

Old age and elderly people: social representations of adolescent students¹

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Objective: to know the main elements of social representations about elderly people and old age among adolescents at a public high school. Method: 172 adolescents between 14 and 19 years of age participated. The free evocation of words technique was applied through the terms elderly and old age. Results: The main elements of the representations significantly designed for elderly people were: respect and disrespect, 78; experience, 49; care, 32; wisdom, 23; fragility, 19. For old age: disease, 51; retirement, 27; experience, 27; wisdom, 19; wrinkles, 17. The social representations of adolescents are strongly marked by physical, psychological and social aspects, with positive and negative aspects about old age. Conclusion: Participatory health education activities are needed to make adolescents critically reflect on and the condition of elderly people in contemporary society.

Descriptors: Aged; Geriatric Nursing; Psychology, Social; Adolescent.

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Introduction

In its clinical practice, Nursing is on a permanent quest for knowledge expansion with a view to making both scientific and social contributions. Therefore, it invests in research and technological innovations to improve professional practice, mainly in elderly health care and in the attempt to understand the nuances of old age, considering this population group's enhanced growth and demand for increasingly complex care. Data from the 2010 census reveal that the Brazilian population adds up to 190,755,799, 20,590,599 (10.8%) of whom are aged 60 years or older. New data point towards the feminization of old age, with 11,434,487 of women for 9,156,112 of men. The data for century-old individuals are noteworthy, with 16,987 women and only 7,247 men⁽¹⁾. Hence, the greater longevity of the population increases the share of elderly people (aged 60 years or older) in the population. Most of these elderly (64.1%) are reference people in their place of residence⁽¹⁾.

The importance of elderly people for the country is undeniable and is not limited to their increasing share in the total population. Today, a large part of these people are family heads and, in these families, the mean family income is higher than in families headed by non-elderly adults. In addition, 62.4% of elderly men and 37.6% of elderly women are family heads. This corresponds to 8.9 million people, 54.5% of whom are solely responsible for sustaining their family⁽¹⁾.

Despite the undeniable active participation of elderly people in society, and mainly in families' financial maintenance, a clear trend exists to reproduce the image of the aged and old age linked to losses, abandonment and death. As the relatives of dependent elderly are in closer contact with the experience of the limitations old age brings about, it starts to be perceived as a process of continuous losses, in which the elderly can be relegated to abandonment and a lack of social roles. In a way, this ends up increasingly contributing to the perpetuation of myths, stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination with regard to old age, also manifested in the care attitude towards this population. Therefore, conceptions of dependence, old age and the aged gain a relevant role, as these aspects can determine the model of personal and social interactions, as well as the ways in which the elderly are taken care of⁽²⁾.

Hence, understanding these conceptions and resulting actions is relevant to establish strategies to reconstruct them, with a focus not on the losses,

but on possible gains deriving from old age, in view of continuous intergenerational experiences in the family as well as social contexts. The strengthening of bonds that originate the relations between elderly and younger people should be based on positive conceptions and actions towards old age, the aged and elderly care. Hence, in this process, productions and meanings attributed to old age and the aged need to be considered.

In this perspective, there is an urgent need to stimulate changes in the conceptions of elderly people and old age, especially for adolescents (people between 10 and 19 years of age)⁽³⁾, whose actions sometimes continue to reveal prejudices and stereotypes about the aged. These changes will permit sensitizing them to clarify and overcome negative ideas, myths, stereotypes, prejudices and feelings about old age, contributing to other conducts, expressions and ways to consider elderly people. In view of the above, the aim in this study is to get to know the core elements of school-age adolescents' social representations (SR) about old age and elderly people.

Method

This theory rests on Social Representations Theory, based on the structural proposal or Central Nucleus Theory⁽⁴⁾. SR is understood as a form of common-sense social knowledge, which produces general and functional knowledge for people and serves from the mental activity of groups and individuals to relate to inherent situations, events, objects and communications. The mediation that permits this event involves the concrete context these people and groups live in, as well as the culture gained through history, besides the values, codes and respective ideas of a given social group⁽⁵⁻⁶⁾.

The study involved a secondary state-owned teaching institution in Fortaleza, the state capital of Ceará (CE), Brazil. Founded in 1844, it is considered the third eldest Brazilian college. The average current total number of students per year is 377. According to the School Secretariat, a large number of students dropped out after the teachers' strike. At night, the classes consist of students over 20 years of age, who generally work, as well as four class groups of the education program for young and adult peoples.

