

Existential phenomenological analysis of fibromyalgia cases from an integrative literature review

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ABSTRACT

The article investigates fibromyalgia from the perspective of existential phenomenology, exploring the psychological impacts of the disease and management strategies. It begins with a review of Heidegger's existential phenomenology, highlighting the relevance of understanding individual existence and the meaning of life. The study adopts the integrative literature review method to analyze recent research on the psychological impacts of fibromyalgia and the different types of management. We identified 8 articles that met the inclusion criteria. The results reveal a complex interaction between self-care, group support, and patient empowerment in the management of fibromyalgia. It is concluded that existential phenomenological psychology may be of paramount importance in the management of fibromyalgia, although further investigations are needed to establish a direct correlation between the themes.

Keywords: Fibromyalgia, Existential phenomenological psychology, Health Psychology, Psychology.

INTRODUCTION

Existential phenomenological psychology, a philosophical approach developed by Martin Heidegger, offers a unique perspective for understanding the human experience, emphasizing the importance of individual existence and the search for meaning (Evangelista, 2015). Heidegger, in his work "Being and Time" (2012), introduces the concept of Dasein to refer to the human condition. Dasein (or "Being-there") is a being whose existence is characterized by his ability to understand and interpret the world around him, and who is always projecting himself into future possibilities. Heidegger's existential phenomenology seeks to unveil the meaning of being through the analysis of everyday experience, focusing on the way people experience the world in a pre-reflective way (Evangelista, 2015).

When we talk specifically about illnesses and pathologies, the existential phenomenological approach highlights the lived aspects of the experience of illness. Instead of focusing only on the

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biological perspective, it directs its attention to the significant aspects of the experience of the disease. Thus, it investigates how illness transforms the way we exist, including habits, interests, and expectations, instead of being limited to dysfunction in body functioning (Gründling et. al, 2021). A theory that uses existential phenomenology to analyze illnesses from an analytical rather than a biological perspective, according to Gründling et al. (2021), is the phenomenological approach to illness, by Fredrik Svenaeus, which starts from the fundamental concepts of Heidegger's existential analytics. This approach focuses on the relationship between the human being and the world, especially on the affective dispositions that influence the experience of the disease. The emphasis is on the importance of understanding how the disease shapes the perception and experience of human beings in their existential context (Gründling et. al, 2021). With this understanding, it is possible to take as an example diseases that significantly affect people's quality of life, such as fibromyalgia (FM).

According to the Brazilian Society of Rheumatology (2011), fibromyalgia is a complex syndrome that manifests itself with generalized body pain, fatigue, sleep disorders, and several other symptoms, including memory changes, anxiety, depression, and intestinal problems. The diagnosis is clinical and is based on the presence of diffuse pain for more than three months, along with tenderness in specific points of the body, especially in regions around joints, such as shoulders, knees, and hips. Fibromyalgia patients are thought to have an increased sensitivity to pain due to a dysregulation in the central nervous system, which amplifies the pain response. Although the exact cause is still unknown, it is known that genetic factors, physical trauma, psychological or severe infections can trigger the development of the condition.

The treatment of fibromyalgia is multidisciplinary and aims to relieve symptoms and improve the patient's quality of life. This may involve a combination of medications to manage pain, physical therapy to improve muscle function and mobility, psychotherapy to address emotional and psychological issues associated with the condition, and self-care strategies such as regular exercise, relaxation techniques, and dietary and lifestyle changes. The therapeutic approach is individualized and adapted to the specific needs of each patient.

According to a survey by Martins (2020), recent studies indicate that fibromyalgia affects a significant portion of the general population, with prevalence ranging from 2% to 22%, being more common in women. In Brazil, it is estimated that the prevalence of the disease is between 2.5% and 4.4% of the population, making it the second leading cause of rheumatological disease after osteoarthritis (Martins, 2020).

