

LEISURE PRACTICES AND HEALTHY AGING: MYTH OR REALITY?

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ABSTRACT: The present study aimed to review the literature in the last ten years regarding leisure practices and healthy aging. This is a qualitative narrative literature review. Aiming at the promotion of healthy aging, leisure practices are important instruments in the promotion of health and quality of life of this population. It was observed that leisure, one of the social rights guaranteed by the Federal Constitution, by the National Health Care Policy for the Elderly and by the Statute of the Elderly, has not been implemented properly. There was a decrease in leisure practices carried out by the elderly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Concludes that leisure experiences in the elderly are one of the means to increase the quality of life during aging.

KEYWORDS: Leisure activities. Elderly. Health of the elderly.

PRÁTICAS DE LAZER E O ENVELHECIMENTO SAUDÁVEL: MITO OU REALIDADE?

RESUMO: O presente estudo teve como objetivo revisar a literatura nos últimos dez anos a respeito das práticas de lazer e o envelhecimento saudável. Trata-se de uma revisão de literatura narrativa de cunho qualitativo. Visando a promoção de um envelhecimento saudável, as práticas de lazer são instrumentos importantes na promoção de saúde e qualidade de vida dessa população. Observou-se que o lazer, um dos direitos sociais garantidos pela Constituição Federal, pela Política Nacional de

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Atenção à Saúde da Pessoa Idosa e pelo Estatuto do Idoso, não tem se efetivado de maneira adequada. Ocorreu diminuição das práticas de lazer realizadas por idosos durante a pandemia da COVID-19. Conclui-se que as experiências de lazer em idosos constituem um dos meios para aumentar a qualidade de vida durante o envelhecimento.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Atividade de lazer. Idoso. Saúde do idoso.

Introduction

Leisure can be considered a positive human manifestation that occurs in time and space and is not related to work, as it follows a fixed, continuous, and organizational pattern of social practices (Silvestre; Amaral, 2017). Thus, the way in which human beings perceive and experience free time is related to work and the existing culture, which leads them to recognize the importance of this practice in their daily lives. The routine of society, however, is increasingly obligatory and filled with production-service activities, which postpones necessary and pleasurable leisure practices and fosters confusion between work and leisure (Braga; Santos, 2019).

Several scientific studies show that participation in activities experienced in the context of leisure can have a positive effect not only on physical health and well-being (Løvlien; Mundal; Hall-Lord, 2017; Meyer; Rosenblum, 2016) but also on mental health (Mudrak *et al.*, 2016). Thus, leisure is increasingly recognized as a social right (Gomes; Isayama, 2015), especially for the elderly population.

The aging process is a circumstance directly linked to a person's quality of life, as it requires increasing attention to the preservation of functional capacity, independence, and autonomy in daily activities (Leite *et al.*, 2012). In this regard, it is evident that elderly individuals constitute a group that requires attention from healthcare professionals, aiming to promote healthy aging, with leisure activities serving as important tools for enhancing the health and quality of life of this population.

Demographic data from the United Nations (UN) show that the population aged 60 and older is growing by approximately 3% per year, which, on a global scale, represents a significant increase when compared to the population growth rate among younger age groups (United Nations, 2019).

In this context, the Theory of Successful Aging was created in 2014, based on the study *Aportaciones del ocio al envejecimiento satisfactorio*, organized by the University of Deusto - Bilbao and developed by Monteagudo, Amigo, and Valle (2014). According to this theory, leisure has been chosen as a subjective alternative for achieving competent and satisfying aging. Therefore, the study recognized the phenomenon of aging as a relevant issue, serving as a crucial field for political, economic, and social debates (Sousa; Baquit; Ferreira, 2019).

Healthy aging is a continuous process of optimizing functional ability and opportunities to maintain and improve physical and mental health, promoting independence and quality of life throughout life (WHO, 2020a). The decade of healthy aging (2021–2030) provides an opportunity to bring together governments, civil society, international organizations, professionals, academia, media, and the private sector for ten years of catalytic and collaborative action to improve the lives of older adults, their families, and the communities in which they live (WHO, 2020b).

Based on the presented context, this study aims to review the literature from the past ten years regarding leisure practices and healthy aging.

Methodology

This study is a narrative literature review with a qualitative approach. According to Rother (2007), narrative review articles are comprehensive publications suitable for describing and discussing the development or the “state of the art” of a given topic from

a theoretical or contextual perspective. They play an important role in continuing education because they allow readers to acquire and update their knowledge of a particular subject in a short period.