Data were collected in the morning and afternoon periods, in the second semester of 2011, involving the 172 adolescents who returned the consent form

signed by their parents after 20 days, permitting their participation in the research.

To choose the participants, the following criteria were adopted: being an adolescent, between 10 and 19 years of age, in accordance with the World Health Organization's definition issued in 1996⁽³⁾; regularly enrolled in the institution's secondary education program; agreeing to participate in the research with the permission of parents or responsible caregivers, through the signing of a consent term. Hence, the sample included adolescents between 14 and 18 years of age, the age range corresponding to that specified for secondary education. To apply the free evocation of words technique (FEWT), a questionnaire was used to apprehend the adolescents' perception of reality based on a pre-existing semantic composition. In total, 172 students answered the instrument, with 688 evocations. Sometimes, they were in the classroom, sometimes in the corridors of the institutions, during the breaks between classes. They were asked to write the first four words that came to their head when they heard the inducing words old age and elderly person. Then, they should organize the terms in decreasing order of importance.

Floating reading was applied to the collected corpus, singular/plural and male/female forms were unified and synonyms were combined, based on the most frequent evocations, so as to make the material homogeneous. To treat the collected data, the software *EVOC (Ensemble de Programmes Permettant L'Analyse des Evocations)*, version 2000 was used, which permits organizing words/elements in terms of their implicit hierarchy, that is, their mean frequency (Fm) and ranking. This involved calculating the mean ranking of evocation (mre) of the different elements and the arithmetic means of the mean rankings of evocation (MRE). The combined analysis of these two parameters (Fm and MRE) permitted distributing the different elements in a dispersion graph, in which the crossing of the Fm and MRE lines allows for its division in four quadrants.

In this study, the frequency equaled 10 and the MRE 2.5. Hence, elements with a mean frequency of 10 or higher and OME inferior to 2.5 are located in the upper left quadrant, constituting the central nucleus of the representation. The lower right quadrant includes elements of the peripheral system, with lower frequencies and higher rankings of evocation, that is, elements evoked later. The upper right and lower left

quadrants contain elements from the intermediary system or the peripheral system located close to the central system⁽⁷⁾.

The study complied with the premises of Resolution 196/96 on research involving human beings. Approval for the project was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at *Universidade Estadual do Ceará*, Opinion 11223077-6; FR 449818, issued on September 22nd 2011.

Results

The study participants were 172 school-age adolescents, regularly enrolled in 2011. The female gender was predominant with 99 (57.55%); ages varied, with 74 (43.02%) aged 14 and 15 years; 63 (36.62%) aged 16 and 17 years and 35 (20.34%) aged 18 years. Family income ranged between ½ and 2 minimum wages, with R\$545,00 (five hundred and forty-five *reais*) as the reference amount at the time of the research. The majority cited the catholic religion, 109 (63.37%). As for living with elderly people in the same residence, only 49 (28.48%) answered positively: 14 (8.13%) lived with their grandmother; 10 (5.81%) with their father or mother, 10 (5.81%) with their grandfather, 3 (1.74%) with other relatives and 2 (1.16%) with their grandparents. The participants live in different neighborhoods, covered by the Regional Executive Secretaries I, II and III (model adopted for the regional division of neighborhoods in Fortaleza-CE).

The results were organized in quadrants. The upper left quadrant is called the central nucleus, the most stable and permanent part of a representation that grants it meaning; it is the element that is most resistant to change. It includes the most frequent evocations with a ranking of evocation below the general means ranking of evocations, corresponding to those elements that will most probably belong to the central nucleus. The lower left quadrant, called contrast zone, includes a representational subgroup. Hence, it can demonstrate groups that think differently from the majority. In this quadrant, evocations are less frequent and have a lower ranking of evocation, a second layer in the peripheral system that includes those evocations a small group of subjects finds important⁽⁸⁾. The two quadrants to the right are the first, in the periphery (upper) and the second (lower), which express the immediate context people live in and their relations with reality⁽⁹⁾.

