

From Financial to Identity: Meanings Assigned to Work by Older People in the COVID-19 Context*

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Topic: Health promotion, well-being, and quality of life

Contribution to the field: This study contributes to the field of nursing by highlighting the importance of work in active aging, not only from an economic perspective, but also from an emotional, social, and cognitive perspective. These findings allow nurses to better understand the needs and perceptions of older people, which facilitates personalized interventions that promote autonomy and integral well-being. In addition, the research highlights the need for inclusive policies that value the work of older people, strengthening the role of nurses as advocates for social and labor inclusion at this stage of life.

Abstract

Introduction: Promoting active aging is essential to ensuring quality of life and autonomy for older people. Work, as a key dimension in this process, contributes to socialization, strengthening identity, and maintaining the physical and mental health of this population. **Objective:** To understand social representations of work among older people during the social isolation imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. **Materials and Methods:** This is a qualitative study conducted with 50 active or retired older people linked to an aging institute at a Brazilian federal university. People aged 60 years or older, with preserved cognition and availability to participate, were included. Data collection, which ended due to theoretical saturation, used semi-structured interviews with the free word association technique, using the term “work” as an inducer. The textual corpus was processed by Iramuteq software, adopting similarity analysis, and interpreted in light of the Social Representation Theory. Three researchers participated in the analysis and discussion of the data; however, the findings were not validated with the participants. **Results:** Four categories emerged: Economic-Functional; Subjective and Emotional; Relational and Socialization; and Cognitive and Personal Development. The results indicate multiple dimensions assigned to work by older people, going beyond the economic dimension. **Conclusions:** The findings reinforce the role of work as a structuring component of active aging and point to the need to formulate policies and practices that promote the social inclusion and appreciation of this population.

Keywords (Source: DeCS)

Work; older adult; social perception; social representation; personal satisfaction; COVID-19.

4 De lo financiero a la identidad: sentidos atribuidos al trabajo desarrollado por las personas mayores en el contexto de la covid-19*

* Derivado de la tesis doctoral en enfermería titulada *Sentidos atribuidos ao trabalho construído por pessoas idosas no contexto da covid-19*, de la Universidade Federal da Paraíba, Brasil. Disponible en: <https://repositorio.ufpb.br/jspui/handle/123456789/33764>

Resumen

Introducción: La promoción del envejecimiento activo es fundamental para garantizar la calidad de vida y la autonomía de las personas mayores. El trabajo, como dimensión fundamental en este proceso, contribuye a la socialización, el fortalecimiento de la identidad y el mantenimiento de la salud física y mental de esta población. **Objetivo:** comprender las representaciones sociales del trabajo entre las personas mayores durante el aislamiento social impuesto por la pandemia de covid-19. **Materiales y métodos:** se realizó un estudio cualitativo con 50 personas mayores activas o jubiladas vinculadas a un instituto de envejecimiento de una universidad federal brasileña. Se incluyeron personas de 60 años o más, con cognición preservada y disponibilidad para participar. La recolección de datos, que finalizó por saturación teórica, utilizó entrevistas semiestructuradas con la técnica de asociación de palabras libres, con el término inductor “trabajo”. El *corpus* textual fue procesado por el software Iramuteq, adoptando el análisis de similitud, e interpretado a la luz de la Teoría de las Representaciones Sociales. Tres investigadores participaron en el análisis y discusión de los datos; sin embargo, no se realizó la validación de los hallazgos con los participantes. **Resultados:** surgieron cuatro categorías: Económico-funcional; Subjetiva y emocional; Relacional y de socialización; y Cognitiva y de desarrollo personal. Los resultados indican múltiples dimensiones atribuidas al trabajo por las personas mayores, yendo más allá de la dimensión económica. **Conclusiones:** los hallazgos refuerzan el papel del trabajo como componente estructurante del envejecimiento activo y apuntan a la necesidad de formular políticas y prácticas que favorezcan la valorización y la inclusión social de esta población.

Palabras clave (Fuente: DeCS)

Trabajo; anciano; percepción social; representación social; satisfacción personal; covid-19.

