



## **The social construction of aging through participation in social work with senes of the Sesc – CE**

### **A construção social do envelhecimento através da participação no trabalho social com idosos do Sesc – CE**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Introduction: The elderly have a perception of aging related to the choices made throughout life, also considering financial resources, family support, social network, and elderly groups. Objective: To analyze the perception of aging of participants in social work with elderly people from the Social Service of Commerce (Sesc) in Ceará. Method: This is a descriptive study with a qualitative approach. For data collection, the conversation wheel technique was used, with the participation of 126 elderly people - 110 women (87%) and 16 men (13%) -, aged between 60 and 102 years ( $73.69 \pm 7.12$ ). The narratives were analyzed using the Content Analysis Method and the categories of aging, activities, and coexistence were identified. Results: It was observed that aging is the result of the history of these elderly people and a natural stage of life, while the activities are a starting point for the feeling of renewal of life as opposed to accommodation, and coexistence was the positive element to establish a relationship intimate with an exchange of voluntary affections of friendships through the interaction provided by the open space and the exchange of knowledge. Final considerations: The study presented narratives that encourage empowerment and the ability of the elderly to see themselves as active in society.

**Keywords:** Elderly, Exercise, Socialization, Health, Education.



## 1 INTRODUCTION

Population aging is a phenomenon that happens in a unique way with each individual, through physiological and biological processes, demanding social and economic actions throughout the country (NASCIMENTO et al., 2016). Studies, in fact, point data that identify that this aging process in Brazil is happening in an accelerated way (MENEZES, et al., 2016; OLIVEIRA, et al., 2013; SOUZA, et al., 2014; VERAS, 2009).

Some people, when they reach the age of sixty, go through several difficulties in society, initially with retirement, leading to a feeling of dependence on their families, which often turns this moment into a phase to be feared, as Braga et al. (2015) explain. The understanding of old age is determined in such a way that there is not much of a way out for people, because there are bonds that cannot be cut by the will of the elderly subjects (NASCIMENTO, 2011). Through life experiences, they have a perception of aging is related to the choices made, financial possibilities, also considering family support, social network and living groups (KREUZ; FRANCO, 2017).

Establishing a good relationship with aging is something fundamental for maintaining quality of life. With this, institutions such as the Commerce Social Service (Sesc), specifically in Ceará, have been gaining more visibility through the Social Work with the Elderly (TSI) group, which develops education, health, leisure and cultural actions directed to the characteristics of the elderly public (SESC, 2010).

Older people who chose to live the so-called "third age" abandoned the "retirement" moment that was related to inertia and quietness without motivation (NASCIMENTO, 2011, p. 45). The term "third age" attracted them to join a new style and programs and activities aimed at revitalizing the body, revaluing self-image and health were created (BOURDIEU, 1990).

Health is an aspect of great relevance for the elderly in the aging process because it is a harmony between behavioral, physical, cognitive and emotional factors, related to well-being and satisfaction with life itself (CONFORTIN et al., 2015). The health of the elderly, being directly associated with the fact that they participate in activities, points to a more active life through the habits of care and disease prevention (ASCARI et al., 2015).

Thus, health, specifically, is one of the indications of active aging, through participation in social groups, "as a result of social interaction that starts to reflect on the psychological and social well-being in this phase, providing a better quality of life" (MENEZES et al., 2016, pg. 144). The Census of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) (2010) presents quantitative data on the elderly population, however, it is necessary to investigate and understand aging from the narratives of the elderly. For the aging process is known for its fragility, functional and social



losses. With this, it is necessary to understand this aging process from the elderly people's speeches. In this sense, the main objective of the study was to analyze the perception of aging of the participants of the social work with the elderly of Sesc in Ceará.

## 2 METHOD

### 2.1 TYPE OF RESEARCH AND INSTRUMENT

Aiming to know the perception of the elderly about aging, a qualitative, descriptive approach was used and developed in the state of Ceará, in the operational units of Sesc that offer socialization activities to the community, specifically to the elderly, by the TSI group, in the cities of Fortaleza, Sobral, Juazeiro do Norte, Crato and Iguatu.

