

The knowledge comes from rivers: the social representations of aging among riverine elderly

O conhecimento vem dos rios: as representações sociais do envelhecimento entre idosos ribeirinhos

El conocimiento viene de los ríos: las representaciones sociales del envejecimiento entre los ancianos ribereños

*Jefferson Luiz de Cerqueira Castro*¹, ORCID 0000-0002-7990-7611
*Ludgleydson Fernandes de Araújo*², ORCID 0000-0003-4486-7565

^{1,2} *Departamento de Pós-graduação em Psicologia, Universidade Federal do Delta do Parnaíba, Brasil*

Abstract: This study aimed at understanding the Social Representations of aging of the senior citizens who live in a Brazilian river island. It is a qualitative-exploratory study with intentional non-probabilistic sample. Socio-demographic questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used. Participants were 100 elderly people, paired by gender, aged between 60-89 years old ($M= 71$ years, $SD= 7$). From the Descending Hierarchical Classification obtained through the IRaMuTeQ software, six classes were presented. They showed representations on the divine grant of aging, chronological aging and cumulative implications, biopsychosocial losses and their impact on functionality, and fear of becoming dependent. It is hoped that the present study will contribute to interventions on the aging of the riverine elderly and subsidize further research in the gerontological field about this population.

Keywords: aging; elderly people; riverine population; social representations; IRaMuTeQ

Resumo: Objetivou-se apreender as Representações Sociais do envelhecimento para idosos de uma ilha fluvial brasileira. Trata-se de um estudo qualitativo-exploratório com amostra não-probabilística intencional. Utilizou-se questionários sociodemográficos e entrevistas semiestruturadas. Participaram 100 idosos ribeirinhos, pareados por sexo, com idades entre 60-89 anos ($M= 70$ anos; $DP= 7$). A partir da Classificação Hierárquica Descendente obtida através do *software* IRaMuTeQ, destacaram-se seis classes, as quais apresentaram representações sobre a concessão divina de envelhecer, o envelhecimento cronológico e implicações cumulativas, as perdas biopsicossociais, o impacto deste na funcionalidade, e o temor da dependência. Espera-se que o presente estudo contribua para intervenções sobre a o envelhecimento de idosos ribeirinhos e subsidie investigações futuras no campo gerontológico acerca dessa população.

Palavras-chave: envelhecimento; idosos; ribeirinhos; representações sociais; IRaMuTeQ



Resumen: El objetivo fue aprehender las representaciones sociales del envejecimiento para los ancianos de una isla fluvial brasileña. Este es un estudio cualitativo-exploratorio con muestra no probabilística e intencional. Se utilizaron cuestionarios sociodemográficos y entrevistas semiestructuradas. Cien ancianos ribereños, emparejadas por sexo, con edades comprendidas entre 60-89 años ($M= 70$ años, $DE= 7$) participaron en el estudio. A partir de la Clasificación Jerárquica Descendente obtenida por el software IRaMuTeQ, se presentaron seis clases, que presentaron representaciones sobre la concesión divina del envejecimiento, el envejecimiento cronológico y las implicaciones acumulativas, las pérdidas biopsicosociales, su impacto en la funcionalidad y el miedo a la dependencia. Se espera que el presente estudio contribuya a las intervenciones sobre el envejecimiento de los ancianos ribereños y subsidie futuras investigaciones en el campo gerontológico sobre esta población.

Palabras clave: envejecimiento; ancianos; ribereño; representaciones sociales; IRaMuTeQ

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Correspondence: Jefferson Luiz de Cerqueira Castro. Universidade Federal do Delta do Parnaíba, Departamento de Pós-graduação em Psicologia, Parnaíba-PI, Brasil. E-mail: jefferson.psico.ufpi@outlook.com. Ludgleydson Fernandes de Araújo; e-mail – ludgleydson@yahoo.com.br.

The fact that the world is becoming older is already well known. That finding has called the attention of government officials and of researchers of this study field, in a way that the populational aging has been highlighted in many agendas. Population aging can be characterized as an increase of the participation of the elderly in the general population, which is followed by an increase in the population's average age. This process occurs differently within developed countries and developing nations; while in the former this process was slow, in the latter, it started more recently, but has been taking place rapidly and more intensively (Martins et al., 2016), such as in Brazil.

Recent data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* - IBGE) show that 14.6% of the Brazilian population is in the age range of 60 years old or older, a percentage that comprehends a little more than 30 million inhabitants (IBGE, 2018). Besides that, this increase surpassed the projections for the number of senior citizens, which estimated a total of 29.3 million of them in 2020 in the country (Simões, 2016).

