Approaches to the empowerment of older people in Cuba. The PIES-PLAZA project experience

Laura Sánchez Pérez[*1], Teresa Orosa Fraíz[2], Paloma Carina Henriquez Pino Santos[3], Jesús Menéndez Jiménez[4], Adialys González Guevara[5].

Abstract: This article aims to characterize the approach of empowerment in older people, from the experience of the Integral Program of Healthy Ageing in the municipality of Plaza in Havana, Cuba. The paper describes the overview of population ageing in Cuba and the challenges it imposes on different social spheres, as well as the particularities of the Integral Program on Healthy Ageing, its justification, and specific actions for the well-being of older people. This study investigates the experience of a system of workshops to promote individual and community empowerment in older people, exposing the articulation between the theoretical and methodological bases and the preliminary results obtained. The theoretical elaboration establishes the categorical system of empowerment understood as a process expressed through changes in the acquisition of knowledge, in social projection and in self-evaluation. The methodology used follows the participatory action-research premises. The results show the enhancement of capacities and resources for individual and social transformation, from the increase in autonomy, commitment, and participation in old age. It was found an improvement in the capacity for self-management in community spaces, increased commitment to the community and to the well-being of older people in their locality. As well as an expanded need for individual and community change for the benefit of older people, and greater social participation and ability for decision making.

Keywords: healthy ageing, education, community empowerment, older people.

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[*] **Corresponding author:** laura@psico.uh.cu
[1] Faculty of Psychology, University of Havana.
[2] Faculty of Psychology, University of Havana.
[3] Faculty of Psychology, University of Havana.
[4] Longevity, Ageing and Health Research Center. Havana, Cuba
[5] Longevity, Ageing and Health Research Center. Havana, Cuba

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Introduction

Cuba is an ageing country, in December 2019, there were 2,328,344 persons 60 years of age or older, representing 20.8% of the total population (ONEI / CEPDE 2020, a) and by 2030 ageing is expected to reach close to 30% (ONEI / CEPDE 2020, b). For some years, there have been in our country more people in this category than children 0-14 years old, being this age segment the only population group that will grow in the coming decades (Alfonso et al. 2016). According to estimates by the United Nations Population Division, Cuba´s proportion of older people will grow much more than world's low-income countries as a whole (United Nations, 2015).

It is the first time in history that such a large proportion of people reach old age and is evident that this process has caused and will continue to have an impact on all social structures. Cuba's accelerated population ageing implies a drastic change in health systems, politics, the economy, culture and society in general.

In this sense, it is essential to understand that it is not only a demographic change, but also a generational change that brings a new way of being, doing and feeling as an older person. For this reason, programs and strategies that address ageing, old age and care for older people must be shaped according to their new needs and interests. Therefore, actions are urgently needed to express and guarantee spaces for development and not only for assistance and protection, from a multi and interdisciplinary perspective responding to the comprehensive, diverse and current well-being of this population group (World Health Organization, 2017).

Education stands as a true factor allowing the dismantling of prejudices towards ageing and old age, as well as the promotion of a new gerontological culture that is inclusive and participatory, non-discriminatory, and non-paternalistic. Learning to grow old at this time constitutes a challenge to social and individual level; therefore training programs coexist from the most dissimilar sectors of society (Orosa, 2018). Education empowers and ensures those who access it, therefore, educational experiences aimed at older people are the forefront of gerontological actions.

Integral Healthy Ageing Program

In a socio-demographic context of ageing, the Integral Program on Healthy Ageing is carried out in the Plaza de la Revolución municipality, in Havana, with an ageing index of 28.3% (ONEI / CEPDE 2020, a), the highest in the country. It is an initiative financed by the European Union and the Municipal Government and coordinated by the Cuban Society of Gerontology and Geriatrics, a non-governmental organization in Cuba. The general objective of the project is to contribute to the development of healthy, dignified and active ageing through socio-sanitary processes and initiatives to enhance the well-being of the elderly in this municipality. It started in January 2018 and should end in March 2022.

The well-being of the elderly occupies a growing important place on the Cuban public agenda. Increasingly, emphasis is placed on local solutions at the proposal of the governments and institutions of the territories together with the members of their communities.

This project aims to generate a multidisciplinary response from the municipality's social actors for the benefit of older people. The aim is to demonstrate that it is possible to contribute healthy ageing at the local level by: a) creating certain capacities in the elderly that

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enables their empowerment, b) creating social actions to promote family and community knowledge about ageing and the old age, c) promoting intergenerational action.