For data collection, the conversation circle was used, in which an interview was applied among the participants on one or several topics in an informal setting (SAMPIERI; COLLADO; LUCIO, 2013). The conversation wheel, in this context, provides for the variation of some details according to the area, objective, characteristics of the participants and environment of the phenomenon (BARBOU, 2005; BONFIM TRAD, 2009; CRESWELL, 2005; GONDIM, 2002; SAMPIERE et al., 2013). Thus, the guiding question was: what is the perception of aging?

### 2.2 COLLECTION PROCEDURES

The conversation circles were held between January and March 2018, from Monday to Saturday. The speeches were recorded and, to ensure the anonymity of the elderly interviewed, codes with letters and numbers were used to identify them. The code initially comes with the first letter of each elderly person's city, followed by the participant's number in order of speech and the group to which they belong.

### 2.3 PARTICIPANTS

The saturation method was used to close the sample, which consists of the redundancy or repetition in the interviewees' statements (FONTANELLA et al., 2011). However, for this study, the number of people varied from two to twelve participants in each group, totaling 34 conversation rounds and an average variation of six participants per group. In all, 126 seniors participated, including 110 women (87%) and 16 men (13%), ranging in age from 60 to 102 years ( $73.69 \pm 7.12$ ). The inclusion criterion was to be a participant of the group and to practice physical activity in any unit of the Sesc Ceará.



## 2.4 ANALYSIS METHOD

For the analysis of the speeches, the Content Analysis technique was used (BARDIN, 2017) performing the construction of the analysis data by transcribing the collected material. Subsequently, a fluent and exhaustive reading of the narratives of the elderly was performed to define and identify some more generic aspects about the perception of aging. After that, there was nomination and identification of the units of meaning, quantification of the units of meaning in each body, grouping of themes for the construction of categories, nomination, quantification and description of categories and association of categories to the characteristics of the elderly interviewed and the existing knowledge (BARDIN, 2011).

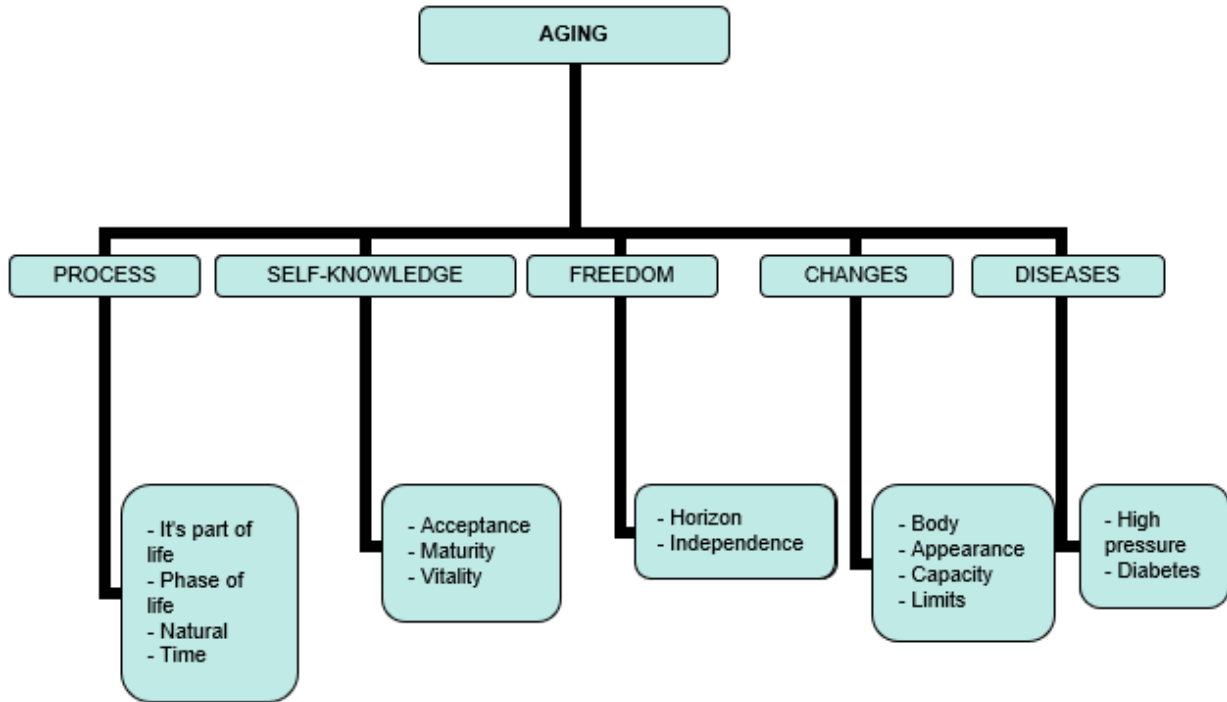
From this, the research was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee (CEP) of the Health Sciences Center (CCS) of the Universidade Federal da Paraíba (UFPB) and approved in June 2017, under No. 68607817.6.0000.5188. All ethical observations contemplated in the National Health Council (Conselho Nacional de Saúde) Resolution No. 466, dated December 12, 2012, were considered (BRASIL, 2012).

