

## RESEARCH

### PERCEPTION OF USERS OF A HEALTH CENTER ABOUT THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THE GROUP OF CHINESE GYMNASTICS – LIAN GONG: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS

PERCEPÇÃO DOS USUÁRIOS DE UM CENTRO DE SAÚDE ACERCA DE SUA PARTICIPAÇÃO NO GRUPO DE GINÁSTICA CHINESA – LIAN GONG: UMA ANÁLISE COMPREENSIVA

PERCEPCIÓN DE LOS USUARIOS DE UN PUESTO DE SALUD SOBRE SU PARTICIPACIÓN EN UN GRUPO DE GIMNASIA CHINA – LIAN GONG: UN ANÁLISIS GLOBAL

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#### ABSTRACT

This was a qualitative research that aimed to understand the meanings of practicing Lian Gong for participants in the group of therapeutic Chinese gymnastics at the São Paulo Health Center, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais. We used Phenomenology as the methodological trajectory, which as a pathway, allowed capturing the essence of the phenomenon from the speeches of nine users. The data were collected through an interview guided by the question: "Tell us what it is for you to participate in the Chinese gymnastics?" The participants' speeches converged into two categories of analysis: a) improvement of physical and mental health; b) coexistence in a group. It is believed that this research will help to strengthen and settle this activity in health units, especially in primary care, aiming to fulfill the precepts of health promotion through complementary and integrative practices.

**Keywords:** Gymnastics; Health of the Elderly; Health Promotion; Primary Health Care.

#### RESUMO

Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa, que teve como objetivo compreender os significados da prática do Lian Gong para os participantes do grupo de ginástica terapêutica chinesa do Centro de Saúde São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais. Como trajetória metodológica, utilizamos a fenomenologia que, como um caminho, permitiu apreender a essência do fenômeno a partir dos discursos de nove usuárias. A coleta de dados foi realizada por meio de entrevista guiada pela pergunta: "Conte para nós o que é, para você, participar da ginástica chinesa". Os discursos das participantes convergiram para duas categorias de análise: a) melhoria da saúde física e mental; b) convivência em grupo. Acredita-se que esta pesquisa possa contribuir para fortalecer e sedimentar essa atividade nas unidades de saúde, em especial na atenção primária, visando cumprir os preceitos da promoção à saúde também por meio de práticas complementares e integrativas.

**Palavras-chave:** Ginástica; Saúde do Idoso; Promoção da Saúde; Atenção Primária à Saúde.

#### RESUMEN

Se trata de una investigación cualitativa con el objetivo de comprender los significados de la práctica de Lian Gong para los participantes de un grupo de gimnasia terapéutica china del puesto de Salud São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais. Como trayectoria metodológica, usamos la fenomenología que, como camino, nos permitió captar la esencia del fenómeno a partir de los discursos de nueve usuarias. La recogida de datos fue realizada por medio de una entrevista guiada por la pregunta: "Cuéntenos qué significa para usted participar en la gimnasia china". Los discursos de las participantes se agruparon en dos categorías de análisis: 1. Mejora de la salud física y mental; y 2. Convivencia en grupo. Creemos que esta investigación pueda ayudar a fortalecer y sedimentar aun más esta actividad en las unidades de salud, en especial en atención básica, con miras a cumplir con los preceptos de la promoción de la salud a través de prácticas complementarias e integradas.

**Palabras clave:** Gymnastics; Salud del Anciano; Promoción de la Salud; Atención Primaria de Salud.

## INTRODUCTION

Health surveillance constitutes a set of actions in public health encompassing the knowledge of professionals from different areas of health and of those working jointly on the determinants and conditionings of the health-disease process, continuously and systematically, in order to modify the sanitary reality of the population.<sup>1,2</sup>

