

Family Integrity: Pathways of Elderly Poor Persons¹

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Abstract: Constructing family integrity is a normal developmental challenge for older people, which is influenced by the family and social systems. This study examined the life trajectories of older people who lived in poverty throughout their lives and how they evolve towards family integrity or family disconnection. A semi-structured interview on family integrity was administered to 12 participants aged over 64 years old (six of each sex), three in each group were considered as living family integrity situation or disconnection. The main findings suggested that some common circumstances of poverty in people's lives namely: family conflict and/or distance, domestic violence, (e)migration, multiple severe chronic diseases, informal work, low income, may prevent family integrity and promote family disconnection/alienation. However, participants who were able to reframe negative events as positive tended to achieve family integrity.

Keywords: aging, family relations, human development, poverty

Integridade Familiar: Especificidades em Idosos Pobres

Resumo: A construção da integridade familiar constitui um desafio desenvolvimental normativo para o idoso, influenciado por fatores dos sistemas familiar e social. Este estudo teve por objetivo analisar as trajetórias de vida de pessoas idosas que viveram pobres ao longo da vida e como elas influenciaram as suas rotas no sentido da integridade ou da desconexão familiar. Foi aplicada uma entrevista semiestruturada, centrada na integridade familiar, a 12 participantes com mais de 64 anos (seis de cada sexo), sendo que três em cada grupo foram considerados como vivendo situação de integridade ou desconexão familiar. Os principais resultados sugerem que algumas circunstâncias comuns na vida de famílias pobres, tais como: conflito e/ou distância familiar, violência doméstica e/migração, múltiplas doenças crônicas severas, emprego temporário e baixos rendimentos, podem dificultar a conquista da integridade familiar e promover a desconexão familiar. Contudo, os participantes que reenquadraram os acontecimentos negativos de forma positiva evoluíram no sentido da integridade familiar.

Palavras-chave: envelhecimento, relações familiares, desenvolvimento humano, pobreza

Integridad Familiar en la Vejez: Características de los Ancianos Pobres

Resumen: El establecimiento de la integridad familiar constituye un desafío para el desarrollo integral del anciano, además está fuertemente influenciado por factores del sistema familiar y sociales. Este estudio analiza las trayectorias de vida de personas ancianas que vivieron en la pobreza a lo largo de sus vidas y como estas se vieron influenciadas en el sentido de la integridad o desconexión familiar. Fue aplicada una entrevista enfocada en la unidad familiar a 12 participantes con más de 64 años (seis de cada sexo), tres en cada grupo fueron considerados como situación de integridad familiar o desconexión. Los principales resultados sugieren que existen algunas circunstancias comunes en la vida de familias pobres tales como: conflicto y/o distancia familiar, violencia doméstica, emigración/inmigración, múltiples enfermedades crónicas severas, empleos temporales y bajos rendimientos que pueden dificultar la conquista de la integridad familiar y promover la desunión familiar. Sin embargo, los participantes que superaron los acontecimientos negativos de forma positiva (circunstancias que permiten el desarrollo) siendo evaluados enfocados a la unidad familiar.

Palabras clave: envejecimiento, relaciones familiares, desarrollo humano, pobreza

Reviewing and integrating life events are key tasks in the development of the aging process (Erikson, 1950; Lewis & Butler, 1974; Walsh, 2005) because they extend the memories of elderly individuals and facilitate acknowledgment of life and death. Inspired by the concept of ego integrity (Erik Erikson), King and Wynne (2004) present “family integrity” as a normal developmental challenge for elderly individuals, influenced by factors in the family system. The issue of

ego integrity gains ascendancy in old age as the individual is faced with changes in social roles, physical vulnerability, and losses. The process of constructing integrity begins during earlier stages but it can only be concluded in old age, which is a period of “great generativity” (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986). At this point, the elderly individual assumes the role of “guardian of meanings” by integrating traditions from the past and providing family and social connections among the past, present, and future (Vaillant, 2002). Family integrity involves processes at different levels (King & Wynne). At the individual level, it is based on the individual's experience of being satisfied or dissatisfied with the family context. The family level is centered on family competencies, which facilitate a sense of belonging and bonding, while the social level involves the transmission of values and rituals, which in turn, impacts the other levels.

