



THE AGING EXPERIENCE IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORK ENVIRONMENT: THE WORKERS' VOICE IN A CASE STUDY FROM SOUTH OF BRAZIL

A EXPERIÊNCIA DO ENVELHECIMENTO NO AMBIENTE DE TRABALHO CONTEMPORÂNEO: A VOZ DOS TRABALHADORES EM UM ESTUDO DE CASO DO SUL DO BRASIL.

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ABSTRACT

Population aging is a worldwide phenomenon, which is expressed in the labor market by the aging of workers. This new scenario can bring opportunities, but also challenges, especially due to the culture of ageism that is present.

Objective: In this context, the present study investigated how the aging experience in the contemporary work environment is constituted.

Method: The case study method was used, with a qualitative approach, and six workers over 50 years of age from a company in southern Brazil were interviewed.

Results: The subjects' voices revealed that aging at work includes the challenges of managing the transformations of the human aging process, as well as to work daily in an insecure and ageist work environment.

Contributions: The article shows the importance that work can have for the lives of older workers, being a source of existential meaning and purpose.

Key words: Aging Workforce. Age Diverse Workplace. Ageism. Aging.

RESUMO

O envelhecimento populacional é um fenômeno mundial, que se expressa no mercado de trabalho pelo envelhecimento dos trabalhadores. Esse novo cenário pode trazer oportunidades, mas também desafios, principalmente devido à cultura do ageism que está presente.

Objetivo: Nesse contexto, o presente estudo investigou como se constitui a experiência do envelhecimento no ambiente de trabalho contemporâneo.

Método: Foi utilizado o método de estudo de caso, com abordagem qualitativa, e foram entrevistados seis trabalhadores maiores de 50 anos de uma empresa do sul do Brasil.

Resultados: As vozes dos sujeitos revelaram que envelhecer no trabalho inclui os desafios de gerenciar as transformações do processo de envelhecimento humano, bem como trabalhar cotidianamente em um ambiente de trabalho inseguro e etário.

Contribuições: O artigo mostra a importância que o trabalho pode ter para a vida dos trabalhadores mais velhos, sendo fonte de sentido e propósito existencial.

Palavras-chave: Envelhecimento do Trabalhador. Local de trabalho diversificado por idade. Ageísmo. Envelhecimento.



1. INTRODUCTION

Aging is a global phenomenon that has profound implications for all of society (WHO, 2016). For an analysis of the multiple effects of social aging, it is important to emphasize that aging is a very complex process, with high variability within individuals and enormous differences between individuals (Lehr, 1999). The complexity of the interweaving between aging and social relationships represents a constant challenge for politics, law and social actors. In this situation, it is important to listen to the voices of those directly affected, which is the proposal of the present article.

One of the impacts of longevity is the increasing presence of older workers in companies (Martin, 2018; IBGE, 2020b), either because of the need to supplement income (Giardino, Bruno & Wall, 2018), or because of the subjects' desire, in reason for the benefits that work provides for their well-being (Soares, Costa, 2011).

The growing presence of older workers in the labor market can bring, on the one hand, possibilities for intergenerational learning in the work environment (Schmitz, 2020; Rozman, Treven & Cancer, 2016), maintenance of health and social relationships for older workers (Soares & Costa, 2011; Tavares, 2015), in addition to using the experience and knowledge of workers for companies (Cepellos & Tonelli, 2017).

On the other hand, it also brings new challenges, especially due to the tensions of a labor market characterized by insecurity and unemployment (IBGE, 2020b; Silveira, Rossi, Vuono, 2020), as well as by the ageist culture (Ayalon, Tesch-Romer, 2018; Naegele, De Tavernier & Hess, 2018). In this context, the question that the present work seeks to answer is: how is the aging experience in the contemporary work environment constituted?

To answer this question, the article is built from a theoretical basis that includes aging and the aging experience, the work context in Brazil, and also the theme of ageism in the work environment. Next, the methodological choices are presented, followed by the results and discussion, and some final considerations.



2. THEORETICAL BASIS

2.1 AGING AND THE AGING EXPERIENCE

Population aging is one of the most significant trends of the 21st century (WHO, 2016). In the case of Brazil, projections from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) show how fast the aging process occurs. In 1950, for every 100 children from 0 to 14 years old, there were about six people over 60 years old. In 2010, there were 29.55 and, in 2020, 46.89, so 14.26% of the population is already 60+ (IBGE, 2020a). According to Kalache (2019), a longevity revolution, because currently old age isn't a privilege of a few people, but a reality existing in most regions of the world, which demands a new conception of human existence.