Furthermore, Pereira *et al.* (2018) demonstrated that qualitative research methods are considered those in which the researcher's interpretation and opinions about the phenomenon under study are fundamental. This review was initially conducted through a bibliographic search for articles in Portuguese and English, available on the electronic portal PubMed, in the Google Scholar repository, and in the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), with a preference for scientific articles published in the last ten years in English, Portuguese, and Spanish. The following Health Sciences Descriptors (DeCS) were used to formulate the search strategy: “Leisure Activities,” “Community and Leisure Centers,” “Elderly,” and “Elderly Health,” in combination with the Boolean operators “AND” and “OR.”

The selection of studies was based on the reading of titles and abstracts, with inclusion criteria focusing on the analysis of works relevant to the topic, including clinical studies, case reports, literature reviews, as well as book chapters, monographs, theses, and dissertations obtained from grey literature. Studies involving animals, in vitro studies, laboratory studies, and other research outside the scope of the topic were excluded. After identifying the relevant texts, a thorough reading and critical analysis of the included articles were conducted to relate the selected literature to the proposed topic.

Results and Discussion

Leisure and leisure practices intertwine with the emphasis on the formulation of their own concepts. Thus, leisure practices are perceived as having distinct characteristics that are viewed collectively because they are part of daily life and are

often linked to other aspects that contribute to improving human quality of life (Gomes et al., 2017).

Although leisure practices are already considered among the factors that influence the perception of quality of life (Zhang et al., 2017), determining the reasons for spending free time is quite challenging. This complexity arises from the fact that leisure can take on different meanings and personal concepts (Rechter; Sverdlik, 2016) and, therefore, depends on various elements related to each individual's psychological framework, acquiring social values.

Leisure is often understood as a personal and complex experience of free choice, satisfaction, and autotelic nature (having an end in itself), yet it has both individual and social effects. In short, leisure practices are a type of subjective experience with multiple meanings, where the main protagonist (primary reference) is the individual. Thus, the quality of the experience determines whether leisure was truly experienced in the realm of freedom (Cuenca; Monteagudo; Bayón, 2014). In the study by Braga and Santos (2019), the time spent on leisure practices was associated with personal satisfaction, as participants were invited to engage in activities that brought them pleasure without being forced. It was also mentioned that these practices promoted physical and mental rest, with any exercise done outside of study and/or work hours. Therefore, these activities are enjoyable, moments of leisure, free from obligations.

From this perspective, leisure practices have gained greater visibility in recent debates across different fields of knowledge, such as health and interdisciplinary studies, with several approaches ranging from economic issues related to human development processes (Dalgaard; Strulik, 2017) to those concerning quality of life and well-being (Zhang et al., 2017).

The discussion of leisure practices within health-related structures has been slowly growing in Brazil, driven by a shifting perspective that includes guidelines and analyses emphasizing their importance for the individual. Even though leisure and health take on different structures and forms depending on the perspective, they are both present and necessary for the development of activities, improving their efficiency. Despite the fact that society often views leisure practices as idle and commonplace activities with a superficial understanding of their significance, those who generally engage in them are individuals with higher economic status. However, everyone can participate in some form of leisure, such as watching a movie, listening to music, lying down somewhere, among other activities (Dias et al., 2017).

Statistical data has shown that people are living longer, and projections indicate that life expectancy will continue to rise (IBGE, 2019). Over the years, aging in Brazil has sparked numerous discussions and reoriented perspectives (Campos; Monteiro; Brisola, 2021). It is essential to pay attention to the needs of this social group, which has various specificities, as it is precisely in this phase of aging that many "victories" occur, along with numerous "losses" (Ferreira, 2017), including the need for leisure activities specifically designed for this age group.

Thus, the reflection covers topics such as the quality of life of the elderly, the nuances of longevity, special national policies for this phase of life, and the social reintegration of the elderly individual. This extensive list of aspects includes health, leisure, safety, livelihood, accessibility, basic needs, and many other related topics (Campos; Monteiro; Brisola, 2021).

Based on the observation of the passage of time and the development of public health policies, the primary focus in contemporary society is on health promotion and improving the quality of life of the population, including the elderly, so that they remain

socially active and are not perceived as a reclusive group within society as a whole (Oliveira *et al.*, 2013).

