



Violence Against the Elderly: Social Representations of Portuguese and Brazilian Caregivers

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Abstract. The increase in life expectancy and elderly people in society, coupled with changes in family structure, have highlighted the importance of formal and informal caregivers of elderly people. **Objective:** To analyse the social representations of violence against the elderly, of two groups of formal and informal caregivers. **Methods:** Exploratory, quantitative and qualitative research, supported by the theoretical-methodological reference of the Social Representations Theory and in the context of this, the Central Core Theory. The sample was participated in by 81 formal caregivers from the project “Aging in Safety in the Alentejo - Understanding to Act, of the University of Évora” and 20 informal caregivers from the project “Qualification of caregivers and aspects related to the quality of life of the elderly people dependent on primary and tertiary care: Implementation and protocol evaluation, of the State University of Southwest of Bahia”. We used the Free Word Association Technique. The data was analysed by prototypical analysis based on two matrices by the software IRAMUTEQ (Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires) 0.7 alpha 2. **Results:** In Portugal, the elements “bad, mistreatment, I will be, sad, anger, patience, physical, injustice, irritation and meanness” stood out in the central core. In Brazil the mention of “hitting” was emphasized. **Conclusions:** In both Portugal and Brazil, physical violence takes on particular significance in the social representations of caregivers, rather than verbal and psychological violence, which is not present in the central core of social representations of violence against the elderly in either of the countries.

Keywords: Aging · Elderly people · Caregivers · Violence

1 Introduction

1.1 Sociodemographic Characterisation

In view of the changes in health conditions and birth rates of the population, as a result of socioeconomic development, there was a general increase in average life expectancy.

Currently, one of the major social challenges is the growth of the number of elderly people worldwide (Brito et al. 2018).

Research on aging became more prominent in the 1950s when the process of demographic change occurred in Europe and the United States (Castro et al. 2013). However, in developing countries, such as Brazil, this problem began to become more visible later in the mid-1980s (Prado and Sayd 2006; Silveira et al. 2018).

In Portugal, the average life expectancy has increased in recent decades, with 80.8 years in 2016 - 83.4 years for women and 77.7 years for men (Pordata 2018). In 2017, Portugal had a Longevity Index of 53.2% and an Aging Index of 153.2%. In the same year, the Alentejo region had an Aging Index of 197.0%, much higher than the 153.2% that was verified in the whole country (Portada 2018).

In Brazil, the aging population has maintained the trend observed in recent years, with a growth of 18% since 2012, reaching 30.2 million elderly people in the country in 2017 (IBGE 2015). In the State of Bahia, the National Survey by Continuous Sampling of Households, revealed a figure of 1.9 million elderly people, corresponding to 12.6% of the population (IBGE 2015).

1.2 The Vulnerability of the Elderly: Risk Factor for Violence

The implications of the phenomenon of the aging population have revealed a major impact on society, mainly affecting the public spheres of health and social security. The elderly population is that which uses the health services most, mainly hospital admissions, besides the constant need for continuous care (Veras and Oliveira 2018). In addition to the cognitive and physical losses of aging, there are the problems related to socio-cultural conditions and incomes. These factors lead to greater vulnerability in these individuals who increasingly need the support of third parties to carry out their daily activities (Mariano et al. 2015).

Given this reality, the caregiver becomes an agent of great importance in the routine of the elderly person. A caregiver can be defined as formal or informal. A formal caregiver is one who performs the care as a professional activity, receiving payment for it, while the informal caregiver performs the care in a non-professional way, and is often provided by relatives, friends or neighbours (Vieira et al. 2011; Batista et al. 2014).

Research on the problem of functionality demonstrates the association between age and dependence, which places the elderly person in a state of greater vulnerability (OPSS 2015; Barbosa et al. 2017; Mariano et al. 2015). According to Ayres et al. (2012), vulnerability in the health field is associated with the elements of the aging process and disease, both at an individual level, as well as socially and operationally. Decreased functionality of elderly people leads to increased risk of vulnerability, which simultaneously exposes elderly people to a greater risk of violence (Apratto 2010; Oliveira et al. 2012). Second Report of the World Health Organization (2002, p. 2) “violence constitutes one of the main public health problems in the world” and can be understood as any isolated or repetitive act that entails physical, sexual or psychological harm, including situations of neglect, exploitation, suffering or distress.

