

Comunicação

Short Communication

## Social representations of aging: a study with elderly grandmothers who take care of their grandchildren and grandmothers who do not

Representações sociais do envelhecimento: um estudo com avós idosas que cuidam dos netos e avós que não

Representaciones sociales del envejecimiento: un estudio con abuelas ancianas que cuidan de los nietos y abuelas que no

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**Abstract:** This study aimed at collecting and comparing the social representations of aging by grandmothers who take part of their grandchildren's raising and the ones who do not. The sample was composed of twenty female grandparents, aged between 60 and 81; ten of them live with their grandchildren; the other 10 do not live with them and/or have little or no contact with them. The free word association technique was used and analyzed by Iramuteq software. From the analysis, it was evidenced that the grandmothers who live close to their grandchildren demonstrated the difficulties of aging; in contrast, those that sporadically see their grandchildren believe that aging is calm. It is assumed, therefore, that the responsibilities towards the grandchildren compromises the enjoyment of the aging. The data are expected to support studies on aging and intergenerational cohabitation.

**Keywords:** aging, grandmother, grandchildren, social representation, prototypic analysis

**Resumo:** Este trabalho teve como objetivo principal apreender e comparar as representações sociais do envelhecimento entre avós que participam da educação dos netos e que não participam. A amostra caracterizou vinte mulheres avós, com idades entre 60 e 81, sendo que dez delas vivem com os netos e dez não vivem e/ou tem pouco contato. Foi utilizada a técnica de associação livre de palavras, na qual foi analisada pelo software Iramuteq. A partir da análise, foi evidenciado que as avós que vivem próximas aos netos demonstraram as dificuldades do envelhecimento, em contrapartida, as que encontram esporadicamente os netos atribuem o sossego ao envelhecimento, pressupõe-se que a responsabilidades perante os netos, compromete a desfrutação do envelhecimento. Espera-se que os dados subsidiem estudos sobre o envelhecimento e a coabitação intergeracional.

**Palabras-chave:** envelhecimento, avó, netos, representação social, análise prototípica

**Resumen:** Este trabajo tuvo como objetivo principal aprehender y comparar las representaciones sociales del envejecimiento entre abuelos que participan en la educación de los nietos y que no participan. La muestra caracterizó veinte mujeres abuelas, con edades entre 60 y 81 años, siendo que diez de ellas viven con los nietos y diez no viven y / o tienen poco contacto. Se utilizó la técnica de asociación libre de palabras, en la cual fue analizada por el software Iramuteq. A partir del análisis, se evidenció que las abuelas que viven cerca de los nietos demostraron las dificultades del envejecimiento, en contrapartida, las que encuentran esporádicamente a los nietos atribuyen el sosiego al envejecimiento, se presupone que las responsabilidades ante los nietos, compromete la disfrute envejecimiento. Se espera que los datos subsidien estudios sobre el envejecimiento y la cohabitación intergeneracional.

**Palabras clave:** envejecimiento, abuela, nietos, representación social, análisis prototípico

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## Introduction

In the last decades, the number of elderly people has increased exponentially; this is due to the population aging (Ricardi & Méndez, 2016), which, in turn, is caused by the drop of fertility rates, and, among the elderly, the decrease of mortality rates (Silva, Santos, Soares, & Silva, 2018).

Aging can be defined as a dynamic, progressive process, which results in irreversible changes (Oliveira, Silva, Lima, Gomes, & Olympio, 2018). Notwithstanding, the aging process does not occur equally to every person, being influenced by various determinants (Nascimento, Cardoso, Santos, Pinto, & Magalhães, 2017). Aging can be understood as a stage in human development that results in the lengthening of chronological age; it culminates in a process of biological maturation that is natural in the vital cycle (Brito, Camargo, & Castro, 2017).

Because of the biopsychosocial changes that result from aging, elderly people commonly need to be cared for (Uyeno, Lima, Júnior, & Oliveira, 2016). On the other hand, not only do the elderly receive care, but also provide it (Molina, 2017). In this sense, taking care of someone is inherent of the human being; it involves essential attributes to keep positive aspects in the biopsychosocial scope (Queiróz et al., 2016). Notwithstanding, the provision of care is settled within a complex context, which takes into account conflicting interests and comprises reciprocity, responsibility, commitment, affectivity and objectives (Rabelo & Neri, 2015).

In this aspect, the birth of a grandchild provokes, consequently, an alteration on the role to be played in the family. Positive feelings of satisfaction and gratitude can be attributed to this role, as well as negative feelings, such as overload, once the role of a grandmother is similar to the one of the parents, which can cause distress, for the experience of a second maternity, but with reduced physical abilities, causing emotional and physical exhaustion (Alves, 2013).

