock”, and Maria do Céu Guerra, also 71 years old, who starred in the recent film “Os Gatos não têm Vertigem”. All these men and women over 65 are seen as Portuguese cultural heritage. However, the fact that they are old does not seem to be sufficient reason for identifying them along with the other older people, because their image as artists outperforms their image as old men and old women²⁰. In a society that cultivates youth as a value (Debert, 2004), young age is in fact seen as a merit. So we are amazed by the youngest billionaire in the world, or the youngest athlete in history, for example.

Cultural, artistic and creative production apparently is not the *métier* of older people and its promotion and encouragement is not worth it. Arts and culture, associated with irreverence and creativity – characteristics not so suited to older people, as they are expected to be resilient, passive, philosophically wise and spiritually at peace –, are therefore almost the exclusive domain of young people. What we then have is the strengthening of stereotypes and stigmas as regards the elderly.

As opposed to this state of things, some one-off initiatives with some limitations in scope begin to emerge. At local level, note the project intended to foster intergenerational artistic production.

The “Social Crochet Program”, promoted by the City Council of Coimbra, appeared two years ago as an institutional partnership of “InProject”, which is an initiative of the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Coimbra, more specifically of the undergraduate degrees in Social Service and Masters in Psychology. The initial goal of the project was to raise awareness to an uncomfortable reality: the isolation of the elderly living in urban areas, in particular in the historical part of Coimbra. With two previous editions, the “Social Crochet Program” is organised by private accredited charitable institutions and consists in the production of artistic crochet items, which are exhibited in public sites across the city over one and a half months²¹. The organising institutions must arrange the accreditation by the City Council and provide the raw materials for the production of the items, usually donated by the relatives of those who work in and attend these institutions, and by the community in general. Moreover, they have to choose and inform the Council of the places where this activity will take place, and define the type of intervention to be made, and are responsible for the production of the items. The City Council is responsible for monitoring the entire project, including the accreditation of the participating institutions, ensuring the availability of venues for the activities, and provide the technical support for setting up and taking down the exhibition, and also disseminate the event, which will be included in the commemorations of the anniversary of the municipality.

The critical analysis of this initiative shows some issues that can be highlighted and/or questioned.

First of all, the positive attributes: 1. The mobilisation of the community in general for an activity intended to promote the visibility of the city and, consequently, of its citizens. The various possible forms of participation (donation of raw material, the manufacture of the items, help in setting up and taking down the exhibition) involve various kinds of people, men and women, children, youth, adults, and the elderly, people more or less economically, socially, and even physically vulnerable, in the same activity; 2. The availability of an urban public venue for the collective creation. Although the city venues are public, they do not always attract the sense of belonging of everyone alike. The artistic activity in urban venues, especially in spaces regarded as the most “noble” of the city, such as historical and heritage centres, or administrative centres, can promote this sense of belonging to all those who in some way are part of this project, and, indirectly, other city residents, when they enjoy and feel involved in

²⁰ In a recent work on the image of older people on the newspaper “Diário de Coimbra”, this finding is confirmed: old age was identified from pictures of anonymous people, and addressed using classification terms such as “grandpas/grandmas”, “old man/old woman” or “seniors”. The old aged men and women known to the public, such as actors/actresses or politicians, or with a certain social status, such as religious authorities, and teachers and doctors), were not identified as such (Veiga, 2014).

²¹ Information obtained from the local and national press on the report of the first edition of the Programme and the interview with one of the coordinators, the social worker of the City Council of Coimbra. Images of the project can be found at <https://pt-pt.facebook.com/coimbracartazcultural/posts/663872183642244> (Accessed on 08/01/2015).

the aesthetic of the activity²²; 3. The rehabilitation of a traditional artistic activity such as crochet, which in a way brings the older population – especially the women – together, as this type of craftwork used to be a common practice in the younger and older days of a significant part of the population²³. Typically, the urban interventions are carried out by young people, whose languages are eminently young, for example, graffiti, mask paintings, rhythms and street dancing, such as hip-hop and percussion, for example.