Pain, the main symptom that affects the quality of life of people with fibromyalgia, has different classifications, which can be made based on different criteria. One of the most common

classifications considers the temporal aspect of pain, distinguishing between acute pain and chronic pain, according to Araujo (2020). Acute pain is pain that arises transiently in response to a specific injury or condition, usually with a limited duration of minutes to a few weeks. However, if not properly controlled, acute pain can contribute to the development of chronic pain, which is characterized by being prolonged in time, often difficult to identify temporally or to identify a specific cause. It can arise as a result of an underlying chronic condition (Araujo, 2020). Chronic pain syndromes, characteristic of FM, are a particular type of chronic pain that is characterized by poor functional adaptation and a significant influence on the patient's quality of life. These syndromes often evolve from pre-existing acute or chronic pain. In chronic pain syndrome, pain becomes the central focus of the patient's life, affecting not only the physical, but also the emotional and social aspects.

Pain, according to Borges-Duarte (2019), is not only a physical sensation, but ontologically, it is an experience that permeates all aspects of existence. Pain is an experience that defies understanding and can lead to a reevaluation of the meaning of existence. Pain in FM can be seen as an invitation to redefine the being and the possibilities of existence, where the individual is called to find new ways of being-in-the-world, despite the limitations imposed by the syndrome. Chronic pain and fatigue profoundly influence one's perception of oneself and the world, challenging one's sense of identity and interpersonal relationships. The narrowing of the horizon of possibilities, as discussed by Sanches and Boemer (2002), resonates with Heidegger's notion of being thrown into a world that is both familiar and strange, where pain becomes a constant that limits the freedom to be and act.

Therefore, fibromyalgia presents significant challenges due to the complex diagnosis, multifaceted treatment, and increasing incidence. In addition, the subjective nature of the condition, which encompasses physical, emotional, and existential aspects, demands a deeper understanding. A comprehensive analysis is essential to improve the care and quality of life of affected patients, which justifies the need for studies that delve into the possibilities of dealing with the syndrome.

In view of the above, the general objective of this study was to carry out a survey of research and information on fibromyalgia in order to conclude whether there is a possibility of an analysis of such a disease from the existential phenomenological approach, in order to answer the question: "What are the impacts and different types of management for fibromyalgia, and if it is possible to analyze them through the perspective of existential phenomenological psychology?"

MATERIAL AND METHODS

For the elaboration of this article, the integrative literature review method was used (Souza, Silva & Carvalho, 2010). This decision was motivated by the fact that integrative review allows a

comprehensive understanding of current knowledge on a specific topic. This method is conducted in order to identify, analyze and synthesize the results of independent studies that deal with the same subject (Souza, Silva & Carvalho, 2010). The integrative review is a broad and judicious methodological approach that seeks to fully understand an analyzed phenomenon, combining data from the theoretical and empirical literature. In this context, a careful analysis of the data extracted from the selected articles was carried out, aiming to identify and synthesize the main evidence on the psychological impacts of fibromyalgia and the management approaches described in the literature (Souza, Silva & Carvalho, 2010).

This review was conducted with the purpose of exploring the psychological impacts of fibromyalgia and the different types of management, so that after this understanding, it would be possible to make correlations with the theories of existential phenomenological psychology, guided by the guiding question: "What are the impacts and different types of management for fibromyalgia, and is it possible to analyze them through the perspective of existential phenomenological psychology?".

The bibliographic survey was carried out from November 2023 to March 2024, using the Scielo, LILACS, and Pepsic databases, aiming to cover a wide range of scientific publications relevant to the topic. The descriptors in Portuguese 'Fibromyalgia', 'Fibromyalgia AND Psychology', and 'Fibromyalgia AND Health Psychology' were used in order to refine the search and ensure the relevance of the retrieved studies.