Salgado (2000) defines the human aging process as a natural phenomenon, consisting of changes that occur throughout the life cycle and result in differences between generations, being a complex process, as it relates to different dimensions of life: biological, physiological, psychological and social. According to Kalache (2013), this process varies from person to person, according to genetic, psychological, social and cultural factors. Neri (2005) highlights that from a biological point of view, aging causes changes in the body that occur after sexual maturation and it makes the effects of the passage of time visible. In the psychological dimension, aging promotes changes in aspects of personality, emotions, memory, intelligence, among other factors of mental functioning, causing changes in capacities such as learning, adaptation and absorption of information. Finally, in the social dimension of aging, changes are observed in family relationships, friendships, work or leisure, transforming the social roles played by people in each of these spaces (Neri, 2005).

Therefore, the aging experience includes changes in different dimensions of life, making it more difficult to define who can be considered an old person. In this sense, Neri (2005) considers that it is around the age of 50 that some social markers appear that would classify an individual as old or older, like white hair, wrinkles, muscle flaccidity, sensory deficits, decreased strength, mobility and resistance, among others.

Beauvoir (1990) indicates that the aging experience is accompanied by profound human dilemmas, such as the fear of death. According to the author, when we are young or adults we behave as if we will never get old, silencing these dilemmas, due to the difficulty we have in managing the temporality of life. In this sense, Tavares (2015) revealed that work can play an



important role in the elderly peoples' lives, maintaining the feeling of usefulness and purpose, thus helping subjects to manage the dilemmas of finitude that emerge with aging.

In this way, the aging experience includes an important question: how do subjects manage the transformations that occur with aging? An interesting answer is the selection, optimization and compensation model, known as the SOC model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). The model is based on the idea that subjects experience their development process throughout their lives, with gains and losses in all stages, in a continuous interaction between the subject and the environment where they live. Thus, it explains how subjects manage their own lives and adapt to changes, using three components: selection, optimization and compensation.

From this perspective, selection represents a process by which the individual, faced with a scenario of limited resources, chooses goals compatible with his or her moment in life. This is what happens during the aging process, when due to some capacity limitation or environmental difficulties, the subject selects attainable goals, seeking to maintain a good level of functioning in their relationship with the environment. Optimization is understood in the SOC model as the maximum use of internal and external resources, it involves the acquisition, application, coordination and maintenance of these resources with the objective of reaching the highest levels of operating capacity, aiming to maximize gains and minimize losses, with a view to the chosen objectives. Compensation, in turn, concerns the use of alternatives to maintain functioning in the face of a loss, and can be performed using external resources, such as the use of prescription glasses to compensate for vision limitations, or even, internal resources, such as the discipline to perform a physiotherapy treatment. According to the SOC model, selection, optimization and compensation occur at the same time in a dynamic and interconnected way, being operated by all people consciously or unconsciously throughout life, as a strategy to achieve chosen goals (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). The SOC model has become an important explanation about the ways people adapt during the aging experience.

2.2 AGING AND WORK IN BRAZIL

To understand the older workers' situation in Brazil, it is important to point out some historical particularities of the Brazilian scenario. Until the beginning of the 20th century, Brazil had a economic structure based on slave labor. The process of industrialization and modernization of the Brazilian economy took place only in the mid-20th century, driven by the State, when big state-



owned companies emerged and economic development was concentrated in the metropolitan regions of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro (Brum, 1998). In the 1960s, an important process of the aging population began in Brazil, however, the aging of the Brazilian workforce only got the attention of administrators in the last 15 years (Tavares, 2015).

The workers' aging has been a topic discussed in Europe and the United States since the 1980s, but in Brazil it still receives little attention and is not on the agenda of entrepreneurs (Fontoura, 2014). Data from the National Household Sample Survey (PNAD) show that of the 92 million employed workers in Brazil, 7.7 million are over 60 years old. In 2012 there were only 5.5 million, so the growth in the number of elderly workers was approximately 50% in just eight years. This same survey reveals that, among the elderly, 26.6% get formal work, while most work informally, mainly on their own (46%) (IBGE, 2020b). Informal work is a striking feature of the Brazilian labor market, representing around 50% of the Economically Active Population (PEA), and is a favorable space for new forms of precarious work (Pereira & Cabral, 2019).

