

**LGBT old age: an analysis of the social representations among Brazilian elderly people****Velhice LGBT: uma análise das representações sociais entre idosos brasileiros****La vejez LGBT: un análisis de las representaciones sociales entre los ancianos brasileños***Ana Gabriela Aguiar Trevia Salgado<sup>1</sup>**Ludgleydson Fernandes de Araújo<sup>2</sup>**José Victor De Oliveira Santos<sup>3</sup>**Lorena Alves de Jesus<sup>4</sup>**Luciana Kelly da Silva Fonseca<sup>5</sup>**Daniel da Silva Sampaio<sup>6</sup>**<sup>1,2, 3, 4, 5, 6</sup>Departamento de Psicologia, Universidade Federal do Piauí, Brasil*

**Abstract:** This research aims to identify the social representations of LGBT old age among the elderly population. A number of 100 people participated in the research; they were aged between 60 and 86 years ( $M = 66.9$  years,  $SD = 6.8$ ). Most participants were female (69%), married (40%), catholic (50%) and heterosexual (91.3%). Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Subsequently, the interviews were submitted to an analysis in the Iramuteq software by the Descending Hierarchical Classification method. It originated 4 classes of semantic approximation. Data obtained showed that the Social Representations of LGBT old age are mostly associated to negative stigma and prejudice. The purpose of this study is to contribute to a successful old age for this part of the population, based on a discussion that provides better understanding of what LGBT old age is, as well as encouraging other studies to guide professional practices for this group.

**Key Words:** old age, older adults, LGBT, sexuality, social representations, Descending Hierarchical Classification

**Resumo:** Esta pesquisa tem como objetivo identificar as representações sociais da velhice LGBT entre a população idosa. Contou-se com a participação 100 pessoas, com idade entre 60 e 86 anos ( $M = 66,9$  anos;  $DP = 6,8$ ). A maioria dos participantes declarou-se do sexo feminino (69%), casados (40%), católicos (50%) e de orientação heterossexual (91,3%). Foram utilizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas para a coleta de dados. Posteriormente, as entrevistas foram submetidas a uma análise, no software Iramuteq, pelo método da Classificação Hierárquica Descendente que originou 4 classes de aproximação semântica. Diante dos resultados, percebe-se que as Representações Sociais da velhice LGBT são, em sua maioria, carregadas de estigmas negativos e preconceito. Pretende-se, com esse estudo, contribuir para uma velhice bem-sucedida dessa parcela da população, a partir de uma discussão que propicie uma melhor compreensão do que é a velhice LGBT, bem como incentivar outros estudos a fim de orientar as práticas profissionais diante desse grupo.

**Palavras chave:** velhice, idosos, LGBT, sexualidade, representações sociais, Classificação Hierárquica Descendente

**Resumen:** Esta investigación tiene como objetivo identificar las representaciones sociales de la vejez LGBT entre la población anciana. Se contó con la participación de 100 personas, con edad entre 60 y 86 años ( $M = 66,9$  años,  $DP = 6,8$ ). La mayoría de los participantes se declaró del sexo femenino (69%), casados (40%), católicos (50%) y orientación heterosexual (91,3%). Se utilizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas para la recolección de datos. Posteriormente, las entrevistas fueron sometidas a un análisis, en el software Iramuteq, por el método de la Clasificación Jerárquica Descendente que originó 4 clases de aproximación semántica. Ante los resultados, se percibe que las Representaciones Sociales de la vejez LGBT son, en su mayoría, cargadas de estigmas negativas y prejuicios. Se pretende, con este estudio, contribuir a una vejez exitosa de esa parcela de la población, a partir de una discusión que propicie una mejor comprensión de lo que es la vejez LGBT, así como fomentar otros estudios para orientar las prácticas profesionales frente a ese grupo.

**Palabras clave:** vejez, adultos mayores, LGBT, sexualidad, representaciones sociales, Clasificación Jerárquica Descendente

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## Introduction

The world population aging is a current phenomenon with exponential growth, which has been highly discussed in several fields of knowledge fields. Before anything, when the issue of population aging is approached, one can notice that it is a phenomenon of geographic transition, marked by the inversion of the age pyramid. This inversion is characterized by the decrease of the birthrate and the increase of longevity, as a result of achievements in the medical field, adequate urbanization of cities, diet improvements, improvement of personal and environmental hygiene, besides the advances in the health field, such as vaccines, use of antibiotics and chemotherapeutic medications, which made it possible to cure and prevent many diseases (Araújo & Carvalho, 2005; Mendes, Gusmão Faro, & Leite, 2005; Camarano, Kanso, & Mello, 2004).