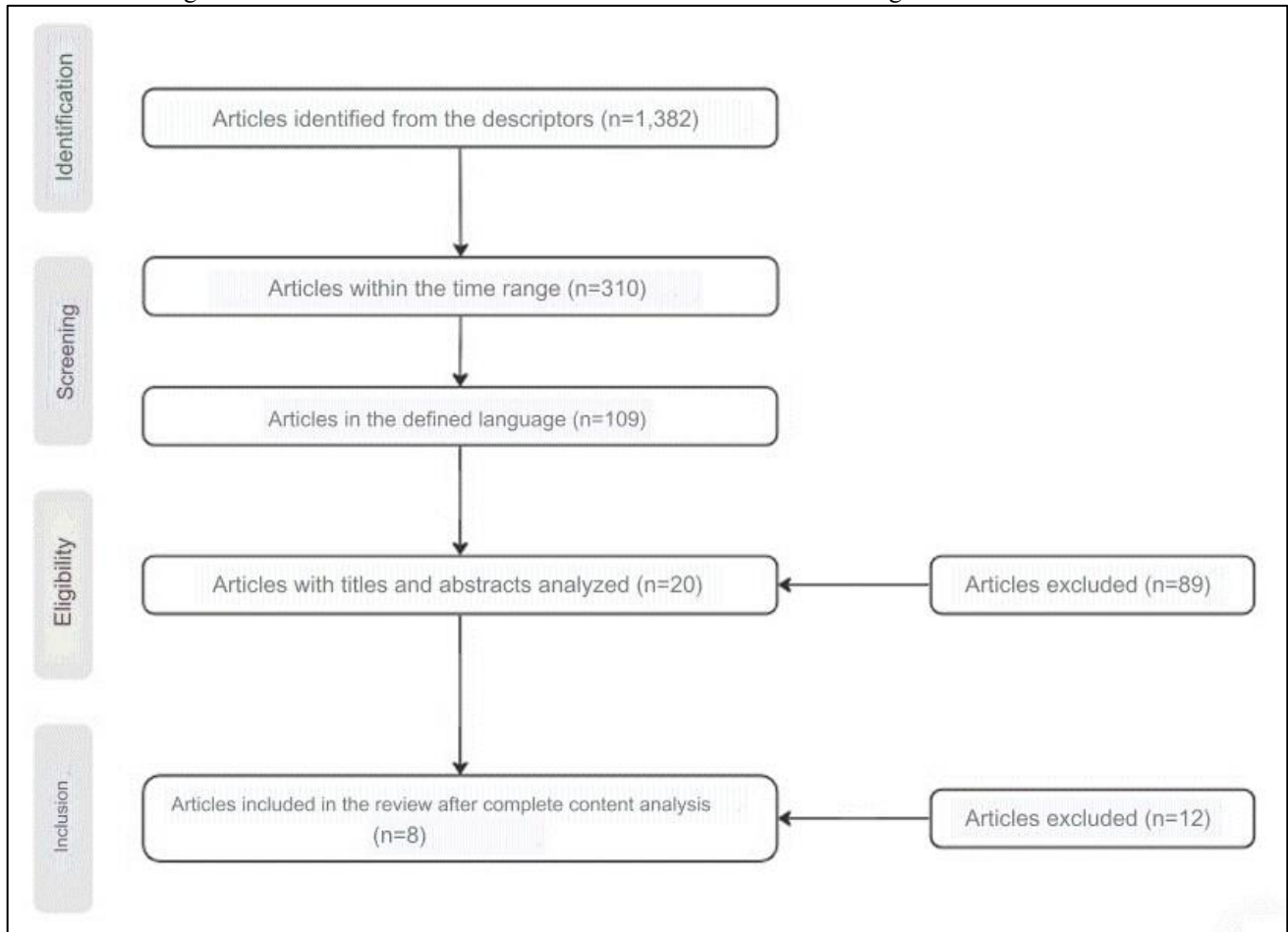
The inclusion criteria adopted were: articles published in the period from 2019 to 2023, in Portuguese, and that addressed the psychological impacts of fibromyalgia and/or the different types of management, whether from the perspective of existential phenomenological psychology or not.

Studies were excluded from the analysis that, despite mentioning fibromyalgia, addressed only the biological aspects of the syndrome, or addressed types of therapies, whether medication or not. Articles in which the intervention used was psychological approaches such as psychoanalysis or cognitive-behavioral therapy were also disregarded.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Initially, 1,382 articles were identified, of which 310 corresponded to the time interval of interest, from 2019 to 2023. After applying the language criterion, 109 articles remained. The selection of articles was carried out in two phases: the first consisted of the reading of titles and abstracts, resulting in the pre-selection of 20 articles; the second phase involved the full reading of these articles, culminating in the choice of 8 studies that fully met the inclusion criteria established for this review, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Flowchart for the identification and selection of studies integrated into the review.