Do financeiro à identidade: sentidos atribuídos ao trabalho construído por pessoas idosas no contexto da covid-19*

* Derivado da tese do doutorado em enfermagem intitulada Sentidos atribuídos ao trabalho construído por pessoas idosas no contexto da covid-19, da Universidade Federal da Paraíba, Brasil. Disponível em: <https://repositorio.ufpb.br/jspui/handle/123456789/33764>

Resumo

Introdução: A promoção do envelhecimento ativo é essencial para assegurar qualidade de vida e autonomia às pessoas idosas. O trabalho, como dimensão fundamental nesse processo, contribui para a socialização, fortalecimento da identidade e manutenção da saúde física e mental dessa população. **Objetivo:** compreender as representações sociais sobre o trabalho entre pessoas idosas durante o isolamento social imposto pela pandemia da covid-19. **Materiais e métodos:** estudo qualitativo, realizado com 50 pessoas idosas ativas ou aposentadas vinculadas a um instituto de envelhecimento de uma universidade federal brasileira. Foram incluídas pessoas com 60 anos ou mais, com cognição preservada e disponibilidade para participação. A coleta de dados, encerrada por saturação teórica, utilizou entrevistas semiestruturadas com a técnica de associação livre de palavras, tendo como termo indutor “trabalho”. O *corpus* textual foi processado pelo software Iramuteq, adotando a análise de similitude, e interpretado à luz da Teoria das Representações Sociais. Três pesquisadores participaram da análise e discussão dos dados; no entanto, a validação dos achados com os participantes não foi realizada. **Resultados:** emergiram quatro categorias: Econômico-funcional; Subjetiva e emocional; Relacional e de socialização; e Cognitiva e de desenvolvimento pessoal. Os resultados indicam múltiplas dimensões atribuídas ao trabalho pelas pessoas idosas, indo além da dimensão econômica. **Conclusões:** Os achados reforçam o papel do trabalho como componente estruturante do envelhecimento ativo e apontam a necessidade de formulação de políticas e práticas que favoreçam a valorização e inclusão social dessa população.

Palavras-chave (Fonte DeCS)

Trabalho; idoso; percepção social; representação social; satisfação pessoal; covid-19.

Introduction

The promotion of active aging, with a focus on preserving functionality and autonomy, is one of the main guidelines of public health policies aimed at the older population. This guideline is based on the recognition of the rights of older people, grounded in values such as independence, social participation, dignity, care, and self-fulfillment, as well as the significant role that work plays at this stage of life (1). Among the various dimensions that compose the aging process, work stands out as a relevant element to be considered (2).

The increase in the retention or reintegration of older people in the workforce is a phenomenon that encompasses both economic dimensions—supplementing retirement income—and biopsychosocial aspects, including strengthening identity, breaking down prejudices surrounding aging, recognizing the value of professional experience, and maintaining satisfactory health conditions (3, 4).

In this context, it is essential to promote active aging, personal satisfaction, and quality of life for this demographic group. For this purpose, it is necessary to implement public policies that ensure the protection of the rights of this segment of society, enabling older people to remain active and functional, living this stage of life in a full and rewarding manner. Therefore, it is worth noting the importance of work as an essential part of life in society, highlighting the need for qualification and training programs for the reintegration of the older population into the workforce after retirement, as well as legal measures that guarantee their labor rights (5).

Social isolation, considered a public health problem, is characterized by reduced social engagement and decreased desire for interpersonal interactions. This condition can negatively impact quality of life, leading to little or no interaction in daily life. Studies show that loneliness is associated with a range of physical and mental health conditions, highlighting the complexity of this phenomenon (6, 7). Therefore, it is essential that older people remain socially active, since many choose to postpone retirement due to the importance of social relationships in building identity, autonomy, and a sense of belonging (8).

To research the meanings assigned to work by older people in this context, this study adopted the Social Representation Theory (SRT) as its theoretical framework. Developed by Serge Moscovici in the 1960s, this theory seeks to understand how individuals produce and share meanings regarding social phenomena, based on their experiences and the sociocultural environment in which they live (9). Social representations emerge through cognitive and communicational processes, organizing collective knowledge and shaping practices and behaviors within social groups (10). In terms of aging and work, these representations offer a crucial interpretive key to understanding how older people perceive their role in the workplace—especially in instances of social isolation, where the challenges and demands of adaptation become even more intense.