The elaboration and implementation of “healthy” public policies based on actions, establishment of intersector joint approaches, creation of health-friendly environments, strengthening community action, development of personal skills, and reorientation of health services and systems can be understood as field actions of health surveillance.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the Ministry of Health approved the National Policy of Integrative and Complementary Practices in the Unified Health System through the approval of an ordinance in 2006, which recommends the adoption, establishment, and implementation, by the state and municipal health secretaries, of actions and services related to integrated and complementary health practices. Such practices involve approaches that seek to stimulate the natural mechanisms of prevention of diseases and health recovery, through effective and safe technologies, with emphasis on embraced listening for the development of the therapeutic link, and integrate human beings with the environment and society providing an expanded view of the health-disease process and the global promotion of human care, especially self-care.<sup>2</sup>

The Homeopathy, Acupuncture, and Anthroposophical Medicine Program are together one of the integrative and complementary practices consolidated in the municipality of Belo Horizonte. It was implemented in 1994 as a proposal for a comprehensive and innovative approach to the determinants of the health-disease process in the municipal health network.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, with the implementation of the Family Health Program in the municipality in 2002, other integrative health practices were incorporated into the services, among them, the Chinese therapeutic gymnastics: Lian Gong in 18 therapies.

The Lian Gong in 18 therapies was created in 1974, in Shanghai, China, by the orthopedic and traumatologist surgeon Dr. Zhuang Yuan Ming. It was brought to Brazil in 1987 by the teacher of philosophy and Chinese Body Arts Maria Lúcia Lee. The word Lian Gong originates from the terms “*lian*”, which means “to train”, and “*gong*”, which means “persistent work”. Therefore, Lian Gong is the persistent work in training and exercising of the body through gentle and firm movements that dissolve muscle tensions, stretches tendons and ligaments, work on joints and coordination, corrects physical posture, and encourages the perception of senses. Remarkable results are observed, for example, in the functioning of the digestive tract, in heart and lung function, and in the control of hypertension, asthma, and rheumatic pains.<sup>3-5</sup>

This practice can contribute to break the vicious circle of conventional treatments and is today one of the complementary therapies recognized and advocated by the World Health Organization (WHO).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the method is greatly accepted by patients and individuals who exercise because of its objectivity, scientific nature, and simplicity.<sup>5</sup>

The Chinese therapeutic gymnastics has been implemented in the SUS-BH network since 2007 in partnership with the Instituto Mineiro de Tai Chi Chuan. Therefore, through the “BH Healthier” project, the Municipal Secretary of Health trains professionals that are involved in primary health care to be instructors in health units. About 160 professionals have been trained and certified as instructors; 120 health units in the municipality offer this practice. It is estimated that over 3,000 people practice these exercises regularly.<sup>7</sup> Currently, this practice is incorporated into the Active Living Program, targeted towards senior citizens in the municipal network.

At the São Paulo Health Center (CSSP), Northeastern region of Belo Horizonte, this practice was implemented in early 2010 after the certification of one of the nurses inserted in one of the four family health teams. Besides the participation of the nurse, this Lian Gong group from the CSSP relies on one physiotherapist from the Family Health Support Core Team (NASF) and one nursing assistant. The observation of the adherence of participants in this group led to the question: what does it mean to these people to attend the Lian Gong group? What has changed in their lives by participating in this activity?

Therefore, this study aims to understand the meanings of practicing Lian Gong to the participants of the Chinese gymnastics group at the São Paulo Health Center in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais.

## METHODOLOGICAL PATH

This is a qualitative research with a phenomenological approach. The study was performed in the São Paulo Health Center (CSSP) located in the northeast region of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais.

A qualitative research allows the in-depth understanding about the meanings of experiences lived by individuals. In every gesture, every attitude, each way of being, there is a purposiveness imbued with subjectivity, which is unlikely to be interpreted in the light of positivist science.<sup>8</sup> The Phenomenology, in turn, is an enlightening speech about what is shown as is, as a praxis or form of action that operates through the method that investigates the experience to understand it in its meanings rather than explain it.<sup>9,10</sup>

The study population was composed of users of the health center who attend the Lian Gong gymnastic group. All 23 participants in the Lian Gong group are females at ages be-

tween 60 and 79 years old; 90% practice twice a week; 48% had some medical diagnosis prior to participating in the group, such as repetitive stress injury, fibromyalgia, depression, hypertension, and labyrinthitis.