Considering the new data, therefore, a population of 32 million elderly people in the country is estimated for 2025 (Vieira, Alves, Fernandes, Martins, & Lago, 2017). It will correspond to the sixth largest elderly population in the world (Araújo, Castro, & Santos, 2018). In addition, it is estimated that the Brazilian elderly population will have reached the number of 66.6 million by 2050 (Simões, 2016). In a comparison to Canada, where the currently number of elderly people represents twice the total number of Brazilian elderly inhabitants, we can notice

that, in the middle of the century, both countries will be leveled in relation to the number of senior citizens (Kalache, 2017).

Aging is a continuous, natural, and inevitable process in the life of every living being. This process is defined by biopsychosocial and cultural changes, which, in turn, are impacted by intrinsic factors, such as genetics, and extrinsic factors such as the experiences lived, and the environment (Souza, Carvalho, & Ferreira, 2018). This way, one can say that “the natural phenomenon of aging goes beyond the biological dimension, and must also be understood as a historical, social and cultural fact” (Peixoto, Lima, & Bittar, 2017, p. 209 – translation by the authors). Besides that, the aging process leads to changes at different levels, which can be mitigated or exacerbated by the environment (Nascimento, Cardoso, Santos, Magalhães, & Pinto, 2017). In this sense, the life-span paradigm sees the development as a process that occurs throughout life; it is multidimensional and multidirectional; it is characterized by gains and losses; it evidences a flexible character; it occurs within a historical-cultural context; it is contextual; and it is multidisciplinary (Pereira, 2015).

Taking those aspects into account, one can realize that the riverine population find difficulties in their living context, because they cannot access basic services, such as sanitary, health related and educational. They also have difficulties in relation to mobility and low political influence, which makes the public power forget them, increasing their vulnerability (Nascimento et al., 2017). This fact calls our attention, because, if the riverine population are not assisted by public policies, it can be assumed that the riverine senior citizens are even more vulnerable, mainly due to the difficulties they face to access the services, because they are geographically far from them (Meirelles, Brugnera, Bruna, & Fehr, 2016).

As far as the riverine population is concerned, it is possible to define these people as the constituent population of a space which has a very peculiar way of living, different from populations from other environments, such as rural and urban ones. The riverside population has its own worldview tuned to the presence of the river (Silva, Farias, & Alves, 2016). The way of life, the work activities and the social relationships in these isolated regions are primarily governed by nature and by culture. These aspects control the timetables, the activities and, therefore, the behavior of the riverine people (Nascimento, Cardoso, Santos, Pinto, & Magalhães, 2019). Therefore, we can say that, for riverine people, the river is not simply a physical element that constitutes their space; in fact, it carries a lot of symbolism for them, i.e., it is part of their way of being and living (Silva et al., 2016).

Aging, in its turn, is not a homogeneous experience, so each person experiments this life phase according to different expectations, desires, values and principles. Aging is, therefore, interpreted in distinct ways, which are influenced by the life history of each subject (Nascimento, Cardoso, Santos, Magalhães, & Pinto, 2016). Due to aging dynamic and idiosyncratic characters, it is relevant to understand how the social representations (SR) can influence on the perceptions of the aging process.

The SR help to understand the individuals' information, opinions and attitudes, once they are identity shared ways of recognizing the world, within a tension between social actors and their subjectivities with the social norms of a specific culture (Torres, Camargo, Bousfield, & Silva, 2015). In other words, representations can be characterized as shared and reproduced by the social environment, providing constancy and objectivity, allowing the crystallization of two-way actions between social actors, thus constituting the institutions that dominate the representations that, in turn, encourage the individual to conform to these (Moscovici, 2012).

It is worth to highlight that the process of SR formation takes place by means of two socio-cognitive processes that occur simultaneously: anchoring and objectification (Moscovici, 2012). Objectification aims at transforming something abstract into something that is almost concrete. This way, it unites an unfamiliar idea with reality, enabling the perception of an initially intrapsychic universe into an accessible universe (Maia, Correia, & Oliveira, 2018). In its turn, the

anchoring process keeps the ideas intertwined in the intrapsychic sphere from the conversion of the non-familiar member into a familiar one, destining such elaboration to the pre-existing structures (Moscovici, 2012).

Moreover, the Theory of Social Representations (TSR) allows the understanding of a certain way of knowing of the world, in which the social groups build and share a quantity of knowledge, concepts and explanations about a specific topic from interpersonal communication that they establish in their daily life (Brito, Belloni, Castro, Camargo, & Giacomozzi, 2018). It is also important to highlight that the TSR is used to address varied issues; firstly, for being an adaptable and versatile theory; secondly, for being a psychosocial theory of the common sense; and thirdly, for its pluri-methodological character (Rateau, Moliner, Guimelli, & Abric, 2012), which allows to explore distinct objects. Aging is, indeed, a socially constructed and culturally rooted idea, and, therefore, it can be transformed and adapted with knowledge (Soares et al., 2014).

