

Aging and internalized homophobia among Brazilian gay elderly: a study of social representations

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at analyzing social representations of Brazilian gay men concerning male aging, homosexuality and homophobia. Ten gay elder men, at the average age of 65.7 years participated of it (SD = 3.86). To obtain the social representations, the free word association test was used, with the stimulus "male aging"; the responses were subjected to prototypical and similarity analysis with the software IRAMUTEQ. The social representations of male aging showed negative aspects, such as sadness and loneliness, and positive ones, such as health and life experience, as well as sexuality. It is expected that data can contribute to new investigations and reflections on the aging of homosexual people, bringing life quality to that group.

Keywords: Aging; Elderly; Homosexuality; Homophobia; Social Representations.

Envelhecimento e homofobia internalizada entre idosos gays brasileiros: um estudo das representações sociais

RESUMO

Este estudo teve como objetivo analisar e explicar as representações sociais de idosos gays sobre o envelhecimento masculino. Participaram 10 homens gays idosos, com idade média de 65,7 anos (DP = 3,86). Para obtenção das representações sociais, utilizou-se o TALP com o estímulo "envelhecimento masculino", em que as respostas foram submetidas a análise prototípica e de similitude com o programa IRAMUTEQ. As representações sociais do envelhecimento masculino situaram em aspectos negativos como tristeza e solidão, positivos como saúde e experiência de vida e sobre a sexualidade. Espera-se que os dados possibilitem novas investigações e reflexões sobre o envelhecimento de pessoas homossexuais, de modo a trazer qualidade de vida para este grupo.

Palavras-chave: Envelhecimento; Idosos; Homossexualidade; Homofobia; Representações Sociais.

Envejecimiento y homofobia internalizada en adultos mayores homosexuales de Brasil: un estudio de las representaciones sociales

RESUMEN

Este estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar las representaciones sociales de los hombres homosexuales brasileños con respecto al envejecimiento masculino, la homosexualidad y la homofobia. Participaron diez hombres mayores homosexuales, con una edad promedio de 65.7 años (SD = 3.86). Para obtener las representaciones sociales, se utilizó la prueba de asociación de palabras libres, con el estímulo "envejecimiento masculino"; Las respuestas se sometieron a un análisis prototípico y de similitud con el software IRAMUTEQ. Las representaciones sociales del envejecimiento masculino mostraron aspectos negativos, como tristeza y soledad, y aspectos positivos, como salud y experiencia de la vida, así como la sexualidad. Se espera que los datos puedan contribuir a nuevas investigaciones y reflexiones sobre el envejecimiento de las personas homosexuales, aportando calidad de vida a este grupo.

Palabras clave: Envejecimiento; Personas Mayores; Homosexualidad; Homofobia; Representaciones sociales.

Introduction

As a worldwide phenomenon, aging causes changes in various contexts of society. This fact boosts health policies, social security, and the pharmaceutical and aesthetic market. The worldwide population growth is caused by the reduction of fertility rates and the improvements of access to health care, education and technology, which result in the increase of life expectation (Fundação Oswaldo Cruz - Fiocruz, 2013). Aging is a phenomenon that is common to all individuals, but it occurs idiosyncratically to each one, being influenced by biopsychosocial surroundings (Neri, 2014).

According to the United Nations projected data, one out of nine people in the world is 60 years old or older than that; a growth of 1 to every 5 is estimated. By around 2050, it is expected that, for the first time, there will be more elderly people than children aged below 15, causing elderly population to reach 2 billion people, or 22% of the world population (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia Estatística – IBGE, 2016). Within the Brazilian context, an IBGE – Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics – (2016) research indicated the real aging of the country, which will reach 30.2 million Brazilians aging more than 60 years.

Even facing the growth of life expectancy, it is known that the percentage of male population is much lower. Literature indicates that people of the male gender are more likely to present risky behavior and difficulty to adhere to preventive practices and health care (Almeida et al., 2015). In relation to elderly gay men, one of the reasons for not going to health centers is the fear of suffering prejudice (Antunes, 2017).

