

Comunicaciones

Short Communications

**Routines of Amazonia's riverine elderly families and restructuring of roles in aging  
Rotinas de famílias de idosos ribeirinhos amazônicos e reestruturações de papéis na  
velhice**

**Rutinas de familias de ancianos ribereños amazônicos y reestructuración del papeles  
en la vejez**

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**Abstract:** Based on the premisses of Developmental Psychology, this study aimed at assessing the perception of routine in families of elderly people that live in riverine communities in the Amazon. By the use of three methodological instruments five families of elderly people that lived in the islands in Cametá, Pará, Brazil. The results showed that in this stage of life the activities performed by the elderly people in the community and at home have major changes in comparison to other stages of life. The most significant one was in reference to the cessation of the economic subsistence activity and the restructuring of roles mainly observed at the routine of elderly riverine man who focus most of their activities on house chores along with the wives.

**Key words:** family routines, old age couples, riverside communities, Amazon, transcultural psychology

**Resumo:** Com base no escopo da Psicologia do Desenvolvimento, este estudo objetivou analisar a percepção da rotina de famílias de idosos que vivem em comunidades ribeirinhas da Amazônia. Utilizando-se de três instrumentos metodológicos, foram investigadas cinco famílias de idosos residentes das ilhas fluviais do município de Cametá, Pará, Brasil. Os resultados revelaram que nesta fase do ciclo de vida, as atividades realizadas pelos idosos na comunidade e nos domicílios sofrem importantes alterações quando comparadas às outras fases de vida. O destaque maior foi referente ao cessar das atividades de subsistência econômica e a reestruturação de papéis observado principalmente na rotina dos homens idosos ribeirinhos, o que redireciona maior parte das suas atividades para o ambiente domiciliar junto às esposas.

**Palavras-chave:** rotinas familiares, casais de idosos, comunidades ribeirinhas, Amazônia, psicologia transcultural

**Resumen:** Basado en el ámbito de la Psicología del Desarrollo, este estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar la percepción de rutinas familiares de ancianos que viven en comunidades ribereñas del Amazonia. Usando tres herramientas metodológicas se investigaron cinco familias de ancianos residentes de islas fluviales del municipio de Cametá, Pará, Brasil. Los resultados revelaron que en esta etapa del ciclo de vida, las actividades de los ancianos en la comunidad y en las viviendas sufren cambios importantes en comparación con otras fases de la vida. Se destaca principalmente el cese de las actividades de subsistencia económica y la reestructuración de las funciones en la rutina de los hombres ancianos ribereños, que se focalizan en las actividades domésticas junto con sus esposas.

**Palabras clave:** rotinas familiares, parejas de ancianos, comunidades ribereñas, Amazonía, psicología transcultural

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### **Aging, family routines and riverine environment**

The aging process and its natural consequence, advanced age, have implications on a series of modification on physical, psychic, and social aspects of the human being. Generally speaking, it is considered a healthy elderly person one who can perform their daily activities and roles in an autonomous and independent way, including basic to more complex activities in the family and social context (Rodrigues, Watanabe & Derntl, 2006; Moraes, 2012).

It is in this context that it is considered unquestionable the importance the family has on their last stage of life. Additionally, it should be taken into consideration that with the transformation in the contemporary world new family arrangements have emerged, which have increased the scientific interest. By analyzing the role elderly people can have in the family context, it can either be part of a 'family with elderly people', in which the elderly lives in the condition of a relative of the householder (parents, in-laws, uncles and aunts of the householder), or in a 'family of elderly people' in which the elderly or the spouse is the householder. The later one, according to Camarano and El Ghaouri (2003), has been vastly increasing in Brazil, a tendency that reflects a scenery with more active and less functional dependent elderly.

This recent change in the family structure and the increase in life expectancy have influence on the experience of aging. To Marques and Sousa (2012), investing in

routine activities by the elderly is marked by some characteristics, such as, restructuring of roles and the return to the couples dyad model, which can have influence on the reorganization of tasks and roles in the life of each spouse and family members.