Thus, our interest in the riverine context is related to the significant number of people becoming old within those spaces, which are connected to distinct ecological and sociocultural characteristics. Because of that, the present study aimed at understanding the social representations of aging for the elderly people living in the riverine context of a river island in Northern Brazil.

Materials and Method

Type of Research

This is a qualitative, descriptive-exploratory, cross-sectional study with a non-probabilistic and by-convenience sample. The research adopts the Theory of Social Representations, specifically the socio-genetic approach (Moscovici, 2012), as a theoretical-methodological tool, together with the life-span paradigm of aging (Baltes, Staudinger, & Lindenberger, 1999) as an understanding of the world.

Participants

The criteria for the participants' inclusion were based on a previous study (Nascimento et al., 2016), and consisted in: 1) being, at least, 60 years old; 2) living in the specified place; 3) not having any type of disorder that could affect the communicative capacity; 4) not having cognitive disorders; 5) accepting to participate on the research as a volunteer and signing the Consent Term (TCLE). The information concerning the communicative and the cognitive capacities were tracked by means of self-declarations, declarations from the participants' families and observations carried out by the researchers. The exclusion criteria were adopted according to the inadequacy to the criteria pre-established for the participation in the study.

The target-population consisted in 124 elderly people, who are registered in the public health center of the *Povoado Canárias* (Ilha das Canárias, Araiões, Maranhão, Brazil). Among that population, two people did not meet criterion 4; five of them did not meet criterion 3; and one did not meet criterion 1. Seven people refused to participate; four of them presented some disease that prevented them from participating; three of them were not in the place where the research was carried out; one of them died during the data collection period; one of them could not be found. This way, 24 senior citizens were not included in the sample.

Instruments

Socioeconomic and sociodemographic questionnaires were used; they contained questions related to gender, income, education, religion, among others, so we could characterize the sample. In order to understand the phenomenon of SR, semi-structured interviews were used, as they allow more flexibility for possible interventions and enable a more comprehensive investigation. The semi-structured interview consisted of the following question: *What do you understand by aging?* It is worth noting that the filling of the instruments took about 40 minutes in total.

Another important fact must be mentioned: all the questions in the questionnaires and in the interviews, as well as the answers delivered by the participants, were provided in Brazilian Portuguese language. For this report, though, all those texts were translated into English, to facilitate their understanding.

Procedures

Initially, this research was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee of *Universidade Federal do Piauí*, being approved in the opinion document number 2.734.021, which declared that all the criteria for research carried out with human beings had been met, according to the Resolutions 466/12 and 510/2016 of the Brazilian National Health Council (*Conselho Nacional de Saúde*).

After the ethics committee approval, a mapping of the place with the target-population was carried out, with the help of community health agents, so we could find the elderly more easily, to facilitate the data collection process in the participants' homes. The researchers adopted, as a criterion, the collection at the participants' home in order to promote a space with reduced anxiety during the application of the instruments, and also to avoid the mobility-related difficulties that the elderly could face if they had to go to another place for the data collection.

Once the participant was found, we paid them a visit, in their own homes. Before the instruments were applied, the Consent Term was presented to the person; the researcher then explained the character of the research, emphasizing the fact that the data provided by the participants would be kept secret and anonymous; the researchers also assured that all the information would only be used for scientific ends, and explained all the risks and benefits of the research, showing that the person could accept to participate or not, being aware that, even after accepting, he/she could stop participating at any time, without any damage.

The instruments were applied in the following order: application of sociodemographic questionnaires, in order to characterize the sample and to function as an "ice-breaker" for the other applications. After that, the semi-structured interview was carried out.

Data Analysis

The data from the sociodemographic questionnaires were submitted to descriptive statistics with the help of the software IBM SPSS 25.0, in order to design the sample profile.

In their turn, the semi-structured interviews were fully transcribed in a text file. After that, commandment lines were created, with some sociodemographic variables that were analyzed by the program IRaMuTeQ 0.7 alpha 2, which performed the text analysis of the discourses. The Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) was obtained. It is an analysis established from statistical calculations, such as chi-square and frequencies, allowing the text segments to be separated into text classes, leading to the construction of the graphic structure that points to the relation among the lexical elements (dendrogram). It is important to mention that the SR comprised by DHC were analyzed through the focus of the Moscovici's sociogenetic approach (MOSCOVICI, 2012).