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An individual's ability to achieve family integrity is influenced by three competencies in the family system (King & Wynne): transformation of family relations to respond to challenges presented to the family members' cycles of life; solution or acknowledgement of losses and conflicts; and creation of meaning and a legacy through sharing family histories and rituals. The authors distinguish three potential elements in this process: (a) *integrity* - which refers to a positive outcome, in which the elderly individual achieves a sense of connection, meaning and continuity in the multi-generational family; (b) *disconnection* -describes families with little communication, which leads to isolation; (c) and *alienation* - refers to an absence of family identity. King and Wynne (2004) and Sousa, Silva, Marques and Santos (2009) stress the need to study family integrity in diverse contexts, especially because some social and cultural groups may experience more difficulty in constructing meaningful connections within multi-generational families. Hence, this study presents an analysis of the life trajectory of poor people in the course of their lives and shows how they progressed towards integrity or disconnection/alienation (these two processes are not distinguished in this study). Poor people in this study are considered to be among the working class with a low educational level and economic instability, which makes these individuals even more vulnerable (Kliman & Madsen, 2005).

The Construction of Family Integrity versus Family Disconnection/Alienation

Sousa et al. (2009) deepened the studies of King and Wynne (2004), analyzing the process involved in the construction of family integrity. Family integrity is described as a sense of peace and satisfaction with family relationships based on: acknowledgment and/or satisfaction with the past, present and future family relationships; emotional proximity with members of the multi-generational family, even if geographically distant and/or if conflicts were experienced. Elderly individuals present, during the process of integrity construction, a readjusted identity supported on a philosophy of life that reflects wisdom and permits one to acknowledge him/herself and others. Additionally, these individuals have projects of life for the near future that enable them to reorganize their sense of value and usefulness (Sousa et al., 2009).

Family disconnection/alienation, in turn, is described as a sense of dissatisfaction with family relationships and with personal life. Family relationships are characterized by emotional estrangement: lack of interest, apathy, and lack of availability. These individuals have an identity in the process of readjustment, showing difficulty accepting themselves and others without a positive philosophy of life, i.e., integration of life events is hindered. Their projects of life are centered on an unresolved past, making it difficult for them to dedicate themselves to the present or future, leading to a sense that they lack utility (Sousa et al., 2009).

Transforming Family Relationships

The construction of family integrity involves the development of a sense of mutuality (keeping a commitment over the long term with family relationships and reinventing as they face transitions in the life cycle) and filial maturity (adult children become responsible for helping and caring for elderly parents while the parents reciprocally become capable of accepting help). In this context, family relationships are continuous and progress with maturity. This transformation depends on the family's ability to renegotiate inter-generational hierarchies of power and develop adult-adult relationships between elderly parents and adult children. Family disconnection/alienation, on the other hand, is characterized by a lack of mutuality and filial maturity (i.e., the elderly individual supports the children and wants to be supported by them, but refuses to ask for help because it raises feelings of inferiority). That is, the family members become attached to old roles and relationship patterns, no longer appropriate to the needs of the life cycle, promoting conflict and ruptures in relationships, which lead to the disruption and weakening of bonds (Sousa et al.).

Solving/Acknowledging Conflicts and Losses

The construction of family integrity implies elderly individuals should: accept or resolve conflicts from the past and present, develop the meaning of "mission accomplished" with family members and resolve resentment. Elderly individuals who are on the path to integrity report unpleasant (past and/or present) events but describe them as irrelevant ("little things" or "unimportant events"). The path toward disconnection is characterized by denial, avoidance of confrontation, and a lack of integrating past experiences. In this case, elderly individuals report a sense of "unfinished tasks" with family members (there are unresolved issues), do not accept conflict (feel anxious) and have resentment (feelings of guilt and regret for past mistakes) (King & Wynne, 2004; Sousa et al., 2009).

Creating Meaning and Legacy

Family integrity involves the coherent integration of one's life history. In general, the elderly individual keeps a sense of belonging in relation to their multi-generational family through the report of family histories, shared interests and values, and involvement in activities and family traditions. This process favors younger generations because younger family members inherit the family legacy, which helps them in their own process of construction and adjustment of identity. Elderly individuals experiencing this process show satisfaction with their transmitted legacy, feeling that they have done their duty, have contributed to future generations, and know they are respected and have a meaningful role in family life. Family disconnection, on the other

hand, is characterized by a sense of having no one to whom a legacy can be passed or having no one who values the transmission of a legacy. Elderly individuals in this situation become frustrated and feel unappreciated because their legacy is neither received nor desired; they do not feel respected or believe they have a meaningful role within the family (King & Wynne, 2004; Sousa et al., 2009).