These themes have been the objective of investigation of researchers and their findings have not only allowed to establish basic definition regarding the family, but also to ramify the impact of routine in the family organization (Haugland, 2005). Even though it is known the importance of investigating the routines in the studies of human development in Brazil it is still evident the lack of studies that approach clearly the routine activities of families of elderly people, chiefly the non-urban ones, as those that live in Amazon riverine communities.

The way of life, the work world, and the social relations in those regions isolated from the urban centers are mainly guided by nature and culture, which regulate the schedules, activities and consequently the behavior of its inhabitants. Moreover, the physical separation between the houses, the flooded lands, and unstable bridges difficult the access to neighbors houses and seem to favor more intense relationship with richer and more constant activities inside the homes, what gives the family in the riverine world a higher value that is socially shared (Scherer, 2004; Silva et al., 2011).

Based on the perspective of Developmental Psychology and Transcultural Psychology a study was performed upon the approval by The Ethics and Research

Committee (CEP/NMT/UFPA), according to the report n.o 926.744/2014, with the proposal to analyze the routine of family of elderly people that live in Amazon riverine communities, describing for the first time the idiosyncrasies in the activities related to housing, subsistence, and community in this sociocultural context.

### Methodology

This is a qualitative research, with a descriptive-observational design, performed in the Cameté Islands, Pará, Brazil. This municipally traditionally represents the riverside Amazon for its territory is formed by about 90 river islands.

The sample for this study was chosen by convenience and was composed by five families of elderly people that are native from the riverine communities, all of them had the couple as householders and were at least 60 years old, were together by civil union, who shared the same house for at least 20 years and lived in isolated riverine communities, away from the urban centers.

In order to ensure a more thorough approach to the theme three instruments were used: Sociodemographic inventory used for the characterization of the sample; Field diary, to describe the experiences and all other information gathered, designed in accordance with the guidelines of Afonso et al. (2015); and the Family of Elderly People Routine Questionnaire [*Questionário de Rotina de Família de Idosos (QRFI)*], developed based on the work of Silva et al., (2010), and adapted for this study.

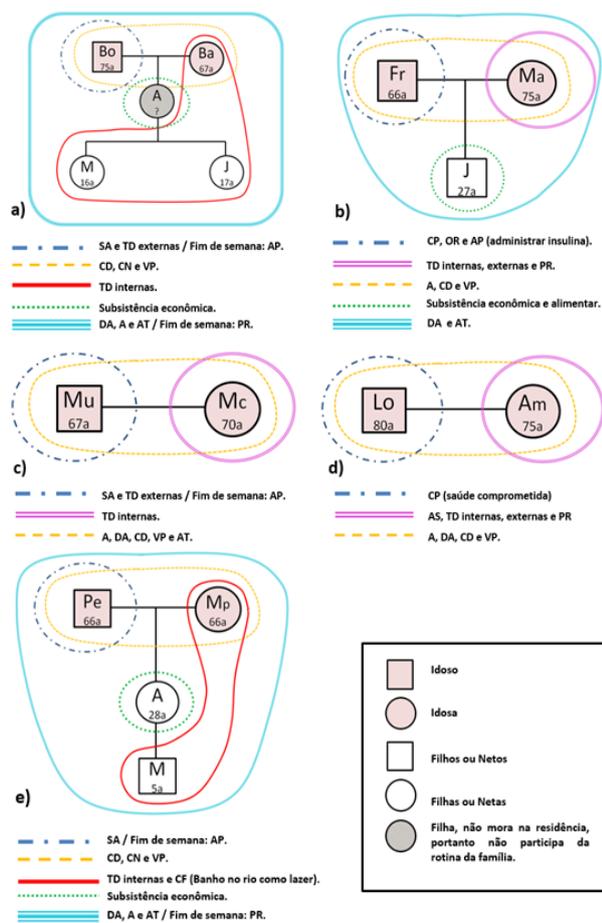
The analysis of the results obtained was performed in the Epi-Info® 6.04 software, for a better visualization and discussion of the data from the software it was created the Family Activities Diagram (FAD) in the software “Smart Draw Suit Edition Version 7.0”.

