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R E V I S T A

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**SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF AGING IN  
PARAMEDICS OVER 55 YEARS OF AGE OF A  
PUBLIC HEALTH INSTITUTION: UNMASKING  
THE REALITY OF PUBLIC OFFICIALS WITH  
RESPECT TO RETIREMENT, WITHIN THE AMBIT  
OF THE HEALTH REFORM**

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We are watching a progressive process of modernization of the State, in its different areas: education, justice, welfare and at present the Health Reform.

Among the reasons that motivated the implementation of the Health Reform are those of an effective management that make it necessary, on the one hand, to provide the system with increased resources and, on the other, to substantially transform the management of health public services.

One of the five bills that integrate the Health Reform is constituted by that called "Sanitary Authority and Management", whose legislative negotiations ended on January 21 when it was approved

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by the chamber of deputies, and is now in a position to be promulgated as a law. Among other aspects, this project creates public health institutions that are self-managed in the net. The objective is to improve efficiency by the granting of increased authority and responsibilities with respect to management of the resources of the institution, while at the same time maintaining the legal nature and the personnel regime.

Among the benefits for the workers of the health sector, an eleven percent increase in the remunerations of the entire staff is being considered that takes into account components of collective achievement of goals, which favors team work inside the institutions. In addition to the above, it improves the promotion system in the public officials career, considering factors that ensure promotion based on merits and not only on years of service. A system of retirement incentives is established, which will allow officials to meet the age requisites for retirement and be discharged from the system with a specific economic incentive (Minsal, 2004).

However, the labor context of public services in which this Health Reform will be implemented presents special characteristics, tinted by the interpretations attributed thereto by the workers of the health sector. This labor context plays an important role in the determination of those interpretations or «ways of understanding and explaining what is happening», because in public health services officials have a scarce mobility that contributes to their prolonged permanence, which in some cases exceeds 40 years of service; they earn low remunerations, which has incidence in the meagerness of old age pensions, together with the inexistence of programs of preparation for old age and retirement. On the other hand, the presence of a growing number of elder adult patients who require

care but who have no access to services adequate to their biologic requirements is evident (Barros, 1999), and in this aspect, personnel who have to treat patients directly, such as paramedics, are in permanent contact with pain, illness and death of patients in general and of elder adults in particular.

The problem lies on the implications of the Social Representations of Aging of paramedics older than 55 of a public health institution with respect to the taking of decisions vis-à-vis the challenges inherent to the belated aging stage, such as retirement, preparation, care, etc.

## **Objectives of the investigation**

### **General Objective:**

Reconstruct the Social Representations of Aging in paramedics older than 55 of a public health institution.

### **Specific Objectives:**

1. Reconstruct the explanatory model of the SR of Aging.
2. Reconstruct the symbolic and significant aspect of the RS of Aging
3. Learn how the RS of Aging have influence on the perception that the informants have of themselves in the vital stage which they are living.
4. Learn how the RS of Aging have influence on the facing of the new roles inherent to the old age stage within the labor ambit.

## Theoretical frame

### SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS:

In the ample spectrum of theories of Social Psychology, this study was centered in the theory of Social Representations, because the thematic in which this study is circumscribed corresponds to the manner in which a group of paramedics of a public hospital, located in an age bracket close to a belated aging and which considers retirement as one of its challenges, build their common sense knowledge on aging, which is an explanatory model of this phenomenon. The study of these representations on aging permit having access to the thoughts, beliefs, emotions, prejudices, etc., of this particular group of persons, who are characterized in certain behaviors that in this case are the manners of facing said phenomenon, where the labor context in which these representations are produced plays a very important role.

### THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS CONCEPT: ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

The Social Representation concept is used for the first time from the point of view of Social Psychology by Serge Moscovici, in his book *"La psychanalyse, son image et son public"* (1961), the result of an investigation started in 1952 on Psychoanalysis in the French society of that time, whose purpose was to demonstrate how a new scientific theory was diffused in a given culture, transformed during this process, and how in turn it changed the vision that people had of themselves and of the world in which they lived, (Moscovici, S., 1984, page 26, Farr. R., 1993, page 497). The development achieved was such that, as from the decade of the seventies of last century an important number of investigators emerge who use the social representation concept, thus giving shape to the theory that bears its name.

### SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS

The Social Representations concept, as defined by Moscovici (1984) refers to *"a particular manner of understanding and of communicating, inherent to a given society or social group, through which the reality and the knowledge of daily life is constructed"* (Moscovici, S., 1984, page 15).

Later on, Denise Jodelet (1993), a disciple of Moscovici, proposes a more elaborate definition of the term Social Representations, pointing out that *"In their nature as phenomena, Social Representations appear under varied forms, more or less complex. Images that condense a whole of interpretations; reference systems that enable us to interpret what is happening to us, and furthermore, give sense to the unexpected; categories that serve to classify the circumstances, the phenomena and the individuals with which we have some relationship; theories that permit establishing facts on those individuals. And often, when they are comprehended within the specific reality of our social life, social representations are all of this together (...) the concept of social representations designates a manner of specific knowledge, the common sense knowledge, whose contents reveal the operation of generative and functional processes socially characterized. In the most ample sense it designates a form of practical social thought, oriented towards communication, understanding and domain of the social, material and ideal environment"* (Jodelet, D., 1993, p. 474).

### CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS:

They are constituted in a socially elaborate and shared knowledge, the common sense knowledge contrary to the scientific knowledge; they are of a prescriptive nature, because the collective process itself

penetrates as a determining factor in the individual thought. (Moscovici, 1984); *"They have two facets; the iconic and the symbolic facet, that is, Representation = image / interpretation. In other words, every image is the equivalent of an idea and every idea is the equivalent of an image"* (Moscovici, S., 194, page 17) and; they are constructed on a variety of theories and ideologies, which are transformed into a shared reality, with emphasis on their explanatory nature. (Moscovici, 1984).

Social Representations may be defined for their social conditions, which implies dispersion and superabundance of information, a pressure towards inference and a focusing towards the object of knowledge; for their contents, made up of information, images, opinions, etc.; or for their formation processes: objectivation that implies the construction of a central nucleus influenced by a social value and cultural fund, leading to naturalization, and anchorage, that is, reducing phenomena to categories, generating an interpretation system that captures novelties, producing a rooting in social thought. According to Jodelet (1993), the social characterization of the contents or of the processes of representation, must be referred to the conditions and to the contexts in which representations emerge, or to the communications through which they circulate and to the functions which they serve within the interaction with the world and with others.

#### FUNCTIONS OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS:

Render familiar what is not familiar (Moscovici, 1984); permit social communication (Di Giacomo, 1987, pages 279-280); furnish a reference system that will guide the behavior of persons. (Ayestarán, S.; De Rosa, A.; Páez, D., 1987, page 17; Di Giacomo, J. P., 1987, page 279); permit that persons may become integrated

in their corresponding group or social stratum (Di Giacomo, 1987, pages 284-285).

#### AGING

This is a phenomenon that can be approached from Social Psychology, because it is centered in the individual-society intersection.

#### SCIENTIFIC APPROACHES TO THE AGING PHENOMENON:

In the biologic approach there are two positions, one that proposes that aging is associated to illness (Drusini, 2000) and the other that indicates that, on the contrary, there would be a better probability of contracting illnesses (Duque, 2002).

From the psychological perspective there is a point of view which assumes a transfer of the concept of involution from biology to Psychology takes place, and certain investigations take into account the changes in the cognitive processes; on the other hand, there is another point of view which emphasizes development throughout life (lifespan), which understands aging as a facet of evolutionary changes throughout life (Friedrich, 2002, page 42).

From the sociological approach, aging is analyzed from three perspectives; the Social response to deterioration, the loss of occupation and the assumption of a "role without a role" and the reduction of income (Barros, 1999).