This topic has remained hidden for a long time, but in view of the new population profile, it needs to be extensively explored, mainly from approaches that seek to reach

the subjectivities involved in a context influenced by moral and cultural conceptions. Thus, the Social Representations Theory is a theoretical tool that helps to better understand this sociocultural and public health phenomenon.

1.3 Social Representations

Authors such as (Danic 2006; Porto 2006; Junqueira 2005) think that the concept of social representations arose from the foundation of sociology as a discipline. At the end of the nineteenth century, in 1898, Durkheim revealed in his research that social representations show social nature by revealing that in their interpretation there exists a physical world and a social world and that these show the influence of society on the individual (Danic 2006). In 1961, Moscovici, a social psychologist, gave a new approach to the Social Representations Theory, as a particular form of acquiring knowledge and communicating acquired knowledge, from the perceptions that individuals produce and give meaning to everyday life (Moscovici 2007).

Taking the collective representations previously proposed by Durkheim as his starting point, Moscovici sought to analyse collective thoughts based on the premise that sociological aspects are unifying, while psychological processes operate in integrity and coherence. Moscovici's proposal does not invalidate collective representations but adds phenomena to the field, developing a social psychology that demonstrates both social and psychological perspectives as imperatives to achieve social phenomena (Moscovici 2007; Duveen 2007; Sá 1996).

The social representations generate and dictate behaviours, conceptualise the stimuli, at the same time, that give meanings to the answers (Sá 2002). For Moscovici (2007), this judgment demonstrates the relevance in understanding the theory, because when he mentions the collective he is, in fact, referring to the individuals who construct meanings for his reality, and this is how the social representation of a given object is born.

The representations “restore the collective consciousness and shape it by explaining objects and events in such a way that they become accessible to everyone and coincide with our immediate interests” (Moscovici 2007, 52).

All representations have the universal function of making something unfamiliar familiar, and for these two processes are used, called anchoring and objectification. Anchoring is the means by which we seek to classify, name or even find a place for something that seems unfamiliar to us. Objectification is an imaginary and structuring operation that gives a specific form/character to the materialising knowledge. It means to reproduce a concept through an image (Moscovici 2007).

According to Abric (2001), the representations can be understood through their content and organisation. The content is important, but it cannot be disregarded that there is a hierarchy of elements, an organisation structure. This approach is presented in the Central Core Theory where representations have a central core related to historical and ideological conditions. The representations present in the central core are those that are resistant to change because they have a common basis shared by the individuals. Whereas, the representations present in the periphery constitute the interface between concrete reality and the central system (Sá 1996).

2 Methodology

An exploratory investigation was carried out, with a qualitative and quantitative approach, which has the Social Representations (SR) theory, adjacent to the central core theory, as the theoretical-methodological reference.

For the conception of the instrument, the Free Speech Association Technique (TALP) was used, adapted for research in social representations by Di Giacomo (1981), where each caregiver was asked to say five words about violence against the elderly.

The objective of this investigation was to analyse and compare the Social Representations of violence against the elderly, of two groups of caregivers in Portugal and Brazil.

In Portugal, the sample included the voluntary participation of 81 formal caregivers of ten Residential Care Homes for Seniors (ERPI), in the Evora district. The inclusion criteria were: being employed at the institution for more than one year; full time; working directly with the elderly people. The data collection took place from March to May 2018, in those institutions.

In Brazil, the sample included the voluntary participation of 20 informal caregivers, coming from Bahia, more concretely from the city of Vitória da Conquista. Data was collected from January to February 2018. The inclusion criteria were: over 18 years old; being an informal caregiver of an elderly person; and living with them.

All the ethical procedures of human research were followed. Thus, all the authorisations required for the study were requested, as well as informed consent of the professionals. All conditions of anonymity and confidentiality of the responses obtained were also guaranteed. The Portuguese project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Health and Welfare Area of the University of Evora under number 16012 of 05/19/2016, while the Brazilian project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the State University of the Southwest of Bahia under number 1.875.418 of 08/15/2016.

The data analysis related to the automatic classification of lexical hierarchical groupings associated to the social representations of violence against the elderly was carried out by the software IRAMUTEQ (*Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires*) version 0.7 alpha 2, created by Ratinaud (2009). This software allowed the matrices of the lexical units to be explored, where in the context of the studies the prototypical analysis was carried out.

The words mentioned were entered into an Excel database, composed of the variables: caregiver identification, age, sex, profession, amount of time in the job in the institution/in the provision of informal care, words mentioned and their rank. The rank signifies the order in which the words were mentioned.

