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A photographic essay of elderly urban workers from Peru

Gabriela Ramos Bonilla and Erika Jaclyn Tirado Ratto

The photographs were taken by Erick Nazario and Nicola Espinosa.

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Introduction

Title: Curriculum Vitae: A photographic essay of elderly urban workers from Peru

“Curriculum Vitae” is a photographic project that was part of an anthropological study about elderly workers’ trajectories, routines and motivations to continue working beyond the retirement age. This study was undertaken in Lima, the city with the most aged population of Peru.

A qualitative methodology was used based on in-depth interviews and photographs. The visual registry sought to capture the environments and work dynamics of the cases portrayed. The sample was composed by equal numbers of men and women working in diverse occupations between 61 and 89 years old. Also, half of the sample was part of a pension scheme and the other did not receive any kind of pension income.

It can be strange to think of elderly workers because, in popular imaginary, “work” and “old age” seem to be two incompatible elements, as this stage of life is usually considered as a moment of inactivity, dependence and economic unproductivity (Bolles, 1981). Contrary to these preconceptions, Peruvian reality shows that more than half of the country’s older adults (58%) continue working over the “state pension age” until quite advanced ages (INEI, 2017; OECD; 2014).

Previous research about the Peruvian elderly workers’ situation has been done but is still an issue that remains largely unexplored. National statistics and current research show it to be a social problem that deserves to be taken into account, especially focusing on the population living in poverty. The evidence shows that only 37.6% of people over 60 years old are part of the pension system, with a minimum fraction of 6% being poor and 1% being extremely poor. The proportion of men with a retirement pension is almost the double (49.2%) than that of women (26.9%), while more than half the total of older adults continue working. Faced with this scenario, national public policy has not shown a clear position regarding the situation of the elderly workers, although the need of universal non-contributive pensions has been widely discussed. And, while this type of pension scheme has not yet been achieved, the discussion has led to the creation of the National Program of Economic Assistance “Pension 65”, designed to provide government economic transfers of only \$77 American dollars every two months to the elderly population in extreme poverty condition (INEI, 2017, Olivera and Clausen, 2014; Ramos, 2009).

All the mentioned studies conclude that the elderly are forced to continue working because of their economic needs, but they also mention briefly that there could be other non-economic motivations, although without deepening into them. Apart from the reasons mentioned there are the facts of being accustomed to a certain job routine or lifestyle, the desire of keeping in touch with spaces or people linked to their work activities, and continue learning or being perceived as an active member of their communities. In addition, work was emphasized by many people as a source of identity, wellbeing and fulfillment (HelpAge, 2012, Paz, 2010, Montes de Oca and Montoya, 2009, Escobar, 2012).

Additionally, there are a few qualitative studies that approach the subjective meanings of work by analyzing aged workers in different contexts, such as rural and urban areas, or informal or formal labor markets. In all of these studies, several reasons or motivations to continue working were found besides economic need, including the desire to maintain a valuable social status, decision power or to maintain healthy (Nué, 2000; Reynolds, 2012; Miralles, 2011; Parry and Taylor, 2007).

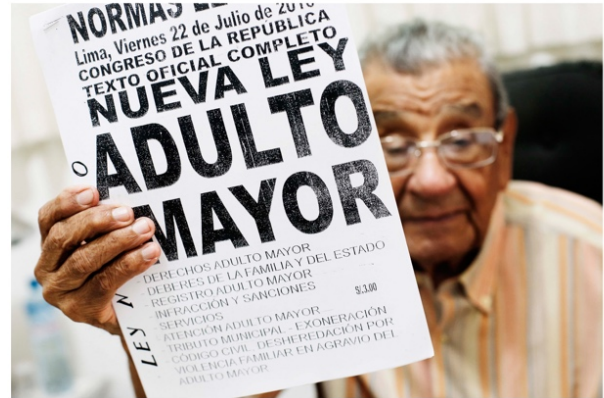
The “successful and active aging” analytical framework has been used by some of these research to highlight the capacity of older adults in contributing to their families, and societies, through work. By doing so, they have sought to confront the prejudices that understand old age as a life stage of inactivity and dependence (Miralles, 2011). However, although this paradigm seems to have positive effects, there are those who consider that it could be problematic due to potentially hidden coercive discourses, which would force people to remain active as a condition to be considered valuable and successful (Lamb, 2013). Taking this into consideration, those who choose to retire or are not able to engage in a remunerated activity, due to sickness or physical dependency, may be experiencing distress and pressure.

Throughout this study we have been able to verify what different researchers had previously mentioned. The variability of work experiences in old age and access to the pension system are the product of social inequalities and disadvantages accumulated throughout life (HelpAge, 2012, Paz, 2010, ECLAC, 2002; Montes de Oca, 1999). In this sense, particular work trajectories and working conditions in old age are the result of having access to basic and higher education, the socioeconomic status, the place of birth (rural or urban) and the gender, as well as the economic and political context. All this is reflected in the number of hours worked per day, the type of space in which they work and the presence or absence of support to carry it out. For example, cases that have had trajectories marked by poverty, lack of access to education and that have exercised informal jobs throughout their lives, must now continue working more than 10 hours a day and in precarious situations, while retired professionals usually work less than 9 hours in safe and comfortable spaces such as their homes or institutions, surrounded by colleagues or family members.

Likewise, this study focuses particularly in the analysis of the motivations to continue working during old age despite an ageist labor market. After categorizing the various answers, numerous reasons were found and those were classified in economic and non-economic.

First, there were economic motivations that focus in the survival needs of those who did not have a retirement pension or had to support the younger members of their families. Additionally, older adults who have retirement pensions also had economic motivations to continue working because they intended to increase their income to keep a desired lifestyle. Second, non-economic motivations were

also found. Older adults keep working in order to bond and serve others. Working was understood as an activity that provides meaning to life, a constitutive part of personal identity and an important way to continue learning and growing as a person. Likewise, older adults wanted to keep working to achieve or to maintain a better state of health. Finally, people wanted their work to transcend themselves in order to continue a family or cultural legacy.









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