### Results

Initially the researchers started building the knowledge based on the assumptions of the Transcultural Psychology, adapting the measurements and interpretations of QRFI to the nature of the target group, ensuring the value and reliability of the study (Valsiner, 2016; Joly, Bustamante & Oliveira, 2015). The adaptation process took into consideration a vast and systematic bibliographic review, the insertion of the data collected into the field diary about the context of the elderly riverine people, as well as the assessment of the theoretical-conceptual equivalence and of items. Thus it was possible to categorize twelve items that represent the main activities performed amongst the family and the community: Feeding (F) Sleeping/Waking up (SW), Morning Nap (MN), Personal Care (PC), House chores (HC), Food Subsistence (FS), Watching Tv (WT), Listening to Radio (LR), Care of Grandchildren (CG), Visit Relatives (VR), Programmed Activity (PA), Religious Practice (RP).

With regards to the characterization of the sample, all of them were natural from the region, including with marriage between members of the community. The age average was 70.7 years. Additionally, all of them had low school levels, low income and some religious practice. The family organization was diversified however with a predominance of living at home with a spouse, children, and grandchildren.

By analyzing how the families are composed it was seen that all the families had few members, being similar to the concept known as “empty nest” (see Figure 1). This fact is important and has direct reflect on the house chores, for the decreased amount of family members, hence less chores to be done. Moreover, there is no great diversity of food to be prepared and the house doesn’t require major care.



**Figure 1**  
Routine Activity Diagram of elderly riverine couples during the week days and weekends. a) *Bo/Ba* family, b) *Fr/Ma* family, c) *Mu/Mc* family, d) *Lo/Am* family, e) *Pe/Mp* family

As the analysis done is in reference to the description of routines involving five family nuclei headed by an elderly couple, here are presented the most significant similarities with regards to the activities that are performed by the elderly alone; those that involve the spouse; those performed as a group when the family is gathered; also those that involve other members of the family or the community (children, grandchildren, son-in-law, daughter-in-law, neighbors, etc.). All the dynamics involving the description of the intrafamily subsystem involved in performing the tasks can be seen in Figure 1, which presents the FAD of the five families of elderly riverine in this study.

Based on the multi methodological perspective it was noted that in this phase of life the activities performed in the homes and communities suffer major changes when

compared to other stages of life.

About the activities performed by the elderly women a common factor seen throughout the families was that the activities were frequently related to the interior of the house, such as meal preparation, doing the dishes, doing the laundry, cleaning and organizing the house, etc, (indoors HC). It is worth mentioning that when the families are also composed by granddaughters as seen in the families of *Bo/Ba* (a) and *Pe/Mp* (e), they assume a role of help and co-responsibility with the tasks. In this context it is noted that the granddaughters are always around the elderly couple (EC), chiefly the grandmothers. Although some grandmothers report having done some activities for subsistence along their lives, those are more clearly common in the men's routine. The analysis of the men's activities showed their routine changes drastically, above all due to the cessation of work then retirement, then spending most part of the day inside the house. Therefore, the elderly man starts to perform domestic chores as his wife does. It is emphasized the fact that the man, in most couples in this study, is the one responsible for the activities performed in the exterior of the house (outdoor HC), which somehow still demand more physical effort. Examples of these activities are: weed out, chop wood, etc. additionally, the FS activities are still frequent among them (trim açai trees, cattle raising, etc) which brings some income for the families in certain times of the year.

It is worth mentioning that most part of the time during the week the elderly share more frequently the spaces at home, thus, the house chores (indoors and outdoors) are frequently shared with all the members of the family. For that reason, we noticed a more constant contact among the members, which strengthen the affective bonds and the co-responsibility for the mutual care. As an example, during the main meals (breakfast, lunch, and dinner) usually all the members are gathered (F).

Another strong characteristic in these couples' routine was seen in all the five families investigated. On a daily basis the period of time right after lunch is used for

resting (MN), which in the region vernacular means taking a nap (*tirar a sesta*), a trait of the culture that is more ingrained at old age and deeply rooted as a life habit.