Table 1 – Distribution of elements according to school-age adolescents' evocation frequency and mean ranking of evocation about old age. Fortaleza, CE, Brazil, 2012

Mean freq.	Elements	Freq.	MRE <2.5	Elements	Freq.	MRE ≥2.5
≥10	Retirement	27	2.33	Grey hair	14	2.85
	Fatigue	13	2	Care	20	2.65
	Disease	51	2	Dependence	14	2.85
	Experience	27	2.25	Forgetting	10	2.6
	Patience	11	2.18	Death	14	2.57
	Wrinkles	17	2.35	Respect	13	3.46
	Wisdom	19	2.15	Long life	13	3.15
	Solitude	15	2.06			
	Sadness	11	2.36			
	<10	Family	6	2.33	Help	7
Weak		5	1.8	Attention	7	2.8
Frailty		7	2	Kindness	9	3.14
Fear		9	1.44	Boring	7	2.55
Time		8	2	Rest	6	2.55
				Pain	6	3.16
				Histories	6	2.5
				Weak memory	5	3.5
				Grandchildren	6	3.6
				Past	4	2.83

The central elements shown in Table 1 picture the meaning of old age as being strongly marked by an imaginary focused on pathological aspects like disease (51), which was the most frequent word. Physical aspects are less frequent, such as wrinkles (17) and fatigue (13); the same is true for psychosocial aspects like retirement (27), experience (27), wisdom (19), solitude (15), sadness (11) and patience (11).

The words retirement (27) and experience (27) ranked second in terms of citation frequency. In some situations, the first can lead to the social isolation of people as a result of old age, to idleness, and reveal the lack of planning of life after retirement. Retirement reveals a lack of roles for retired people, their anguish, their marginalization and, often, their isolation from the world. According to the adolescents, old age also

means solitude (15), sadness (11), attention (7) and, therefore, need for help (7).

Other expressions of this exclusion are reminders of wrinkles (17) and fatigue (13), commonly associated with loss of beauty, with are automatically linked to the image of health in common sense.

The study also intended to apprehend how the adolescents represented the elderly person by pairing the central elements that emerged with those mentioned for old age. It is relevant to get to know the central nucleus of these adolescents' knowledge as all representations are organized around a central nucleus that determines, at the same time, its significance and internal organization. Table 2 shows a simplified picture of the ranking of the productions resulting from the FEWT.

Table 2 - Distribution of elements according to frequency of evocation and mean ranking of evocation of school-age adolescents in secondary education about elderly people. Fortaleza, CE, Brazil, 2012

Mean freq.	Elements	Freq.	MRE <2.5	Elements	Freq.	MRE ≥2.5
≥10	Thoughtful	10	2.3	Help	14	2.64
	Grey hair	11	1.9	Joy	10	2.8
	Tired	11	2.27	Love	18	2.66
	Care	32	2.37	Retirement	25	3.32
	Experiences	49	2.26	Kindness	21	2.95
	Frailty	19	2.31	Illnesses	20	2.5
	Respect	78	2.17	Life history	10	3.4
	Disrespect	78	2.17	Patience	12	2.58
	Wrinkles	10	1.5			
	Wisdom	23	1.78			

(continue...)

Table 2 - (continuation)

Mean freq.	Elements	Freq.	MRE <2.5	Elements	Freq.	MRE ≥2.5
<10	Grandparents	6	2.33	Boring	9	3.11
	Difficulties	6	2.16	Knowledge	5	2.6
	Wrinkled	5	1.8	Advice	5	3.2
	Responsible	7	2.28	Dependence	5	3
	Old	5	1.8	Lack of health	7	3.28
				Preferential	8	2.87
				Priorities	7	3.14
				Problems	6	2.66
				Solidarity	7	2.85
				Time lived	7	2.85

According to the central elements in Table 2, the meaning of elderly person is marked by the contradiction between respect and disrespect (78), and by positive elements like experience (49) and wisdom (23). The adolescents consider, however, that elderly persons represent the need for care (32), frailty (19), possibly deriving from the aging process and its changes. They also highlight physical aspects like grey hair (11), wrinkles (10) and fatigue (11), words the adolescents also reminded when they think of old age.

This evidences that the social thinking rooted in the influence of the group permits revealing reality, with emphasis on the observation of the need for respect, despite the disrespect present in the individual and group reality, which can be modified through the understanding of the aging process.