The quantity of gay men at an old age shows us the reflex of the sexual prejudice, in which homophobia is responsible for the mortality of a countless number of homosexual people. Not only does this refer to cases of aggression that cause death, but also to suicide cases when there is not a family or psychosocial support adequate to

the necessities of the homosexual person. Related to that, risky sexual behaviors that propagate sexually transmissible infections also contribute to the invisibility of the LGBT aged person.

It can be identified that the aging of a gay man is related to sexual orientation and homophobia. A high number of homosexual people have internalized homophobia, which is the result of prejudice and of moralist, religious and traditionalist contents, based on traditions of past centuries. This makes the homosexual persons to internalize the prejudice, without admitting their sexuality to society (Antunes, 2017; Vries, 2015).

In a previous research, it was demonstrated that elderly gay people were forced by their families to have a cisgender heterosexual relationship, as marriage, for decades, was understood as being irrefutable. In order to avoid it, some men became Fathers (priests); others ran away from home (Santos & Lago, 2013). Within this context, homosexual aged persons experience twice as much prejudice, for their sexual orientation and for being in this age group. In some cases, old gay people are still "in the closet", and, in other cases, they have only admitted their condition to their family and friends at an old age (Mota, 2012).

While denying their sexuality, with the old age, elderly old gay people also deny the old age itself (Santos, Carlos, Araújo, & Negreiros, 2017). This development phase is full of negative stereotypes, such as frailty, loss of libido and dependence. Because of this, aged people try to find, by means of aesthetic procedures, ways to feel younger and sexually active (Antunes & Mercadante, 2011) – this issue can be analyzed in further studies. Sexual orientation is a determinant factor to differentiate aspects regarding the health of the LGBT elderly people. However, there are other aspects, such as income, physical fitness and mental health (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2015).

The first studies carried out on gay aging emphasize negative stereotypes, such as loneliness, depression and promiscuity (Henning, 2017). A study carried out with undergraduates found social representations based upon prejudice, social exclusion, loneliness, lack of family ties, and difficulties of being an LGBT old person (Carlos, Santos, & Araújo, 2018). In a recent study carried out with old people on social representations of the LGBT old age showed the prejudice and the invisibility of the LGBT old persons among people of their own cohort (Salgado et al., 2017).

It is known that there are not many studies on this topic, and that to today's contemporary society, the research on LGBT old age is psychosocially relevant. Considering this, the social representations theory is a pertinent theoretical perspective, as it allows discussing the contents that are shared by old gay people about their own aging. Because there is not a social representations study with old gay people, our research seeks to discover if the social representations concerning LGBT old age made by other social groups contrast or compare to the elderly gay people social representations.

Social representations, as a methodological technique, seeks to turn what is unfamiliar into something familiar (Moscovici, 2017). The concepts and images formed from social representations are ways to interpret the daily reality. Jodelet (2016) characterizes the representation as a form of practical knowledge that connects a subject to an object, i.e., it establishes a bond between an individual or social subject, to the object that it substitutes.

Social representations are always the representation of something or of someone. However, they are not copies of the reality, but, for being socially constructed and considered culturally correct, they are in accordance to what is socially desirable and/or expected. They are influenced by the cultural background, codes, symbols,

values, ideologies, and all the other things that are part of the context where they are inserted, helping at the construction of our reality (Morera, Padilha, Silva, & Sapag, 2015).

The structural approach of social representations is complementary to what Moscovici (2017) proposes. According to Abric (1998), social representations are generated and organized from a central core, and around it, there are peripheral social representations that are contents depending on the individual's context, which are easier to be modified. The first ones consider the main elements for an operative task; the latter ones involve social, affective and ideological dimensions (Sá, 2002). Therefore, the structural approach allows visualizing the social representations structuring and knowing what negative elements in the central core must be modified.

Based on what has been exposed, the present study seeks to analyze the social representations of Brazilian old gay men in relation to male aging, homosexuality and homophobia, with the purpose of learning more about this phenomenon, which is neglected by society's institutional devices, to understand gay aging from the point of view of people who suffered prejudice as they became old.