The older workers' presence in the labor market raises tensions, especially in a society of capitalist values, where aging is associated with disability and unproductivity (Fasbender, 2016; Ayalon & Tesch-Romer, 2018; Goulart, Mergulhão, Canêo, Najm, & Lunardelli, 2009). In this context, older workers are affected by age-related prejudices, or even because they would be seen as more expensive, prejudicing them from selection processes to opportunities for promotion and development (Cepellos & Tonelli, 2017; Goldani, 2010). Lara and Canoas (2010) revealed in their study that the work experience of workers over 40 was marked by concerns regarding the condition of being the head of the family, difficulty in entering another branch, reduced income, low education, job instability, and age discrimination.

The study by Cepellos and Tonelli (2017) revealed the view of managers of big companies about workers over 45 years old in the Brazilian context. According to the data, despite perceiving different qualities of the workers, there weren't management practices that allowed using the workers' strengths in favor of companies. It was found that more than half of the companies didn't involve older professionals in the activities of integrating younger people into the organization's culture, and 83% didn't have practices for integrating different generations. When questioned about positive perceptions regarding older professionals, companies expressed that they are more reliable, have more useful knowledge for the company's daily life, are more organized, more committed, work harder, are more loyal to the company, more cooperative, can learn new skills as easily as young people, perform better quality work, keep pace with younger people, are more punctual and



productive. When asked about the differentiated skills they observe in older workers, 96% of the companies reported that they have greater emotional balance, 87% reported that they have a greater ability to perform diagnoses and 86% declared that they have a greater ability to solve problems. However, that competences are not considered when drawing up the career plan. Thus, the authors consider that, although there are some positive perceptions about older workers, companies are still not sensitive to the workers' aging, which is reflected in the lack of people management practices capable of including these workers and opening space for their potential in the work environment.

2.3. AGEISM AT THE WORKPLACE

The contempt for old age and the cult of youth crossed the history of humanity and are still present in contemporary times (Beauvoir, 1990). The concept of ageism was developed by Robert Butler (1969), when the author referred to discrimination based on the age. The title of his text "Age-ism: Another Form of Bigotry" (Butler, 1969, p. 243) called attention to a new kind of prejudice, which had similar effects to other "isms".

In this way, the author denounced the phenomenon of ageism as the judgment of a person merely based on age, which can be directed both at young and older people. According to Butler, in general, the elderly people are more affected by ageism, due to the repulsion caused by aging in the culture, by the association that is made of it with illness, disability and even with the question of death. Currently, the theme of ageism is widely discussed in the gerontological context (Ayalon & Tesch-Romer, 2018).

According to Mccann and Giles (2002), stereotypes about elderly people are not isolated in the work environment, but are socially diffused, propagating the idea that elderly people have lower mental capacity, inability to deal with changes, lower performance and productivity. Thus, it is judgments made based on people's age, without considering other characteristics and singularities.

Using stereotypes to organize the complexity of the social environment is basic to human perception of the world, and most of the stereotypes are acquired by culture (Appelbaum, Wenger, Buitrago & Kaur., 2016). According to Cuddy and Fiske (2002) stereotypes are fixed beliefs about characteristics of members or social groups that are in our cognitive structures. Thus, they are constituted from relationships with colleagues and supervisors to the structural level in organizations, when certain characteristics are established for each age group (Hirsch, 2020).



Stereotypes can become a source of suffering, as they impact the behavior of subjects, causing them to adjust their behavior to the expectations of the stereotypes (Ayalon & Tesch-Romer, 2018).

Although some stereotypes about older workers are positive, most relate these subjects to negative characteristics, assuming that they are less motivated, less confident, less willing to participate in training, resistant to change, more vulnerable to work-family imbalance and less healthy (Fasbender, 2016). Another very common stereotype associates older people with lower productivity, however, several studies show that this stereotype doesn't portray reality (Bryson, Forth & Stokes, 2020; Aubert & Crépon, 2006; Calzavara, Battini, Bogataj, Sgarbossa & Zenaro, 2020). Thus, although stereotypes related to older people have an important impact on the work environment, affecting hiring, promotions and relationships at work, they don't have consistency in scientific studies (King, Finkelstein, Thomas & Corrington., 2019; Ng & Feldman, 2012).

3. METHODOLOGY

The present research¹ was developed as a case study, which is defined as “an empirical investigation that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and in its real-world context” (Yin 2015, p.17).