Source: Pereira et. al (2024)

The selected articles were reviewed and organized in Table 1, containing information such as the title of the study, authorship, year of publication, sample size, instruments used, objective, and results pertinent to the psychological aspects of fibromyalgia. Then, they underwent bibliometric analysis (Vouga & Amatucci, 2015) and content analysis (Bardin, 2008).

Table 1: Descriptive overview of the data collected

Authorship (year). Title	Bibliometric Analysis			Content Analysis	
	Study Type	Sample	Instruments	Objective	Main results
Ferri, Bianco, Thiago, Contro and Oliveira. (2023). Online psychoeducational follow-up: the experience of a self-support group for women with fibromyalgia	Experience report	15 subjects	Field observation	Discuss the role and support of psychoeducation with women with fibromyalgia.	Promotion of information would not have reached patients without the mediation of the group.

Oliveira, Silva, Santo and Mattos. (2023). Body practices and interdisciplinary treatment of people with fibromyalgia: the gift of care	Qualitative study	8 subjects	Open interview and field observation	To understand Interdisciplinary Treatment and Body Health Practices as a health care system.	The treatments were able to construct new social uses of the body in the social instances of life.
Crestani, Ramsdorf, Lima and Costa. (2022). Effectiveness of group therapies on the quality of life of patients with fibromyalgia: a systematic review	Systematic review	Not applicable		To verify the effectiveness of group therapies on the quality of life of fibromyalgia patients.	Positive impact on the quality of life of patients in their physical, psycho-emotional and social dimensions.
FerriI, Wagner and Oliveira (2021). Family dilemmas, fibromyalgia and the relationship with the support group: a case study.	Case Study	1 59-year-old female participant.	Field observation	Discuss the dynamics of health care resulting from a support group.	The support group was important for the promotion of mental health.
Monteiro, Oliveira and Oliveira. (2021). Psychological aspects of fibromyalgia - integrative review	Integrative review	Not applicable		To construct a descriptive overview of psychological aspects of patients with fibromyalgia.	Difficulties in adapting to the disease, with negative consequences in biopsychosocial aspects
Couto, Yuan, Souza, Santo and Marques. (2020). Evaluation of self-care agency and its association with symptoms and quality of life in individuals with fibromyalgia	Field research	40 subjects	EAAA-R; EVA; IDG; SS; QIF-R	To evaluate the self-care agency of individuals with FM.	Moderate self-care agency and weak association of self-care.
Oliveira, Berardinelli, Cavaliere, Rosa, Costa and Barbosa. (2019). The daily life of women with fibromyalgia and the interdisciplinary challenge of empowerment for self-care	Qualitative study	12 women participating in the interdisciplinary group on health education.	Field observation	Describe the daily life of women living with fibromyalgia	Living with pain causes physical, emotional and psychic exhaustion.

Oliveira, Berardinelli, Duarte, Ferrari and Campelo. (2019). Quality of life and self-care of women living with fibromyalgia: an integrative review	Integrative review	Not applicable	To analyze scientific productions on the quality of life and self-care of women living with fibromyalgia.	The symptomatology of the disease, specifically pain, was the main factor that negatively influenced the quality of life.
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Fonte: Pereira et. al (2024)

The annual distribution of the 8 selected articles reveals an increasing trend in recent years, with a distribution that suggests a peak of interest and publication in the year 2021 and 2023. The research methods employed in the articles vary significantly, with a predominance of qualitative studies (50%) exploring the lived experiences of fibromyalgia patients, followed by literature review studies (37.5%). Quantitative studies, through the use of psychometric instruments, had lower representativeness (12.5%). The population studied in the articles reflects particular attention to women, who are predominantly affected by fibromyalgia. This emphasis is consistent with the existing literature, which points to a higher prevalence of the condition among females. The instruments used to assess depression and anxiety in the studies demonstrate an interest in quantifying pain intensity, as well as measuring the levels of impact on the quality of life of the population studied.

Analysis of the psychological impacts of fibromyalgia and the different types of management reveals a complex interplay between self-care, group support, and patient empowerment. In the study by Couto et al. (2020), a moderate agency of self-care is observed among individuals with fibromyalgia, highlighting a fragile association between self-care and quality of life. This result points to the need for more holistic and personalized approaches in the treatment of fibromyalgia, suggesting that self-care, although essential, is not enough on its own to ensure a significant improvement in patients' quality of life, especially when it does not consider sociodemographic factors and the severity of symptoms.