Method

Type of study

This is a qualitative-quantitative, exploratory study, with transversal data collection. The data are analyzed quantitatively and reported qualitatively.

Participants

Ten old gay men participated. They were, in average, 65.7 years ($SD = 3.86$); all of them are single, and have an average income of R\$ 3,570.00 (in Brazilian currency). As for their religiosity, 30% is agnostic, 30% is spirit, 30% is catholic and 10% is atheist. Among the group, 80% had already experienced a flagrant sexual prejudice situation; 30% had already been married to a woman and two of them had children. Seventy percent were retired, and 30% still worked. The close contact with their families is not frequent, and only 60% affirmed being friends with other elderly gay people.

Instruments

The research protocol was composed, initially, of signing of the consent term. After that, the Free Word Association Test (FWAT) was carried out, with the stimulus "male aging." In the test, the participant must list the five first words that come to their mind from the stimulus expression. The FWAT allows knowing latent elements that constitute a social representation; the faster the answer, the more valid it is (Coutinho & Bú, 2017). To constitute the participants' profile, sociodemographic data were composed of: age, marital status, education, individual income, religiosity, experiences with prejudice, family relationships, if there has been a previous heterosexual marriage, if they had children and if they had elderly gay friends.

Ethical procedures

The study was subjected to the Research Ethics Committee of *Universidade Federal do Piauí* (Brazil). The authorization was issued by means of the opinion document number 57225916.1.0000.5214. The participants were recruited in a non-probabilistic way and by convenience, on an online socialization community for gay men, SCRUFF. That application allows the interaction among gay men of various ages. For the research, the filter "above 60" was used. Then the gay elderly were approached and invited to take part of the research; in this moment, the study aims were presented, together with the link of the online form on Google Forms, which contained

the sociodemographic data and the consent term. After that, the FWAT was applied, by means of a phone call. A previous study with gay men recruited the participants by means of social networks (Henning, 2017).

The research protocol included a Consent Term, made from the ethical principles established by the resolutions 466/12 and 510/16 from the National Health Council of the Brazilian Ministry of Health. Each participant spent around 15 minutes to answer the questionnaire. During the data collection, there was a high number of participants who refused to participate, a percentage of about 80% of the elderly that were initially approached, totalizing around 50 people approached. Some of them were afraid of having their identity revealed, because they were married; others feared frauds, or being somehow identified and facing embarrassing situations.

Data analysis

Sociodemographic data were subjected to descriptive statistics by means of the software IBM SPSS 23. Data obtained from FWAT were tabulated on the Software Calc, of OpenOffice. After that, the file was inserted and compiled by the software IRAMUTEQ, which carries out quantitative analyses of textual data. The analyses chosen were the prototypical and of similarity, which allow the interpretation in the light of the paradigm of the structural approach of Social Representations. The prototypical analysis divides the words within four quadrants, from the frequency and the average order in which the words were evoked (Wachelke & Wolter, 2011). The words that are evoked first have a higher relevance, for the short time for cognitive processing possibly refers to the social representation of the core nucleus. It must be highlighted that all the words form social representations. The similarity analysis was organized by means of the co-occurrence among the words and is structured by connections means among them.

The structural approach was chosen to analyze the data due to its social representations organization dimension, making it easier to separate the central representations from the peripheral ones. This way is in agreement with the aim of this study, showing what representations are rigid and central and what social representations reflect the identity of the researched group (Abric, 1998).

It is also important to mention that the whole study, including the questionnaire, the participants' responses and the manuscript, was originally done in Brazilian Portuguese language. After the first manuscript was finished, it was translated into English language. Regarding this issue, it is relevant to explain the use of the word "geezer" in the translation. It has been used as a translation for the Brazilian Portuguese word "coroa". It originally means "crown", but, is also a slang for "old man". In the present study, the word "coroa" was used by the participants as "old man", but with an additional meaning; it is also a word that younger homosexual men use to refer to an older partner, within a homoaffective relationship. The word "geezer" may not incorporate all those meanings.