Still regarding the afternoons, it is noted as the most emphatic moment regarding the communication with the community, time that almost every couple visit their closest relatives and friends going either on foot by the wooden bridges or by boat (VP). In these moments it was clear the creation of leisure activities and making use of the free time. Most of them reported enjoying the company of other people to talk and share stories of daily situations.

The activities performed at night were more directed towards the domestic environment, after dinner the couple performs another important leisure activity - watching tv (WT), gathering in the family room to watch soap opera and local news, summing up the daily activities of the family, each one already in their hammocks in the same room where everyone sleeps (SW). In comparison to the urban context the nights in these communities are relatively shorter, however, the habit of sleeping early is still present in this stage of life.

Regarding the weekend, all the couples reported that the pattern of activities suffers little changes. On Saturdays, the only activity that is different according to their perspective is going shopping (AP). To do that they make use of a boat (*rabeta*) as means of transportation to the closest urban area and buy the necessary supplies for the family. On Sundays, most elderly broaden their social contact through religious practices. They go to Catholic Church closer to their homes to attend the cults (RP) where they meet other family members, friends, and neighbors that also live in the area.

### Discussion

Thought the perspective of some rural communities, as well as the riverine ones, it is very marked the culture of constituting new families with members of the community (Missio & Portella, 2003). Therefore, it is stated that the concept of “empty nest” for the

riverine communities is broaden to consider not only couples without children, but also elderly people that are going through this part of life, for before they shared the house with their children until they left to constitute their own families. However, it is still worth mentioning that the contextual disposition enables an important and functional family support.

Regarding the restructuring of the roles perceived in the advanced age it is crucial to first ponder about the importance of the work for subsistence and food in the routine change of these individuals. During almost all the cycle of life the daily routines of the amazonian riverine is guided by the need to survive in this environment. To that matter, the activities designed for work are guaranteed and conditioned due to practices, costumes, values, beliefs, and traditional knowledge this people has historically built in the amazonian lowland.

Another important finding states about restructuring of roles in the advanced age and the differentiation between genders. The current findings agree with the ones of Baia (2006) and Silva (2006) about the adult life, which point to the organization of riverine families that resemble the traditional patterns, with a clear separation of activities between genders.

In this study, based on the concepts explained earlier, it was seen that at advanced age such division, even though attenuated, is still similarly present. Centered in the domestic environment, the elderly restructure their activities and consequently their routines considering their skills and experiences acquired along the life. Therefore, women invest more in domestic indoor activities, on the other hand, men invest more in activities linked to the outdoor domestic activities, regarding the weald, the farm animals, and the river.

Along with the domestic life of the couple, in this context it is also worth mentioning that at old age, as well as in other stages of life, the social network represented by the religious practices, but chiefly during the visit to the neighbors, are important

protective sources of the local culture and maintenance of health and become even more efficient when done in parallel to the family support network (Bertuzzi, Paskulin & Morais, 2012; Morais, Rodrigues, & Gerhardt, 2008).

### Final Remarks

Based on the assumption that this theme is still little known in the scientific scenario, the analysis done in this study presented important contributions about the routine of elderly people in the amazonian riverine context. Generally, the old age comports a set of restructuring of marked roles, chiefly by the freedom from work responsibilities and economical subsistence and by the departure of the children from the family nucleus, also maintaining a strong traditional gender pattern still at old age.

The results also show that even though this stage of life is marked by the reduction of activities centered at work, the elderly people keep themselves sufficiently active, with skills and capabilities preserved while performing daily functions, which reveals in a certain fashion, the preservation of functionalities, either in domiciliar and/or social environments, pointing to a clearly participative aging process.

At last, it is concluded that this theme is extremely relevant and needs to be deeper studied, including by other perspectives of analysis. It is understood that in the current populational aging context it is also indispensable to study this phenomenon in traditional rural contexts.

#### Authors' participation:

a) Conception and design of the work; b) Data acquisition; c) Analysis and interpretation of data; d) Writing of the manuscript; e) Critical review of the manuscript.

R.G.N. has contributed in a,b,c,d; R.O.C. in b,d, Z.N.L.S. in b,d; D.S.P in c, e; C.M.C.M in c, d, e.

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