## 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The categories were: aging, activities and coexistence, which will be illustrated in the following figures through the most significant or representative excerpts in the speeches of the elderly for clarity. Based on the categorization, the discussion of the results was structured.

### 3.1 CATEGORY 1 - AGING

Diagram 1 – Summary of the thematic content aging mentioned by the participants of the TSI/SESC group from the cities of Fortaleza, Sobral, Juazeiro do Norte, Crato and Iguatu (CE) about their perceptions of aging.



Source: elaborated by the authors (2019).

The perception about aging emerged in the TSI participants as a conformation of life, in which the elderly feel satisfied with their current moment. A positive and a negative sense is attributed, despite all the social and economic difficulties, so the elderly's statements can be applied as an example.

Diagram 1 highlights comments about aging as a process of self-knowledge, self-care, freedom, change, and illness. The fact that the elderly understand aging as a natural process of life contributes to a broad perception that is not at a starting point, starting at age 60, but is built throughout life. This perception is directly related to the lives and experiences represented by the elderly (BRAGA et al., 2015).

Thus, human chronology indicates different ways of representing the multiple stages of life. Old age would be a continuous process of reconstruction through the representational meanings of reality positively validated (NASCIMENTO, 2011). Aging is associated with loss of productivity and cognitive and physical decline, influencing the body perception, since it is imposed by society (MENDES et al., 2020). Even with the pressure from society for eternal youth and the weight assigned to the elderly to remain active, they can still perceive positivity in this new phase of life (FREITAS; NAIFF, 2021). Thus, the changes related to the body, functional and



physical capacity, limits and appearance pointed out as a consequence since birth, chronological aging is a phase, as can be seen in the following statements:

[...] natural process of life. (FS3GA)

[...] begins from the moment of gestation. (IS1GHH)

[...] it starts when you are born. (FS5GA)

[...] a phase of life. (JS1GR)

[...] it happens every day. (CS1GZ)

In this case, the elderly have an understanding of aging involving physiological and biological changes. For Sena et al. (2016), aging also concerns physiological, but morphological, biochemical, and psychological modifications, which vary according to each person's life history. However, the perception of old age presupposes the consent of the very individuals treated as old, that is, it is also present in the very representation they have of themselves (NASCIMENTO, 2011).

Aging, throughout history, has been represented by two antagonistic roles: on one side as wisdom, obedience and respect, and on the other as fragility, incapacity and end of life (SIMÕES and SAPETA, 2017). In these positive and negative representations about aging Guerra and Caldas (2010) point out in their study that "old age is a historically constructed concept that is actively integrated into the dynamics of attitudes and cultural values of society," attitudes and values also positive and negative.