The psycho-social approach takes into account the cohorts or generations, the status and role, the family, and the segregation, activity and vital cycle theories of Erikson.

As regards sexuality, it is recognized that biological changes exist, but that not



necessarily affect sexuality and that the experience of life acquires relevance.

Spirituality is evidence in the studies that prove that in this stage there is a rapprochement to divinity (Moragas, 1998).

#### CONCEPTS CONCEIVED BY THE LAY KNOWLEDGE OF OLD AGE

There are myths relative to aging, from the biological, psychological social perspectives (Moragas, 1998). The ideology of ageism has also been generated, which implies discrimination towards elder adults, for the mere fact of accumulating years (Salvarezza, 1998).

#### SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF AGING:

We have had access to certain investigations developed on the Social Representations of aging (Villar, 1998; Monchietti & Lombardi, 2000a, Monchietti & Lombardi 2000b, Monchietti, 2001), which share the following aspects:

- Aging has a connotation, image or interpretation of a negative nature.
- A strong influence of the biomedical or organic model is observed in the Social Representations of old age.

### Methodology

According to the nature of the SR, the methodological orientation corresponded to a qualitative investigation, as this permitted an approximation to the subjective construction of the common sense knowledge conceived collectively. The methodological procedure used was the Grounded Theory of Glaser and Strauss, in which the gathering of information is carried out jointly with the analysis of

data, until a theoretical saturation is obtained, using the theoretical sampling. The analysis unit was the Paramedics older than 55 years of the San Juan de Dios Hospital of La Serena, Region IV, Chile, who had a seniority in service longer than 20 years, and was made up only by representatives of the feminine genre because there were no representatives of the masculine genre. The field work was divided into phases: obtaining authorization for the performance of the study, compilation of socio-economic and labor antecedents and planning of the team work, which had the assistance of a co-investigator who participated in the data analysis process. The gathering of information was performed through 12 at-depth interviews and a focal group with eight participants other than those interviewed. In the analysis of data the open codification, the axial codification and the selective codification were used. The Atlas-Ti 4.2 (build 59) information package for Windows was used, the interviews were transcribed, "primary documents" were created as well as two Hermeneutical Units (one for at depth interviews and another for the focal group) and codes or "categories" and "Networks" (nets of relationships) were generated.

#### FINDINGS – OBJECTIVE I: EXPLANATORY MODEL

To reconstruct the explanatory model prepared by paramedics with respect to the aging phenomenon, three types of codifications must be applied: open, axial and selective, which are described below:

**Open Codification:** Descriptive analysis, in which categories are discovered, such as "contact with retired workmates" "physical changes" "deterioration associated to work", etc., which take into consideration categories that are repeated in the interviews with the informants.

**Axial Codification:** Consists in making a relational analysis by means of the codification paradigm that includes: attributes, conditions, context, phenomenon, action/interaction strategies, consequences, such as can be appreciated in figure No. 1.