Thus, it is relevant to understand the perceptions of older people regarding the meaning of work in the context of social isolation imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this scenario, this study aims to analyze the social representations of work, constructed by these people, considering the need to continue their work activities during this period, based on the SRT. The objective, therefore, is to understand these social representations of work in the context of social isolation caused by the pandemic.

Materials and Methods

This is a qualitative study based on the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research — COREQ (11). The study was conducted at an aging institute of a Brazilian federal university.

The population of interest included individuals aged 60 years or older, of both sexes, active or retired, who re-entered new employment, and formal and informal workers who currently perform or have performed remote work for a minimum period of three months. Older people who performed their activities in a hybrid manner were excluded.

The sample was selected by convenience, considering the accessibility and availability of participants for the study (12). During the collection period, 75 people were contacted, but 25 did not meet the inclusion criteria. There were no refusals among those eligible, resulting in a total sample of 50 participants, following the principle of theoretical data saturation. This criterion was discussed by the authors of this study and considered to have been achieved when the responses started to repeat themselves, without the inclusion of new information relevant to the qualitative analysis (12).

Data collection occurred between July and November 2023, through semi-structured interviews developed by the researchers and conducted by two of them. These researchers were previously trained; they provided a brief personal introduction and clarified the purpose of the research. The interviews consisted of two parts. The first part included sociodemographic questions such as age, sex, religion, and level of education. The second part used the free word association technique (FWAT), a projective method that aims to identify social representations through the participants' first cognitive associations with one or more inducing terms (13). For this study, the stimulus adopted was “work”, and participants were instructed to report the first five words that came to their minds. This approach allows for the identification of semantic universes linked to the object of social representation under study (13).

FWAT is characterized as an open research approach that stimulates spontaneous responses based on one or more triggering words, revealing semantic universes related to the object of repre-

sentation (13). This technique allows access to spontaneous and structured meanings of individuals' social reality, contributing to the identification of the symbolic dimensions of work in the aging process.

Each interview lasted an average of 15 minutes, during which the researcher asked participants: "If I say the word 'work' to you, what are the first five words that come to mind?" The interviews were conducted individually, in a private room, without the participation of other users, ensuring confidentiality and minimizing interference.

Sociodemographic data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (absolute and relative frequencies). Participants' responses were transcribed into Microsoft Excel® and organized into a *corpus*. This *corpus*, corresponding to the words obtained by the FWAT technique, underwent a refinement process, which included the elimination of vocabulary repetitions, the organization of words by semantic proximity, and the creation of a dictionary. To ensure the validity of this dictionary, two independent researchers participated in the procedure.

Subsequently, this *corpus* was processed using the Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires (Iramuteq) software, version 0.7 alpha 2, through similarity analysis. It uses the co-occurrence of certain lexical forms in texts or text segments to generate graphical representations that show the structure of the content present in a *corpus* (14).

In the data analysis, three dimensions of social representations were considered: knowledge/information (organization and distribution of knowledge regarding the social object); images/field of representation (associated symbolic meanings); and positioning/attitude (subjective positioning of individuals [15, 16]). In addition, the processes of objectification, which materialize abstract elements in daily reality, and anchoring, which structures social interactions based on these elements, were adopted (16, 17). These categories enabled the identification of patterns and meanings assigned to work in the aging process and social isolation.

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Health Sciences Center of the aforementioned university, under number CAAE (Certificate of Ethical Review) 57889122.3.0000.5188. The volunteers participated with their consent, having been thoroughly informed of the study's objectives and procedures by reading and signing the informed consent form.