The ones who are considered elderly are comprised within the group of people who are 65 years old or older in developed countries, and 60 years old or older in countries under development (Law n. 10.741, 2003; Neri, 2008). According to the census of the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* ([IBGE – “Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics”], 2000), in 2000, 8.56% of Brazilian population was within this age group range. In 2015, this range increased to 14.3%, according to the *Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios* (PNAD - “National Research per Sample of Households”) (IBGE, 2015). It is estimated that, in 2030, the elderly population will represent 18.62% of the total Brazilian population. According to PNAD (2015), Brazilian Southern and Southeastern areas are the ones that have the higher proportion of elderly people, with 16% and 15.7%, respectively.

In line with the total elderly population, it is supposed that the proportion of LGBT elderly people will also increase in the next decades (A. C. F. Araújo, 2016; Kimmel, 2015). In Brazil, at the Demographic Census of 2010, for the first time, the quantity of homoaffective relations was identified and quantified. IBGE (2010) identified a total of 58 thousand homoaffective couples who live together in Brazil. According to Bergamo (2016, December 5), recently, the president of IBGE, Paulo Rabello de Castro, declared his interest in collecting the number of LGBT people in Brazil, which allows the collection of more knowledge on that part of

the population, and makes it possible to provide more attention to that social category.

Nevertheless, the lack of knowledge about that population puts at risk the healthy aging of those people, whose specific necessities and experiences, are, most times, unknown (Fernández-Rouco, Sánchez, & González, 2012; Orel, 2014).

Differently from what is usually widely spread, we understand that the old age is also full of positive aspects. Despite the losses concerning physical, sensorial and neurological skills, the old person may have some gains related to the capacities influenced by culture, inspiring the old person to develop within the domains of arts, leisure and the handling of existential issues, once the old person has taken a long path, rich in experiences (Neri, 2008; Novaes, 1995).

Among the diverse aspects regarding life quality, it is understood that sexuality is a primordial aspect of human being, going beyond the sexual act itself; it comprises gender identities and roles, eroticism, pleasure, sexual orientation, intimacy and reproduction. Even though sexuality can be included in many dimensions – thoughts, attitudes, desires, behavior, values, among others – it is not expressed or experienced all the time. Since the 1960s, sexuality has been through an individualization process towards behavior and standards. This way, besides the biological and psychological views, sexuality is influenced by social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, religious and spiritual factors (L. F. Araújo, 2016; Lima, Santiago, & Arrais, 2014; Organização Mundial da Saúde [OMS], 2002; Santos, Carlos, Araújo, & Negreiros, 2017).

The current cohort of LGBT elderly people has lived a historic period, in which they could not share their sexuality, for being afraid to be rejected and persecuted, fearing to admit their sexual orientation to themselves, once they had internalized the negative stereotypes that the society imposed to the LGBT population (Fredriksen-Goldsen, Hoy-Ellis, Muraco, Goldsen & Kim, 2015; Huyck, 1995, as mentioned in Papalia, 2013; Marques & Sousa, 2016). Therefore, many of the current LGBT old people took many years to “get out of the closet” (Scherrer & Fedor, 2015).

In accordance with Facchini and França (2009), the term LGBT refers to lesbians, gays, bisexual, intersexual, and T represents the presence of travesties and transsexuals; in some places in Brazil, it also represents transgender people, i.e.,

those who do not identify with the behavior or role expected from their biological sex determined by their birth, such as crossdressers, drag queens, transformist artists and others.

Considering the scenario that the LGBT community face because of historical prejudice that brings a lot of types of violence motivated by negative stereotypes, discrimination and intolerance, as well as a social context characterized by the discrimination process that goes from the direct cruel termination manifestations of intolerance at work, inside the family, religion, medical assistance, communication means and in the population in general, it can be noticed that the elderly that are part of that social category also suffer from that stigma.

Despite the fact that the researches on the old age have been emerging among the themes investigated by social sciences, especially by Psychology, exploring and analyzing the aging process in the context of the elderly sexual orientation is still something uncommon. Considering that, in Brazil, there is a series of difficulties and challenges to deal with the theme, the struggle for visibility is a constant act in the life of those people. (Santos, Carlos, Araújo, & Negreiros, 2017; Wladirson & Chaves, 2012).