Considering these aspects, the Social Representations Theory (SRT) presents a theoretical framework for the understanding of this phenomenon, in a way that the representations are marked by social-ideological values and the history of the group (Fernandes, Costa, & Andrade, 2017). The SR constitute the way that the world is noticed and how the individuals create it, those ones marked by representations, images, ideas and opinions that cross their existence, permeated by

time-space and that are transmitted within society (Moscovici, 2012).

This study aims at collecting and comparing the SR of aging for grandmothers who take part of their grandchildren's raising and of the ones who do not.

## Method

### *Investigation Type*

It is an exploratory cross-sectional descriptive research, with non-probabilistic sample for convenience.

### *Participants*

Twenty Brazilian grandmothers participated in the research; they aged from 61 to 81 years old, in average, 64.10 years old ( $DP = 6.48$ ). Ten of them raised their grandchildren, and the other ten did not have a direct participation on their raising. Sixty percent of the participants are married, 40% live with their spouse and grandchildren, and the same percentage of them lives with their grandchildren, spouse and children, and 20% live only with their children and grandchildren. Forty percent of the grandmothers prefer to play with their grandchildren and 30% like to go out with them.

### *Instruments*

A sociodemographic questionnaire was used, in order to characterize the sample, together with the technique of free association (TALP), which consists of evoking five words related to the inducing word "aging". Both instruments were prepared by the authors themselves. It is important to mention that, in this report, all the words used and mentioned in the technique have been translated to English language from Brazilian Portuguese, original language in which the research was carried out.

### *Ethical Procedures*

This Project was subjected to the Research Ethics Committee of the institutions to which the authors belong (withdrawn for blind assessment). All the ethical terms mentioned by the Brazilian National Health Council (*Conselho Nacional de Saúde, Brasil*) were followed, according to the Resolutions 466/12 and 510/2016. After the approval, (opinion document 1.837.204),

the Consent Term (TCLE) was presented to the participants.

### *Procedures for the Data Collection*

After explaining the objectives and the presentation of the TCLE, the sociodemographic questionnaire was applied. It took around 2 minutes to be filled. After that, the TALP was also applied; it took 5 minutes to be finished.

### *Procedures for Data Analysis*

The descriptive statistics of the sociodemographic questionnaire were performed by means of the *software* IBM SPSS 23. TALP, in turn, was analyzed by means of prototypical analysis, by means of the *software* Iramuteq. Therefore, a diagram of two coordinates was obtained. One of them represented the frequencies, and the other, the average order of evocations (OME), with values from high to low (Wachelke & Wolter, 2011), delimiting four zones.

## **Results**

The words referring to central elements of representation (see table 1) of aging are: “difficulties”, “happy” and “experience”. The knowledge shared by those grandmothers who raise their grandchildren is characterized by understanding aging as a process with difficulties; however, they seem to be happy for getting old.

The elements “longevity” and “realization”, are not central, but should be analyzed in further research, for they were very frequently mentioned. The word “unrest” is readily recalled, suggesting that aspects related to uneasiness at aging could be further investigated.

It is worth to highlight that the elements “naturalness”, “harmony”, “fun” and “conflicts” are all peripheral. This way, getting old, to the participants of this research, is more similar to a “difficult, but happy period” than to a “harmonic natural process”.

In the first quadrant (see table 2), there is the central nucleus of the representations, composed by the high evocation and hierarchy, with a highlight for the words “calm” and “health”, mentioned by the grandmothers who do not raise their grandchildren, which reinforces the centrality of tranquility and health at aging.

In the second quadrante, the presence of the terms “nostalgia” and “autonomy”; despite the low OME, they complement the group. Thus, the participants live the aging with nostalgia and autonomy, which reinforces the meaning of tranquility.

The third quadrant shows the contrasted elements. Therefore, “naturalness” and “unrest” contrast with “calm” and “health”, which may indicate a complement to the first periphery, or the existence of a sub-group.