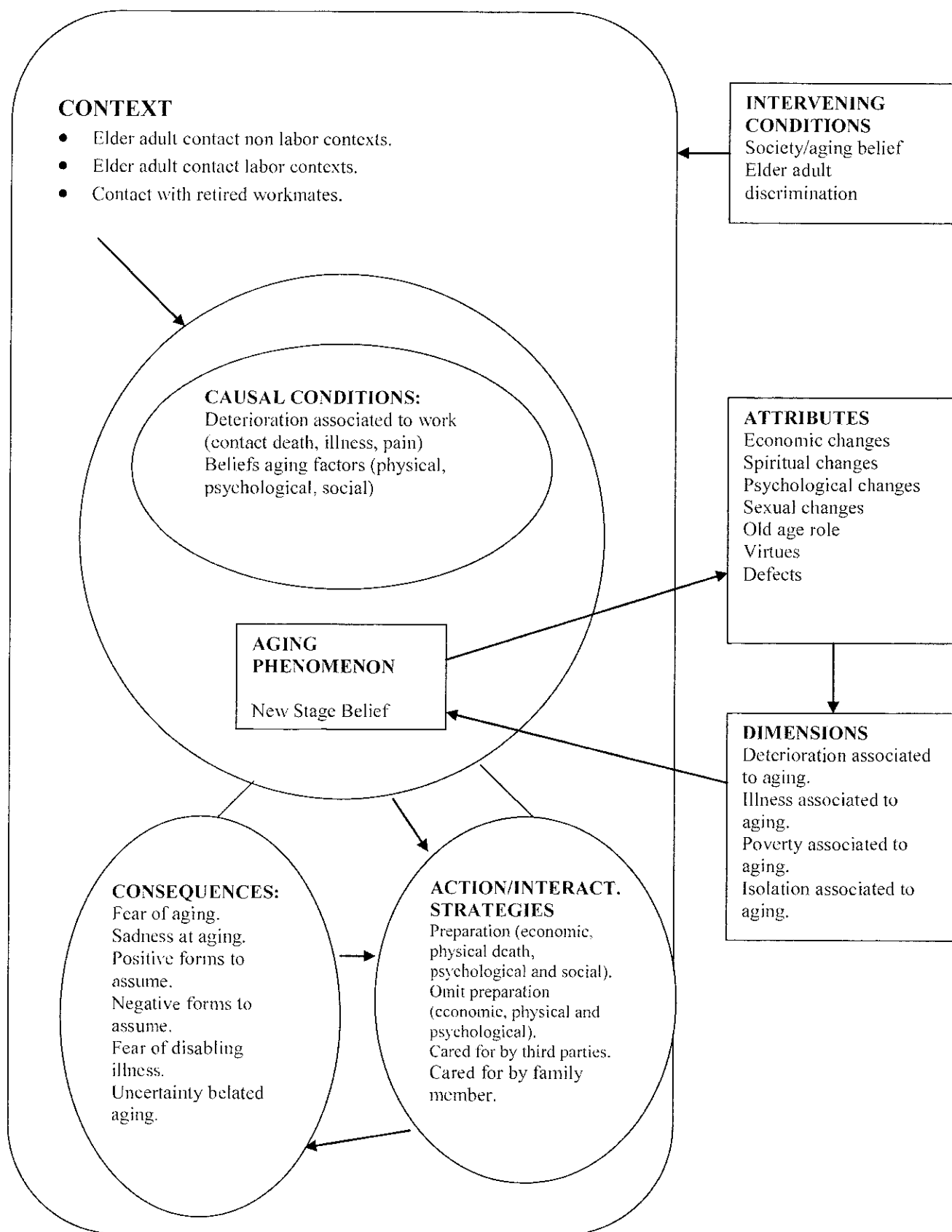
In the sketch presented below, the phenomenon which is the purpose of Social Representation is aging, perceived as a new stage of life, which has causal conditions that "accelerate" the age of those interviewed, among which stand out the deterioration produced by the type of work they perform (in contact with death, illness and pain). This phenomenon is connoted in a context of contact with elder adults in the labor and non labor ambits, and with retired workmates through whom they capture their attributes most of them characterized by changes in the physical ambits, mainly economic, psychological, social, sexual and spiritual. These relationships bring about as a consequence the surging of feelings such as fear and sadness caused by aging, fear of disabling illnesses, uncertainty with respect to the stage of belated aging, all of which reflect the influence of the labor context, on the one hand with a strong presence of the biomedical model and, on the other, with their labor experiences in the course of the years related directly with illness and its recovery.

Vis-à-vis these consequences, the action/interaction strategies are: an opposed relationship between preparation/omission and cared for by family/others. The first strategy depends on the identification with the stage of the vital cycle, that is, to the extent they identify themselves they become prepared and otherwise, preparation is omitted. The second strategy is affected by the relationships that they have established with their families, especially with their children; thus to the extent that these relationships

are satisfactory, the care shall be provided by a member of the family, otherwise, by third parties. Omission and the care by family members predominated.