The study was performed in a private Brazilian organization maintained by entrepreneurs of goods, services and tourism in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, which has 1900 employees, and develops activities aimed at promoting quality of life, like gym, dental clinics, cultural events, sporting and recreational events, libraries, restaurants, kindergarten schools, among others. It is, therefore, a formal work context, a corporate organization. The average age of the workers of this organization, at the time of the study, was 39 years, with 15.05% of the workers being over 50 years old.

The goal of the study was to analyze how the aging experience in the contemporary work environment constituted. To answer the research question: "How was the aging experience in the contemporary work environment constituted?", six workers were invited to participate. The older workers were at least 50 years old (Neri, 2005) and were chosen looking for diversity in their professional activities. All had more than 1 year at the company. It is important to mention that, despite the age cut-off above 50 years old chosen in the present study, there are other researches

¹The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul under ruling no. 4,013,962. The subjects were informed about the objectives and possible explicit risks in the Free and Informed Consent Term (TCLE).



that use different cut-offs, investigating the case of workers over 40 or 45 years old. Despite the different age groups, it is important to pay attention to the results of these other researches in the present study, as they can provide important elements to reflect on the aging process at work, especially because there is no clear definition about the age in which the worker starts to be seen as old or when he starts to feel old.

Data collection was carried out through four individual interviews with the older workers, identified by the letter “T” followed by the numbers 1 to 6 in the description of the results. Table 1 shows how the data was collected and it includes some characteristics of the survey respondents.

Table 1: Research data collection

Professional activities	Sex	Age	Identification in the reporting and discussion of data
Administration	Male	52	T1
Maintenance technician	Male	59	T2
Cultural events technician	Male	59	T3
General service assistant (cleaning)	Male	65	T4
Administration	Female	50	T5
Kitchen assistant	Female	58	T6

Source: Elaboration of the authors, 2022.

The collected data were recorded and transcribed. Content analysis was used, which refers to

A set of communication analysis techniques aiming to obtain, through systematic procedures and description objectives of the content of messages, indicators (quantitative or not) which allow the inference of knowledge related to the production/reception conditions (inferred variables) of these messages (Bardin, 2009, p. 44).

Campos (2004, p. 612) states that this technique concerns the “[...] study of both the contents in the figures of speech, reticences, interlines, and the manifestos”. This methodology proved to be appropriate to the context of the present study, because the evidence were not restricted to the words said. Data analysis was performed based on thematic analysis (Minayo, 2014), thus, it started with a first reading and analysis of the data, going through the process of unitarization, grouping of ideas by similarity, until reaching the final categories. This way, the results are organized and analyzed in three dimensions: the transformations of aging and the challenge of staying productive; the



importance of work in the aging' challenges; and, the challenge of aging in an insecure and ageist labor market.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF AGING AND THE CHALLENGE OF STAYING PRODUCTIVE

In their reflections on the experience of aging in the work environment, workers initially referred to the changes that the passage of time causes, in the face of the challenge of feeling productive.

[...] we have a different rate of productivity (T3).

[...] my back hurts, my knee hurts, my leg hurts (T5).

And we start to be more forgetful [...] is it a question of the disease (referring to the disease she has) or a question of age? (T5).

[...] we feel a little ashamed, because the young are too fast (T5).

Maybe for an older person, you have to be more didactic, say the whole sentence (T2).

[...] some limitations will appear, they already appear (T2).

I asked a young worker (a job with technology) and he said: "here's boss". And I said: "thanks, one day you have to teach me." These things make us feel late (T5).

It is evident, in these first statements, that in the workers' opinion the passage of time has caused changes in their bodies, whether in the capacity of muscles or mind, bringing pain, slowing down reasoning, and, in general, technologies have advanced in a pace faster than their ability to keep up with them, which could impact their productivity.

To analyze these ideas of older workers, it is important to have a discussion about the relationship between aging and productivity. It is accepted in the literature that aging may impact worker productivity, but there isn't consensus on this issue due to the fact that there are inconclusive results (Bryson et al., 2020), and also because productivity is difficult to be measured (Naegele et al., 2018).