3 Results

3.1 Characterisation of the Portuguese Sample

81 caregivers aged 26–68 participated in the study. It was confirmed that 2 caregivers were male and 79 female.

The dominant professions expressed by the sample were: 47 direct action assistants, 11 general service assistants (13.58%). It should be noted that the direct action assistants have a representativity of 58.02% of the sample. The remaining professions were: from the food division, senior technicians from the social and nursing area.

Representatively, 62.95% of the caregivers have between 1 and 10 years of professional experience in the job, 25.92% have between 11 and 20 years of professional experience in the job and 11.1% of caregivers present between 21 and 32 years of experience in the job.

3.2 Characterisation of the Brazilian Sample

In the study carried out in Brazil, 20 informal caregivers, aged between 18 and 60, participated in the study, 16 of which were female and 4 were male.

In relation to the professions exercised by the caregivers, it was confirmed that the greatest representation was in 6 maids, followed by 3 general services assistants. With an equal number of each, there were 2 students, 2 nursing technicians and 2 independent workers. The remaining sample consists of 1 artisan, 1 administrative assistant, 1 kitchen assistant and 1 teacher.

In relation to the practice of care, 8 of these caregivers have between one and three years' experience; 6 caregivers have more than ten years' experience; 2 of the caregivers have between four and six years' experience; and only 4 caregivers have less than one year's experience.

3.3 Prototypical Analysis of Portugal

Through the data obtained in the single frequency and in the multiple frequency, $f \geq 4.25$ and $f < 4.25$ was established as a cohort bridge, in order to determine the minimum frequency to be considered for constitution of the prototypical analysis, together with the diagram of the four social representations of violence against the elderly, expressed in Table 1. Prototypical analysis is a simple and efficient technique developed exclusively for the study of social representations in order to identify the representational structure based on the frequency criteria and order of word mentions from the Free Speech Association Technique (Abric 2003a).

The four quadrant diagram (Table 1) is composed of elements separated according to frequency and order of mention. This plan is made up of four quadrants: the central core; the first peripheral zone; the second peripheral zone and the contrast elements. The upper quadrant group (first quadrant) consists of the central elements, with a higher frequency and a lower mean order of mention, indicating the words that have a high frequency, that is, the words that were most quickly mentioned by the caregivers in the first order (Abric 2003b), when compared with the remaining quadrants (Torres and Camargo 2014). Thus, they become like the probable indicators of the central core of the social representation. In the specific case of our investigation, the constituents "bad", "mistreatment", "I will be", "sad", "anger", "patience", "physical", "injustice", "irritation", "meanness".

Regarding the upper right quadrant (second quadrant) that point to the elements of the first periphery, the following mentions are highlighted: "respect", "family",

“abandonment”, “attention”, “psychological”, “defenceless”, “affection”. They are the words that have a high frequency, but which had a higher average order, which means they were not immediately mentioned by the caregivers (Camargo and Justo 2013).

In the lower left quadrant (third quadrant), the contrast zone contains elements that were quickly mentioned, but often below the given cohort point (Camargo and Justo 2013). In the case of our investigation, in this quadrant words like “crime”, “heart”, “horrible”, “must not do”, “cruelty”, “stupidity”, “aggressiveness”, “sadness”, “frustration”, “environment” were found.

In the lower right quadrant is the second peripheral zone, i.e. the most active ones, where words such as “shouting”, “verbal”, “they do not think”, “I do not like”, “hitting”, “horror”, “care”, “work”, “I think about my parents”, “institutions”, “support”, “tiredness”, “talk”, “humanity”, “training”, “words”, “rage”, “inhumane”, “compression”, “frustration”. These are the words that have a low frequency, but which have a higher mean order of mention, which means that they were the words most quickly mentioned by the caregivers compared to the right quadrant (first quadrant).

According to Sá (1996) there are several methods of data collection concerning the elements of the central core of a social representation. In this study we chose the method of identification of central mentions supported in the Free Word Association Technique. This method is based on two basic quantitative criteria: the frequency of mentions and the average order of mentions. The combination of these two criteria reveals the possible central elements of a social representation, in this case in the social representation of violence against the elderly.