The elderly report that old age is a new phase, the elderly highlight, in their aging process, that there are positive points, revealing an acceptance and the importance of this process in their lives. Silva, Caminha and Gomes (2013) point out, in their study, the importance of revealing the potentialities of this phase of life through the accumulated knowledge, the ability of the elderly to have reached this age, and the freedom of choice previously impractical, as it is possible to verify in the following passages:

It's maturity... (FS1GB)

It's very good because here we renew ourselves... (CS1GT)

[...] it is the best thing in the world. (FS1GF)

I perceive aging with naturalness. (JS3GO)

A horizon of possibilities... (JS1GS)



In view of this, the narratives of the elderly constitute an understanding through experiences, changes, maturity, importance, acceptance, vitality, renewal and possibilities, which may be related to new life experiences that he did not have the opportunity to live before, bringing a sense of freedom.

The great change caused by aging seems to be related to the focus of life of these individuals, to the fact that they stop existing for others and start being themselves for the first time, feeling a true liberation (GOLDENBERG, 2011, p. 84), since most of them started working very early and did not have the opportunity to play, study and play sports, thus presenting a positive perception of aging, supported by the performance of these activities that contribute to the quality of life of the elderly at this stage of life (BRAGA et al., 2015).

It is also noteworthy that the progressive advancement of time can cause several physical, social and cognitive losses, which were also narrated by the elderly through the perception of aging in the confrontations of fear, difficulty, prejudice, body functionality, chronic diseases and aesthetics, adding a universe of values, representations and different confrontations (NASCIMENTO et al., 2016). Thus, negative representations are still a reality:

[...] this intimidates me, the loss of memory. (IS2GFF)

High blood pressure, heart problems, circulation, so all this "for" me came to present after I was sixty... (FS3GC)

[...] at the same time it is negative, because there are many consequences due to age. (FS2GC)

But if I could, I wouldn't get old. (FS3GF)

In the social imaginary, aging is associated with the end of a stage; it is synonymous with suffering, loneliness, disease and death (JARDIM, MEDEIROS and BRITO, 2006). The perception of aging of the elderly is also evidenced by negative points, recorded by society, such as the exaltation of the body, with standards of aesthetics and functionality, which when presenting decline causes dependence on instrumental activities of daily living, chronic diseases and difficulty in facing social problems (NASCIMENTO et al., 2016).

The change in the body was evidenced in wrinkles, confirming beauty as a disturbing factor with which the elderly need to deal, by the marks of the aging process, being a concern held by them, as Silva, Caminha and Gomes (2013) point out. Nascimento (2011, p. 77) corroborates:

In the sense that they accept old age on the one hand when it represents experience and freedom, but try to hide it, because this experience also represents many wrinkles, skin, weight, and deformities.



Besides a physical capital, the body is also a symbolic, economic, and a social one. However, it should be noted that this numerical body is not just any body (GOLDENBERG, 2011). The studies by Braga et al. (2015) and Luiz et al. (2018) bring reflections on this issue. The authors state in their studies that even with advances and progress in health care, it is inevitable to remember that the older the body becomes the more the person tends to present some limitations in a multidimensional process, centered on the interdependence between biological (changes in the body), psychological (cognition, personality, and affectivity), and social dimensions. It was also manifested in the interviewees' speeches their perception about the personal identification with the phase of life:

[...] and you look in the mirror and see that you are getting older. (CS1GU)

In this scenario, the narratives bring a perception of being elderly from accumulated experiences, maturity and freedom to take over, as well as to free themselves from certain responsibilities such as maintaining the realization of their own youthful spirit activities, functionality, work, involvement, self-esteem and opportunities. In this space of sociability, these seniors realize themselves personally, generally for the first time in their lives, and in some cases, the persistence of an active life in old age means being able to live what was denied to them in the past (ALVES, 2021). This contributes to ease and distance the problems faced at this time, as observed:

Aging, "for" me I still do not know what it is. (CS2GV)

[...] I feel very healthy. (CS1GW)

This distancing, through the perception of aging, contributes to the elderly enjoy the phase from their potentials, by the possibilities provided through new experiences and life expectancy, which can reach up to one hundred years (SILVA; CAMINHA; GOMES, 2013).