On the one hand, some studies show that older workers are seen by their managers as less productive and with difficulties in dealing with technologies (Lallemand, 2009, Roscigno, Mong, Byron & Tester, 2007; Brooke & Taylor, 2005, Pinto, 2014, Henkens, 2005). On the other hand, in



different studies that investigate perceptions of older workers, several positive characteristics are also admitted (Pinto, 2014; Dennis & Thomas, 2007, Roscigno et al., 2007, Cepellos & Tonelli, 2017). Thus, it is considered that, if the environment is favorable, the changes that occur due to age can be well managed (Countryman, 2016), whereas an unfavorable environment impairs the productivity of the older worker (Hippel, Kalokerinos & Henry, 2013, Bryson et al., 2018). Aubert and Crépon 2006 revealed that the productivity of workers aged 40 to 55 is higher when compared to younger workers, raising questions about the belief about the work rate of older people. Similarly, Bryson (2018) revealed that a higher proportion of older workers cannot be associated with a lower work rate, suggesting that, depending on the type of work to be performed, the experience and knowledge of workers can be a differential for productivity.

The workers also highlighted positive changes that the passage of time has brought, and it is an advantage for exercising their function.

Older people sometimes have the emotional control needed to make this basis. Leave the young up here running and leave us here holding them (T5).

Due to your experience, you already know: “that work won't be good” (T3).

There are some situations here [...] it needs an older person who knows how to talk: “calm down, let's talk”. Even as a matter of respect, if there's a young person there, there will be a problem (T3).

I think about many advantages [...] you already have your life resolved, in the family. There's no child to raise, there's no problems like “the guy goes out to party at the weekend and goes back bad”, you know (T3).

The workers commented that they use the positive factors to compensate for possible negative ones. One of the workers highlights the need to “know where to put each one” as one of the ways to manage the changes caused by the passage of time.

My knee mobility is no longer the same, it's more a physical issue [...] so it limits you some things [...] I have a certain time, so I have to stop, take a seat [...] but, in other activities, sometimes I am even better! (T3).

I can't keep up with technological innovation with the same agility [...] But I'm smarter, I have more emotional control and more persistence than a young person. There are different generations with different characteristics, I just have to know where I'm going to put one and where am I going to put the other one (T5).

This compensation between losses and gains of the age mentioned by the workers refers to the explanations of the SOC model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). Age gains such as intellectual capacity, experience and accumulated knowledge are optimized, that is, harnessed to their fullest



potential and enhanced, to compensate for the physical losses that have been reported.

Thus, it was observed that the aging experience at work includes the perception and management of the transformations that the passage of time has caused, highlighting the natural physical and cognitive limits of age. At the same time, gains have been reported, such as experience, balance, emotional control, the ability to relationship well, maturity and more favorable living conditions, which, in the workers' opinion, can help compensate and manage possible losses from the aging process.

4.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF WORK IN THE AGING' CHALLENGES

When talking about the aging experience at work, the importance of work activity for the subjects' lives became evident, as it provides a sense of purpose, usefulness, and social belonging. It is interesting to note that at the beginning of their careers, work was more linked to financial needs, while at the present time the meaning of work is linked to personal fulfillment, affection and contemplation of life.

In the beginning, work symbolized survival for me [...] today work means fulfillment (T5).

There's a period in your life that the biggest concern is the financial [...] Today my need is more the affective issue [...] When you're young you have to run, you have to earn (T3).

It was notable that the current meaning and importance of work for these subjects are not the same as when they were young. A first explanation for this change in the meaning of work could be aging itself, because over the years, if basic material needs are satisfied, the subject can pay attention to other issues such as contemplation of life meaning, religious activities, purpose for its existence, legacy, among others (Maslow, 1943). A second explanation could be anchored in the cultural transformation that has taken place in recent decades, not only in the world of work, but in society as a whole, giving more value to the subjects' own lives. According to Bauman (2008), while in the working society the meaning of life was strongly linked to the obligations towards traditional institutions, in the consumers' society the meaning of life is connected with the individual inner demands of each subject, valuing the pursuit of happiness and personal fulfillment. That is, in the current culture, work isn't just a means of survival but it has become a means of achievement, like workers expressed.



Along the same lines, it is necessary to consider productive restructuring as one of the recent milestones in the world of work, through which the worker is no longer a merely objective instrument in the production process, but starts to put his subjectivity at the service, awakening other dimensions of their inventiveness towards the objectives of the work, under the promise of a more fulfilling and meaningful work, which, however, can remain alienating, especially in unequal contexts (Antunes, 2001, Lara & Canoas, 2010, Harvey, 2002). Thus, the idea of a work endowed with meaning and linked to more romanticized purposes may constitute a mere reproduction of the logic that marginalizes many subjects in the labor market.