Discussion

In capitalist societies, in which the functionality of the body stands out, old age undeniably is the time when people no longer offer the same workforce. One of its dramas is the new start when getting old/elderly to perform one's functions, in accordance with the time of the organism, which determines the entry into old age. Or, perhaps, it is the willingness to work that denies its start⁽¹⁰⁾. In view of these concerns, for the adolescents, old age is the distancing from work marked by retirement, fatigue and, mainly, by disease. In common sense, as a result of old age, people become weak and susceptible to illnesses. This idea motivates the relation between old age and disease. This result represents the reality the adolescents possibly experience in family and social life, also involving information originating in the written and/or spoken media. The association between old age and disease results from a social process that is closely related to the loss of youth, strength and vigor⁽¹¹⁾. If there are no strong old people, they will be ill as they

are weak, without strength for daily coping. And, for young people, the weakening of the elderly is a negative characteristic of aging^(10,12).

Concerning fatigue, old age appears as a phase when one needs rest; when people are entitled to a deserved time of relaxation, picking the fruits of what was seeded in their youth. These data seem to indicate the participants' desire that, when they reach old age, they will be able to use the privileges and tranquilities supposedly guaranteed in this phase. This group idea of old age serves as a guide to put in practice daily actions and exchanges, evidencing one of the functions of social representation.

The contemporaneous society cultivates the new, beauty, physical strength and willingness to be constantly active, mainly in the physical sense^(11,13). The idea of the perfect body provokes an additional inhibition in people who get older as, if the good and active body is young, full of vitality and freshness, as a result of old age, identified by the adolescents, the person escapes from the stereotype and is consequently considered inapt to perform bodily activities^(12,14). This thought is also reinforced by the representation of old age expressed in the words solitude and sadness.

Solitude and sadness are peripheral notions that reveal the understanding of old age as a phase in which the human being is no longer socially productive⁽¹¹⁾. These words can represent that, when reaching old age, people become unnecessary and, thus, can remain isolated, retreated and excluded from society⁽¹³⁾.

Elderly people know that, when they face their own decline, they also delay it. But aging does not mean getting obsolete or opposing the modern. In view of physical changes, however, other people's merciless look confirms this generalized decadence expressed in the word old age. Then, they try to show other people and themselves that they are still people⁽¹⁴⁾. In addition, however, nuances were evidenced of

ideas about old age that go beyond the presence of disease and social isolation. As mentioned, it can be represented by wisdom and experienced, favored by lifelong years of experience. These are reasons to highlight and acknowledge aging people's potential, independently of the negative aspects indicated. These central elements elaborated by the adolescents organize and reflect common sense, aroused through stimuli that come from the family, from social groups and from information disseminated through television and written media, through different modalities of dialogue, strengthening the social representation of old age in their imaginaries.

The adolescents' SR relate to the way they apprehend daily-life phenomena, information circulating in discourse and events, sharing the world with other people's ideas and their events. These relations further and guide the way the different aspects of daily reality are named, defined and explained⁽⁶⁾. These events are based on the experiences, information and knowledge that are part of the trajectory of life, as SR corresponds to practical knowledge. It is established to enable the subjects to act and deal with daily objects⁽²⁾.

Old age entails slower movements, reduced static muscle strength, and particularly changes in the body dynamics as a result of aging. All of this causes great disadvantage and predisposes the elderly to disease, reflected in fatigue, sadness and, often, solitude. The situation described still seems to prevail in the conception of old age and the elderly in society though, mainly for the adolescents, as negative images, commonly shared by the community they belong to. This favors the elaboration of images with representations that are revealed through daily actions.

These representations are called social because they are collectively constructed in the daily communication of groups, and also through their function. Even when considering old age as a culturally and socially relevant theme, the existing knowledge is strengthened by losses and disadvantages, showing diverging thinking between what is positive, with emphasis on social concerns, and what is negative, as revealed by myths^(6,12).

Identifying the elements of adolescents' SR means making familiar what used to be unknown, strange, intriguing, disturbing and socially relevant to the groups. Thus, it may be possible to organize strategies to rekindle and unveil the theme old age and understand its nuances, so that the members of society in general can naturally accept the process and collaborate towards the desired active old age.

To feel that these objects are part of daily life and that the group serves as a co-author in their creation and evolution, representations emerge. This means that the group will consider them in their way, in their context, according to their needs, desires and interests. The group takes part in a region of thought or knowledge it had been eliminated from, invests in it and appropriates itself of the object, changing it, representing what existed without the group. This corresponds to the creative power of representative activity: one departs from a repertoire of knowledge and experiences, which can be dislocated and combined, so as to integrate them or work towards their disintegration⁽⁵⁻⁶⁾.