The elderly, when perceiving themselves with limitations, mainly physical, arising from aging, free themselves from their responsibilities (NASCIMENTO et al., 2016), which does not characterize a decline in their functions. Through, then, the perception of chronological age proper to human nature, life history contributes to the distancing of the impacts that emerge in this phase (FALLER; TESTON; MARCON, 2015), as highlighted by some statements:

It's an old age that we don't even realize we are old... (CS1GY)

I live so involved that I don't even notice... (IS3GFF)



[...] so it grows and develops and there is no age and nothing to stop anyone from doing anything. (IS1GGG)

The aging process does not start the same for everyone. The elderly represent a group with different characteristics such as family, cultural, social and self-knowledge. The body is also a variant of the aging phenomenon (NASCIMENTO, 2011), being this aging process inherent to human nature and a natural stage of life that is being experienced in common by all individuals. Aging, from the biological point of view, is perceived as a natural wearing out of organic structures. Thus, these go through transformations with advancing age, with degenerative processes prevailing (JARDIM, MEDEIROS, and BRITO, 2006). However, the way this phase is lived is essential to take advantage of what is positively provided.

It is perceived that the perception of the elderly of the TSI about aging is related to their life stories and is a heterogeneous process, in which each elderly person ages differently. These social constructions of the elderly group are in accordance with the worldview shared in values, beliefs and practices.

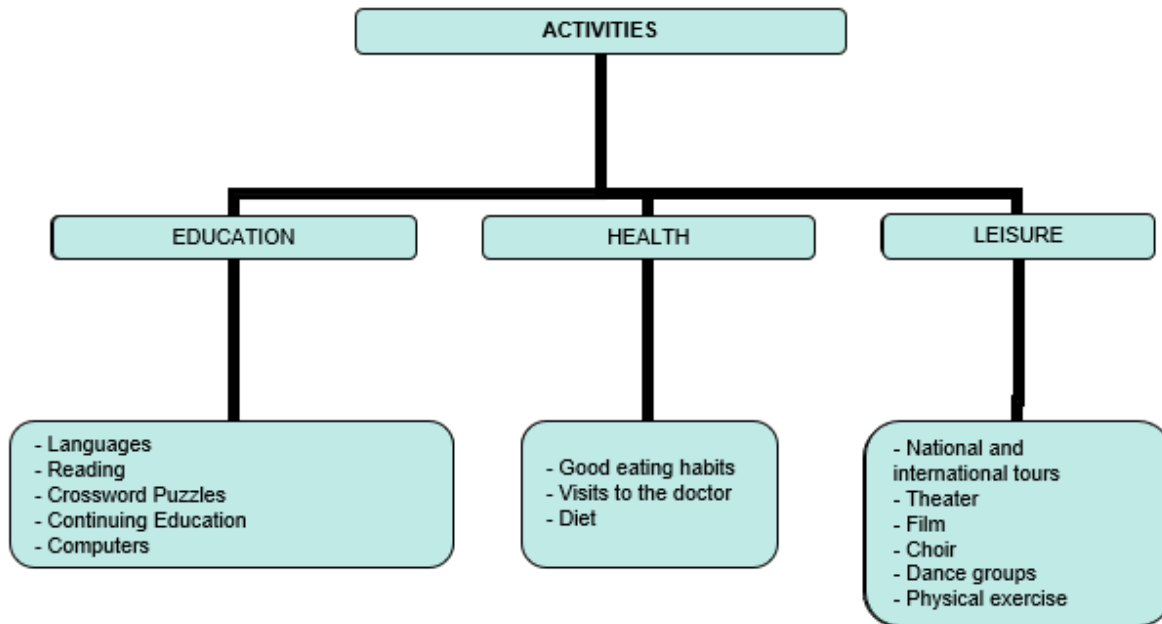
### 3.2 CATEGORY 2 - ACTIVITIES

The activities offered for the elderly are understood as spaces of communication and recognized as social and emotional support, also configuring themselves as important strategies for health and quality of life, to the extent that they allow the affirmation of the social protagonism of the elderly.

In Diagram 2, another category identified between the lines of the narratives of the elderly was the importance of performing activities to fill free time, such as technological, intellectual, bodily, physical, sports, manual, leisure and cultural:

Reading is considered to be important to increase cognitive gains, such as memory and motor actions. Well, for the elderly person it is necessary to read so as not to lose memory, and it is necessary to write so as not to lose motor skills. (TORQUATRO; MASSI; SANTANA, 2011, p. 96).