Results

A number of 100 elderly people participated of the research. They were paired by gender; they aged between 60 and 89 years old ($M=70$ years; $SD= 7$). As for the marital status, most of them were married (61%), quantity followed by widows/widowers (26%). In relation to religion, they were mostly catholic (86%); concerning dwellers, there was a predomination of participants living with someone of their family or a friend (88%); in terms of education, almost all the participants had low education level (unfinished elementary education – 53%; no education – 45%); the highest education level recorded was complete elementary school (2%).

Most participants do not have a job (85%), and practically all of them are retired (97%), and around one fifth of the sample has a pension, besides being retired (22%), and most of them are responsible for keeping their family (66%), having an income of a minimum wage (70%), followed by the ones who receive twice or three times the value of a minimum wage (24%).

The general *corpus* was constituted by 98 texts (interviews), separated into 98 text segments (TS), with the utilization of 71 TS (72.45%). It is important to highlight that among the 100 participants, only 98 of them responded que semi-structured interview in full; therefore, 2 texts were not used by the *software*, what explains the use of only 98 texts.

A total of 2,055 occurrences (words) emerged; 431 of them were distinct words, in a way that, from these words, 230 were mentioned only once. The content analyzed was categorized in six classes: Class 1, with 11 TS (15.49%); Class 2, with 10 TS (14.08%); Class 3, with 10 TS (14.08%); Class 4, with 11 TS (15.49%); Class 5, with 12 TS (16.9%); and Class 6, with 17 TS (23.94%).

It is worth mentioning that the main corpus was subdivided into four principal branches (see Figure 1). The subcorpus A), “*Aging as a gift*”, formed by Class 6 (*The Privilege of Aging*), which presented representations of aging as a divine concession that allows those who get old to reach a higher life expectancy.

In turn, subcorpus B, named “*Aging: a series of changes*”, comprising Classes 1 (*Cumulative Aging*), 4 (*Aging and Functionality*), shows this uninterrupted process, in which physical changes and social roles impact on the activities performed by the elderly, having as a consequence, their reduction. Subcorpus C, named “*Aging: a continuum*”, constituted by Class 5 (*Chronological Aging*), presents an aging concept as a continuous process in time, resulting in a cumulative process, which has, as a final product, the old person.

On the other hand, Subcorpus D, named as “*Negative attitudes towards aging*”, constituted by Class 2 (*Losses of aging*) and by Class 3 (*Aging and dependence*), present in their content a negative representation of aging, which is anchored in the losses that result from that process, as well as its consequences, such as the lack of the individual’s autonomy.

In order to visualize those classes better, we have designed a dendrogram with the list of the words of each class established from the chi-square test. In the dendrogram, the evocations that share the same vocabulary among themselves and the distinct vocabulary of the other classes emerge. Later on, each of the classes expressed in the DHC (see Figure 1) will be described, operationalized and illustrated. To illustrate the meaning of the words in the dendrogram, some excerpts from the participants’ interviews will be presented, in a way that the words that emerged in the above-mentioned class were highlighted in bold.