The action referred to the empowerment of older people within the logical framework of the project, aims to achieve an active, inclusive and healthy ageing through the development of capacities in older people. It involves acquiring skills that allow them to think and execute their own individual and community projects; as well as the possibility of actively participating in decision-making processes alongside the social actors of the community, becoming themselves protagonists of change. The educational factor becomes a key tool to achieve the acquisition and strengthening of capacities in old age (Morón-Marchena, 2014).

This article presents the experience of the system of workshops for the individual and community empowerment of older people from a gerontological perspective, with a gender and rights focus as well, within the framework of the Integral Program on Healthy Ageing, Plaza. Although it will be described in subsequent sections, it is worth highlighting as a premise that is an expression of the integration of three sectors: health, education and government.

Theoretical-methodological bases of the workshop system for the empowerment of older people.

Any transformation produced from the social sciences must be elaborated from a coherent interweaving between theory, methodology and application. The implementation of the workshop system to empower the elderly and turn them into promoters of empowerment practices is an expression of the interrelation of these three systems.

The theoretical approach constitutes the articulating axis of the workshops. It integrates addressing issues around the category of empowerment, the relevance and need to promote empowerment in older people, the skills and competences that are part of it, and the underlying socio-political perspective.

Old age, although linked to positive characteristics such as knowledge and experience, is generally a period that evokes deterioration, disease and finitude. These conceptions form stereotypes and social prejudices that are uncritically reproduced from generation to generation. However, many older adults are reluctant to assume this cultural order and prove to be active agents, transformers of themselves and others, as well as their social environment (Yuni, 2015). Empowerment is a process through which older people can become protagonists of their history, fundamental pillars of their society.

The term empower can be divide into two aspects. First, it implies the acquisition of greater power than previously had, and secondly, it implies the gain of power for individuals who did not have it. The struggles of each social group are different depending on their needs, which is why the elderly are more oriented to empower themselves to increase their quality of life and well-being in old age, as well as to defend their citizen rights through critical and democratic participation.

The definitions of the term empowerment are varied, but all refer to a process of strengthening individual and collective capacities allowing the subject to gain control and exercise them over certain resources and situations, which has a positive implication for the individual or empowered group (Silva &Martínez, 2004; Restrepo, 2001).

For the creation of the workshop system, we adhere to the definition of empowerment or strengthening by Maritza Montero, which she conceives as:

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The process by which the members of a community (interested individuals and organized groups) jointly develop capacities and resources to control their life situation, acting in a committed, conscious and critical way, to achieve the transformation of their environment according to their needs and aspirations, while transforming themselves (Montero 2004, p. 7).

It is also important to rescue for the study of empowerment the three dimensions that Rowlands (1997) raises:

- Personal: implies developing individual self-esteem and generating a reflexivity that eliminates internalized oppression and its psychological effects. For this, it is necessary to reveal the power dynamics that operate in the vital context, as well as promoting skills to achieve greater self-management.

- Close relationships: refers to the development of the ability to negotiate with others and influence decisions within a given social relationship.

- Collective: refers to teamwork to achieve a broader impact than could have been achieved individually. This is the community level where the attempt is made to promote the construction among all from a community with the capacity for self-sustainability and collective problem solving.

Empowerment in turn is made up of various psychological and social formations. Thus, collaborative associations, commitment to the activity to be carried out, self-management capacity, critical awareness of our place in the social context and of our citizen rights, democratic social participation, and need for change and aspirations are some of the essential aspects to analyze when we refer to empowerment. These indicators in turn can present different levels of development (Banda, Morales 2015).

Empowerment processes implies deconstructing our old and deep-rooted conceptions to create new ones from an ideology of liberation. Therefore, empowerment is also a concept loaded with an ethical component that includes notions of equity, justice, solidarity and love for humanity and a political component that implies a social criticism of conditions of social inequality and marginalization.

Important to underline that empowerment in old age rescues a humanistic vision as it is understood as a period of life not only of losses but also of psychological and social gains. Currently, multiple groups and networks of older people are integrated into international non-governmental programs and organizations. Many of these programs have been formed from the self-management of the elderly themselves (Iacub and Arias 2010). By participating in social transformation activities, an empowerment process is activated.

Although this can be expressed from a basic level to a high level of development based on the personal skills and life experiences of these older adults. This grassroots empowerment with which adults join projects in their communities and other non-governmental or political organizations, could be enhanced with educational resources or training specifically aimed at developing empowerment skills. In summary, empowerment must not only be promoted from the subject himself, but also from community and institutional structures. We consider that the system of workshops to enhance empowerment in older people is one of the multiple ways to achieve this goal.