The last quadrant, composed of “realization”, “longevity”, “diseases” and “resting”, allowed different personal variations, without altering the

Table 1  
*Prototypical Analysis – social representation of aging construed by grandmothers who participate of the raising of their grandchildren*

		OME≤2.92			OME>2.92		
Average		CENTRAL NUCLEUS			PRIMARY PERIPHERY		
Frequency	Evocations	f	OME	Evocations	f	OME	
>4	Difficulties	9	2.9	Longevity	5	4.4	
	Happy	6	2.0	Satisfaction	4	4.0	
	Experience	5	2.4				
	Health	4	1.0				
	Realizatin	4	2.0				
Average		CONTRASTING ZONE			SECONDARY PERIPHERY		
Frequency	Evocations	f	OME	Evocations	f	OME	
<4	Unrest	3	2.0	Naturalness	2	3.0	
				Harmony	2	4.0	
				Fun	2	2.0	
				Conflicts	2	2.0	

Table 2  
*Prototypical Analysis – social representation of aging construed by grandmothers who do not participate of the raising of their grandchildren*

Average Frequency	OME≤2.86			OME>2.86		
	CENTRAL NUCLEUS			PRIMARY PERIPHERY		
	Evocations	f	OME	Evocations	f	OME
>3.6	Calm	6	2.8	Nostalgia	5	3.4
	Health	5	1.6	Autonomy	4	3.5
<3.6	CONTRASTING ZONE			SECONDARY PERIPHERY		
	Evocations	f	OME	Evocations	f	OME
	Naturalness	3	1.0	Realization	3	4.7
	Unrest	3	2.0	Longevity	3	3.0
				Diseases	2	3.0
				Resting	2	4.5

nucleus, working like a prescriber of behaviors and being the operational part of the representation.

**Discussion**

The findings evidence the dynamic and heterogeneous character of aging. It must be highlighted that the difference between the groups, in a way that the care-giving grandmothers represent the aging as a period of difficulty, but happy and full of experiences, while the other group highlighted aging as a period of longevity and health.

Therefore, it is clear that the elderly who take care of their grandchildren, for having more responsibility, do not experience some positive aspects of aging. This way, the care-giving grandmothers, when presenting a role conflict, get confused for being “mothers” again, and do not live in full the aspects related to aging (Silva, Magalhães, & Cavalcante, 2014).

As for the grandmothers who do not take care of their grandchildren, they, for not participating directly of their care giving, can experiment the role of being a grandmother, once they do not carry out parental tasks (Landry-Meyer & Newman, 2004).

However, despite the care is considered, most times, as an obligation, it also embraces the affection, protection and reciprocity expression (Hedler, Faleiros, Santos, & Almeida, 2016). Considering this, concerning the care-giving grandmothers, it can be noticed that the relationship between them and the grandchildren who live with them allows their partnership at various activities, reinforcing the affection and the tightening of bonds (Ramos, 2012).

In relation to the grandmothers who do not raise their children, some of them link the idea “illness” to aging. Due to the reduction of the capacity to adapt to endogen and hexogen aggressions, they are more likely to become sick (Locatelli, 2017). Nevertheless, the relationship between aging and disease means a way for the elderly to represent their tiredness and discouragement accumulated with the passing of time, once even their health problem is not serious, those elderly people feel sick and connect aging to a physical state. (Martins, 2013).

In this aspect, the elderly people who live by themselves have worse health, for not having relatives to help them (Camargos, Rodrigues, & Machado, 2011). This way, family still remains as a support point to their members when they have some type of health problem (Valença, Santos, Lima, Santana, & Reis, 2017). The family is considered essential, for they support the elderly emotionally and physically; solitude is thus undesirable (Brito, Belloni, Castro, Camargo, & Giacomozzi, 2018). Therefore, the relationships between grandmothers and grandchildren who live together are reciprocal, for the grandmothers take care of the grandchildren and the grandchildren also provide help to the elderly (Ramos, 2012).

Moreover, when the participants refer to the defining word “resting”, similar to the central element “calm”, they highlight the tranquility of living aging without having to take care of their grandchildren directly. Complementing that, a study emphasizes the presence of stress in grandmothers who take care of their grandchildren (Yamashiro & Matsukura, 2015). Therefore, the grandmothers

who do not take care of their grandchildren, for not having the pressure of the responsibility, experiment the role of grandmothers in a more effective way (Landry-Meyer & Newman, 2004).

### Conclusions

From the findings of the present study, it could be noticed that the care-giving grandmothers represent the aging as being difficult, while the grandmothers who do not take care of them evidence calmness at aging.

As it is a descriptive study, with reduced sampling, the data cannot be generalized. However, psychosocial aspects of the elderly who take care of their grandchildren, together with their implications, are evidenced. It is hoped, then, that new studies, with larger samples and in different contexts, are carried out.

Therefore, it is expected that this study may contribute for the recognition of the SR of aging in the context of intergenerational cohabitation, as well as to encourage the improvement of public policies and more researches on the gerontology scope.

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