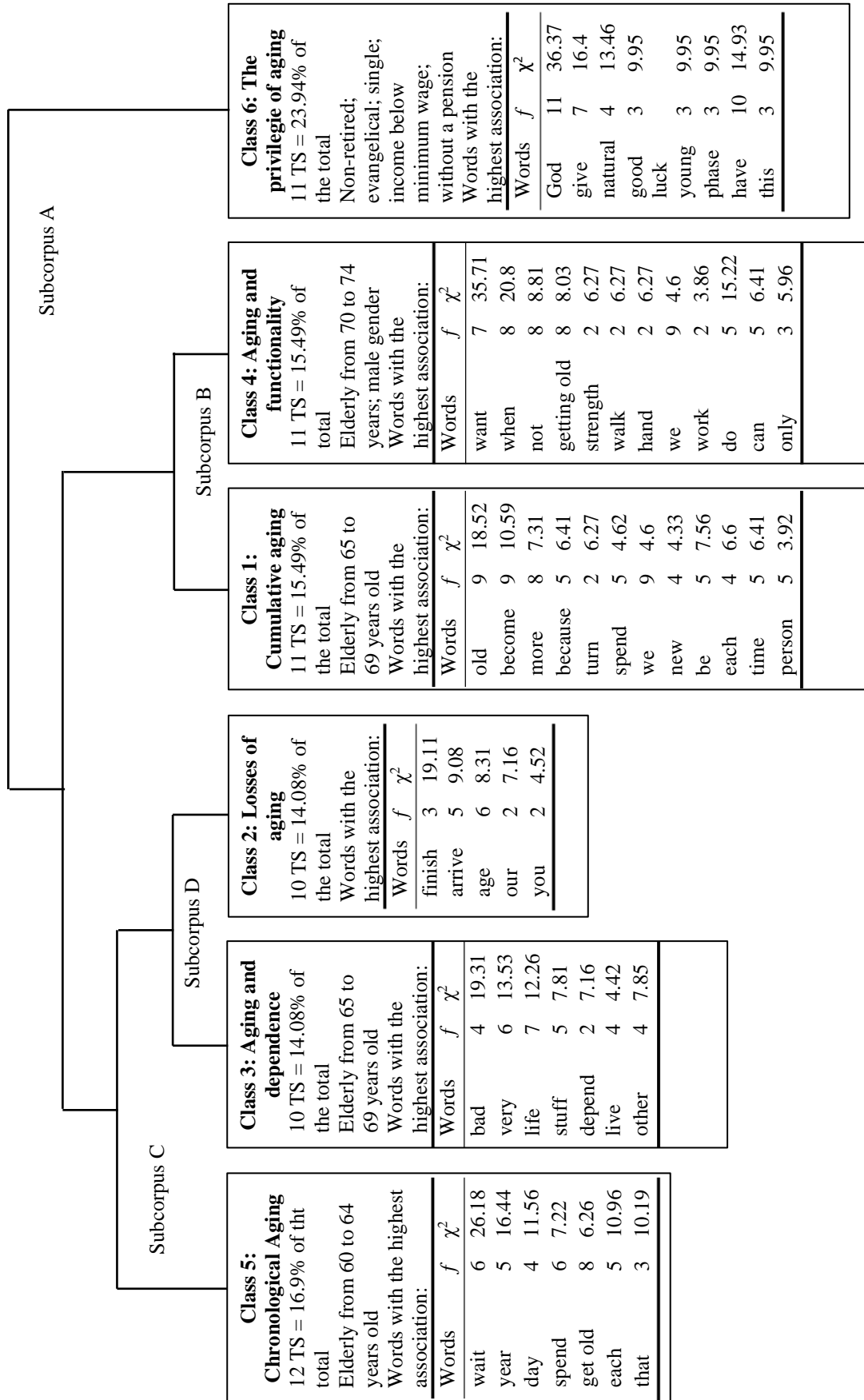


Figure 1. Social representations of riverine aging.

Class 6 – The privilege of Aging

This class includes 23.94% ($f=17$) of the total of text segments retained from the corpus. It was the most significant class, being constituted by terms that comprise the interval between $\chi^2=9.95$ (“good luck”) and $\chi^2=36.37$ (“God”). This class is formed by words like “give” ($\chi^2=16.4$); “natural” ($\chi^2=13.46$); “young” ($\chi^2=9.95$); “phase” ($\chi^2=9.95$); “have” ($\chi^2=14.93$); “this” ($\chi^2=9.95$).

From the information provided by the participants, a representation of aging anchored in the spiritual dimension could be noticed. This representation is characterized by the objectivation of the divine attribution of aging, considering both positive (longevity) and negative aspects (diseases) of aging, which, to those elderly people, is determined by a heavenly figure. Moreover, the elderly highlight the privilege of getting old, understood as being lucky, considering that many die young and do not reach old age. It could be verified a strong highlight of these representations among the senior citizens who are not retired, who are evangelical, single, who have an income lower than a minimal wage and who do not get a pension.

“It’s the **good luck** that **God gives** us, we are **lucky** to live more, but today is very difficult. Getting old is better because life is long” (Participant 97, 68 years old, male, married).

“We have to **accept** the age that is coming, it’s **natural**, even with the **diseases** that we have, **everything** is the will of **God**” (Participant 91, 72 years old, female, married).

Class 1 – Cumulative Aging

Class 1 derives from one of the branches of Class 6. The former comprehends 15.49% ($f=11$) of the total of the text segments obtained from the corpus, which is formed by the words and radicals that range from $\chi^2=3.92$ (“person”) and $\chi^2=18.52$ (“old”). This class is formed by words like “become”, ($\chi^2=10.59$); “more” ($\chi^2=7.31$); “because” ($\chi^2=6.41$); “turn” ($\chi^2=6.27$); “spend” ($\chi^2=4.62$); “we” ($\chi^2=4.6$); “new” ($\chi^2=4.33$); “be” ($\chi^2=7.56$); “each” ($\chi^2=6.6$); “time” ($\chi^2=6.4$).

As already explained in the previous class (*The privilege of aging*), the senior citizens see aging as a gift from God, and from that idea, aging is assumed as a continuum that denotes a time-cumulative process, i.e., God allows the elderly to live longer, providing them with more years in their lives, making them become older and older.