The subjects were informed about the research, goals, and justification and signed a volunteer consent form in compliance to the 196/96 resolution from the National Health Council, which deals with research involving humans.<sup>9</sup> The data were collected through an open interview guided by the question: "tell us what it is for you to participate in the Chinese gymnastics group?" The interviews were recorded on audio and transcribed in their entirety. The saturation criterion<sup>10</sup> was based on the repetition of contents signaling phenomenon concealment; a total of nine interviews were recorded. Fictitious names were adopted for the presentation of speeches. The adopted names in ascending order of interviews were: Fátima, Denise, Marisa, Elisa, Maria, Tereza, Rosa, Clara, and Ana.

The data were analyzed according to phenomenological assumptions in the understanding analysis:<sup>10</sup> a) reading and re-reading interviews to search for the meanings assigned by the subjects to their experiences participating in the exercise group; b) seizing units of meaning presented in the speeches, which was timely called phenomenological reduction; c) regrouping units of meaning in analytical categories and outlining the structure of the phenomenon (essence). These are: improvement of physical and mental health and coexistence in groups.

The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committees from the Belo Horizonte/SMSA Prefecture and the Federal University of Minas Gerais (ordinances CEP-SMSA-PBH: 0184.0.203.410.11\*; COEP/UFMG-CAEE: and 0689.0.203.410-11, respectively).

## RESULTS

### IMPROVEMENT OF PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

This analytical category showed that the Chinese gymnastics is helping to improve the quality of life of the participants in the group when considering reports that body aches decreased, and blood pressure became stabilized. It was also possible to learn that chronic pain such as joint and muscle and tensional pain were alleviated with the exercises provided by Lian Gong. The peculiar pain inhabits each body part and materializes in its various nuances according to the life story of each user, as shown in the fragments of testimonials:

*[...] For me it is very good because I had a back problem, with a lot of back pain, leg pain, and after I started doing Lian Gong all have improved a lot [...] It is very good*

*for health, it improved my pressure and the back problem [...] (Elisa).*

*[...] I am suffering from fibromyalgia, I am a caregiver for elders, and then it relieves tensions a lot, the pain. It relieves all the pains because fibromyalgia reaches from head to toe, then it helps me in the leg, calf, it relieves the tension in my neck. It helps the whole body [...] (Denise).*

*[...] It was excellent, I had a knee problem, which I could not kneel and now after the gymnastic I started to kneel. In the right arm, I already had surgery for carpal tunnel and I have Repetitive Strain Injury, and then the lump disappeared, after the gymnastic it is over, so it was excellent for me [...] (Marisa).*

*[...] It's great, it's helping me a lot, I'm enjoying it a lot, because before I felt a lot of pain, to this day I still feel [...] because I was with osteoarthritis, and for me it is being good [...] there is just gymnastics, physical exercise. It is being good [...] (Elisa).*

In addition, the gymnastic enables improvement in the quality of sleep for the subjects in the research; they feel better and go back into performing activities that they were not doing anymore. Thus, this practice is helping in the restoration of physical and mental health. The participants find a new support system in their lives according to the speeches:

*[...] my sleep is better, the mood is vastly improved, I'm more excited about walking, going out, I was very subdued, quiet indoors, I did not like walking, hiking, and stuff. But now this is being good, much better [...] (Elisa).*

*[...] It is very good to participate in the gymnastics, I improved, I almost could not sleep, I had to take controlled medicines and now it has been almost a year that I don't take, I'm sleeping well [...] My sleep improved a lot [...] (Tereza).*

*[...] but I like to come because we get entertained a lot [...]. For me it is physical activity, activity for the mind [...] it is very good for mind and body [...] (Rosa).*

In the preliminary survey carried out through the questionnaire applied to the 23 users who attend the Chinese gymnastics group at the CSSP, 69% reported some type of pain: back, arms, and legs; and 81% claimed decreased pain after participating in the group. Regarding the use of medication, 47% were using medicine for pain, anxiety, depression, or insomnia before start-

ing attending the gymnastic group, and 36% reported a reduction of symptoms with the Lian Gong exercises; 64% maintained the same dosages of medication. As for the need for medical consultation at the health center, 43% of the respondents reported decreased need of consultations with the practice of gymnastics.

