

**Compassion day  
Social Psychology  
Colombia**

# A visit to the elderly Welfare Center For Elderly People “ARCHBISHOP GÓMEZ MISAEI”



*Welfare Center For Elderly People “ARCHBISHOP GÓMEZ MISAEI”*

In this text, I would like to tell my experience during the “day of compassion” suggested by the Coursera course: Social Psychology.



*Access road*



I live my life going back and forth between Bogota, the Capital, and Pacho, a small town in Cundinamarca, Colombia, where I spend several days a week, usually Thursday through Sunday. When I thought about the best way to live the day of compassion, I remembered the elders of the Welfare Center, a place that I already knew. So I paid a visit to the old people who live in this Center.



*Hallway to bedrooms*

Some time ago, I used to go there to draw pictures with the elders and read stories to them. At that time, it was hard for me to find my place in this institution, which is administered by two Catholic nuns and counts with some workers and benefactors, but not with volunteers. Somehow, I was starting a pioneering role in the Center.



*In front of the dining room*

In the past, when I visited the Center, I was often very moved by the elders' loneliness. That is why I think they deserve compassion. To me, this word means that I feel others' pain and I try to make sense of this feeling.

In this last visit, I had two purposes. Firstly, I wanted to go back to spend time with the elders in playful activities, and secondly I wanted to meet the Sisters and make a good impression to them so I could take up the goal of becoming friends with the elders, register and recover their life stories.

It is important to keep in mind that neither the Sisters nor the caregivers and the elders, or even I, share the same vision of reality. Our contexts, our stories, our expectations and purposes are very different and, naturally, this affects our perceptions.





*Anita and her dog*

Colombia's multiculturalism and diversity is present here. As for myself, I come from an academic environment, since I was a university Professor for many years, and I live in Bogotá much of my time. The Sisters, in contrast, come from Antioquia, a Colombian province with its own, very particular, cultural background. They have a religious-oriented fieldwork training. And, finally, the elders come mostly from rural Pacho and almost all of them have very little education.

As expected, the communication was not easy. It was necessary to confront prejudice and preventions. While the material needs of the elderly are well provided, I think human beings need more than just food and shelter. In particular, everyone needs to relate to others, to communicate, to build shared experiences.



*Anita and her cats*



Unfortunately, the communication among the elders, and between them and their caregivers, is very poor. This is in part because their language is poor and they have hearing problems, but mostly because of the prevalence of distrust and fear which can be traced back to a history of abuse and neglect.

A few elders do chores such as gardening or cooking. Some like to play ludo. But most of them just sit and let pass the time ...

Sister Marta arrived to the Center three months ago along with another nun to take over the management of the house.



*Chickens*

I had not met her before, so I explained the best I could the purpose of my visit. I suggested that I could talk to the elderly and create a file with their life stories, but she said she did not agree with the latter. I think she feared that I wanted to criticize her work.

I am aware that some elderly have the habit of complaining and making up stories. I also know



*Helping in the kitchen*



that what they say should not be taken literally. But they are, by no means, absolutely unintelligible. Underlying what they say, they express the truth of their lives, and through their stories, it is possible for an understanding and empathetic ear, to take a glimpse of their past experiences, desires, and hopes.

How to persuade the Sister? Taking the direct route of persuasion would have been difficult. I decided better the peripheral route. I tried to make her feel that I was



*Playing ludo*





*Gardening*

useful and that we shared a common purpose. So I took part of the rosary, and when she told me that a patient needed a drug, I offered myself to go get it. So, I went and I also bought corn for the chickens and food for the cats. The elderly are very happy when they got the food to feed their animals.

When I went back I joined the rosary. Most of the elders like to pray but others remain apart and they even try to sabotage the activity.

I wonder if this passivity of most of the elderly is related to the phenomenon of de-individuation. The elders exercise their role, caregivers and directors alike, but no one really questions who he/she is, or why he/she does what he/she does.

After the rosary, I read them some poems and short verses.

From this experience I was motivated to continue visiting the elderly, supporting



*Anita and her friends*

the work of the Sisters and other caregivers and continuing the work of saving their narratives and life stories. I think that, no matter what difficulties and obstacles I may encounter, eventually, I will be able to write a text and make photographic records, so that the lives of these people are not lost in oblivion, and new generations will be able to learn to understand and value their elders.



*Drawing*



I will also try to promote library visits and participation in the town's cultural projects. These activities will surely contribute greatly to improve the elders' good self-esteem and a better perception of themselves as individuals.



*Peeling potatoes*