Therefore, from the analysis carried out, it could be verified that the participants, when questioned about what they understand by aging represent it as a chronological process, in such way that, in the passing of time, the subjects become older. Besides that, the participants anchor this representation when they do become old, i.e., to those senior citizens, aging is only noticed from the state of being old, and not as a process that occurs since one is born. Moreover, they represent this process as being determined and irreversible. It means that, to those participants, aging has to happen and cannot return to youth. It must be highlighted that there has been a higher remark of the SR of this class to the elderly people who are aged between 65 and 69 years old – the younger elderly.

“It’s something that **we already** know that **we’re already getting old** e **won’t become younger**, as time **goes by** we keep **getting older**” (Participant 62, 70 years old, female, widow).

“**We don’t have** to **get young**, we gotta **get old** indeed. Every **passing** year **we get older and older**” (Participant 72, 66 years old, male, married).

Class 4 – Aging and Functionality

This class presented the retention of 15.49% ($f=11$) of the total of the TS analyzed, presenting the same weight as the previous class, which is paired in its branching. It comprised the words within the range from $\chi^2=35.71$ (“want”) to $\chi^2=3.86$ (“work”). Besides those, the class was constituted by the definitions “when” ($\chi^2=20.8$); “not” ($\chi^2=8.81$); “getting old” ($\chi^2=8.03$); “strength” ($\chi^2=6.27$); “walk” ($\chi^2=6.27$); “hand” ($\chi^2=6.27$); “we” ($\chi^2=4.6$); “do” ($\chi^2=15.22$); “can” ($\chi^2=6.41$); “only” ($\chi^2=5.96$).

When taking the previous class (*Cumulative Aging*) into account, it could be evidenced that the cumulative process of years has, as a final result, the old subject. This subject is described by the respondents in this class as “old”. According to the data mentioned, it was evidenced that, to the participants of the study, aging is related to the functional incapacity, which is mainly anchored on laboring losses. Because of that, the elderly represent aging as a rupture period between what one used to do and cannot do any longer, which evidences the dependence issue during aging. As the elderly cannot perform certain activities like they used to anymore, they now depend on other people to do them. It could be observed a highlight of these representations among the male participants, within the age range from 70 to 74 years old. The gender difference may be explained by the relationship of the riverine man with harder activities, which are more difficult to be performed by older people, which is accordingly to the age range presented.

“That’s **when** the person gets old and **cannot** do what they **want**, **cannot** do anything, **cannot** see. **Aging** is only **walking** on the **hand** of others, it’s only depending on others” (Participant 26, 70 years old, male, married).

“**When we get old, we cannot** do what we used to, **we want** to work in our field (fishing/planting) and **cannot** anymore, and **we miss it**” (Participant 71, 66 years old, male, married).

Class 5 – Chronological Aging

This class obtained 16.9% ($f=12$) of the total of the TS classified by the general corpus and comprised the terms in the range from $\chi^2=6.26$ (“get old”) to $\chi^2=26.18$ (“wait”). Besides that, this class was constituted of the forms “year” ($\chi^2=16.44$); “day” ($\chi^2=11.56$); “spend” ($\chi^2=7.22$); “get old” ($\chi^2=6.26$); “each” ($\chi^2=10.96$); “that” ($\chi^2=10.19$).

In one of the branches of the Class 6 (*The privilege of aging*), and in close meaning to Class 1, it could be noticed that the interviewees represented aging as something already expected, as being programed and universal, and that everyone must experiment it. Besides that, the SR anchored again on the chronological dimension of aging – as evidenced in Class 1, being objectified in the passing of time, and in the cumulation of years to the life of the elderly, which contributes for them to become older. A higher concentration of those SR was observed among participants aging from 60 to 64 years old.

“Aging is something that we keep **waiting** to happen. It’s something that doesn’t renew; every **passing day** we get older” (Participant 29, 76 years old, female, married).

“**After we get old** we only **wait** for death, because all that time **passed**, from that on... isn’t it, son?” (Participant 70, 87 years old, female, widow).

Class 3 – Aging and Dependence

This class presented 10.08% ($f=10$) of the total of the segments obtained by the general corpus, being constituted by the words from $\chi^2=4.42$ (“live”) to $\chi^2=19.31$ (“bad”). Besides these words, this class is composed by words like “very” ($\chi^2=13.53$); “life” ($\chi^2=12.26$); “stuff” ($\chi^2=7.81$); “depend” ($\chi^2=7.16$); “other” ($\chi^2=7.85$).

Class 3 is derivate from Class 5, whose content represents the passing of time as a mark of aging. It could be noticed that the participants have a negative attitude towards aging, characterized by the valuative dimensions of its social representations. This negative perception is directly related to the dependence, like it was observed in Class 3, i. e., to those elderly, the facto of depending on someone in old age represents a negative marker of the aging process. It is worth to mention that there was a stronger highlight of the SR of this class to participants aging from 65 to 69 years old, i. e., younger elderly.