In other manifestations, workers highlighted the importance of work to feel integrated into society. The fact of being an active worker seems to provide meaning to their existence, due to the feeling of belonging to a purpose, and at the same time it brings other gains, such as maintaining health, network of relationships and updating.

Work dignifies, because you feel useful and productive, and you leave something, a legacy (T3).

It's that sense of belonging to something bigger. [...] to have a voice and space in this bigger thing, but to live together (T2).

We work with something that gives people satisfaction, which is food! It's the sweet! People go to a restaurant, they get together, they eat food, good food, and that was made with care (T6).

It's something I feel useful to society! It's something that fills my life, I talk to people, I have more knowledge, I talk to you, I talk to someone, I learn from people, I don't want to stay at home waiting! (T6).

I would feel empty, because without purpose, the same thing when we take a vacation, the first week is the most beautiful thing, but after isn't cool (T4).

[...] job means to keep my mind sane. Feeling and having a place in the world, keeping up to date, today work has a very strong weight (T5).

What makes me happy is doing things well and seeing the result [...] if you could see, I do it! (T4).

In this way, it's possible to perceive the relevance of work for the very structuring of the subjects' lives and the way they perceive themselves in the world, being a source of fulfillment, health and dignity, as well as a source of meaning for their lives (Tavares, 2015, Marra, Souza, Marques & Melo, 2013, Bitencourt, Gallon, Batista & Piccinini, 2010, Carvalho, 2009). At the same time, the workers mentioned the need for their work to be conscious and contextualized, it means,



in their perspective, a context in which they can understand and identify with the objective of their work, know their goals and what is expected from their work, so they can work independently.

I need to be very clear about what they expect from me [...] Tell me what you need, what, when, what, and leave it to me! (T5).

I think the most important thing for your work routine is to know your goal. What do I have to fulfill? Who do I have to answer? (T2).

I need two things: tell me what I do, what I do, and I also need a person to tell me if I'm going the right way or not, a person who is responsible to say ok, ok, not ok (T6).

This conception of workers is in line with the recommendations of the European Center for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), that defends the importance that older workers have some control over their work, with autonomy to choose the methods they consider most adequate to carry out their activities (CEDEFOP, 2013). In this sense, Souza (2017) revealed in her study the desire of older workers to work autonomously.

In one of the speeches, a gender issue was also observed, when the worker expressed that “man is proud to be working”. It was noticed that his speech not only expressed the idea that work is important to make him feel good, but expressed ideas of the patriarchal society’ culture, according to men have an obligation to be a financial provider, thus being a source of honor (Perista & Perista, 2012, Hirata, 2009). Although the objective of the present study is not the analysis of gender issues, it is important to highlight that the relationship with work is crossed by gender issues, being influenced by social constructions about the place of men and women in society (Fontoura, 2014).

[...] work for me means everything, because it's a pride for the man to be working, not depending on anyone, holding the life, helping people, participating (T4).

It was possible to perceive, in this analyze, that work plays an important role in the lives of these subjects, because through the work activity, workers feel integrated and have other benefits such as health maintenance, network of relationships and professional updating. Workers also pointed out the importance of working consciously, and it includes understanding and ownership of their work process. They want to be valued, listened to, understood, respected and monitored. Thus, this kind of work would help to ease the tensions and limits imposed by the aging process, through belonging, usefulness and recognition.



4.3 THE CHALLENGE OF AGING IN AN INSECURE AND AGEIST LABOR MARKET

In another group of ideas, workers spoke about the challenges of getting old in a labor market unstable and ageist. Initially, they expressed the importance of the salaries and benefits they have, recognizing difficulties existing in the current world of work, feeling privileged because they are in a formal work context. The fear of workers was evident, due a disputed labor market where they are, according to the reports, especially because of their age. For these reasons, the subjects consider very important issues such as the correct payment of salary, the supplementary pension plan and, with a special importance, the health plan, in view of the current context of unemployment and underemployment that they observe.

Having a good health plan, this is essential (T3).

The health plan! This is the most important. Because you know it's difficult in the labor market [...] The health plan is even more important than the salary! Yes, people's health is important, because if you aren't healthy, you cannot work (T6).

Knowing that on the last day of the month your salary will be paid, having a formal contract, today is a great benefit (T3).