Diagram 2 – Summary of the thematic content activities mentioned by the participants of the TSI/SESC group from the cities of Fortaleza, Sobral, Juazeiro do Norte, Crato and Iguatu (CE) about their perceptions of aging.



Source: elaborated by the authors (2019).

The participation in these activities is one of the possibilities pointed out to distance the difficulties encountered by the elderly in the absence of work, when they stay at home and live alone. Initially, the elderly feel happy, but then they recognize they are unable to do so, and this space is filled with participation in various activities.

[...] I do pilates. (FS4GD)

[...] I already do yoga here, play volleyball, and do hydrogymnastics and bicycle. (FS4GE)

[...] I have taken two language courses... (FS6GE)

One has to look for activities. (SS5GL)

It is to develop the mind. (JS2GR)

But I do crochet and fuxico. (CS1GV)

Learn internet. (FS1GB)

The elderly state the importance of filling time through development, knowledge, and participation in activities, because the learning process occurs, throughout life, through physical, intellectual, technological, manual, cultural, and religious activities, consequently increasing the expectation of active life with high levels of autonomy (INOUYE et al., 2018).



Participation in cultural actions increases self-esteem and positive emotions, as well as reduces social isolation, anxiety, and agitation, enabling the construction of resilience (BERNARDO; CARVALHO, 2020). These activities provide the elderly with experiences in their lives of things never done before, as they well point out:

I love to read! (JS1GO)

We still manage to do a movie and theater. (CS2GBB)

The narratives show feelings of fulfillment because the elderly perform activities they had not done before, often because they are involved with the family, taking care of children and spouse. Regardless of being intellectual, cultural or physical, these activities bring a motivating feeling, providing joy, and self-esteem in the face of so many family and social difficulties, prejudice and exclusion, by filling the "free time that has always existed in all types of society, but leisure, in the sense of fun, belongs to societies modified by the Industrial Revolution" (NASCIMENTO, 2011, p. 182).

In this context, physical activity was also evidently present in the narratives of the elderly through their good daily habits that should be part of the routine, being directly related to the life expectancy of the elderly along with quality. Thus, the practice of physical exercise will reflect on the autonomy, self-esteem and quality of life associated with healthy aging as a form of prevention, which is noticeable in the reports:

Regarding health, physical activity is of fundamental importance. (FS7GB)

So I preferred to invest in health, doing physical activity. (FS6GE)

[...] depending on food, being very careful with health, doing sports. (JS1GQ)

[...] unfortunately, without health, many people are not able to participate in activities. (JS1GR)

Physical activity coupled with good eating habits and disease prevention are guiding elements for good aging. Almeida et al. (2014) guide that physical activity limits the natural losses of aging and contributes to the maintenance of functionality, helping the elderly to have independence and autonomy, besides preventing falls and fractures.

Simukaua and Silva (2018, p. 19) understand that: "The practice of physical activity represents an improvement in health problems, reducing body pain, depression, in addition to providing physical and mental well-being." Thus, the elderly have a perception that physical activity is a way for them to be able to perform their own activities and take care of themselves



with more autonomy and independence (NASCIMENTO et al., 2016), besides the psychosocial benefits, making them more self-confident:

[...] doing physical exercises gives a feeling of well-being. (JS1GR)

It's because physical activity influences a lot on balance... (JS2GR)

Physical activity contributes a lot! (CS1GT)

For this reason, the practice of physical activity is motivated by several factors, such as contributing to self-confidence, social interaction, health care and combating sedentary lifestyle during aging (CASTRO; LIMA; DUARTE, 2015), as well as collaborating so that the elderly have continuous participation in society (VALER et al., 2015). Based on this, among the various possibilities of physical exercise, hydrogymnastics is a regular activity in the lives of the elderly, mainly aiming at health, according to the interviewees' reports:

[...] physical activity helps, invigorates, rejuvenates. (CS1GW)

Several types of discomforts, of diseases, appear, then we start to start the best age, which is water aerobics. (CS1GX)