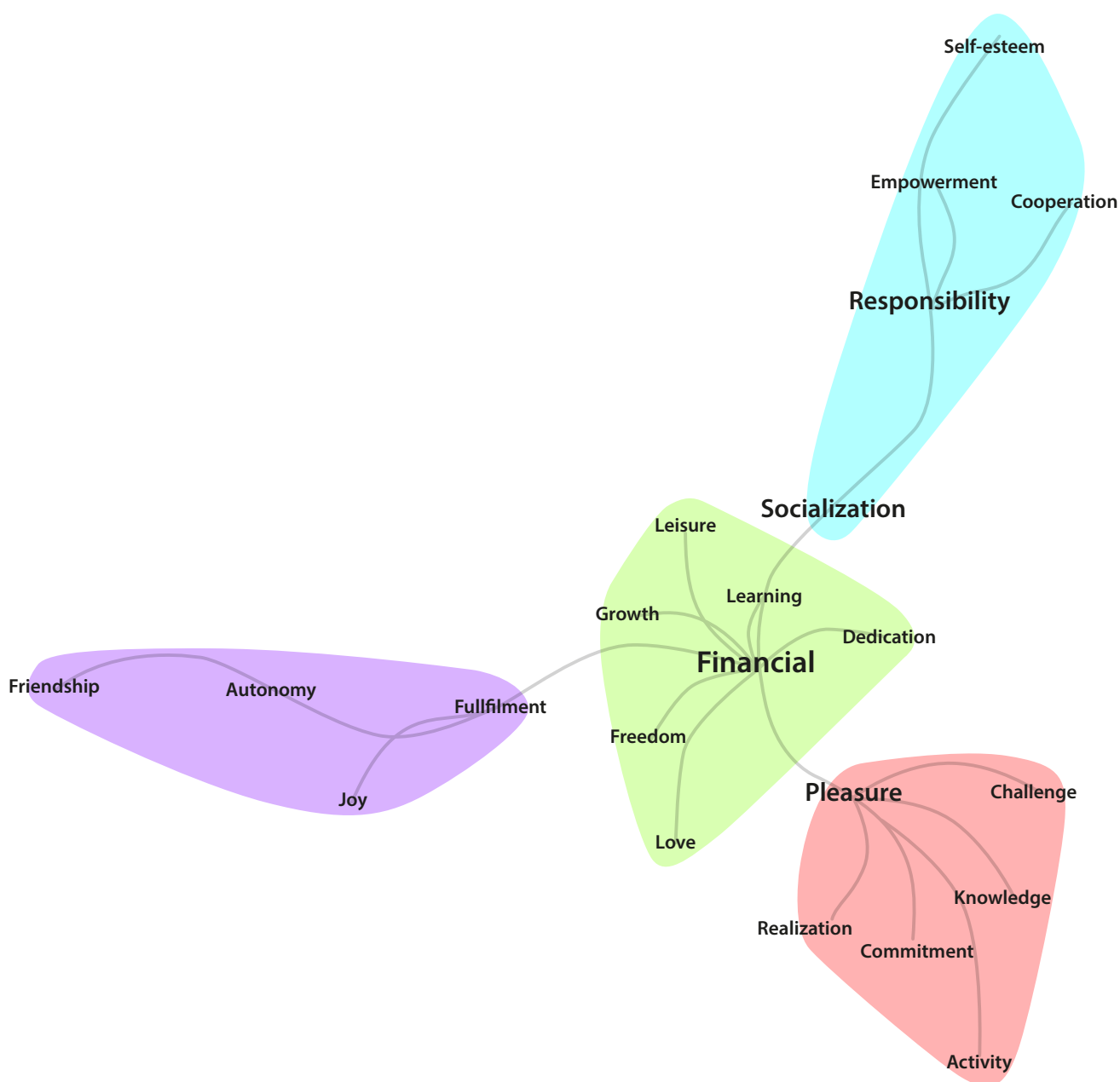
Results

The study included 50 people aged from 60 to 79, with most of them in the 65 to 69 age group (46%). Most participants were women (68%), and a significant percentage identified themselves as Catholic (58%) and married (52%). In terms of level of education, there was diversity, with 42% of participants having completed higher education and 26% having completed high school.

For the trigger word “work”, the 50 participants mentioned 250 evocations, comprising 101 distinct forms. The similarity analysis, represented in Figure 1, revealed the structure of the social representation of work among older people during social isolation, considering only words with a frequency greater than three instances.