In this context, one of the factors that currently most affects the quality of life and human development of older adults is retirement. Despite this, many remain in the workforce (formally or informally) due to financial necessity, thereby reducing the free time they could otherwise dedicate to leisure activities. This affects their quality of life during the aging process and directly threatens human development (Campos; Monteiro; Brisola, 2021).

Brazil has several legal frameworks concerning the elderly population, including the Federal Constitution (1988) (Brazil, 2003), the National Elderly Policy (Brazil, 1994), the Elderly Statute (Brazil, 2003), the National Policy for Elderly Health Care (Brazil, 2006), and the National Policy on Integrative and Complementary Practices (PNPIC) (Brazil, 2006). However, leisure, as one of the social rights guaranteed by the Federal Constitution (1988), is often overlooked, as it is frequently regarded as secondary to physical and mental health (Brazil, 2003).

One of the guidelines of Federal Law No. 8.842, enacted in 1994, which establishes the National Elderly Policy, is to provide alternative forms of participation, work, and social interaction for the elderly, allowing them to integrate with other generations. This law states that public institutions have a duty to encourage and create leisure, sports, and exercise programs that improve the quality of life of older adults and stimulate their participation in social life (Brazil, 1994). Additionally, according to Article 20 of the Elderly Statute, older adults have the right to education, culture, sports, leisure, entertainment, performances, products, and services that respect their specific needs. Elderly individuals are also entitled to a minimum 50% discount on tickets for art, cultural, sports, and leisure events (Brazil, 2003).

Regarding Integrative and Complementary Health Practices, which are represented by the terms traditional medicine and complementary and alternative medicine within the World Health Organization, it has been recommended that its member states develop policies aimed at integrating these practices into formal healthcare systems (Brazil, 2006). The National Policy on Integrative and Complementary Practices (PNPIC) currently includes 29 practices, including Music Therapy (Brazil, 2015). Coulton *et al.* (2015), whose purpose was to assess the quality of life, depression, and anxiety in elderly individuals participating in a singing group, found that the community singing group had a significant effect on the mental health-related quality of life of older adults. Therefore, music provided therapeutic benefits to this population. Regarding the influence of music on cognitive and psychological aspects of elderly individuals, Hars *et al.* (2014) aimed to evaluate cognition and mood in older adults through a music-based multitasking training program using neuropsychological tests. They observed improvements in cognitive function and reductions in anxiety in the intervention group compared to the control group.

Regarding the association between the elderly age group and leisure practices, Finkel *et al.* (2016), in a 17-year longitudinal study following older adults, evaluated leisure activities in three domains (physical, social, and cognitive/sedentary activities). They found that even when controlling for gender, education, depression, physical health, and marital status, participation in physical and social activities decreased with age. On the other hand, an increase in cognitive engagement/sedentary activities was also observed among participants.

It is still evident that free time has taken on an important role in the pursuit of improved quality of life. Therefore, sports as a form of leisure is a tool that directly impacts quality of life, as it is not only related to free time but also to personal, social,

and physical development, health promotion, and physical exercise. Leisure practices are not just an ideal situation but also a necessity. Through such activities, individuals improve not only their physical health but also their mental health (Araújo; Quixabeira; Abrão, 2022).

In the context of physical activity, it is inferred that it is linked to numerous aspects, including the pursuit of better health conditions or maintaining existing health, a means of distraction, socialization with others, concern for physical appearance, among others. These factors contribute to improving the quality of life and functional independence of older adults, as well as promoting well-being and happiness (Ferreira; Dietrich; Pedro, 2015), attracting significant interest, particularly among the elderly (Monteiro; Neri; Ceolim, 2014).

An example of these practices is dance, which has increasingly been explored and shown to have therapeutic potential, as evidenced by satisfactory results in scientific studies. These results, analyzed through physiological and neurological variables, are observed in the studies by Antunes and collaborators (2018), who reported that dance as an activity promotes a better perception of strength, mobility, joy, and self-confidence in elderly people, enhancing and promoting socialization. According to a study developed by Souza and Metzner (2013), in addition to the sense of well-being and joy, dance offers a range of physical and psychological benefits, such as improvement in motor coordination, breathing, and cardiovascular endurance. Dance strengthens emotional well-being and, besides fostering group interaction, also offers the possibility of improving personal relationships. Therefore, dance plays a role as a physical activity that cares for both the body and the mind of the elderly, as well as their social relationships and self-esteem (Fontoura *et al.*, 2016).