However, as the elderly and the LGBT populations increase and have the recognition of their rights established socially, it is necessary to increase the knowledge on older LGBT people (Berger, 1982, as mentioned in Marques & Sousa, 2016; Berger & Kelly, 2002, as mentioned in Marques & Sousa, 2016; Minichiello, Plummer & Loxton, 2004, as mentioned in Marques & Sousa, 2016).

Under a dynamic view, the social representations are configured as a net of interactive concepts and images developed by individuals and groups, whose contents continuously evolve through time and space; this process is more and more intense, according to the complexity and the speed of the available communications (Carvalho & Arruda, 2008; Jodelet, 1989; Morera, Padilha, Silva, & Sapag, 2015; Moscovici, 1984; Sêga, 2000). The concepts and images formed from social representations are ways to interpret the daily reality. Jodelet (1989; 2016) characterizes representation as a form of practical knowledge that connects a subject to an object, i.e., it establishes a link between a subject, individual or collective one,

and the object that the representation substitutes.

The social representations allow the understanding of the world, from a practical aim, where a set of different pieces of knowledge and understanding, concepts, explanations about someone, some object or some fact. This way, social representations guide people's attitudes towards the object of the representation. Studying the society's perception about aging and LGBT aging allows the identification of the conceptions that people have on those events.

Within this context, we sought to identify and compare the social representations of LGBT aging of Brazilian elderly population, by means of the Theory of Social Representations.

## Method

### *Investigation type*

This is a descriptive and exploratory study, with transversal data.

### *Participants*

The research had the participation of 100 (one hundred) Brazilian elderly people, of both genders, aging from 60 to 86 years ( $M = 66.9$  years;  $DP = 6.8$ ). Most participants affirmed being female (69%), married (40%), catholic (50%), of heterosexual orientation (91.3%), having an average family income of R\$1,800 (Brazilian currency) (23.8%), having had formal education up to secondary school (25.6%) and being retired (70.7%). All the participants live on the Brazilian states Piauí, Ceará and Pará.

### *Instruments*

Two instruments were used for data collection. The first one was a social-demographic questionnaire to characterize the participants, aiming to obtain information on their age, gender, marital status, income, sexual orientation, religion, state where they lived, whether they had any relatives who were homosexual and if they lived with any LGBT old person. The second instrument was a semi-structured interview to understand the participants' perception on old age and LGBT homosexuality, with the following guiding question: "How do you understand LGBT old age?"

**Ethical procedures and data collection**

This research was subjected to the Research Ethical Committee – CEP - of Universidade Federal do Piauí (Brazil), with CAEE: 57225916.1.0000.5214 and opinion document number 1,755,790. After the Committee’s approval, the data collection was carried out voluntarily and anonymously. Before the collection, the aims of the study were explained and the proper authorization documents and the Consent Terms were filled, so the participants could authorize their participation in the research and answer the questionnaires, as the resolution 466/12 of Brazilian National Health Council (CNS) requires. It is estimated that around 30 minutes were necessary for the participation of the research to be concluded.

The criterion established by Camargo (2005) was used; it indicates a number of at least 20 units of the initial context for defining the number of participants necessary for the research. In this investigation, one-hundred questionnaires were collected; part of the samples was taken for convenience, in which the participants were approached in public places, such as squares and shopping malls; another part was collected in a non-probabilistic

way, intentionally and accidentally in groups organized for elderly people activities. The data collection was carried out in the Brazilian states Ceará, Pará and Piauí.