One (benefit) that could be created is a supplementary pension plan (T1).

Today, practically if you leave, you lose your job, you are out of the labor market (T3).

Afraid, yes, I am, I'm afraid of being unemployed because at 52 the labor market no longer sees you with potential, with energy to give, you know. And I think that a lot of people think the same (T1).

I was lucky to get this service, at my age (T4).

The insecurity mentioned by workers may be explained in the numbers of the Brazilian labor market. Data from the first quarter of the continuous PNAD (IBGE, 2020b), show that of the 105 million people who are part of the workforce in the country, 12.8 million are unemployed and about 38 million work informally. Thus, there are 50 million helpless people, without the protection of the State. According to Franco and Ferraz (2019), the lack of protection of workers has been intensified in recent years by big platform companies, so millions of drivers, motorcyclists and cyclists provide services, subject to an unequal work relationship, which leaves the worker susceptible and unprotected. According to the IBGE (2020b), the number of people who joined this type of work has been increasing every year: it reached 3.6 million in 2018, 29% more than in 2017.



This scenario of labor relations, which was already marked by the lack of protection and susceptibility of most workers before the pandemic, became even more uncertain and disturbing with the advent of COVID-19. According to Silveira, Rossi and Vuono (2020), the flexibilization of contracts and rights of work could lead to massive precariousness, further increasing the informality and vulnerability of workers. Along the same lines, Yazbek, Raichelis and Sant'ana (2020) suggest that the COVID-19 crisis could further intensify inequality and income concentration, which were already sharpened before the pandemic by the current political perspective in Brazil, hegemonically liberal. The concern, in this sense, is with the alienated, dehumanized and unprotected work, too evident in the daily lives of app drivers, outsourced workers and so many others who are susceptible to informality.

With regard to the impact of COVID-19 on the elderly, the ConVid survey (FIOCRUZ, 2020) revealed that the pandemic caused a decrease or extinction of income for 23% of the elderly who worked formally, and for 55% of the elderly who worked informally. In addition, it showed that more than a third of the elderly worked in essential activities, such as health, transport and security, which restricted the possibilities of social isolation for these subjects. Thus, in addition to an important economic impact, a significant portion of the elderly were also exposed to the disease. According to Kalache et al. (2020), COVID-19 potentiated existing problems: inequality, sexism and ageism, which were manifested in merely economic choices and discourses, in the difficulty of accessing health services and in domestic violence. Thus, deaths caused by COVID-19 aren't a simple reflection of age composition but reveal the lack of public policies to promote active and healthy aging for all.

In the voice of older workers, in addition to the insecure work environment, there is also the challenge of living in an ageist culture. Reports emerged of situations in which the subjects perceive a different treatment due to age, which is perceived by them as prejudice and devaluation of their knowledge. Thus, the feeling is of being left aside, as commented in an interview.

I think you can't treat people differently [...] because you talk a lot about innovation [...] you've already done that, you end up devaluing the experience because of the novelties (T5).

I think treating me differently [...] treating me differently because I'm older, you know, discriminating against me in any way (T5).

When you start to be cornered [...] when you start to notice that there is any kind of prejudice regarding your stay in some space, then you will tend to move away (T2).



Because we get to a certain age sometimes and it's common, "then you don't know anymore", so, they leave you aside, in the sense that they think they know everything, and in reality, don't know! (T3).

I feel prejudice. Too much prejudice. Because "now is the time for you to retire". I don't want to retire! (T6).

Similar to the ideas above, others emerged reinforcing the feeling of being left aside. In this sense, it is imperative to observe the idea of one of the workers who claims to have to justify his ability every day to be at his job.

I feel it sometimes, you know: "look, the grandfather came with his old idea [...] sometimes you notice, like: "we don't need to hear that old person", you understand [...] sometimes we need to kill a lion a day after a certain age, you need to look like you're much better, to justify your stay there, right, that's a complicating factor (T2).

There is a prejudice that we feel due to experience, age, you can assimilate it a little better, it's like bullying at school, right, you learn to live with it (T2).

Thus, the prejudice creates a situation in which it is assumed that, because of being older, the worker would not have the capacity to work, unless proven otherwise. It was evident that, in this context, the worker is disadvantaged in relation to the others, as the younger ones would have natural possession of a credit that the older worker needs to strive to conquer in their daily life, "killing a lion a day", as he said.

