



# The old lady from Ipanema: Changing notions of old age in Brazil

Annette Leibing\*

*Department of Social Studies of Medicine, McGill University, 3647 Peel St, Montreal, Qc, Canada H3A 1X1*  
*Instituto de Psiquiatria, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*  
*Institute of Social Gerontology of Quebec, Montreal, Qc, Canada*

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## Abstract

This article identifies the main categories, notions, and values associated with aging in articles published in urban Brazilian print media 1967–2002, and uses these categories to trace several historical changes regarding what constitutes “successful” aging in Brazil. The historical changes include the transition of aging from a divine to more worldly concern; from a male to predominantly female preoccupation; from ‘old age’ to ‘third age.’ These transitions are intertwined with new moral hierarchies, and are linked to the medicalization of old age in the late twentieth century.

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## 1. Introduction

The Girl from Ipanema. Look, what a beautiful sight! There she is, full of grace, That girl who’s coming towards us, Passing us with a sweet swing of her hips, Towards the sea. . . (“The girl from Ipanema”, composed by Tom Jobim and Vinicius de Moraes, 1963)

Fernanda Montenegro, considered by many to be Brazil’s most talented actress, was nominated in 1999 for an Academy Award for her role in the film “Central Station.” Her nomination made her a national heroine, not only because she was the first Brazilian to receive such recognition—augmenting

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\* Department of Social Studies of Medicine, McGill University, 3647 Peel St, Montreal, Qc, Canada H3A 1X1. Tel.: +1 514 398 6033; fax: +1 514 398 1498.

*E-mail address:* [aleibing@videotron.ca](mailto:aleibing@videotron.ca).

Brazil's self-esteem, as former president Cardoso remarked at that time—but also because a 70-year old woman was challenging young, seductive Hollywood beauties. “I am the old lady from Ipanema,” commented Fernanda Montenegro, referring to the famous song by Tom Jobim.

Fernanda Montenegro did not win the Oscar, but the story continued receiving coverage in the Brazilian media, revealing many of the topics to be discussed below. Recently, for example, the cover of the weekly magazine *Veja* showed a photograph of the mature and self-confident actress with the title “Simply Fernanda” (*Veja Rio [weekly magazine]*, 2001). “Simply” referred to Fernanda's personality which is less “show business” in comparison to her Hollywood colleagues, but also to a certain “de-corporeality”: her prominent wrinkles set her apart from many Brazilians of the higher classes who carefully hide all visible signs of decay. What Fernanda and these Brazilians have in common is that certain persons are considered neither old nor young, because, up to a certain point, their prestige, fame, and money allow them to transcend a more traditional life course by ignoring decay and old age.

Hierarchies of power<sup>1</sup> and the plasticity of the body are important issues when discussing aging in Brazil. It is far more common to carefully hide all signs of the aging body in Brazil than in many countries. Brazil is well known for its large number of plastic surgeries,<sup>2</sup> even if some popular sayings—such as “when she smiles, her knee lifts”—ridicule the practice, and reveal the decay behind many careful attempts of hiding one's age.<sup>3</sup> The management of the perfect body is part of a system that creates moral hierarchies: the boundaries between what is considered right and wrong, successful or unsuccessful are often made up along dynamic, sometimes hidden, and ideological lines. Gerontology, concerned with theorizing aging, is but one institution that contributes to the formation of categories that influence everyday life. Gerontology has been described by some critical scholars (e.g., Cohen, 1994; Katz, 1996) as linked to what Althusser (quoted in Haraway, 1991, p. 196) called “simplification(s) in the last instance”: certainties such as unquestioned categories, clichés, and stereotypes.

In this article, I discuss the most salient categories of aging and how they have changed over the last 35 years through an analysis of the coverage of this topic in the local print media in urban Brazil. These changes, which also indicate a change in individualities (Novas & Rose, 2000), open up new possibilities for living one's life as one becomes older, but, at the same time, make other possibilities less desirable or even immoral. To shed light on the process of becoming of certain categories, while others drift into the shadow, is the intention of this article.

## 2. Some background observations on topic and methodology

Studying aging in Brazil is important for several reasons. First, it is conceivable that the obsession of many Brazilians with a desirable body makes aging more problematic than for persons living in a less

<sup>1</sup> Power is here understood in the Foucaultian sense as “the relational environment in which actions take place, and so is the sum of influences on actions...” (Prado, 1995: 162).

<sup>2</sup> In 1994, 100,000 plastic surgeries took place in Brazil, while in the year 2000, the number rose to 360,000 (8% and 28% of these, respectively, were men; Sociedade Brasileira de Cirurgia Plástica, in: Rogar, 2002). A recent worldwide study by Avon Cosmetics revealed that not only that Brazilian women are the most preoccupied women in the world with their appearance, but also that plastic surgery is regarded as “natural” in Brazil even more than in the U.S., the country with the highest number of this kind of surgery (Buchalla, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> The 22-year-old “Miss Brazil 2001” set off a heated debate within the local press because of her 19 surgical interventions before the elections. The boundaries of the authenticity of beauty were discussed, with questions asked about how much “unnaturalness” could be allowed while still attributing beauty to the person and not to technological interventions (Mansur, 2001).

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