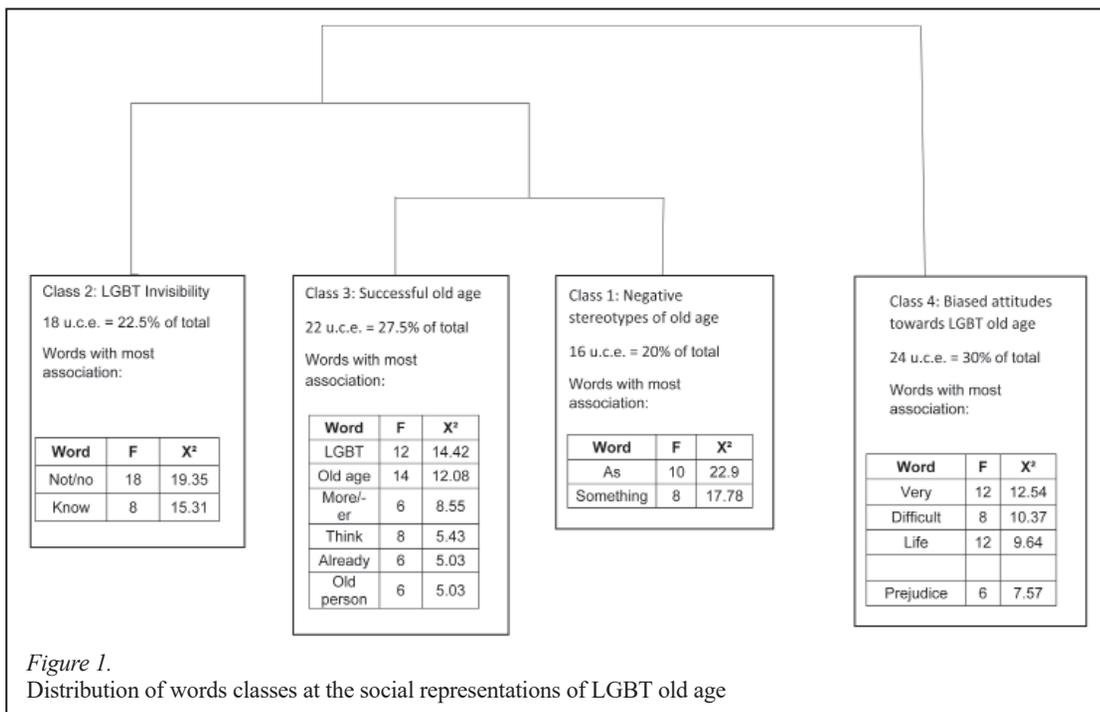
**Data Analysis**

The social-demographic data were analyzed with the software SPSS for Windows version 21, aiming to characterize the sample.

The semi-structured interviews were subjected to a simple Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC), with the aid of the software Iramuteq version 0.7. According to Camargo (2005), this type of analysis allows to obtain lexical classes, characterized by specific vocabulary and by textual segments that have those words in common.

**Results**

The data analysis, in the software Iramuteq, constituted of 100 interviews, or initial context units (u.c.i.), resulted in 80 elementary context units (u.c.e.), which originated the dendrogram (Figure 1). Four classes of semantic approximation were taken; however, it was not possible to



establish a profile of people belonging to each class. The first partition divided the Corpus into two sub-corpus, separating class 4 from the others. The second partition fragmented the larger sub-corpus, originating class 2. The last partition originated classes 1 and 3. It is worth to mention that all the interviews were carried out in Brazilian Portuguese, so the corpus was constituted of words in this language. However, the interviews and the words were translated into English language for this paper.

Class 1 is the smallest one, constituted of 16 u.c.e., representing 20% of the total of units. This class was named *Negative stereotypes of old age*. In this class, the idea that the LGBT old age is just like any other old age is predominant. Nevertheless, some negative aspects of old age are highlighted, such as the reduction of abilities, abandonment and necessity of more care due to the diseases. Besides that, in this class are still found negative feelings regarding LGBT old people, such as “pity for the homosexual”, once the old person who follows a sexual orientation different from the heterosexual one suffers with the stigma of old age and of sexual orientation,

Class 2 is composed by 22.5% of the u.c.e. total (18 units). Taking into consideration the descriptive variables, this class can be characterized as being constituted mostly by male old people (10 u.c.e.). In this class, there is the predominance of discourses in which the elderly affirm not knowing their opinion or not having knowledge about LGBT old people. For this reason, the class was named *LGBT Invisibility*.

The third class, constituted of 22 u.c.e (27.5% of total), has, as its main contents that the LGBT old age must be just like any other old age. It can be observed that the discourses of this class claim that the LGBT old person affirms their orientation when they are still young, and it is one of the aspects that determines a “good old age”. Differently from what was found in class 1, in this class there is a positive perspective of aging: peace, tranquility, stability and maturity. This class was named *Successful old age*.

Class 4 is the larger one (24 u.c.e. – 30% of the units). Named *Biased attitudes towards LGBT old age*, the fourth class expresses contents related to hostility before LGBT old age. The understanding regarding LGBT old age is of a stage marked by social prejudice and disdain, as being lonely, complicated and troubled.