Processes Associated with the Construction of Family Integrity

The construction of family integrity seems to be anchored in three interrelated processes developed by the individual with the family's support: (a) forgiveness (oneself and another), which involves less negative and more positive responses; (b) acknowledgment (positive attitude in relation to oneself and others); (c) valorization (sense of having lived a meaningful life) (Sousa et al.).

Economic resources and social status influence family responses and relevant events because they determine choices and resources available to deal with both expected and unexpected challenges found in family life (Kliman & Madsen, 2005). Being poor does not inevitably mean to be dysfunctional, though poverty is a factor that makes people and families more vulnerable (Hines, 1989). Aspects such as health problems, economic deprivation, and limited access to resources may interact and lead the family/individuals to experience problematic patterns.

Families or individuals living in poverty for long periods tend to experience difficulties in various spheres (Sousa, 2005): education (low academic performance); employment (unemployment, temporary or informal jobs); housing (poor living conditions, lack of basic facilities, overcrowding); family relationships (conflicts, estrangement, and violence); social relationships (conflicts, loneliness, exclusion); income (low or limited, indebtedness);

health (impairment, chronic diseases, alcoholism, drug abuse). This network of problems is translated as a life characterized by: (a) multiple and long-term challenges (such as violence or lack of resources); (b) chronic crises that symbolize family suffering (there is always some problem occurring); (c) alienation that involves a lack of trust and/or empathy; (d) learned incapacity and low self-esteem that reflects an individual's inability to identify their own abilities and is translated as passivity that results from feelings of a lack of self-value (Kagan & Schlosberg, 1989; Sousa, Ribeiro, & Rodrigues, 2007; Summers, McMann, & Fuger, 1997). Nonetheless, these families are also resilient because they survive amidst very difficult conditions and manage to adapt (Madsen, 1999). This study presents aspects of the life trajectory of poor elderly individuals, aiming to identify the influence of poverty in the process of constructing family integration *versus* the process of family disconnection/alienation.

Method

Participants

The sample comprises 12 participants of low social class aged between 65 years and 89 years old (Table 1): six women and six men. Inclusion criteria were: (a) being older than 64 years old, (b) residing in the community, (c) belonging to a low social class, (d) presenting coherent speech, oriented in space and time. The sample should include 12 individuals (six men and six women; three of each group should be experiencing family integrity and three experiencing family disconnection/alienation). The choice of this number is due to the researchers' previous experience in the investigation of this topic with the same instruments, which indicates that data saturation is reached with a sample of 10 participants.

Table 1
Socio-demographic Characteristics Concerning the Sample's Integration/Disconnection

Participant*	Gender	Age (years)	Academic background	Marital status	Check-list	Classification**
(A)na	Female	86	No education	Widowed	4	Disconnection
(B)erta	Female	89	No education	Widowed	5	Disconnection
(C)ristina	Female	85	No education	Single	4	Disconnection
(D)aniel	Male	65	Primary education	Divorced	4	Disconnection
(E)rnesto	Male	71	Primary education	Widowed	4	Disconnection
(F)ernando	Male	78	Primary education	Widowed	5	Disconnection
(G)omes	Male	73	Primary education	Widowed	0	Integrity
(H)enrique	Male	73	Primary education	Married	0	Integrity
(I)smael	Male	80	Primary education	Married	0	Integrity
(J)oana	Female	78	Primary education	Widowed	0	Integrity
(L)urdes	Female	79	Primary education	Widowed	0	Integrity
(M)aria	Female	79	Primary education	Single	1	Integrity

Note. *All names are fictitious. ** Obtained after content analysis of the interviews.

Instruments

The instrument included semi-structured interviews concerning the process of constructing family integrity (*versus* disconnection/alienation) (King & Wynne, 2004; Sousa et al., 2009). To ensure the organization of the participants' selection (six men and six women: three women and three men experiencing family integration and three women and three men experiencing family disconnection/alienation), the professionals were asked to fill in a questionnaire with data (no identification was required) concerning elderly individuals whom they knew and with whom they were regularly in contact. The questionnaire addressed: (a) socio-demographic data (age, gender, and family constitution); (b) assessment of the individual (whether the individual had a coherent speech and was oriented in terms of time and space); (c) socioeconomic condition (Graffar index along with one question: was the individual poor for his/her entire life?); (d) assessment of the family integrity process (checklist). The professionals also identified the participants who met the inclusion criteria (they had access to the participants' socio-demographic data, assessment of their mental status, and space-time orientation).