Ageism is very present in the work environment and especially affects older people (Appelbaum et al., 2016), promoting prior judgments of subjects based on age, negatively impacting their performance, job satisfaction and mental health (Hippel, Kalokerinos & Henry, 2013). According to Rozman, Treven and Cancer (2016), what may facilitate the propagation of stereotyped ideas about professionals is precisely the lack of knowledge of the specific characteristics and needs of each generation, which may negatively reflect on the relationships between professionals. In addition, stereotypes may harm the self-image, confidence, satisfaction, motivation and performance of individuals in the work environment. In this sense, Countryman (2016) showed the importance of a work environment that provides older workers with good psychological conditions to deal well with the physical and cognitive changes related to aging.

However, in general, work environments are not favorable for older workers, corroborating the data found in the present research. In the study by Rozman, Treven and Cancer (2016), older workers expressed that their experience of aging at work was marked by prejudice, as



they felt stereotyped as less productive, less motivated, less innovative, less dynamic, less flexible, less able to learn and less agile for work.

The work of Loth and Silveira (2014) revealed that mature workers themselves express negative stereotypes regarding their age group: resistance to change, inability and insufficiency to deal with new technologies, boredom, less dynamism and less propensity to risk. However, it was interesting to observe that the subjects perceive these characteristics only in other workers and not in themselves.

Although the focus of the present study is not the analysis of the gender issue, it is important to register the research by Neumark, Burn and Button (2017), as it revealed that different types of prejudice can be manifested at the same time in work environments. This study was relevant to expand the notion of discrimination, showing that there was more age discrimination against older women than against older men, which may possibly be explained, according to the authors, due to the fact that women are more affected and judged by their physical appearance than men. The study also revealed that there was more discrimination against job applicants aged between 64 and 66 than candidates aged between 49 and 51.

In this way, it can be observed that the aging experience at work is marked by insecurity, which is especially accentuated for the most vulnerable groups, considered to have a lower chance of employability: this is the case of older workers or those who did not have the opportunity to study and qualify, for example. Concomitantly, the subjects feel the effects of an ageist culture at work, experiencing daily situations of contempt for their knowledge and marginalization of their work process.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The aging of the workforce is a contemporary phenomenon, which can bring new opportunities as well as new challenges, especially for companies, workers and public authorities. In this context, the present study investigated how the aging experience in the contemporary work environment is constituted.

The perspective of the subjects participating in the study revealed that the aging experience in the contemporary work environment includes the challenge of feeling productive in the face of the transformations arising from the aging process. The physical and cognitive changes perceived in the aging process were highlighted, and limits were recognized for the performance of some



activities that demand physical performance or skills with digital technologies. On the other hand, gains that the aging experience has produced were also mentioned, which may constitute a way of compensating and managing possible losses. In this sense, the SOC model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) helped to understand how subjects adapt to the changes of aging in the work environment.

The voice of workers also showed the relevance that work activity has for their lives, allowing them to feel integrated into society, maintaining social relationships, promoting physical and mental health, providing updating and a feeling of usefulness. The subjects also reported the desire and importance of experiencing a conscious work activity, feeling appropriate in their work process, valued, listened to, and respected. At the same time, it became evident that their experience of aging at work is marked by insecurity and fear of unemployment, which is accentuated by the effects of an ageist culture, experiencing daily situations of contempt for their knowledge and marginalization of their work process.

In view of the results, we can reflect that the experience of aging, which is known to be complex for human beings (Beauvoir, 1990), also proves to be a dilemma and challenging in the contemporary work environment. The workspace is a place of power, where the experience of the subjects can be used in favor of society, at the same time that physical, mental and social well-being for aging workers can be promoted. However, the context marked by social inequality, job insecurity and an ageist culture, as is the case in Brazil, makes the experience of aging at work embarrassing, obstructing the opportunities that the aging workforce can create.

Thus, there is an urgent need for a joint effort by the government, companies and society as a whole, so that the aging of workers is no longer an issue that is foreign to organizations, becoming one of the priority issues. In this way, people management policies may be created that provide a work environment favorable to intergenerational solidarity, dialogue, age diversity and mutual respect, enabling workers to contribute, be recognized and valued, regardless of their age. Finally, it is pointed out that the present study has as its limit the studied context, a formal corporate work environment. It is therefore suggested that studies be carried out in other contexts, such as in the informal work environment, so that it is possible to increasingly expand the understanding of the aging experience in the contemporary work environment.

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