The following dimensions, sub-dimensions and indicators are integrated into the declaration of the category system that supports the design, implementation, and interpretation phases of the workshops: *changes in knowledge or new knowledge* includes knowledge about the community and awareness of rights; *changes in social projection* includes collaboration

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associations, political interest, source of decision making, need for change and aspirations, legal power, social participation and commitment; c*hanges in self-assessment* includes self-esteem, self-management and control of tasks (Henríquez and Sánchez, 2020; Montero, 2004).

On the other hand, it is also necessary to analyze the methodological dimension of empowerment. The methodology constitutes the strategic pillar from which the theoretical concepts mentioned are to be put into practice, which is why its contents must be completely consistent with the theoretical perspective.

The investigative method is characterized by a mixed study that integrates quantitative and qualitative methods, in the investigation, programming and interpretation of information. The procedure developed in the design and execution of the workshops is linked to the style of participatory research-action, which is consistent with the intention of individual and social transformation. Therefore it is an investigation on action and for action, which "gives as much importance to the investigative result as to the human processes that accompany it (…) the investigation process itself is represented as construction in itself, as intersubjective space that configures a reality" (Tovar, 1995, p.41).

It is a process that simultaneously involves the production of knowledge around the object of study, as well as the promotion of awareness of the problems addressed, with the intention of generating actions in pursuit of individual and social change. Based on the focus group device, the possibility is opened for the participating older people to actively contribute to the research-action-participation process, making their discourses visible and legitimate as a social group.

The workshop system has as its general objective: to provide socio-psychological resources that enhance empowerment in older people in the Plaza municipality, Havana. The specific objectives are:

- Demystify stereotypes and prejudices associated with old age and ageing.
- Enhance knowledge about self-esteem, subjective well-being and quality of life as necessary pillars for healthy empowerment.
- Stimulate the proactive agency of older people through their creative and social participation.
- Promote critical reflection on the citizens' rights of older people.
- Promote the integration and social participation of older people in their community through the design and execution of community empowerment projects with and for older people.

The program consists of 9 thematic sessions, with duration of two hours each. It has 3 essential moments of evaluation of individual, group and social empowerment in older people: a) the application of a pretest questionnaire and a test to control learning and the appropriation of empowerment skills; b) the replication of the workshops to empower other older people in their locality and c) the creation and implementation of new community projects with/for older people.

The design of the sessions was elaborated from the following items: duration, activities, objectives, content and learning results of the session. The structure of the group work was: initiation, development, and closure and learning control. The use of participatory techniques prevails, helping to focus on the group's task, encourage group production, and mobilization towards reflection and self-reflection.

For the registration and analysis of the information, the following indicators of group functioning were taken into account: resistance during the dynamics, the roles assumed by group members, emerging anxieties, group stability, and group environment. Content indicators were also considered, based on the categories and dimensions of empowerment.

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The interpretation of reflexive movements, individual and group changes, contribution to group construction are aspects that allow work from the focus group.

The main topics addressed in the workshop system were: the basic concepts for healthy ageing, an approach from gerontology; self-esteem, quality of life and subjective well-being in old age; community participation and active ageing; older people as subjects of law, resolutions and conventions of older people, worldwide and in Cuba; individual and community empowerment in the elderly, notions and dimensions; proactive community agency; volunteering for the elderly; productive old age and micro-entrepreneurship; project opportunities in a friendly community with older people.

Discussion

The sessions were carried out according to the planned program, 22 old age adults participated in the study. The age and generic composition of the group ranged around an average of 72. 4 years, with a prevalence of the female sex in 90.9% as opposed to 9.1% of male participation. In their entirety, the members were older graduates of the basic course of the educational program of the Senior Adult University Chair.

The coordination team was made up of professors from Senior Adult University Chair belonging to the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Havana. The role assumed was that of moderators/facilitators of the group process in coherence with the established group methodology.

In general, a favorable climate for group work prevailed, conducive to reflection, debate and the joint construction of knowledge. However, in the initial sessions individual and group resistances were found, which were dissipating in the last sessions. This can be explained by the gradual increase in the commitment of the participants to the group task.