Results

The words evoked from FWAT are organized in Table, placed in four parts, selected from the frequency and the average evocation order (ome). The central nucleon, which is the first quadrant, has words with a frequency higher than 2.75, and ome lower than or equal to 2.7. It is composed of the words "sadness" and "erection". Notice that they are words with a higher frequency and high ome. According to Abric (1998), the central nucleon is the one responsible for generating the representation meaning, and is able to transform the other elements that constitute the representations.

Table. Prototypical analysis of social perceptions of male aging.

Average frequency	OME ≤ 2.7			OME > 2.7		
	CORE NUCLEON			PRIMARY PERIPHERY		
	Evocations	F	OME	Evocations	F	OME
2.75	Sadness	5	2.2	Fear	3	3.3
	Erection	5	1.4	Experience	3	2.7
				Frustration	3	2.7
Average frequency	CONTRAST ZONE			SECONDARY PERIPHERY		
	Evocations	F	OME	Evocations	F	OME

The first periphery is composed of words with average values, as for frequency and ome. The evocations "fear", "experience" and "frustration" form the second quadrant. For Chaves and Silva (2013), the peripheral elements are more accessible and flexible, allowing the relation to individual experiences. The periphery is secondary, and it is represented by low scores at frequency and at ome. This quadrant was composed of the words "asexual", "dependent", "complicity", "geezer", "illness" and "health".

The contrasting elements indicate idiosyncrasies, which are representative words when there is the average evocation order, but with a low frequency. It can be identified that the word "loneliness" follows the line of thinking of other words present in social representations of gay old people about male aging. The central nucleon and the peripheral elements are complementary, and their structure allows us to understand how the social representations are structured within cognition (Abric, 1998). It was noticeable that the social representations of the participants do not indicate only the vision of the male aging in a broader context, but incorporate the knowledge and the identitarian functions (Abric, 1998).

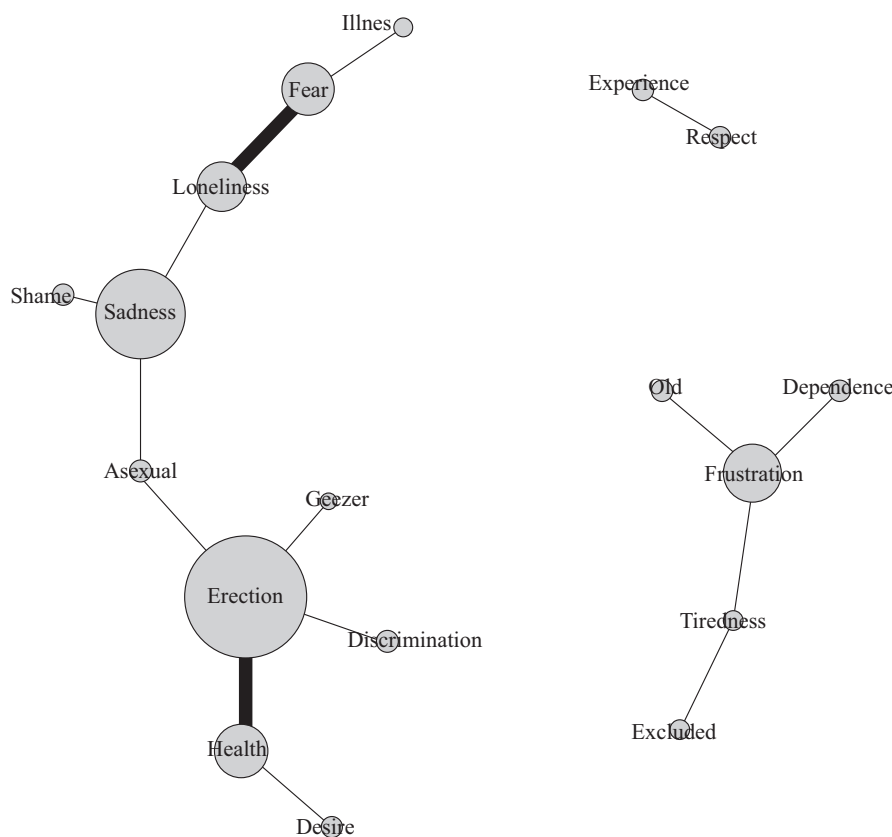


Figure. Similarity analysis of the social representations of male aging among gay elderly people.