“It’s **very bad** being **old**, because **depending** on others is **very bad**, uh? It’s the end of our **life** uh? Everybody **lives** facing a **health** problem” (Participant 18, 62 years old, female, married).

“Getting old is very **bad**, we **get** in others’ hand. It’s having **lived a lot**, uh? We’ve already been through a lot of **good** and **bad stuff** to be where we are” (Participant 34, 68 years old, male, single).

Class 2 – Losses of Aging

This class represented 14.08% ($f= 10$) of the total of TS, having the same weight as the class paired in its branching (Class 3), and is composed by the words ranging from $\chi^2= 4.52$ (“you”) and $\chi^2= 19.11$ (“end”). This class is also composed by other words such as “arrive” ($\chi^2= 9.08$); “age” ($\chi^2= 8.31$); “our” ($\chi^2= 7.16$).

We could observe some closeness to the previous class, considering that the dependence process in aging causes psychosocial damages to the elderly, also impacting the aging experience negatively. Therefore, from the data collected, it could be noticed that the participants represent aging from a negative perspective, connecting it to the losses of aging (physical, social and emotional ones), as well as a connection to finitude, perceptions linked to the age marker.

“It’s when the time **arrives**, the old **age**, and many don’t get to live much, **end up** dying” (Participant 24, 68 years old, female, widow).

“It’s the **age**, isn’t it? Health starts **ending**, the excitement we used to have we no longer have. The good things in **life all end**” (Participant 25, 76 years old, male, widower).

In this sense, it could be noticed how varied the SR of aging constructed by those senior citizens are, from negative perceptions of aging to spiritual aspects.

Discussion

The social representation of religious or spiritual issues is almost always included in the discourses, attributing different values such as gratitude, guidance and divine blessing, which corroborates how important it is to believe in a superior figure during old age. Besides that, the strategies used by the elderly, based on religiosity, serve as an extenuating factor for the negative situations (Nascimento et al., 2016).

Thus, the elderly who have a religion tend to present a more spiritual perspective on aging; like the single ones, possibly for not having as much social support as the married ones, stick to their faith to face aging. Similarly, the elderly with lower income, for having reduced access to resources, tend to link spiritual aspects to aging as a way to face social vulnerabilities.

This way, when we notice that the elderly use spirituality as a way to face some losses, it is evidenced that “the individual’s plasticity along their vital circle, and their circle of change and adaptation to new situations, when they compensate functional, cognitive and social losses caused by the chronological aging” (Faria, Santos, & Patiño, 2017, p. 2, translated by the authors).

Notwithstanding, the riverine elderly, in spite of not being in a vulnerable situation, highlight some gains during the aging process, which confirms the life-span perspective. Regarding this aspect, in accordance with the life-span paradigm, the development does not end in the adult phase, but is spread all life long, i. e., from conception through the end of life adaptive processes of acquisition, maintenance, transformations and “wear and tear” of the structures and psychic functions are present (Luttigards, 2018).

Aging can be described as an idiosyncratic, active, progressive process; it does not take place in isolation, but, is, instead, a sum of multiple determinants, which starts when one is born and will continue to finitude (Arruda & Borges, 2016). Besides that, aging has to do with the act or the result of becoming older, which denotes getting old, looking old, living a long time (Vieira, Coutinho, & Saraiva, 2016). It is in accordance with the respondents’ perception about aging and becoming old.

It is important to notice that this lack of differentiation among some concepts of the gerontology field is very common in researches on social representations of old age, of the senior citizen and of aging, once the common-sense knowledge does not often distinguish these social objects, anchoring and objectifying them in a similar or even the same way (Biasus, Demantova, & Camargo, 2011).

Notwithstanding, becoming old refers to the natural effect of time, which makes every living being become old, modifying their physical appearance, as well as their body's functionalities (Arruda & Borges, 2016). The functional performance, i.e., the condition that the subject has to live autonomously and to establish relationships in their context decreases as age increases (Lima, Araújo, & Scattolin, 2016). Because of precarious life conditions in developing countries, functional aging precedes the chronological one, and this fact is more evident in more needy populations (Papaléo Netto, 2017), and such is the case of the riverine ones.

The riverine older people have a strong relationship with laboring issues since early age, performing a type of work that requires a lot of physical effort, which often demands physical strength; Therefore, with the senescence process, there is a gradual reduction of the activities carried out by those subjects. This reduction in the older people's functionality make them feel old, once, for them, when they cannot perform their activities, they realize that they have already got old.