In the first session, a questionnaire that established a baseline of the individual and community empowerment capacities of the group was applied as a form of monitoring. Later in the last session, it was applied as a post-test and control of the impact of the workshops.
The main indicators were:
1. Perception of community participation.
2. Type of community activities and frequency of participation.
3. Degree of execution of strategies linked to community activities.
4. Membership in community or mass organizations.
5. Positive contribution of your participation to society.
6. Knowledge of their citizens' rights.
7. Particularities of the decision-making process.
8. Self-confidence and purposeful character of personality.
10. Current personal aspirations and their connection to the community project.
11. Perception of the project's contribution to community development (Soler et al. 2014)

The data presented below is preliminary because they show some of the sub-dimensions studied:

Table 1:

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Indicators	Before		After		p*
	No.	%	No.	%	
Level of knowledge about the community					
High	7	31.8	7	31.8	
Medium	13	59.1	14	63.6	0.53
Low	1	4.5	1	4.5	
Null	1	4.5	0	0.0	
Frequency of support for decision making					
Always	13	59.1	12	54.5	
Almost always	6	27.3	9	40.9	0.63
Almost never	0	0.0	0	0.0	
Never	3	13.6	1	4.5	
Position assumed when making a decision					
Democratic	8	36.4	15	68.2	
Directed	1	4.5	1	4.5	0.04**
Authoritarian	6	27.3	4	18.2	
No answer	7	31.8	2	9.1	
Levels of participation					
Active	11	50.0	18	81.8	
Moderately active	4	18.2	3	13.6	0.02**
Scantily active	6	27.3	1	4.5	
Passive	1	4.5	0	0.0	
Frequency of actions associated to the project					
Very frequent	1	4.5	2	9.1	
Moderately frequent	5	22.7	10	45.5	0.02**
Scantily frequent	6	27.3	8	36.4	
Null	10	45.5	2	9.1	
Self-esteem					
High	16	72.7	19	86.4	
Medium	5	22.7	3	13.6	0.22
Low	1	4.5	0	0.0	
Self-evaluation of the work done					
High	17	77.3	19	86.4	
Medium	1	4.5	2	9.1	0.64
Low	4	18.2	1	4.5	
Execution of tasks associated to community activities					
Yes	9	40.9	16	72.7	0.05**
No	13	59.1	6	27.3	

* Probability associated with the Z statistic of the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test (non-parametric test of comparison of two related samples) ** p ≤ 0.05

In the joint qualitative and quantitative evaluation process of the data, there is evidence of growth in the comparison of the pre and post-test according to the some indicators of empowerment. It is particularly observed in the sub-dimensions: *social participation* (attending to the levels of participation and the frequency of carrying out activities associated with the project), *self-management* (attending to the execution of tasks for carrying out community

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activities), and *source of decision-making* (considering the frequency of support for decision-making and the position assumed when making a decision), where statistically significant changes were demonstrated between the indicators before and after the intervention. In the case of the *self-esteem* and *community knowledge* sub-dimensions, the variation was minimal, which could be explained from a qualitative point of view: a) firstly, because they are graduates of the University Seniors' Chairs educational program, which contributes to the strengthening of the self-esteem of its students as older people, as well as encourages the knowledge of their communities, b) secondly, old age is a period of life where self-referential psychological processes (personal identity, self-knowledge, self-esteem, etc.) are usually consolidated.

In the analysis of the main group constructions that show change or movement around the various dimensions of empowerment at the individual and group level, they can be combined in the following points:

-*Group expectations about the empowerment workshops*, where knowledge needs appear, for individual and social transformation, desires to "help others", learning interests around empowerment, contributing to the development of Cuban society. They are needs for transcendence in accordance with the socio-psychological characteristics of this age group.

-*Reflections on the meaning and representation of ageing* as a demographic and individual process, of old age as a stage, and of the various forms of good ageing (healthy, optimal, active, participatory, and successful). The appearance of syncretism that move from a more traditional view of old age to a gerontological view of the stage associated with optimism, creativity, propositional capacity and experience.

-*Identification of strengths and weaknesses as components of their self-esteem* as from the experiential level, based on feelings of worth associated with their sense of identity as an older person, significant learning throughout life, goals or projects in this age period. Personal qualities linked to moral values such as solidarity, honesty and resilience were expressed; self-respect from the defense against discrimination based on age and from their knowledge of citizen rights; the maintenance of quality of life, emphasis on health care and the transmission of knowledge; achievements associated with tasks of high social and political commitment, the exercise of parentage and caring for the family.

-*Characterization of the resources and limitations in the communities*, *as well as diagnosis of the needs of the elderly at the local level*. It talks about the knowledge that older people have about their community and expresses mastery over the history, activities of the community and its inhabitants. Among the main resources identified are: existence of institutions with material and human capital that can contribute to the designed projects and the replication of the workshops, as well as possible alliances with other community projects and cultural clubs. The various prejudices and stereotypes that exist around old age and older adults are declared as established obstacles. The needs and problems of older people perceived in the explored localities are: those linked to an unfriendly environment with older people (architectural barriers, poor lighting, access to public transport); those associated with the preparation and training of personnel who must attend or deal with older people; difficulties in accessing leisure and leisure activities; limited possibilities of effective participation in decision-making processes at the community level; problems of care systems for the elderly.