The similarity analysis allows us to see how the links in the social representations are established (Camargo & Justo, 2013), being a form of methodological triangulation to increase the vision of the data obtained from the study. As observed in Figure, one can notice the words with higher frequency and their connections. The word erection is more frequently associated to asexual, health, desire, discrimination and geezer. The word asexual leads to sadness, shame, loneliness, fear and illness. On the other hand, the word frustration is associated to the terms old, tiredness, dependence and excluded. Both analyses allow identifying how the social representations of male old gay men are structured. In the following section, the data found are discussed, in association with studies published on the topic presented here.

Discussion

The participants' social representations mostly presented negative aspects. This shows their way of understanding male aging. The central nucleon is connected to the collective memory (Abric, 1998). Therefore, it is noticed that the social representations lead towards the image of sadness, which can reflect the identity of the old gay man, as well as social representations on aging that have lasted a long time. In this context, Henning (2017) describes the representational spectrum of homosexual people's aging, showing characteristics such as bitterness, social depreciation, abandonment and rejection. The social representation of sadness may stem from the internalized homophobia, as it is a hindrance for the elderly to construe solid homoaffective bounds, once the stigma makes them act like heterosexuals, denying their own identity (Antunes, 2017).

The central and the peripheral social representations, in the present study, were based upon fear, frustration and loneliness. The fear may be related to prejudice and social invisibility of the old gay man, which causes a feeling of helplessness stemming from both family distancing and public power neglect (Marques & Sousa, 2016; Salgado et al., 2017). Another topic that could be related to fear is the insecurity to admit their sexuality performances. Leal and Mendes (2017) mention two types of fear: the fear of being lonely and the fear of hostile prejudice. Loneliness is a negative stereotype of gay aging (Santos, Araújo, & Negreiros, 2018; Salgado et al., 2017) that was also evidenced in this study.

Loneliness is a social representation of the old age as a whole, such as experience, dependence and illness (Torres, Camargo, Bouldfield, & Silva, 2015), and is not a factor exclusive to gay elderly people. The frustration feeling occurs when some expectations could not be experimented; to an old gay person, for example, it is related to the sexuality deprivation and the dependence that comes with old age. Dependent old people whose family claim not being able or available to take care of them are usually taken to a long-term stay institution (Leal & Mendes, 2017). It is suggested that this kind of situation can be one of the reasons for the extreme anxiety of the old gay person, reinforcing the feelings of frustration and lack of protection.

The old gay people who became older being worried about suffering prejudice and social rejection in relation to their sexual orientation develop protection factors, and turn into resilient people (Fruhauf & Orel, 2015). Even with the internalization of the homophobia, old bisexual and gay people have positive feelings regarding the fact of belonging to the LGBT group (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the fact of being a sexual minority and turning old is a significantly stressful factor (Wight, LeBlanc, Vries, & Detels, 2012).

The internalized homophobia contributes to the feeling of sadness and fear that cause loneliness. In accordance with Vries (2015), the stigma of internalized homophobia

increases significantly with the aging process. It possibly stems from the double prejudice fear that contributes to the old LGBT people invisibility (Santos, Araújo, & Negreiros, 2018), once the old gay person with the homophobia stigma reduces his/her presence in social spaces (Vries, 2015).

In Brazil, the family violence towards the sexual orientation rejection causes many homosexual people to run away from their homes; in other cases, they are expelled from their homes, or even killed (by homicide or suicide) (Mota, 2012). In this way, the negative social representation of gay aging is marked by the absence of a psychosocial support network, such as family and friends. The participants of this study claimed not being close to their family, except two of them, who had children from a heterosexual relationship. A study highlighted that being legally married is a protective factor that helps on mental health (Wight et al., 2012).