A research carried out by Pereira, Firmo and Giacomini (2014), in the city of Bambuí (Minas Gerais State, Brazil), which aimed at investigating the elements that collaborate in the construction of meanings of the functional incapacity to senior citizens, presented, as analyzes categories, being able (or not) to do something and being a nuisance. Among the 57 senior citizens interviewed, 'not being able' refers to the losses caused by aging, and "being a nuisance" represents dependence. The research shows that when the person is still able, they are not old yet, while not being able is signified as being incapable and dependent, becoming old (Pereira et al., 2014).

Despite of those findings, the way of living in the rural context may provide higher levels of maintenance of the functional capacity, once the physical activity is kept for longer, even being reduced in frequency and intensity; therefore, the realization of domestic and subsistence activities (such as taking care of the animals and the garden), mean the continuity of the work and of the social role of the elderly in the family (Winckler, Boufleuer, Ferretti, & Sá, 2016).

As already known, aging is a phenomenon characteristic of the life cycle, which is defined by biopsychosocial changes inherent and connected to the passing of time. Therefore, it should not be perceived as a casualty of the situation, but as a determination of a development and maturation program in multiple dimensions (Silva, 2011). Notwithstanding, the "chronological aging is the modification experimented along time, characterized as a biological phenomenon that affects the human being" (Arruda & Borges, 2016, p. 215, translated by the authors). This way, aging is conceived as the phase of a whole continuum that life is, beginning with our birth and ending with our death (Papaléo Netto, 2017).

In the representations of the society, aging is linked with diverse losses, such as autonomy, physical frailty, diseases, incapacity to work (Araújo & Carlos, 2018). Along the life course, the representations of aging are internalized in a subjacent way, shaping the perception of the subject in relation to their own aging (Swift, Abrams, Lamont, & Drury, 2017). It means that this subject, who has a stereotyped view of aging, ends up carrying those stereotypes during old age, which could be damaging during this phase of the development cycle.

Therefore, this self-perception of aging has harmful implications on the self-care and on the health of the senior citizens (Mendoza-Núñez, Sarmiento-Salmorán, Marín-Cortés, Martínez-Maldonado, & Ruiz-Ramos, 2018). This pessimistic view of aging that the interviewees have may be associated with some losses (such as the reduction of health, of the disposition) that are within the aging process, which affect their autonomy, being dependence the biggest fear of that age group.

This way, when taking into account that the social representations are anchored in social and cultural identities and on the experiences they have in their daily life (Jodelet, 2001), we could reflect that the riverine senior citizens relate to the SR of aging, mainly contents linked to losses and limitations, because those aspects possibly are part of their daily living.

Conclusions

Considering the data presented, one can notice a heterogeneous character in the SR of aging to the riverine, what is in agreement with the literature. However, due to the riverine reality, some specificities could be observed, for, despite of the losses recognized, we could see that the riverine senior citizens use spiritual aspects to evidence positive aspects of aging, including longevity among them. Notwithstanding, we could notice that, in spite of being in a more vulnerable situation, they generally face aging as a blessing, what can be reinforced by the life-span paradigm, the theoretical model adopted in this study.

Therefore, the senior citizens, when adapting to the unfavorable conditions, demonstrated more plasticity, as well as a selection of socio-affective resources and optimization of the current resources, such as the case of the religious view as a way of dealing with their condition.

As for the methodological setbacks, we highlight the process of data collection, which profiled only one of the villages of Ilha das Canárias. This happened because other villages were farther and going there would require more time for locomotion and would be more onerous; it was not possible, thus, to conduct the research in those territories. Therefore, we suggest that new studies are carried out with senior citizens that live in farther territories of the island, in order to confirm or confront the data presented.

Besides that, once this research is based on a non-probabilistic by-convenience sample, it does not allow the generalization of the results obtained to all the riverine senior citizens of northern Brazil. In addition, this study was designed in a way that did not allow us to establish a cause-effect relationship from the SR perceived and the variables investigated.

Considering the importance of the topic of this study to the gerontology field, the present work marks an inaugural field in the scope of the psychosocial-nature research. In fact, the findings of this study contributed to recognize the perception that the riverine senior citizens have on the aging process and how they represent those processes. In the interim, this study can set precedents to psychosociological researches in the riverine context. Because of that, we suggest that studies with the riverine senior citizens with mixed methods are carried out, assessing the functional capacity and the self-perceived health, articulating that data with the qualitative information on aging.

Beyond academic aspects, the present study can subsidize reflections of policies of attention to the riverine senior citizens. This way, concerning the social contribution of this study, we would like to recommend the planning and the implementation of actions towards the health of the elder people who live by the rivers, considering their particularities and necessities, prioritizing the full experimentation of the aging process.

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