The importance of support groups is highlighted in the studies by Oliveira et al. (2019) and Ferri et al. (2023), which illustrate how these spaces can function as catalysts for patient empowerment, promoting self-care and improving quality of life. These studies highlight the value of support groups in mitigating social isolation and promoting mental and physical health, indicating the relevance of the community and collective support in the management of fibromyalgia. In addition, the study by Oliveira e Silva et al. (2023) on interdisciplinary treatment and body practices highlights the importance of reciprocity in health care, suggesting that an approach that transcends the traditional doctor-patient relationship, involving a mutual exchange of care that values patients' knowledge and experience, may be particularly beneficial in the treatment of fibromyalgia. This

aspect is in line with the existential phenomenological perspective, which emphasizes the patient's autonomy and the importance of the lived experience.

Finally, the systematic review by Crestani et al. (2022) reinforces the effectiveness of group therapies in improving the quality of life of fibromyalgia patients, highlighting the crucial role of patient empowerment and building a support network. This result highlights the importance of therapeutic approaches that promote the active participation of patients in their own care process, emphasizing the therapeutic value of social relationships and patient involvement.

From the perspective of existential phenomenological psychology, the experience of fibromyalgia gains even more depth when we incorporate the concepts of possibility and closure (Evangelista, 2015). Heidegger conceives of the human being as a being of possibilities, emphasizing that existence is marked by the ability to transcend the present and project oneself into potential futures. Fibromyalgia, in this sense, can be seen as a condition that imposes a historical restriction of some physical and psychological possibilities, but not necessarily a closure of the individual's capacity to be. Closure, in Heidegger, is not an absolute end, but a limit that can be confronted and potentially overcome (Evangelista, 2015). The experience of pain and suffering can lead to a temporary closure, where the individual is confronted with the limitations imposed by the condition. However, even in the face of this closure, Dasein maintains the ability to project itself beyond its current situation, seeking to appropriate new possibilities of existence.

Fibromyalgia, therefore, challenges the individual to reevaluate what is possible within the new conditions of existence, encouraging a redefinition of life projects and a reunion with one's own being. The condition of fibromyalgia can be understood as an invitation to reinterpret and appropriate the possibilities of life, where the individual is called to explore new paths and redefine what it means to live well. Authenticity, in this context, is achieved when the individual actively engages in the search for these new possibilities, taking responsibility for their own existence and choosing how to respond to the challenges imposed by the disease.

In short, fibromyalgia, by imposing a closure of certain possibilities, does not determine the being of Dasein, but offers a terrain for the exploration and realization of other possibilities. Through Heidegger's existential phenomenological psychology, we can understand that fibromyalgia is not only a limit, but also a starting point for the reaffirmation of freedom and the ability of human beings to choose, even in the face of the most challenging adversities.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

After collecting and analyzing the data obtained from the selected articles, it is possible to identify the various psychological impacts resulting from fibromyalgia, as well as a range of forms of

management, often aimed at self-care and improving quality of life. However, the examination of the data revealed a lack of productions that directly addressed the analysis of fibromyalgia from the perspective of existential phenomenological psychology. On the other hand, the relationship between fibromyalgia and existential phenomenological management was inferred from the theoretical basis, supported by authors and studies that establish connections between health conditions, including pain, and existential issues. These scholars reiterate the comprehensive nature of phenomenology, emphasizing its contribution to coping with psychological issues, which is corroborated by the results of the reviewed articles, which identified interventions aimed at understanding and acceptance. Thus, it is possible to say that, theoretically, existential phenomenological psychology can be used for the management of fibromyalgia cases. The effectiveness of group approaches in the treatment of fibromyalgia is also highlighted.

In this context, it is concluded that existential phenomenological psychology can be of paramount importance in the management of this syndrome, however, additional investigations are needed to establish a direct correlation between the themes, especially in practical and interventional studies. In addition, I advocate the application of the phenomenological method of qualitative research, emphasizing the possibility of subsequent field studies using this methodology. Finally, it advocates for the encouragement of the implementation of group self-care practices, both in public and private health services, given their proven efficacy.

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