The Graffar Index (Amaro, 1990) is an international classification that uses five criteria (academic degrees, profession, income, family composition, and characteristics of the neighborhood) to define socioeconomic class. The sum of the scores obtained in the five criteria indicates the individual's class. People classified as 'low class' obtained from 22 to 25 points.

A checklist based on prior studies was organized to obtain an indicator of the construction of family integrity (King & Wynne, 2004; Sousa et al., 2009). The checklist contained five questions: (1) Is this person's conversation centered on the past? (2) Does this individual frequently repeat an apparently unimportant item of history or event? (3) Does this individual have a tendency to be arrogant and/or depreciate others? (4) Does this individual blame another for conflicts? (5) Is this individual bored? Each question is scored either 1 (yes) or 0 (no). Higher scores suggest disconnection. Participants with extreme scores were selected: 1-2 (suggests integrity) and 4-5 (indicates disconnection/alienation). The checklist was used only as an indicator to select the participants because the classification was completed only after the interviews were analyzed.

Procedure

Data Collection. The participants were identified in institutions in the community. Permission to conduct the study was asked from all four institutions. We also asked for a professional in the institution to mediate the contact between the researchers and potential participants. All the institutions authorized the study. The indicated professionals (female social workers) were first contacted by the primary author, who clarified the study's objective and the participants' inclusion criteria. The social workers selected the potential

participants, filled in the questionnaire, and provided information to the researchers that ensured that inclusion criteria and the composition of the sample were met. Then the researchers informed the professionals of those who met the inclusion criteria. The social workers approached the participants, explained the study's objectives, how they would collaborate, and asked their permission for the researchers to contact them. All the individuals agreed to collaborate and the first author scheduled a meeting in which the study's objectives, collaboration required, and reasons why they were chosen, were explained. Confidentiality and anonymity was ensured. All the individuals consented and signed free and informed consent forms. Data collection was then initiated.

Data Analysis. Interviews, which took from 24 to 53 minutes, were recorded and transcribed to be submitted to content analysis by two independent judges (the authors) using the N-vivo 7 software.

The judges started by classifying the participants as either on the path towards family integrity or moving towards family disconnection/alienation, using the following procedure: they independently read the interviews and classified the participants either as experiencing family integrity or disconnection/alienation using King and Wynne (2004) and Sousa et. al. (2009) as their theoretical framework. Then, the researchers met to compare their classifications and full agreement was reached.

The next phase of analysis was designed to identify the events related to a life of poverty of the participants, which influenced the construction of family integrity *versus* disconnection/alienation. We considered the literature concerning poor families (Sousa, 2005), identifying events mentioned by the participants in the areas: health, employment, income, social and family relationships, education, and housing. The process was similar to the previous one: each judge explored the interviews independently, seeking the mentioned life events. Afterwards, the researchers met and, through a process of successive refinement, the researchers reached four spheres mentioned by the participants: family relations; health, employment, and income (Table 2).

Finally, the judges analyzed each of these life events and how they influenced the construction of family integrity *versus* family disconnection/alienation, based on the domains defined by King and Wynne (2004) and deepened by Sousa et al. (2009). Again, each judge worked on an individual analysis and then they all met again to compare the reconstitution of the process and refine it until reaching a consensus.

Ethical Considerations

There are no ethics committees in this field in Portugal (only in the health field). For this reason, we followed the ethical guidelines adapted from The Declaration of Helsinki. The number of 12 individuals as participants in the study was appropriate because it corresponded to data saturation (no new properties or dimensions emerged and analysis accounted for a great part of potential variability).

Results

Four areas were mentioned by the participants as having influenced the construction of family integrity *versus* family disconnection/alienation: family relations, health, employment, and income (Table 2).

Table 2
Areas of Life Influencing Family Integrity

Participants	Family relationships		Health	Job	Low income
	Conflicts	Violence E/migration			
Ana*	X		X		X
Berta*	X			X	X
Cristina*	X		X		X
Daniel*	X			X	X
Ernesto*	X				X
Fernando*	X		X	X	
Gomes**			X	X	
Henrique**	X		X	X	
Ismael**					
Joana**	X		X	X	
Lurdes**	X		X	X	
Maria**	X		X	X	