## Discussion

From the observation and interpretation of the data obtained in the research, it could be noticed that, in general, many stereotypes of LGBT aging and old age presented in previous studies are confirmed. Thus, the lexical contents that frame the dendrogram within each identified class will be discussed.

### *Class 1 – Negative stereotypes of old age*

The contents obtained in the class *Negative stereotypes of old age* make little difference between heterosexual old age and the LGBT one, with discourses that affirm that the latter is “just like any other old age”. However, this claim is associated to the stigma of old age as a lonely stage of life, in which the elderly suffer with the abandonment and the disdain from their relatives and from society in general, besides the impairment of some physical and psychic abilities. It must be highlighted that these data are opposite to the ones identified in previous researches that present the social representations of the elderly in relation to old age.

The speeches that best represent this class are: “*I believe that it tends to many difficulties, much suffering and loneliness*”; “*something difficult*”; “*it is just like the old age of heterosexual ones, a time of impairment of psychic and motor abilities and the necessity of more care from the family*”; “*something worrying, if it’s taken into consideration the way that the elderly are treated in Brazil, for there are not actions in which we are prioritized*”; “*a different sexual condition worsens their situation as a subject doubly stigmatized*”.

Frequently, people who are not old represent old age and aging in a negative way. Those significant differences of perceptions are justified because groups tend to represent other groups socially in a different way, mainly when those groups are of different generations (Araújo & Carvalho, 2005; Camargo, Contarello, Wachelke, Morais, & Piccolo, 2014; Cruz & Assunção Ferreira, 2011; Daniel, Antunes, & Amaral, 2015).

Nevertheless, despite those representations agree in some aspects, they diverge in the general conception of the elderly who tend to represent the old age in a more positive way, believing that the experiences that they have had along life have produced wisdom, and the social relations, work,

and feeling of being helpful complement the idea that the old age is a successful phase, mainly regarding family relations, which become essential in their lives (Camargo et. al., 2014; Comerlato, Guimarães, & Alves, 2009).

In the social context, the old age is frequently represented in a diminished way. This negative and stereotyped image that is spread makes many people who reach the old age assume those characteristics (Araújo & Carvalho, 2005; Oliveira et. al., 2012). Therefore, it is natural that some old people represent the old as a synonym of illness, declining and death (Costa & Campos, 2009; Dias, Paúl, & Watanabe, 2014; Guerra & Caldas, 2010; Vianna, Loureiro, & Alves, 2012).

Besides that, many people, even the ones who are already older than 60 years, do not recognize themselves as being old, for having their cognitive, social, emotional and physical abilities preserved, seeing the condition of being elderly as distant (Passamani, 2013; Santos, Carlos, Araújo & Negreiros, 2017). Thus, the denial of old age is also a possible justification for the representations identified in this class.

### ***Class 2 – LGBT Invisibility***

In this class, one can notice the presence of speeches that picture how much the old LGBT population is hidden, ignored, forgotten and despised by society. This class was marked by expressions like “*I don’t have an opinion*”; “*I don’t know*”; “*I’ve never heard of it*”; “*loneliness, but I don’t understand much of this subject*”; “*it’s a behavior that causes difficulties of understanding*”; “*I can’t explain, but I think it is sad and lonely*”; “*I’ve never thought of that*”.

Because of the stigma concerning sexuality in old age, talking about homosexuality, bisexuality or transsexuality in that stage of life becomes even more difficult, especially because old LGBT people are still victims of invisibility in society (Adams, 2015, as mentioned in Araújo & Fernández-Rouco, 2016; Persson, 2009, as mentioned in Araújo & Fernández-Rouco, 2016; Santos, Carlos, Araújo & Negreiros, 2017), as the analysis of the lexical contents has exposed.

The invisibility of LGBT old people has some possible justifications: firstly, due to the tendency of society to stereotype the elderly as “asexual” and due to the conception of many psychogerontologists that almost all the older

adults are heterosexual and that the ones who did not have this orientation were already too old to follow another one; secondly, for the difficulty to study that population, who, many times, avoids the exposition, for fear of being victims of prejudice; thirdly, for the interest of Geriatrics and Gerontology in studying other aging aspects, such as chronicle diseases. This way, the necessities and the existence of LGBT old people have been ignored for a long time by most institutions and by society (Dorman et al., 1995, as mentioned in Orel, 2014; Kimmel, Hinrichs & Fisher, 2015; Quam & Whitford, 1992, as mentioned in Orel, 2014).