The term “financial” occupies a central position in the graph, acting as the core that articulates the other connections. This centrality shows that, although work is strongly associated with maintaining economic stability, its meaning goes beyond the material dimension, also connecting to subjective and relational aspects.

Figure 1. Graphical Representation of the Similarity Analysis Regarding the Perception of Work by Older People during Social Isolation. João Pessoa, Paraíba, Brazil, 2024 (n = 50)



Based on the distribution of the most frequent terms and their co-occurrences, it was possible to identify four main semantic categories, as described below.

Category 1 — Economic-functional dimension

This category (highlighted in green in the figure) has “financial” as its central term and shows that, for the older people in the sample, work remains understood primarily as a means of subsistence and economic stability. Even in the context of retirement or reduced workload, the discourse points to the relevance of economic independence as a structuring aspect of daily life. Maintaining financial autonomy is associated with preserving dignity, freedom of choice, and a sense of security in the face of economic uncertainties, which are especially intensified during social isolation.

Furthermore, from the “financial” core, connections emerge with the terms “learning,” “freedom,” “dedication,” “growth,” and “leisure,” indicating that work is also understood as a space for personal, emotional, and intellectual development, and is experienced as an enjoyable activity. This aspect is reinforced by the proximity to the terms “pleasure,” “fulfillment,” “activity,” “challenge,” and “commitment,” revealing that work is a source of meaning, engagement, and achievement.

Category 2 — Subjective and emotional dimension

Displayed in red in the figure, it revolves around the term “pleasure”, which connects to words such as “fulfillment,” “activity,” “challenge,” “commitment,” and “knowledge.” This cluster shows that, for participants, work represents engagement in meaningful activities that provide personal satisfaction and strengthen their sense of identity. The experience of work as a source of pleasure highlights its role in fueling enthusiasm, motivation, and self-esteem, being perceived as a space for personal achievement and growth.

This emotional dimension is also associated with the idea of project continuity and active permanence in the world. The challenge and commitment mentioned in the lexical associations indicate that work allows older people to experience responsibilities and maintain bonds with individual and collective goals.

Category 3 — Relational and socialization dimension

This category (in blue) emerges from the terms “socialization” and “responsibility,” which unfold into words such as “cooperation,” “empowerment,” and “self-esteem.” This semantic structure points to the conception of work as an environment for building social bonds, promoting solidarity and social recognition, with a positive impact on the sense of belonging.

The interactions provided by the work environment are understood as ways to break social isolation, expand opportunities for socializing, and generate intergenerational bonds. Work, therefore, acts as a mediator in the creation and strengthening of social networks, being a cornerstone for active and healthy aging.

Category 4 — Cognitive and personal development dimension

In lavender, this category consists of the terms “learning,” “growth,” “dedication,” “freedom,” and “leisure,” which point to the appreciation of work as a continuous process of personal development. This network reveals that, for participants, continuing to work after the age of 60 represents an opportunity to acquire new knowledge, remain mentally active, and expand skills over time. Work is therefore perceived as a tool for self-development and for strengthening cognitive abilities in aging.

The presence of the terms “freedom” and “leisure” in this category highlights the concept of work not as a rigid obligation, but as a space for personal expression and choice. Thus, work is understood as a practice that combines social utility, individual pleasure, and intellectual growth, contributing to the strengthening of self-concept and identity in the aging process.

The identification of these categories highlights the complexity of the social representation of work among older people, transcending their economic function to incorporate affective, social and identity senses. Even in an adverse context, such as the social isolation imposed by the pandemic, work remains a structuring element of daily life and relations with the world.

Discussion

The results reveal a complex and multifaceted social representation of work among older people, especially during the period of social isolation. The analyses demonstrate that work remains having a central role in the lives of this population, transcending its economic function and assuming importance in the social, emotional, cognitive, and identity spheres.