Note. * Disconnection/family alienation; ** Family integration

Family Relations: Conflicts and/or Estrangement

Five participants reported family conflicts: four experiencing family disconnection (Berta, Cristina, Daniel and Ernesto) and one individual experiencing family integrity (Maria). Those experiencing disconnection report estrangement between parents (the participants themselves) and children and/or other family members, who no longer visited them or participate in family events; guilt was assigned to the other party or parties. For instance, Daniel feels sad about his family relationships because he has not seen his son in years (“he does not visit his father”); he believes his son should become interested in being with his father (“he knows where I live and never comes to visit”). He notes “he struggled a lot to raise his son” because he had to face many economic hardships. He highlights the social obligation of children to care for, visit, and show interest in their elderly parents. Daniel would like to have a good relationship with his son, but he does not consider it to be feasible since his son “never shows up”. He puts the responsibility to solve the conflict on the other party (the son), promoting a “mutual disagreement” that results in dissatisfaction with family relationships. Daniel is classified as experiencing family disconnection, though, it seems he tries to cope with the estrangement with his son through a renewed philosophy of life: “living one day at a time”, valuing what he has of good in life (“I’m healthy”) and investing in relationships with his daughter and friends (“I feel good with my friends”).

Maria, classified as experiencing family integrity, reports conflicts with her stepmother’s son, who she considers to be a “true brother: he was raised with me”. The relationship was broken when he said: “you’re not my family”. Maria manages this rupture through her philosophy of life (apparent in expressions such as “I don’t overvalue this situation, I don’t care”), which helps her not to focus on the relationship and forgive her “brother”, so this event does not overflow into other aspects of her life nor mark all her experiences (“I’m still happy”).

Family Relationships: Domestic Violence

Two participants reported domestic violence. Both individuals were classified as having disconnected families (Ana and Fernando). Ana was the victim of physical and verbal abuse by her alcoholic husband, who left her disfigured (“have no teeth in my mouth”). Her report suggests she developed a victim’s identity (she did not achieve a survivor’s identity), which is extended to all the other relationships and seems to describe her current relationship with her children: “It was a life of bitterness, the man died and I remain in the bitterness of my children (...). They pass by on the street and don’t even ask about their mother (...). My husband under to influence of rum left me without teeth, died 40 years ago. But I miss him because I had his support”.

Fernando was alcoholic and an aggressor. He reports regret in his testimony, acknowledging his guilt for his behavior and confessing being incapable of forgiving himself, despite (apparently) having been forgiven by his daughter, who “respects and appreciates her father”. Fernando states that he is now committed in improving the relationship with his family: he decided to move in with his daughter to avoid “losing himself in drinking”; is trying to become closer and become a friend to his daughter to compensate her for the “old times”; he states he is starting a new life to calm down and make up for disappointments he caused in the past. He is classified as being in family disconnection, but his report suggests a transition towards integrity, a process that seems to be dependent on forgiving himself: “I tried to go to my daughter’s house and forget the past, as if I was starting a new life... I try to settle things with me and with my conscience...”

Family Relationships: (E)migration

Migration is a factor influencing family estrangement, especially when resources are scarce and the lack of them impedes frequent contact and visits. Geographic mobility is characteristic of modern societies and has been an option for poorer families as a way to attain better jobs and life conditions.

Henrique, Joana and Lurdes (all experiencing family integration) report the emigration of children (who seek job opportunities abroad). Henrique has three children; two are emigrants. He reports that contact with children who

“love him” and call him every week makes him feel like they lived near by (*“as if we lived on the same street”*). The histories of Joana and Lurdes are similar: geographic distance is compensated for by emotional proximity. These participants present a philosophy of life that favors and reinforces integration of geographical distance; Joana reports the importance of respecting the life chosen by her children (*“it’s their lives”*).

Health: Multiple Chronic Diseases

Chronic health problems are frequent in poor families because poor living conditions and poor care provided to health conditions (associated with limited economic resources) favor the early onset of health problems in various family members (Sousa, 2005). These problems were reported by Ana, Cristina, Fernando (disconnection) and Gomes, Joana, Maria, Lurdes and Henrique (integrity). Data suggest that similar circumstances can lead either to integrity or disconnection. Cristina (disconnection) and Maria (integrity) report histories marked by the early death of close family members (due to diseases) and by their current fragile health conditions (chronic disorders of the respiratory and musculoskeletal systems).

Cristina’s mother died when she had her second child, who also died a little after. Her father married again and died when Cristina was 11 years old. Then, her stepmother (*“a second mother”*) died a few years later. Cristina feels she does not know her origins (*“I don’t know who my family is”*). She only knows a *“cousin”* (daughter of the stepmother’s brother) with whom she wished to keep in touch, but who despise her (*“she says I’m not a blood cousin”*). Cristina focuses her speech on the non-existence of a family (*“I have no one”*) because she lost all her close family members during her life, never married or had children. These circumstances justify her anguish and dissatisfaction with life (*“how could I be happy?”*).