The perception of aging is related to participation in physical activities by the possibility of maintaining youth. For the elderly relate to physical, cognitive and social benefits that physical activity provides and that are fed by a capitalist society that cultivates beauty, activity and power (JARDIM, MEDEIROS and BRITO, 2006). The elderly bring a conception of opportunities through practice, which can be understood as a change in their behavior that formerly used to be staying at home, taking care of the grandchildren, focusing on household chores and manual labor. Participation in physical activities contributes to late aging from the opportunities for relationships and social integration, culminating in health promotion (COELHO, 2017). Today, it is observed a higher frequency in physical activities that brings satisfaction:

[...] aquarobics improved a lot. (CS2GX)

The performance of physical activity is, for the elderly, the starting point for the realization of other activities, by the feeling of renewal of life as opposed to accommodation (BRAGA et al., 2015). When the elderly perform other physical, intellectual, technological, manual, cultural and religious activities in groups, they interact with each other and unconsciously are improving their interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, quality of life, promoting their insertion in society as well as increasing their active life expectancy with high levels of autonomy.

## Participating and

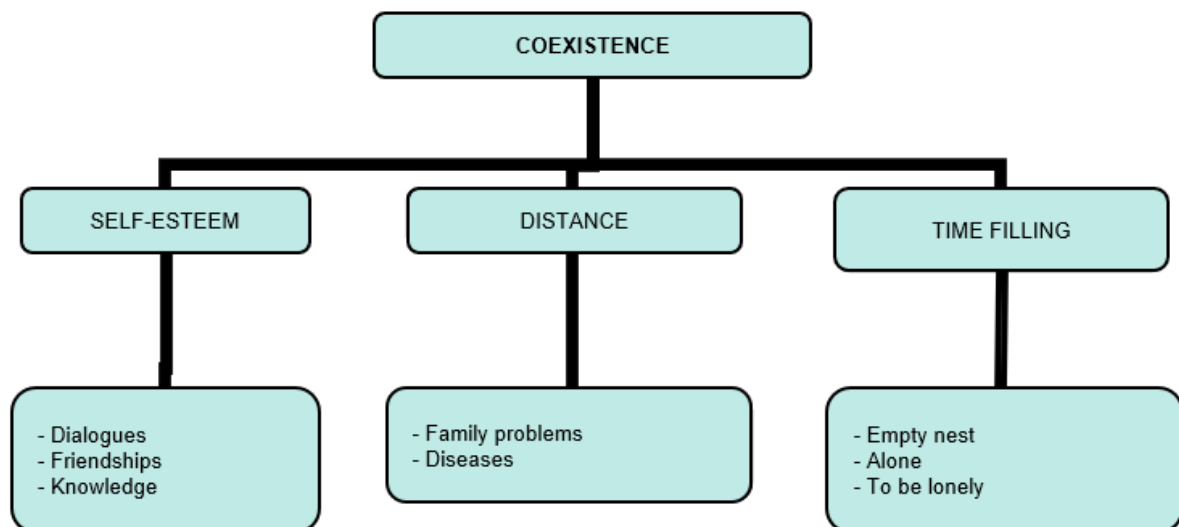
staying active will only be a way for the elderly to cultivate their physical and mental well-being if it brings meaning and satisfaction to their existence, either by the commitment and social responsibility implicit in the activity, or by the opportunity to maintain social interaction. (FERREIRA; BARHAM, 2011, p. 582).

Some of the seniors in the group prefer to seek social interactions because they aim to broaden their coexistence by participating in TSI, which has a more social character as presented in Diagram 3.

### 3.3 CATEGORY 3 - SOCIALIZING

The perception of the elderly revealed that the group that participates in the TSI has the possibility of sharing subjective experiences, which strengthens the social protagonism in relation to the feelings experienced. The following statements illustrate this perception:

Diagram 3 - Summary of the thematic content coexistence mentioned by the participants of the TSI/SESC group from the cities of Fortaleza, Sobral, Juazeiro do Norte, Crato and Iguatu (CE) about their perceptions of aging.



Source: elaborated by the authors,2019.