Finally, there are the Intervening conditions, in which it is possible to appreciate a strong belief of discrimination towards elder adults, reflecting processes of social exclusion towards the persons with a lesser power in society, without participation in political-economic decisions.





**Selective Codification:** The explanatory model is focused in this type of codification, whose central category was the Aging Phenomenon, around which the social Representations were organized.

Figure 2 highlights that with the aging phenomenon, recognized as new, emerges the need for nomination, through the objectivation process, associating it to specific concepts such as poverty, illness, abandonment, deterioration and isolation, which are anchored in the labor context that during more than three decades has

been influenced by the biomedical model with a "biologist" conception of human development.

The above gives shape to its reference system that constitutes a guide for behavior, which underlines the opposites preparation/omission, family care/third parties and finally the deferral of retirement, a transcendental topic that worries health services with respect to its influence vis-à-vis the modernization of the health management.

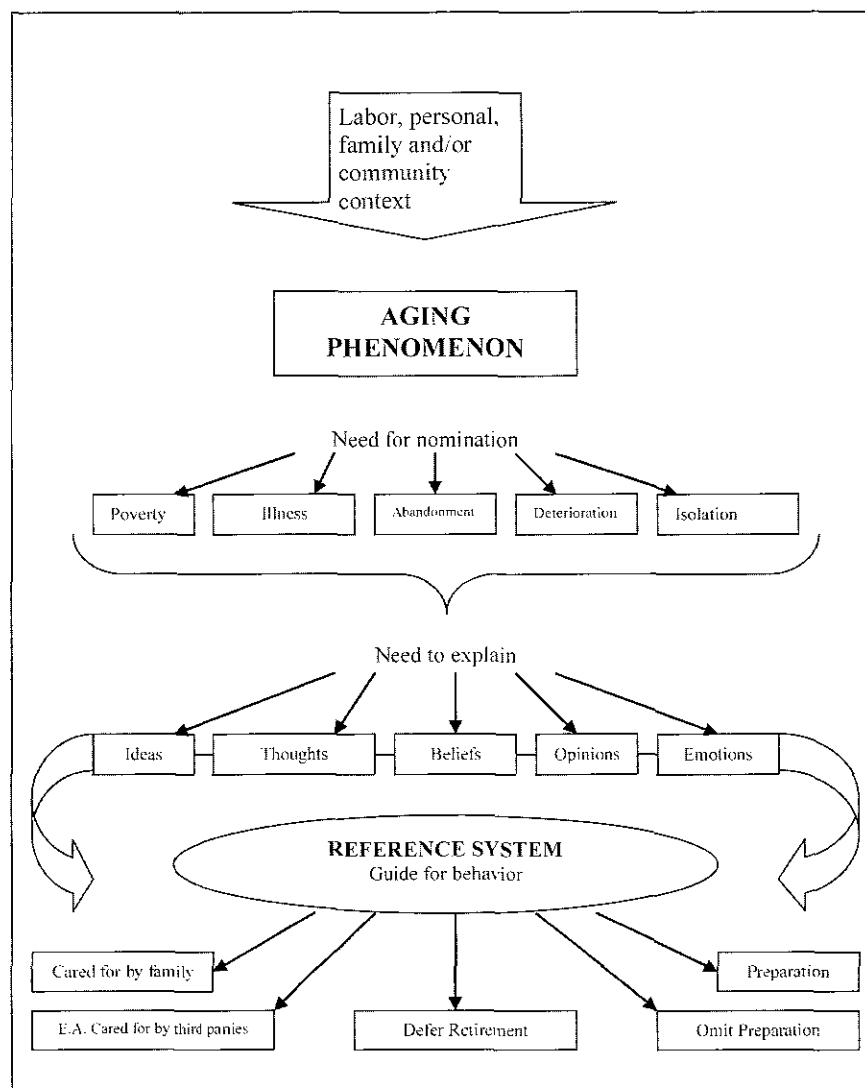


Fig. 2: Explanatory model of Social Representations of Aging.