Maria reports a similar history of life but progresses to family integrity. She lost her mother at the age of ten and for this reason had to raise and look after her two sisters (one sister was 22 months old and the other was four years old at the time). She started working during adolescence to support herself and her sisters (*“I started working as a housemaid”*). She describes her father as being absent; he worked too much. The father married again but the stepmother did not work and forced Maria to earn money for the family: *“My stepmother just wanted to go out and always said that if I wanted anything I would have to earn it, so I left home and started working as a housemaid! (...) I feel very good with my sisters. (...) Everybody said my mother was a very good woman.”*

It is likely that Maria is now constructing family integrity because she focuses on positive aspects of life (especially her affective approximation with her sisters). She shows an ability to adapt to life, even during difficult moments, seeking support in her mother’s memory (*“she was a good woman”*) to construct her identity.

The participants also report their current chronic diseases; while they are common during old age, they emerged early. It involves participants experiencing integrity (Ana and Cristina) and disconnection (Joana, Lurdes and Maria). The diseases are described as obstacles to the promotion of family and social relationships and limit the ability to solve conflicts. Cristina has had an osteo-articular disease for years, which impedes her visits with family members (*“my legs won’t let me”*) and from reconnecting social relationships (*“my life is limited to going from the center to home”*). She considers the disease to be an obstacle to solving conflicts with her cousin (*“I can’t go and talk to her because I can’t walk”*), and has to wait for the cousin to take the initiative. Additionally, economic difficulties impede her resolving health problems or speeding up her recovery from health problems: *“I should wear a girdle for my spine and I don’t, I have no money”*. Lurdes (integrity) has a disease similar to that of Cristina but she copes with it with ease because she feels her family is available to help her: *“I’m less satisfied because I’m not healthy...but it is not difficult to ask for help because if I ask them, they help me out, they listen to me and satisfy my needs... My children are my friends!”*

Henrique, classified as being in a situation of family integrity, has a grandson with a severe incapacitating chronic disease and wished he could help his grandson and daughter, who also are in poor economic condition. He recognizes that with better economic resources he could help more, but is satisfied with contributing the way he can.

Employment: Casual and Informal

All the participants had poor jobs over the course of their lives, but only seven (four in a situation of integrity and three in disconnection) report histories concerning the impact of these experiences on family life. They report situations of informal jobs, often initiated when they were still children (children working to complement limited family resources) and kept such jobs after retirement (seniors working to complement low pensions). Poor jobs are mentioned as a factor contributing to distance from family and raising children because work hours were extended and varied according to the needs of the employers. These were also poorly paid jobs and required the individuals to work in temporary/casual jobs to improve income. Nonetheless, four participants (Gomes, Henrique, Lurdes and Maria) progress to having family integrity. Gomes, for instance, reports he worked many extra hours and was absent during his son’s upbringing (*“actually, my son only lived a very short time with me”*). Because his wife died while the boy was a child, the paternal grandmother and an aunt raised the child. Currently, the son does not visit his father, but Gomes believes this was the *“price to pay”* for getting enough money to give the son a good education and feels proud of himself for being acknowledged as a *“good professional”*.

Other aspects deserve attention: Maria started working at the age of 10, after her mother died, *“working as a*

housemaid in the house of a family”; her effort, sacrifice and the adversity she encountered were compensated because she established strong bonds with her employers, whom she considers to be family. Lurdes also started working as a housemaid and established a good relationship with the family for which she worked. For this reason, they left her a piece of property she can now leave to her heirs.

The participants experiencing disconnection (Berta, Daniel and Fernando) feel “offended” by their children’s estrangement. Daniel has no contact with his son, a situation he considers to be humiliating: “he doesn’t care whether his father is alive”. He states he sacrificed himself to raise his son and now (in old age), he still works (“I do what I can”) to balance the scarce economic resources. He prefers to live like this instead of asking his son for help (“I’ll fight until I can”). He describes himself to be hard-working, independent and proud.

