The Relationship Between Care and Aging: Between Survival and Social Devaluation

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Objectives: To analyze and characterize the care of poverty-stricken elderly as an avenue for their social devaluation

Methodology: Multi-centric qualitative study. The informants were 92 poverty-stricken elderly in both rural and urban areas from the Mexican states of Jalisco, Guanajuato, Chiapas and Veracruz. They were interviewed and recorded on two occasions at home in reference to the issue of personal care. Further analysis of the transcripts focused on identifying the arguments made by respondents about the reasons and circumstances in which such care should be given to the elderly.

Results: Care is valued by the respondents as an inevitable event that must be dispensed with aging and is appreciated as a beneficial and desirable resource for the survival of the elderly; but at the same time it is also considered an undesirable event as it represents a mechanism that makes visible their dependent status and devalues their capacity as full citizens. According to the imagery of the interviewees, there are two types of elders: one is the person devalued by the fact that is receiving care and for that reason has lost his/her autonomy; the other is the elder who cares for their own self and is independent, and not devalued. Thus, elderly respondents identified themselves as not needing nursing care, which according to the author is a strategy to avoid being categorized by the interviewer as dependents and thus undervalued.

Conclusions: The social devaluation of a person because they are dependent on care because of their age is a remarkable paradox. On the one hand, care appears as an indispensable social resource for the survival of individuals in need of care, but it also becomes an avenue for social devaluation by revealing a status characterized by loss of autonomy and the capacity care for themselves.