## **FINDINGS – OBJECTIVE II: IMAGE AND INTERPRETATION**

In the analysis of interviews and of the focal group three appeared icons or figures such as: "half dragging little feet", "they drag their feet", "old junk", "grandma knitting", "light and darkness", "day and night", "flower", "mate", "overcoat", "withered rose", "scarf", "hat".

The interpretations attributed to these icons are related to physical changes associated to aging, deterioration and dependency condition; a particular and unavoidable stage of life. They denote biological conception associated to involution and presence of myths and influence of the ideology of the old: disability, inactivity, uselessness, without social importance.

## **FINDINGS – OBJECTIVE III: PERCEPTION OF THEIR OWN SELVES**

The informants were not identified with the stage of belated aging, because they are active as workers. This brings about as consequences: the refusal to face their own aging process and omit and/or refuse to carry out preparation actions in different ambits.

Components of their SR are evident in these findings: they consider aging as a new and threatening phenomenon, related to poverty, illness, deterioration, isolation, etc., for which they are not prepared and have no space in society.

## **FINDINGS – OBJECTIVE IV: FACING OF NEW ROLES**

The refusal to age delays the decision of retirement, which is understandable because of the sentimental labor relationships, satisfaction with the work

performed and reasons of an economic nature (low pensions or retirements, that imply a considerable decrease in their income).

The illness, loneliness and economic scarcities that they observe in their contact with their retired workmates, have tinted the perception of the new role of old age.

The components of their SR: Aging related to poverty, deterioration, illness, abandonment, isolation, feelings of satisfaction and usefulness associated to the work being performed.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter we will list the main conclusions of this study, that emerge from results, analysis and discussion, and that are related to prior investigations of the purpose of the study and with unexpected results encountered.

1. We have concluded that there would exist a series of knowledge socially created and shared in the course of the interaction by a group of paramedics older than 55 with respect to the aging phenomenon, reflected in the presence of an explanatory model.
2. This Social Representation is characterized by the prevalence of the influence of the biomedical and involution model, transferred from biology to social sciences and, on the other hand, by conceiving aging as a stage in the vital cycle characterized by changes in different aspects (psychological, social, biological, economic, etc.) and that ends with death.

3. Said Social Representation of Aging is focused at the fact that this is the case of women who are paramedics of a public health institution, a labor context that would be the aspect of the relevant object for this social group, emphasizing how they live closely with the stage of old age of patients as well as their labor conditions that accelerate their own aging process.
  4. The contact with retired workmates and with elder adults that are ill and require medical care, is constituted as the principal component of the labor context of the informants, which by being related to the area of medicine, makes it possible to develop interpretations about aging oriented towards the ideology of old ageism, which plays a preponderant role in the integration of their Social Representations on said phenomenon.
  5. As regards the processes of integration of the Social Representations, the objectivation was denoted both in images associated on the one hand to the vital cycle, in which the last stage of old age is characterized by a marked decline, giving as an example a flower that is born, grows, withers and dies, and on the other to the physical deficiencies, denoted by the lack of defenses and the dependence that pathological aging would provoke. The anchorage evidences a global conception of the vital cycle that leads to an unavoidable physical deterioration and to dependency.
  6. This investigation represents an approach and a contribution to a field not yet explored, because no studies on this topic have been found, neither in the labor context of public health institutions in Chile.
  7. This study is a contribution to Social Psychology, from the perspective of its utilitarian role: a change in the biomedical model, associated to involution and introduced to social sciences to incorporate the psycho-social perspective from the point of view of the subjects themselves.
  8. Like in the studies made of the social Representations of Aging, the common points coincide: a connotation, image or interpretation of a negative nature and a strong influence of a biomedical or organic model.
  9. On the other hand, there is coincidence with the conclusions of the studies of Alicia Monchiatti, when reporting that the replies of those interviewed reflect a negative connotation of old age, characterized by irreversible changes, but none of these conclusions reflect other more positive aspects such as creativity and generativity (Erikson and Salvarezza), the possibility of displaying new potentialities (Barros) or the conception of "productive aging" (Firbank).
  10. It is possible to conclude on the basis of the results, that the informants reproduce unconsciously what they themselves criticize of society: discrimination, the lack of respect, etc., which they evidence in specific aspects, such as defer retirement, refuse to age, differentiate themselves from the state of belated aging and omit preparation for old age. To achieve a change in this sense, it is necessary to carry out psycho-social interventions through de-ideologizing, at a micro-social level, in the labor, family and school environments, that will have as finality to change or amplify the images and the interpretations
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attributed to old age, that will permit giving significance to this phenomenon by incorporating satisfactory components oriented at visualizing this stage of life as a field in which new challenges and possibilities are open.