Table 1. Prototypical analysis of the SR of Violence against the elderly of the formal caregivers of Portugal Source: Prepared by the Authors (2018)

Average order of mention ≤ 2.45				Average order of mention > 2.45		
≥ 4.25	<i>Central core</i>			<i>First peripheral zone</i>		
	<i>Words</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>OME</i>	<i>Words</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>OME</i>
	Bad	11	2.3	Respect	12	3
	Mistreatment	11	1.5	Family	8	2.9
	I will be	10	2.3	Abandonment	6	2.5
	Sad	7	2	Attention	6	3
	Anger	7	2.4	Psychological	6	2.5
	Patience	7	2.3	Defenceless	5	4
	Physical	7	2.3	Affection	5	3.2
	Injustice	6	1.8			
	Irritation	5	2			
	Meanness	5	2.4			

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Average order of mention ≤ 2.45				Average order of mention > 2.45		
f < 4.25	<i>Elements of contrast</i>			<i>Second peripheral zone</i>		
	Crime	4	1.5	Shouting	4	3
	Heart	4	1.8	Verbal	4	2.5
	Horrible	4	2.2	They do not think	4	2.5
	Must not do	4	1.5	I do not like	3	2.7
	Cruelty	3	2.3	Hitting	3	2.7
	Stupidity	2	1	Horror	2	4
	Aggressiveness	2	1	Care	2	5
	Sadness	2	1	Work	2	3.5
	Frustration	2	1	I think about my parents	2	2.5
	Environment	2	1	Institutions	2	4
				Support	2	3
				Tiredness	2	2.5
				Talk	2	4
				Humanity	2	4
				Training	2	2.5
				Words	2	2.5
				Rage	2	2.5
				Inhumane	2	2.5
				Understanding	2	2.5
				Frustration	2	2.5

3.4 Prototypical Analysis of Brazil

Also through the data in Brazil, we obtained the single frequency and the multiple frequency, where $f \geq 5.25$ and $f < 5.25$ was established as a cohort bridge, in order to determine the minimum frequency to be considered for constitution of the prototypical analysis, together with the diagram of the four quadrants of the social representations of violence against the elderly, expressed in Table 2.

Thus, they become like the probable indicators of the central core of the social representation. In the specific case of this investigation is the mention “hitting” in the upper left quadrant (first quadrant). Regarding the right upper quadrant (second quadrant) it indicates the elements of the first periphery, where words such as “verbal” and “not caring” are observed. In the lower left quadrant, in the contrast zone, words such as “money”, “attention”, “ridicule”, “hygiene”, “responsibility” and “psychological” are found. In the lower right quadrant is the second peripheral zone where words such as “not feeding”, “abandonment” and “respect” appear.

Table 2. Prototypical analysis of the SR of the Violence against the elderly of the informal caregivers of Brazil Source: Prepared by the Authors (2018)

Average order of mention ≤ 2.3				Average order of mention > 2.3		
≥ 5.25	<i>Central core</i>			<i>First peripheral zone</i>		
	<i>Words</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>OME</i>	<i>Words</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>OME</i>
	Hitting	15	1.9	Verbal	12	2.9
				Not caring	8	2.6
$f < 5.25$	<i>Elements of contrast</i>			<i>Second peripheral zone</i>		
	Money	4	2.2	Not feeding	5	2.4
	Attention	3	1	Abandonment	4	3.5
	Ridicule	3	1.7	Respect	3	2.7
	Hygiene	2	1.5			
	Responsibility	2	1			
	Psychological	2	2			

4 Discussion

4.1 Discussion of Results from Portugal

The structural approach to social representations was chosen as a guideline for methodological procedures, aiming at identifying the structure and organisation of the contents of social representations. This structure is constituted by hierarchical elements, organised into two systems: central and peripheral.

According to our prototypical analysis, more specifically that expressed in the central core, (first quadrant) the mentions that stand out are “bad”, “mistreatment”, “I will be”. It is revealed that “mistreatment” is a concept similar to the concept of violence advocated by several authors such as Dias (2010), Duarte and Barbosa (2011). The mention “I will be” represents the feeling regarding concerns with personal perspectives, as if there was a projection of what the future holds.

In the first periphery (second quadrant), the mentions: “respect”, “family” and “abandonment” are in line with the WHO concept (2014, p. 78), which includes various types of violence. “Abandonment (...) refers to actions that compromise dignity and respect.” The mention “family” is explained by the APAV (2010) when it reveals and frames the family association with violence, stressing that (...) the elderly person is one of the most fragile members (...) in the family hierarchy, (...) rarely occupying top place, where such determining powers like finances, organisation, leadership, influences and decisions are concentrated (...)” (p. 54). The APAV (2010) further points out that when institutionalised the elderly person may be at high risk of violence, especially when they are abandoned by relatives in an institution.