As questionable points of the project, we highlight: 1. The control of the public venues by the City Council, by imposing the registration of the institutions who wish to take part in this project. Although the Council's intention is to better distribute the spaces, this control minimises the "transgressing" effects of the intervention, eliminating the sense of belonging, which in a way is still only felt by those who are called and feel invited to attend and intervene in these spaces. This will also promote the existing inequalities between the status of "young" (the one who is expected and even allowed to transgress) and "old" (the actions and behaviour of whom is supposed to be restrained and controlled). 2. The need to be linked to a private charitable institution in order to participate in the activity. Although some shops and families joined the project (after registering with the City Council), individual and/or voluntary initiatives are not repressed nor facilitated. If during the exhibition people are attracted and motivated to participate spontaneously in the project, they can do so by producing work. This work, however, can only be exhibited in private spaces (façades and balconies of their own homes and apartments, or as props in their own cars, for example). We believe that this limits also the sense of intervention as an occupation and transformation of the public space. 3. The anonymity of the people who participate in the activity, especially those that actually produce their work to be exhibited²⁴. Although this anonymity may represent a broader inclusion of everyone who participate in the project, and does not actually emphasise a specific type of activity, in our opinion it still cripples the subjects, in particular the elderly, who are already so invisible and marginalized in their daily lives. The question is: would the signature and dissemination of these artists not qualify the status of the elderly in our communities and/or accentuate the relevance of diversity in collective productions and intergenerational relationships?

In any case, despite their limitations or issues that can appear, our communities still need projects to boost creative production as an activity that can be carried out by and for everyone, by regarding diversity as a social and cultural gain.

Final comments

Our main goal was to reflect on the relationship between old age and culture in contemporary times.

Although we are experiencing a phenomenon of worldwide dimensions hitherto unheard of, with changes in the demographical configurations in almost all countries, especially in developed countries, including Portugal, population aging has not yet brought the deserved visibility and recognition of the elderly population, which today is in numerical advantage in almost all countries.

Our old men and women still suffer from prejudice, stigmas and segregation from the lasting culture based on youth. This reflects on the cultural life of older people, both as consumers and as producers of culture.

Without realizing it, research – or the lack thereof – often end up crystallising this reality: the persisting homogeneous and unique view on "old age" as a uniform and independent category, without any relation with other categories and variables; the little or no concern about considering the elderly as potential, effective, and even differentiated consumers and producers of culture; the use of questionable terminologies, such as "leisure time", that can give rise to a weakened image of old age as "useless" or "inactive", on the one hand, or of culture as a mere "hobby", on the other hand, are examples that lead us to question the responsibilities of each and

²² In the two years when the project was being developed, there was only one problem with one of the monuments used in the intervention, called "Cruz de Celas", a cross that marks the centre of the Celas neighbourhood, in the parish of Santo António dos Olivais.

²³ The rehabilitation of this type of activity and the fact that it catapulted from being craftwork to a legitimate form of art is not new. The Portuguese plastic artist Joana Vasconcelos uses crochet and knitting in her creations. The Polish plastic artist Olek – Agata Oleksiak also uses the traditional crochet technique in her artistic productions. Sources: <http://www.joanavasconcelos.com/> and <http://olekny.com/home.php> (Accessed on 08/01/2015).

²⁴ This anonymity is part of much of the promotional material and even of the report, which contain only the participating institutions and its coordinators. Most of the images disclosed are from interventions and not of the individuals who were part of it.

everyone about the representations and imaginary built around the negativity of old age and culture and art as lesser dimensions, and not as part of what makes us humans.

We can conclude that old age as imposed by contemporaneity directs the cultural experiences and practices of old people. The lack of investment in the potential of the public audience, fruit of the negative image construed and reproduced around this population, is an economic, social and cultural problem. Although diverse and complex, life at old age has peculiarities that can and should be used and optimised in terms of supply of cultural goods and products for that audience.

An almost insignificant initiative to change this scenario is, for example, the “Social Crochet Program” of Coimbra. Although questionable in many aspects, it appears to be a small step to the creation of an intergenerational cultural production. This is how it should really be seen: as a small step, and not as the solution for a problem of a structural nature. But also not as a ready-made programme, free of criticism and assessment, and not as the only part that falls under the responsibility of the public authority. A first step presupposes advancements, subsequent steps. There still remains much to be done by public powers, institutions – public and private – and societies in general, whether in a collective or individual way.

We believe that it is necessary and pressing to change the distorted view of old age. Demographical transformations imply social and cultural changes that represent a civilisational progress towards a peaceful and respectful learning experience of difference as an integrating element, rather than excluding and segregating. This is the course we hope the world will take.

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