This category was also significant in the narratives of the elderly being directly related to self-esteem, detachment and time filling. Related to family problems, diseases, losses, lack of work, empty nest syndrome with the marriage of children and widowhood. Added to the physical limitations, loneliness becomes more present in the lives of the elderly, as we see below:



[...] this coexistence animates us. (FS5GA)

And sociability, interaction. (FS7GB)

With the experience, we learn a lot. (FS9GD)

Knowledge, getting to know friends, daily coexistence. (FS10GD)

The elderly speak of conviviality, conversation, dialogue, sociability, experience, and knowledge being cultivated outside the family environment, counterpointing loneliness. Isolation, emptiness, is not a permanent state in the lives of the elderly, but the feeling due to their living conditions. These reports indicate a renovating space in the field of aging. This scenario proves to be conducive to the formation of a social, ethical identity, capable of meeting the biopsychosocial and cultural needs of women experiencing old age (SCORTGAGNA et al., 2019).

For the elderly it is an impactful when they are faced with the departure of their children from home, restrictions on social and leisure, retirement, withdrawal from work and productive activities, the arrival of widowhood and loneliness (KREUZ; FRANCO, 2017). The feelings of social identity of the elderly, can be raised by sharing, experienced as attitudes of motivation and participation, trust, justice, interaction, well-being, quality and satisfaction with life, reducing experiences of loneliness and isolation (WANDERBROOKE; WIEDEMANN; BUSSOLIN, 2015), present in many of the following narratives:

[...] so as not to be alone at home... (CS2GAA)

[...] so here is the opportunity to meet each other, the coexistence is very good. (FS7GG)

[...] you have to know how to live with life. (FS2GI)

[...] because you interact with your colleagues... (JS2GN)

[...] you get good friendships, it is another family ... (CS1GT)

[...] it is a family, I feel very well, it is only joy (CS1GCC)

The companionship... (CS2GDD)

In this coexistence, the elderly narrate about the opportunity, the exchange of experiences, sharing stories of similar lives or not. The group contributes to the improvement of confidence, satisfaction with life and the ability to face problems, in addition to making the elderly feel useful, as opposed to the need to stay only at home, but to live every moment with joy and intensity (ANDRADE et al., 2014). The coexistence is also pointed as a distance from diseases, such as depression, for example, which appears below:



So I go [...] to see if I don't get depressed. (CS3GDD)

Depression, it is sad, you isolate yourself a lot... (JS1GR)

Also mentioned were concerns about isolation, which has become a generator of anxiety and depression: living alone produces social isolation and increases the possibility of triggering depressive symptoms, a condition that affects health, well-being, and lifestyle (COLUSSI; PICHLER; GROCHOT, 2019).

There is an interdependent relationship of togetherness, avoidance, detachment, and absence of illness. Loneliness expressed by the elderly as a perception of aging is currently linked to the relationships that occur in the family. Thus, modern living conditions may favor the emergence of loneliness, since people's lifestyles and family structure undergo intense modifications (BATISTA et al., 2014).

The elderly, then, understand this coexistence as an intimate relationship by the perception of absence, distance and isolation of their families, as a voluntary exchange of affections through the network of friendships and through the interaction provided by the space and the exchange of knowledge. Corroborating the experiences expressed by the elderly, living together has a therapeutic, healing, and creative dimension, capable of generating autonomy, well-being, empowerment, and self-government.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

In the light of the above and in accordance with the objective of the study, to analyze the perception of aging among the participants of the social work with the elderly of the Sesc in Ceará. We noticed, in the reports of the elderly participants, that aging is a process that can bring pleasure, fulfillment, autonomy, independence, and willingness to overcome difficulties. As well, some limitations such as the decrease in functional capacity, diseases, depression, and isolation were also evident.

Knowing the perception of the elderly about aging is important to build positive representations of this phase. In this sense, it is suggested that other, deeper studies be carried out on the perception of aging within this environment of Sesc, in other operational units offered to the community by TSI, as well as to delve into issues of finitude, religion and religiosity in the behavior of the elderly, with the intention of contributing to a greater awareness of professionals and family members who deal with the elderly.



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