Low Income

Reference to low income, common to all the participants, is only observed in the testimonies of those experiencing family disconnection. These individuals tend to justify or attribute family conflicts to economic hardships, revealing feelings of uselessness and devaluation because they are poor. They report they feel sad because they “have nothing to leave”, which they see as a synonymous with “having constructed nothing in life and having nothing to contribute to the next generations”. The participants who have family integrity do not emphasize this issue: despite the economic hardships experienced in the course of life, they feel satisfied and proud with what they have constructed (whether it is a house, good values they transmitted, or a sense of having done the best they could) and do not justify their failures and/or conflicts with economic hardships.

Discussion

Family integrity is the result of the development of an elderly individual, which depends on the process of examination and integration of one’s family and personal life. The literature addressing poor families/individuals suggests these individuals tend towards family disconnection. Nonetheless, it also underscores that poor families/people are resilient because they survive years with limited and unstable income, living in poor conditions and facing persistent crises (Madsen, 1999; Mulin & Arce, 2008). Gergen and Gergen (2000, p. 281) state that “history is not fate”. The results seem to support such a statement, because they show that people with similar life histories may follow different paths: some towards family disconnection and others towards family integrity. Hence, it is relevant to identify the factors favoring or promoting each path.

Despite a constant confrontation with economic hardships, which may favor conflict, poor families reveal a strong sense of unity (Sousa et al., 2007). The transformation of

family relationships with continuity and maturity is challenged by events such as: poor jobs (long and irregular work hours weaken the establishment of bonds with children), emigration (geographic distance), conflicts (rupturing of relationships), and chronic diseases (difficult to reconnect relationships). Poor jobs are described as a factor leading individuals to disappear from family life by the participants experiencing both family integrity and disconnection, especially hurting relationships with children. Elderly individuals experiencing disconnection tend to blame their children for being away, viewing their children as having an obligation to care for their parents and to acknowledge the effort (sacrifice) their parents expended to educate them in a context without adequate resources. Those experiencing family integrity lament the estrangement of their children but assume this is “the price they had to pay” for having provided their children with an education.

The various severe health problems from the past emerge as factors that led to the loss of family members (including the early death of parents and siblings). Those in family disconnection assert that these events made them lose their identity (do not know their origins and there is no family). Those in situations of family integrity, with similar histories, focus on the good memories of deceased relatives and affective proximity with those who remain alive. Webster (2003) suggests that recalling self-biographical memories (including family origins) reinforces identity and preserves it. The fact an individual (due to the early death of family members) does not recall origins during a review of their life is an indication one’s identity is compromised, and family continuity between the past and present, in addition to a purpose for future life.

Emigration is only mentioned by people in families that are integrated and is described as a factor that transforms relationships without, however, affecting its quality and intensity. Emigration adds the challenge of avoiding the rupture of family relations because it geographically separates close family members (Souza, 2007). In a family experiencing integration, emigration strengthens bonds, especially because the family members explicitly assume the commitment to maintain the connection and family unity, enriching the sense of continuity and identity (Hernandez & McGoldrick, 1999).

Two participants experiencing family disconnection report domestic violence: one aggressor and one victim. The victim seems to have incorporated the identity of a victim, generalizing it to other relationships (i.e. she is a victim of the children’s abandonment). It is common for abused individuals to face an identity crisis and assume a victim’s identity (Barros & Passos, 2002). The aggressor is in the process of forgiving himself, which may be a step in the direction of family integrity. Sousa et. al. (2009) explain that forgiving oneself means also acknowledging and living with everything good and bad one has done in life, opening a path to family integrity.

Family conflicts are more frequently reported by participants experiencing disconnection, tending to end in a rupture of family relations. These individuals tend to blame the other party for the conflict and this perception seems to be the basis of their entire lives. People experiencing integrity note that conflicts cause pain but such pain is confined to that specific relationship. The participants in disconnection/alienation seem to constantly relive bitterness, that is, they live an obsessive reminiscence (Wang, Hsu, & Cheng, 2005; Watt & Cappeliez, 2000) through excessive rumination on events that reflect failure in the integration of troubled experiences from past and draw attention to unresolved conflicts.

Resolving/accepting conflicts may be hindered by everyday pressure, exponentially affected in poor families due to economic hardships (Sousa & Rodrigues, 2008). Exhausted individuals tend to act with more intolerance and irritability, increasing the risk of arguments and instability and diminishing the ability to solve problems. Economic difficulties, family conflicts and changes in family structure may lead the family to become very tense and less available (Zamberlan, Freitas, & Fukamori, 1999). Non-acceptance/non-resolution of conflicts and losses may be affected by severe health problems and family conflicts (including domestic violence).