It could be noticed how much the participants include sexuality in the social representations of male aging, by mentioning words such as "erection", "asexual" and "geezer". The term "geezer" (in Brazilian Portuguese, "*coroa*"), besides defining the mature man, is associated to sexuality. An example is the intergenerational relationships, in which younger people call their partner that way. Other terms to refer to old gay men are mentioned by Henning (2017), such as "*paizões*", "*tiozões*", "*mariconas*" and "*cacuras*", in Brazilian Portuguese, which could be freely translated into English as "daddies", "aunties", "faggots" and "chicken queens". These names present in the gay elderly social representations are important categories, which structure many meanings of what is aging and being gay in Brazilian culture.

Erection and asexual are related; male aging has a social representation of an asexual phase, with the reduction of the penile erectile function. The asexual old age is a myth; Henning (2017) also describes that the society has the representation that old gay men seeking for sex are desperate and sexually perverted people. The presence of asexuality in the social representations of gay old men in this study is the transmission of that social stigma. On the other hand, it may refer to a low sexual activity level, once the participants were recruited from a gay relationship website, and, if they are there, it is because they desire and wish to find affective and sexual partners.

A study with heterosexual and homosexual aged men found social representations of male aging associated to libido loss and reduction of sexual activity (Maravilha, Santos, Gouveia, & Almeida, 2013). The above-mentioned authors also claim that the homosexual participants preferred relationships with younger partners, using sexuality as a way to diminish the asexual old man stereotype. In this context, the escape from the elderly appearance refers to the old age denial and the fear of suffering the double prejudice.

The word erection presented the most relevant scores; this fact may be due to the importance given to the desire of having sexual relations, the fear of not having sexual pleasure, emphasizing the stigma of losing masculinity. The negative feelings and of low self-esteem contribute to the cases of erectile function, which, according to Lima et al. (2016) may originate from biological and psychological factors.

A study on the aging of homosexual men in Portugal demonstrated a negative aging perception and difficulties in dealing with the sexual orientation and the discrimination (Pereira et al., 2018). Another study researched three understanding perspectives of old gay men. The first one is that old gay men try to feel younger by having relationships with younger men; the second one, the lonely and reclusive old men; the third one brings a re-invention of the old age, seeking to live sexuality beyond the sexual act itself (Ussher, Rose, & Perz, 2017).

The social representations of Brazilian old gay men showed to be based upon sexuality and old age aspects, demonstrating the identity connected to the shared knowledge on aging. The social representations can be divided into three emphases: first of all, the aging aspects, such as sadness, dependence, loneliness, frustration and fear; secondly, the senescent traits, such as life experience, companionship and keeping a good health; and, the last one, topics on the sexuality of the old man, such as erection, social representation of old age as an asexual phase and the acceptance of being a "geezer" as a way of being sexually attractive.

The social representations functions – justifying, identitarian, guiding and of knowledge (Abric, 1998) – showed to be completely consistent about the male aging of old gay men. The participants connected themes on life phases, homosexuality and masculinity to socially represent the object of this study.

The results cannot be generalized due to the sample size and the social-cultural and historical factors. Nevertheless, they reflect data that can be found in the literature on the aging of homosexual people. They can contribute to further studies with larger samples, on other contexts and from other paradigms of social psychology.

The difficulty experienced in this investigation regarding data collection must be highlighted. Many of the possible participants refused to take part of the research. In some cases, the elderly men were married, and were afraid of being identified; others thought that that it might be a type of fraud, considering the Brazilian economic crisis; another justification for that is the expansion of the prejudice, due to values preached since ancient times.

One must identify the necessity of public policies and actions in geriatrics and gerontology to bring visibility, safety and life quality to homosexual people. The expansion of the LGBT old age is a phenomenon that demands attention from public power so that prejudice is not an impediment for the search of health, education, leisure and freedom.

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