11. In the course of the gathering of information a component of Social Representations emerged: the fact that they are integrated by groups of belonging that permits differentiating them from other groups: in spite of belonging to the same stratum of paramedics, the majority of those interviewed coincided in differentiating themselves from the "new" paramedics, referring to those recently hired and who have studies of a superior rank, who they qualified as having more knowledge but a lack of a vocation which is acquired in the old school, and who have scarce experience which is obtained through the years of service the informants had. They suggested judgments towards these new paramedics such as working only for an economic motivation and not for a service vocation. This differentiation reflects that paramedics older than 55, in addition to recognizing themselves as a social group of belonging, by denominating themselves "we the veterans" express their differentiation with the new paramedics through negative evaluations.
12. In the findings presented, poverty emerged as a significant element, whether reflected on low salaries, on meager retirements of retired workmates, or on the refusal to age, deferring retirement, considered as an important reduction in economic income. This element is constituted in a socio-structural condition in

which it is difficult to intervene, but that must be taken into account as a factor of incidence in the integration of the social Representations of Aging of this group of paramedics.

13. The sample of this study was constituted only by women, which is also reflected in the determination of the Social Representations of Aging, from the perspective of genre and of the roles associated both to the care of patients and their influence in the interpretations attributed to old age, and to those related to the fact of being active workers and continuing to perform a domestic role, added to the exhausting working hours, situations that tint the perception of their deterioration and the acceleration of their own aging.
  14. The lack of preparation to face old age that was evidenced as a preoccupying thematic in those interviewed, reflects that the need exists in their labor environment to implement programs destined to the preparation of officials to face the process of aging and retirement, which must be supported on the interpretations attributed to said processes, with the purpose of changing these interpretations.
  15. The growing demand for health care on the part of the elder adult population, makes it necessary to sensitize, inform and train all the employees of health institutions, and especially the personnel that has direct contact with them, with respect to the characteristics of the aging phenomenon, with the purpose of offering to this population services and care that are adequate for the needs and requirements inherent to this stage of life.
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16. It becomes necessary to generate a public policy that is destined to solve the needs of the elder adult population of Chile, through which programs are implemented with the participation of psycho-social teams that will contribute mainly to make possible that this population approach their process of aging from a perspective of development of their potentialities and of activity in all senses, so as to reverse the findings of this investigation: fear, sadness, uncertainty provoked by this stage of life.
  17. From the results obtained, we understand the need to generate employment strategic planning policies oriented, in the first place, towards the instauration of welfare systems that will ensure dignified retirements similar to the remunerations of the active population, a progressive detachment from work, concomitant with a preparation and involvement with social nets, such as universities, institutions, governmental organizations, social organizations, the promotion of community association, etc., that will maintain the activity of aging persons and will propitiate the conception of a productive old age.
  18. This investigation, although it permits reconstructing the social representations that the informants have developed on aging, leaves the possibility open to make new investigations of a comparative type between their social representations and those of their retired workmates and/or of housewives. The first study would permit establishing similarities and differences between persons who continue working and others than have resorted to labor retirement. The second one would be interesting, because it would permit visualizing two different representations, those of the informants who have constituted a life style around a labor activity, in comparison with those that have developed their life style around house chores.
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