Because the current health problems of the participants experiencing family disconnection affect mobility, they are seen as obstacles to the reconnection of family and social relationships. The participants experiencing family integration face health problems as an area in which they can depend on family support. Family conflicts are acknowledged and resolved by elderly individuals experiencing integrity while those in disconnected relationships expect the other parties to take the initiative to solve the problem, undermining their willingness to promote reconciliation. The successive crises (Sousa & Rodrigues, 2008) these families have to face reduce the time they have to solve problems, making resentments to last.

The material legacies in poor families have a probability of being unsatisfactory. Elderly individuals may feel frustrated or useless due to being unable to contribute financially to their children and grandchildren. A legacy is a relational experience of old age associated with a sense of continuity, preservation of time (symbolic immortality) and construction of identity (Sussman, Cates, & Smith, 1970). Low income is devaluated by those experiencing integrity; rather, they highlight the transmission of values and principles to their descendants. They also valued their children and the poorly compensated work they performed because it enabled them to establish bonds with those whom they worked for; in one of the cases, the family left property that now can be passed on to the participant's heirs. Therefore, the participants experiencing integrity feel proud and satisfied at having been able, in a context of scarce resources, to construct a legacy of values, principles and education. Those experiencing family disconnection feel they have nothing to leave, that is, they cannot contribute to future generations.

The philosophy of life of elderly individuals has emerged as a factor that either facilitates or hinders the construction of family integrity (Sousa et al., 2009). The studied participants mentioned philosophies of life that: (a) facilitate integration, i.e. "do not overvalue a situation", "respect others' choices"; (b) promote disconnection, i.e. "I'll fight by myself while I can, I won't ask for help"; (c) facilitate the transition from disconnection to integrity, i.e. "I'll try to live each day without focusing on problems, value the good things despite the bad things". Identifying the philosophy of life of elderly individuals (their attitudes towards life and that constitute a script for attitudes and behaviors) is a potential intervention strategy to help people experiencing family disconnection to achieve family integrity. Because a philosophy of life is intrinsically related to individuals' identities, it shows the way individuals perceive the world and act through subjective relationships, communication and personal experiences. The identification of a less positive philosophy of life that promotes disconnection may help one to acknowledge internal conflicts and rumination that hinders positive integration of life events.

In terms of limitations and perspective of research, disconnection and alienation were not differentiated in this study. These processes describe different forms through which one examines and integrates life events and further research should consider this differentiation. Another limitation is the small sample size and future studies should address larger samples so that some variables such as gender and whether the individual has children or not can be taken into account. Family integrity/family disconnection and alienation could also be related to satisfaction with life and depression in future studies, because it is common to find elderly individuals to be depressive or dissatisfied with life. Identifying the process through which individuals construct family integrity can help understanding the individuals' feelings and thus intervene more efficiently. Additionally, a deeper exploration of the participants' histories of life can help one understand the epigenetic process involved in the construction of family integrity. The data obtained reinforce the process' epigenetic nature, but do not allow forming an understanding of how it progresses throughout life. The investigation of family integration should be expanded to other social and cultural contexts because it refers to a process of normative development, crucial to the achievement of a successful aging process.

Final Considerations

A life of poverty involves risk factors that may favor a process of family disconnection or alienation. It is possible, however, to progress towards family integrity, particularly if elderly individuals adopt philosophies of life centered on positive aspects of life and respect the choices of others. Positive philosophies of life impede a problem from characterizing one's entire existence. The following

seems to differentiate people: (a) individuals progressing towards family integrity reveal a sense of self-valorization (the individual lived a meaningful life) despite poverty; (b) those moving on a path of disconnection or alienation nurture feelings of meaningless due to the scarcity of economic resources.

Family integrity, and disconnection and alienation are epigenetic processes (constructed throughout life), thus, promoting integrity occurs over the course of life. It can, however, be promoted in old age, especially if elderly individuals are supported and helped to forgive themselves and others, and aided to (re)construct philosophies that permit them to frame life events in a more positive manner. Techniques of evaluating and integrating life events (Butler, 1963) seem to be appropriate and effective in this line of intervention because they can help elderly individuals to integrate life events in meaningful and supportive narratives. The construction of family integration depends on life circumstances and experiences, but it is mainly associated with the way people integrate and define events.

Achieving family integration is possible regardless of life history. Elderly individuals with a history of poverty, scarcity of resources, family conflicts, irregular trajectories of employment and severe chronic diseases can face difficulties achieving family integrity. Nonetheless, a philosophy of life focused on life achievements instead of on failures can make a difference.

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