In this perspective, Ferreira (2017) argued that the meanings of leisure are fundamentally and strongly related to health. The preference for certain experiences or those conducted some time ago falls under the category of physical leisure interests, among which most elderly participants mentioned walking and water aerobics. Regarding the importance of these practices in the lives of this social group, it was also observed that, in some aspects, there is concern with the body and health.

It should be stressed that, as part of a lifestyle, movement in leisure plays a fundamental role in maintaining health during social distancing and the pandemic (Matias et al., 2020). Adopting this behavior during a pandemic can bring many benefits, such as reducing the severity of COVID-19 infections and increasing the effectiveness of the treatment and prevention of non-communicable chronic diseases that increase the risk of death in infected individuals due to the coronavirus; the practical importance of providing mental health benefits, helping people cope with stress, anxiety, and preventing potential mental health issues, in addition to other widely proven benefits (Sallis; Pratt, 2020).

In light of the above, it becomes clear that the pandemic affected the dynamics of leisure around the world. The decrease in social interaction due to restrictions, the inability to use public spaces, the closure of gyms, clubs, parks, and institutions related to tourism, made it impossible for different social groups to enjoy their free time, resulting in a significant impact on people's health and well-being (Roberts, 2020).

Furthermore, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic state combined with the inherent situation of social isolation, the home has been referred to as one of the main leisure resources for the population that has adhered to quarantine. At home, the internet and technological means have been used in choosing possible activities carried out in the context of leisure. However, it must be acknowledged that access to these

technologies and devices for the proper functioning of the internet is a privilege for a few, as authorities do not guarantee these devices and products, which represent an additional cost for the population (Silva; Rigoni; Silva, 2021).

On the other hand, considering the COVID-19 pandemic and the alternatives related to leisure practices during this period, Acioli (2020) emphasized through his study that, according to a survey by the Brazilian Bicycle Sector Association, conducted with 40 associated companies, there was a 118% increase in bicycle sales between June 15, 2019, and July 15, 2020. In the context of leisure practices, especially referring to physical activity, walking gained prominence, as it does not require special equipment or training, only the ability to walk.

Thus, even spaces designed for the specific needs of elderly people should consider physical aspects, as well as spaces that address subjective needs, such as their memories. In this perspective, three aspects should be considered when thinking about leisure spaces for the elderly: the formal, the social, and the imaginative (Giraldi, 2014).

It is important to clarify that although global aging is a trend, there are still public policies for elderly leisure that lack epistemological foundation and effectiveness. From this point of view, free time as a means of social interaction and improvement of quality of life must be adapted to the demands and characteristics of this population (Sousa; Baquit; Ferreira, 2019).

The number of elderly people is increasing exponentially, and many find themselves in complex and uncertain socioeconomic situations. Only timely interventions will allow for increased contributions from this age group to social development and prevent population aging from becoming a crisis for the healthcare and social assistance systems of the Americas (Who, 2020a).

A decade of global action on healthy aging is urgently needed. There are already more than one billion people worldwide aged 60 or older, most of them in low- and middle-income countries. Many of these people do not even have access to the basic resources necessary for a full and dignified life, and others face numerous obstacles that prevent them from fully participating in society (Who, 2020b). The leisure of the elderly is guaranteed by law, but the assurance of this right has not been effectively implemented. Therefore, it is necessary to implement and adjust existing public leisure policies, emphasizing their social right, so that the activity aligns with the reality of the elderly.

Scientific production on the leisure perspective for elderly people is still limited, with few references that offer more in-depth discussions, both directly and indirectly related to national policies aimed at the elderly. Furthermore, the preference for other topics over the elderly age group has also occurred in academia. It is evident that new primary studies must be conducted addressing the leisure practices of the elderly, delving into their health problems in the context of leisure. This is essential to strengthen the scientific literature on the subject, in addition to suggesting that one way to address the physical and mental complications of aging is to expand the availability of leisure time and the quality of experiences.

Final Considerations

Leisure activities are important for health and socialization, becoming a pathway to healthy aging. The leisure of the elderly is guaranteed by law, but the assurance of this right has not been effectively implemented. According to the material consulted, there was a decrease in leisure activities carried out by older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. Leisure experiences constitute one of the means to improve health

promotion and increase quality of life during aging, promoting numerous cognitive and emotional benefits for this age group.

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