In the third quadrant, the contrast zone contains words like: “crime”. “Aging is associated with the phenomenon of crime and violence committed against the elderly” (APAV 2010, p. 41). This Association shows that the concepts of physical, psychological, sexual violence, neglect, financial violence and abandonment, are crimes under

Portuguese legislation. This representation expresses the meaning of the Portuguese legislation regarding violence against the elderly.

In the second periphery (fourth quadrant) are the words “shouting” and “verbal”. To Luoma et al. (2011), psychological violence includes verbal and non-verbal emotional violence, which can be defined as active or passive. These are actions that aim to inflict mental suffering or distress on an elderly person. In this sense it is possible to add “shouting”, as a practice of psychological violence.

4.2 Discussion of Results from Brazil

In the Brazilian investigation, the centrality of the mentions is in the central core (first quadrant), in the term “beat”, which is a practice of physical violence. According to the UN (2002) and the *Manual de enfrentamento à violência contra a pessoa idosa* (Handbook for combating violence against the elderly) (Brazil, 2013), physical violence refers to the use of physical force to force the elderly or to cause physical pain and injury, among other punishments. The most visible violence is usually through pinching, slapping, shoving, or even aggression with knives or firearms.

In turn, the mentions found in the first periphery (second quadrant) constitute the types of violence. The “verbal” element is associated with verbal violence, such as threats and humiliation, which are classified as psychological violence. The term “not caring” refers to neglect.

In the second periphery (fourth quadrant) the “not feeding” and “abandonment” mentions were also associated with neglect. According to Minayo (2006), this is based on the refusal or omission of the necessary care.

In relation to the elements of contrast (third quadrant), the term “money” has been referenced, which is incorporated in financial violence, which is recognised as the improper use or use without consent of the elderly person’s material assets. This is a type of violence that has been growing in Brazil, representing 40.1% of the reports of violence against the elderly population (Brazil, 2013). The terms “attention”, “ridicule”, “hygiene” and “responsibility” refer to the issue of neglect, and although it is a frequent type of violence, it is not always identified as such. Also, the “psychological” mention referred to as the last element of contrast corresponds to psychological violence, which may be exercised in a verbal or non-verbal way (Gondim 2011).

4.3 Discussion of Results from Portugal and Brazil

Through the prototypical analysis carried out in both studies, there are some similarities mainly at the central core level. As we can see in Table 2, the word “hitting” is present, then in Table 1, the formal caregivers when referring to violence against the elderly mention “physical” as one of the main words. Thus, it is possible to conclude that in both Portugal and Brazil physical violence is of great prominence. This can be justified because it is the type of violence that most often leaves visible marks. Or rather, it becomes a facilitator so that this is a social representation common to most individuals, from both countries. Also in the study conducted by Leite et al. (2008) on social representations carried out with informal Brazilian caregivers, they said that violence against the elderly is concentrated around “physical aggression, such as hitting and pushing” (p. 217).

In the first peripheral zone of Table 2, the word “verbal” is expressed, a word that is also present in the second peripheral zone of Table 1, which means that it was mentioned more by Brazilian caregivers than by Portuguese caregivers. In comparison, in Table 2, in the second peripheral zone there are typically the mentions “abandonment” and “respect”, but in Table 1, these are in the first peripheral zone.

As in Table 2, also in Table 1 are the words “psychological”. However, while this is found in the contrast elements of Table 2, Table 1 is present in the first peripheral zone, as is the case regarding the mention “attention”. As verbal and psychological violence and neglect have already been mentioned, they end up being less visible, or rather, they will be less noticeable by not being taken into account as the social representation of violence against the elderly (Leite et al. 2008).

5 Conclusion

The social representations mentioned by the caregivers are consistent with concepts already validated by epistemological and methodological bases. These social representations derive from the negative representations of the practice of caring for the elderly, which is prevalent in today’s society. Violence against elderly people is based on disrespectful behaviour and humiliation and depictions of violence reflect, in essence, the prevailing social attitude towards aging.

In the conclusion of the investigation in Portugal and Brazil it was verified that Physical Violence is of great prominence in both countries. The basis of this representation happens to be the type of violence that leaves visible marks. Verbal, psychological violence and neglect, due to being less visible, are less valued for the definition of the representations, as can be seen from the fact that they are not present in any central core of the social representations of violence against the elderly.

It is therefore considered important to replicate this study in more regions of both countries, so that it can be understood, according to the Social Representations Theory, whether there are significant differences regarding the community and institutional context where caregivers develop their caring practices.

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