### ***Class 3 – Successful old age***

The contents noticed in class 3 refer to a point of view that has the old age as an enjoyable stage of life. Speeches like “*comfortable life*”; “*a moment of freedom to choose sexual and affective achievements*”; “*completeness*”; “*must be happy*”; “*I understand it was a life achievement for their right [to reveal being LGBT]*”; “*in this case, it has such a great importance, that the person wants to be happy, and we must respect that*”; “*it’s never too late to be happy*”; “*tranquil and peacefully*” characterize this class.

As mentioned before, the elderly, especially the ones who do activity in groups, tend to symbolize the old age as a pleasurable moment, in which they become protagonists of their lives, once their children are already grown up and the elderly retire from work (Camargo et. al., 2014; Comerlato, Guimarães & Alves, 2009). Recognizing LGBT old age as a happy, full period, means to assume that those old people also have the assurance to live this stage using the benefits and rights achieved during their life.

On the other hand, believing that LGBT old people have the same conditions to live their old age like the heterosexual ones means to disregard the huge differences between those groups. Many LGBT old people live under vulnerable conditions, for example, regarding health. LGBT old people have particular necessities, especially the ones who are transsexual (Fernández-Rouco, Sánchez, & González, 2012), who have more difficulty to access the devices for healthcare, and experience more disparities at the healthcare attention, having more psychic suffering and less physical health in a general way (Fredriksen-Goldsen et. al., 2015; Scherrer & Fedor, 2015).

Cahill (2015) presents some alternatives that have already been adopted in the USA, and other possibilities that can be established to offer more life quality to old LGBT people. Among those alternatives, we can mention a better preparation of the professionals who will care for that population, the creation of a law that sets LGBT old people as a population with more social needs, promotion of education in sexual health, mental health services and programs for income support.

Therefore, it is fundamental to notice the need of having a different way to look at the LGBT population, concerning the specific needs of this group, so that, this way, a successful old age can really be provided.

#### ***Class 4 – Biased attitudes towards LGBT old age***

This class is the most different from all the others, for it is characterized by speeches that picture the LGBT old age as being full of difficulties due to the social prejudice. One can notice that, in the participants' speeches, there is the revelation of the presence of strong stereotypes against that part of population. However, the elderly who participated of the research did not consider themselves as part of the social group who has prejudice against LGBT old people.

Some speeches such as “*wrong, but it is a personal choice*”; “*I think it's ugly, but I have nothing against it*”; “*I've never seen it near me, but it's each one's choice*”; “*in society, this relation is, I believe, only suffering*”; “*it's very difficult, specially because prejudice*”; “*it seems a complicated life*”; “*I believe that it tends to many difficulties and suffering because of people's bias*”; “*I think that in LGBT old age the suffering is huge for because of society's disdain*”; “*difficult, any part of the LGBT cycle is disturbed, with social hypocrisy*”; “*I think it's difficult to be homosexual at any phase of life*”; “*overcoming, after facing a lot of bias along all life*”; “*I think people's disdain is huge, because of prejudice*”.

Besides exempting themselves from the responsibility to have prejudice against old LGBT people, it can be noticed that the participants of the research demonstrate having subtle traces of prejudice in their speeches. Different from the flagrant prejudice, the subtle prejudice is indirect, distant, “cold”, being a more veiled or disguised way to express the biased opinion (Allport, 1954; Lima & Vala, 2004).

## **Conclusion**

The present study brought some information on the social representations of LGBT old age among old population in three Brazilian states: Piauí, Ceará and Pará. The data obtained allowed to compose representations systematized in four classes.

It could be verified that those representations are mostly related to the way that the elderly who participated of the research experiment their own old age. The elderly who see and live this life stage as something negative or do not see themselves as old have the idea that the LGBT old age is equally disturbed and challenging; this conception is stressed, mainly, due to the stereotypes towards LGBT people. The ones who experiment old age in a pleasurable and enjoyable way, also represent LGBT old age this way, even though they disregard the discrepancies and the particularities of those groups.

Moreover, the invisibility and the bias identified in the representations suggest the necessity to produce and disseminate knowledge on this group of people, who has shown to be unassisted and disregarded within the population interviewed.

Therefore, it is expected that this research may encourage other studies on this topic, as well as guide practices of gerontology with the elderly, aiming to dissolve negative stereotypes at this life stage.

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