## COEXISTENCE IN A GROUP

The participation in the Lian Gong Chinese gymnastics group provides feelings of well-being, pleasure, and happiness. Moreover, it is an opportunity to meet people, make new friends, chat, and talk about different things. The practice of physical exercises is incorporated into the routine of subjects and represents a differential in their lives. These are meanings related to the Chinese gymnastics practice evidenced in the speeches:

*[...] For me it is a great pleasure and a great happiness [...] (Denise).*

*[...] It is being good; I'm meeting new people, making new friends, issues of improvements in my life [...] (Elisa).*

*[...] I think that it's good because we socialize with different people; we get to know about more things in our daily life [...] (Maria).*

*[...] It brings new friends too, conversation, I am satisfied, we do not stay with trauma, sometimes we leave home with a trauma and when we get here everything goes away [...] (Tereza).*

The therapeutic Chinese gymnastics at the CSSP is becoming a healthy social living space considering that the people who attend the group have similar needs and lifestyles because they reside in the same community. Another interesting fact is the involvement of team professionals in this activity; the therapeutic gymnastics is currently part of the prescriptions from professionals in the health center.

The participants in the study suggest an increase in the frequency the group meetings. We infer if the fact that they feel alone, having no one to talk to at home, lead them to express that need as a way to interact with people with similar health problems, in addition to the benefits provided, by the gymnastics.

*[...] I think that the number of classes should be increased, to improve even more [...] (Denise).*

*[...] it's a shame that we only have it twice a week, it could be three times a week because we feel the need to do it three times a week [...] (Marisa).*

*[...] We should have it more to feel even better [...] (Maria).*

It is worth mentioning that the expanded perspective in health, with the incorporation of alternative practices, transcends the biomedical model focused merely on the medicalization of the body and healing of the disease to an integrated care that considers the social, cultural, and emotional aspects of the human being in a multidisciplinary approach.

## DISCUSSION

Considering the emerging essential aspects, it was possible to understand that the meaning of practicing the Chinese gymnastics is closely related to physical and mental improvement in the study participants. In the age range of the participants, between 60 and 79 years, the factors that influence the emergence of body aches can be external, such as wind, cold, humidity and dryness; and internal, such as: negative emotions (anger, worry, sadness, fear, anxiety, depression, and loneliness), in addition to bad use of the body in inadequate posture, sedentariness, overexertion, or injuries. The regular practice of Lian Gong in the third age allows adequate movements to release muscles, fascia, ligaments, and tendons improving and expanding the range of movement of joints and thus reducing pain.<sup>6</sup> Experiences with slow and gradual exercise are presented as the means for understanding the changes in the elderly body. By consciously mobilizing the body, the elderly understand the blocking of tensions and changes in the aging process.<sup>11</sup>

In the elderly, the practice of Lian Gong helps in the recovery and preservation of the body's physiological condition strengthening limbs and functions of organs, and slowing down the aging process.<sup>12,13</sup> In addition, it provides multiple beneficial effects in the anthropometric, neuromuscular, metabolic, and psychological level, which, in addition to serving in the prevention and treatment of elderly diseases, it significantly improves the quality of life of individuals and their independence.<sup>3</sup>

The advantages of practicing physical exercises for the elderly are dependent on how aging is being processed and their routine. The health benefits occur even when the practice of physical activity is initiated later in life. Exercises are a form of self-moving and natural to the human body, a pleasurable way to keep the body strong and trained.<sup>14</sup>

Other meanings of practicing the Chinese gymnastics emerged from speeches by professionals, such as about understanding that gymnastics extends the social conviviality of the participants. The concept of quality of life in the elderly population may be related to interpersonal relationships, emotional balance, good health, healthy habits, leisure, material goods, and personal values among other factors.<sup>3</sup>