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-Establishment of personal and group strategies to achieve the objectives outlined in the workshops, by raising social problems in the locality and the needs of older people, active participation in other projects and processes of the community, information and communication to institutions and key actors of the proposals designed for change, the deployment of alliances with the various associations operating in the community, as well as the conversion into community leaders in their territories.

-Emphasis on the culture of law as a resource for empowerment and citizen participation (Del Barrio, Marsillas, Sancho 2018), that is, awareness of citizens' duties and rights as a way to defend and exercise them; the question of human dignity as a supreme value; importance of the right to health, education, sports, gender equality, religious freedom, self-protection; respect for the rights of others as the guarantee of peace.

-Community self-management importance as a way and expression of empowerment. Proactively as a skill that places them in pursuit of action, assuming their self-responsibility for actions and decision making, as well as the value of management as a tool to achieve certain individual and community goals (Amador & Martínez 2018). Perceived evidence of self-management in the framework of the workshops: interviews with the delegates of the constituencies, contacts with key agents in the community, decision-makers from the local government. In accordance with this, an intrinsic motivation and commitment to the PIES-PLAZA project and to the objectives of the workshops for the empowerment of older people were appreciated.

-Specific indicators of empowerment in old age identified by students: acceptance of the characteristics of older adulthood; active participation in recreational-cultural and knowledge acquisition activities; effective membership in various social groups; self-validity and the exercise of a hierarchically high position within the family system; assuming the role of community leader as well as recognition by others; active involvement in community processes; a high self-esteem in accordance with the particularities of age, social commitment and values such as human sensitivity, solidarity; the capacity for decision making.

As a final product and evaluative indicator of empowerment, 17 projects were generated with/for older people in the communities. Each community project was designed with a view to its implementation in the localities, in coherence with the diagnosis made by the workshop participants about the community processes, the main needs of the elderly population, the real resources available.

In summary, an increase in the capacity for self-management in community spaces, increased commitment to the community and to the well-being of older people in their locality, increased knowledge of the community (resources, intrinsic processes, etc.) as a key tool for the design and execution of their community projects, increasing the need for individual and community change in pursuit of the benefit of older people, as well as greater social participation and decision-making capacity.

Conclusions

The characterization of the described experience reaffirms the scientific and social relevance of addressing the empowerment of older people from a gerontological perspective, integrating a

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culture of law and a gender approach. The empowerment processes in older people, allow to lay the bases for the elaboration of individual, group and macro-social strategies that contribute to a more active and healthy ageing.

It is important to highlight the articulation between the theoretical bases around empowerment in old age, a methodology based on participatory action research and the empirical level. The later characterized by the implementation of the workshop system to enhance empowerment.

The analysis of the data produced evidence of positive changes in the acquisition of knowledge or new knowledge, in the social projection, and in the self-evaluation of the participants as older people. In this sense, the individual and group movements around the increase of knowledge about the community, the need for change and aspirations, the capacity for self-management, participation or social commitment are verified. The workshops constitute an experience that opens the possibility of developing skills for change, self-worth, autonomy, self-management, and the achievement of well-being in older adulthood. Consequently, the process made personal strengths visible and legitimized. This constitutes the starting point of the valorization of the experiences acquired and knowledge learned throughout the life course of the participants.

The results obtained in the workshops will be susceptible to replication and execution by the older people involved in the project. This implies that the germ of transformation returns to society, which in turn constitutes a key indicator of empowerment.

Finally, it is pertinent to outline a brief reflection on the conditions through which humanity transits under the effects of the pandemic by COVID-19 and its possible impact on the processes of empowerment achieved by the elderly. And it is that, linked to the pandemic, there have been two types of vulnerabilities in this age group. First, an obvious biological one, with the risk to life in the possibility of contagion. And a second one, not visible but with a risk to older people's autonomy by underestimating their voluntary decision and self-care, in conditions of physical isolation. This has led to the development of new campaigns against the return to old age prejudices due to mismanagement by family impositions or by repeated use of terms through the mass media that connote absolute fragility, even when these expressions are neither generalized nor ill-intentioned. It is therefore a premise to emphasize more and more in the promotion of empowerment to achieve an active, healthy, sustainable ageing, with legitimate and effective spaces for social participation of older people.

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