Nowadays, media dissemination of events focused on issues related to elderly people results in new knowledge and innovative strategies to enhance this population group's acknowledgement for its merits in social construction. Treatment alternatives are indicated, as well as supposedly miraculous care to postpone the physical effects of old age, such as wrinkles. Therefore, elderly people are invited to star in commercials, incorporate successful characters, among other, so as to minimize stigmas about them not being active and dependent on care, in line with the central elements of the SR revealed.

Media information is undoubtedly influential, with its strategies to format behaviors and identities. There is an ongoing dialectic game, however, between the media and the subjects in touch with it, as they have peculiar tactics to absorb and forward media contents. These efforts permit outlining new knowledge, theories and conceptions in interpersonal relations, so as to reconsider and represent elderly people and successful old age⁽¹⁵⁾.

Common-sense knowledge is spontaneous, naïve and natural knowledge, constituted by experiences, information, models of thinking, contact with people nearby or far-off, as well as by what is received and transmitted through social communication. It is based on this limit between the psychological and the social that the notion of social representation is found, which corresponds to practical knowledge⁽⁵⁻⁶⁾. This justifies the search for knowledge about adolescents' SR of old age and elderly people, with a view to understanding their ways of dealing with these objects.

According to the adolescents' SR, elderly people have life experience and therefore deserve respect, as they have lived a lot and have a lot to offer. This respect is due to their wisdom, as their age favors the knowledge gains evidenced in people's interaction in

social groups⁽¹²⁾. In the same dimension of respect, disrespect is revealed through elderly people's frailty, their need for care, and especially through their exit from the job world, which keeps them isolated and distanced from social activities, leading to solitude and sadness.

In the SR, the images gain strength, and the image created of elderly/old people is ugly, as the loss of beauty, characterized by the emergence of the physical signs characteristic of old age, is always considered as opposed to the young and beautiful⁽²⁾. These are the so-called SR linked with systems of social thinking, which continue over time and are stable⁽⁷⁾.

Getting to know elderly people's needs, the support the need and their satisfaction with life and family is important to qualify the professional care they require⁽¹⁶⁻¹⁷⁾. It is equally important, however, to know adolescents' social representations about this age group, with a view to better understanding their actions towards them and better preparing them for a future of contact and support, which the elderly need for their good health and well-being⁽¹⁸⁾. That is so because, the more the adolescents are stimulated to have social contact with elderly people, the greater the possibility of circulating elements that can change the negative images of old people in this group, with a view to furthering good social relations between both. In combination with having company and feeling loved, these elements contribute to a good quality of life for elderly people^(12,19). Studies about old age and elderly people also indicate the articulated development of social and health projects in order to improve intergenerational relations, through activities directed at young people, elderly people and their relatives. These show the fundamental importance of specialized gerontology training for nurses to strengthen their identity in the multiprofessional team⁽²⁰⁻²¹⁾.

Final considerations

The research provided knowledge on the construction of SR elements deriving from school-age adolescents' common-sense knowledge. The elements were expressed through language and expressions of thought originating in the investigated social groups' experience and information stimuli.

According to the results, the elaborated representations get closer to reality depending on the stimuli that were detailed. As regards old age, according to the participants, disease is more closely related,

although they also relate it with retirements and the experience the person can gain over the years. This idea favors the construction of new ways of considering old age, although the representation about retired persons can imply distancing from society.

As evidenced, through this research, the groups envisage old age as a phase in which individuals' life and development have ended, while losses and frustrations about physical decline prevail, as revealed by the words fatigue, tired and frailty. In addition, elderly people have their own physical characteristics, like grey hair and wrinkles, demanding care, despite their experience and wisdom. The difference between the consensual world discussed in research publications and its innovations for man and the reified universe was clearly evidenced, regarding knowledge about old age and its changes revealed by senescence and senility.

Knowledge about these representations also indicated the need for nurses' educative interventions in schools, with a view to maintaining a dialogue to consider and reconsider knowledge transfers about old age and the age, by nurses, so as to sensitize the adolescents' behaviors and attitudes towards the elderly.

As a study limitation, the research development in a sole school is highlighted, located in a Brazilian state capital. Therefore, research possibilities should be expanded to other public and private schools, as well as to other sociocultural realities.

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