The incorporation of complementary and alternative health practices in primary health care has increased in the recent times, preferably those geared to older people. It is indicative that society is more sensitive to the demands of the aging population.<sup>11,14</sup> The overlapping between physical exercise and health have a high probability of contributing to improve the habits in this population consequently causing physical, mental, and emotional betterments because participating in a regular program of physical activity prevents, assists, and brings many benefits for these people during the aging process.<sup>15</sup>

In the Family Health Strategy, these practices are often under the responsibility of the NASF consisting of physiotherapists, physical educators, audiologists, occupational therapists, nutritionists, psychologists, and pharmacists. In these meetings, the important interaction among participants with the exchange of experiences and problematization of the reality experienced by them is noticeable. Such practices are compatible with the fundamentals of SUS and the WHO recommendations; they improve the quality of life of the population and contribute to the promotion of self-care.<sup>15</sup>

The elderly seek social integration and coexistence with other people through this practice; they feel valued with strengthen self-esteem and “joy to live”, which leads to decrease in anxiety, aggression, hostility, and depression.<sup>15</sup> The well-being arising from the practice of physical activity appears to be associated with the opportunity to forget about everyday problems for a period of time, feel in control of the experience, feel competent and effective, increase social interactions, and strengthen self-concept, self-esteem, and good humor.<sup>16</sup>

The participation in the Lian Gong group has contributed to the disruption of isolation, strengthening of ties, encouragement of mutual aid – “to take care of yourself and the other” – the group encourages the integration of individuals in search of healthy environments into society.<sup>17</sup> This interaction takes place by means of coexistence that is expressed in familiarity and conviviality, in relationships (intimate or social), and in living in common; it promotes the creation of links with others and a feeling of belonging to a group.<sup>18</sup>

In a study conducted with a group of health promotion, the participants’ reports indicate the benefits from body activities, which provide vitality in the aging process. The elderly report that they perceived that being a healthy elder was not as difficult as they imagined because they began to expand their networks of social relations and saw the need of mutual cooperation in the pursuit of health, held in a relaxed and cheerful way. They discovered the importance of being responsible for their own health because they learned to know their bodies, and consequently, identified their limitations and potentialities. Self-care appeared as one of the most important gains for these seniors. The results obtained in the group contributed significantly to the elderly’s mental, emotional, and social health.<sup>13</sup>

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The findings in this study indicate the importance and necessity for the implementation of complementary and integrative health practices in the primary care geared mainly to the elderly population, given the age of the subjects who participated in this research. While taking the new concept of aging as a phase of great possibilities of learning and knowledge, it becomes urgent to incorporate strategies on health care for the elderly, so that they can promote their self-care and face the aging process with more tranquility.

For the elderly, chronic pain is alleviated by means of physical exercises performed in a simple manner that aid in balance and flexibility and extend the range of body movements. Hence, the practice of Lian Gong breaks the vicious circle of conventional treatments. Furthermore, the acquaintanceship in the gymnastic group encourages socialization, helps in mental health to the point that the subjects expressed the need to do it more times a week.

In the present day, the need to combat the medicalization of human suffering is notorious, which pervades far beyond the physical pain and can be achieved through alternative health practices. The Lian Gong represents one of the strategies for improving the quality of life of people, especially the elderly, who are still marginalized in our society.

It is necessary, therefore, that health professionals awaken participants in Chinese gymnastics about the necessity of seeking quality of life, encouraging the routine practice of bodily exercises that strengthen the cardio-respiratory and locomotion system, and contribute to the improvement and maintenance of health and functionality in the individual.

It is believed that this research could help strengthening and settling this activity aiming to fulfill the precepts of health promotion with complementary and integrative practices. However, the limitation of the study is perceived, by the fact that it was carried out in only one health unit. Thus, we summon other professionals in the execution of new studies aiming to expand the essential aspects of the topic in focus.

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