In Category 1 —*Economic-functional dimension*, work is perceived as a space for developing new skills, in line with the concept of healthy aging proposed by the Pan American Health Organization (18). This perspective can be understood in light of the informational dimension of the SRT, since it articulates socially shared knowledge regarding the importance of work in quality of life in older age (15, 19). In this sense, the anchoring process can be observed, as the meanings of work —such as the search for autonomy, leisure, and personal growth— are reinterpreted

in light of values previously established in the life trajectory of older people, such as responsibility, dignity, and social contribution.

Financial security also stands out as an essential component. Studies indicate that adequate planning throughout life provides stability during retirement, reducing concerns and promoting well-being (20). However, the economic instability exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified this dimension, leading several older people, including retirees, to return to or remain in the workforce to supplement their income or assist family members in vulnerable situations (21).

In addition, some sectors have gradually adapted to the inclusion of this population, promoting ergonomic adjustments and incentives for digital inclusion. Digitization, although challenging, represents an important means of inclusion, provided it is followed by support and training (22, 23). Still, the strong association between work and productivity poses obstacles, such as resistance to the flexibilization of functions and the retraining of older professionals (24).

Category 2 — *Subjective and emotional dimension*, shows that the experience of meaningful work activities promotes self-esteem and positive self-perception, contributing to mental health. This understanding is related to the imagery dimension of SRT, as work is symbolically represented as a space for personal achievement, overcoming challenges, and project continuity (15).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interruption of these activities had a profound impact on the lives of older people, as they are part of the highest-risk group. This separation intensified their isolation and brought to the surface feelings of uselessness, exclusion, and helplessness, compromising their emotional well-being and sense of social belonging (25, 26).

In addition, studies indicate that work acts as a protective factor against depressive symptoms and promotes emotional well-being (27). However, it is worth noting the existence of the different perceptions between those who continue to work by choice and those who do so out of necessity. In this process, objectification is observed when the abstract concept of “personal fulfillment” is realized through work, which then represents self-esteem, usefulness, and existential continuity (28). This ambivalence, identified by the SRT, reinforces the duality of work as a right and source of well-being and, simultaneously, as a burden and obligation in contexts of vulnerability (29).

Category 3 — *Relational and socialization dimension*, reinforces the concept of work as a space for building social bonds and recognition. In this sense, work breaks social isolation and strengthens support networks, which are vital for healthy aging. In addition, the work environment can promote intergenerational coexistence, enabling the exchange of knowledge and experiences between dif-

ferent generations. This dynamic contributes to the empowerment of older people and to the deconstruction of age-related stigmas, broadening the perception of work as an inclusive and socially valued practice (30, 31).

Category 4 — *Cognitive and personal development dimension*, highlights work as a continuous opportunity for learning and improvement. This perception relates to the attitudinal dimension of SRT, demonstrating how participants position themselves in relation to market demands and their own life projects. The cognitive stimulation provided by work contributes to the maintenance of mental functions, creativity, and problem-solving skills (32).

Notably, the terms “freedom” and “leisure” point to a reframing of work as a personal choice and expression, rather than merely an obligation. This more flexible approach strengthens self-concept and promotes autonomy in later life. However, ageism still represents a significant barrier. Several companies disregard the experience and skills acquired throughout a professional career, which hinders the integration and retention of older workers (29, 33). Overcoming this reality requires educational initiatives, recognition policies, and legislation that encourage diverse and inclusive work environments.

The similarity analysis confirms the articulation of social representations with broad meanings assigned to work, associating it not only with financial sustenance but also with identity construction, personal fulfillment, and social participation. Social representations highlight dimensions of work that are often underappreciated by other age groups. The association between work and feelings of fulfillment, personal growth, knowledge, and joy reinforces the importance of ensuring adequate conditions for older people to remain professionally active, respecting their individual needs and abilities (10).

In this context, retirement is no longer understood as the end of productive life and is redefined as a flexible transition. Based on the SRT, work is understood as a multifaceted social practice that structures identities, promotes recognition, and strengthens bonds (8). However, this appreciation can also lead to tension, such as resistance to retirement and pressure to remain productive in the face of physical or cognitive limitations. Therefore, it is essential that public policies and organizational practices consider the specific needs of this population, promoting not only their permanence but also ensuring dignified conditions adapted to their reality.

Finally, understanding the social representations of work among older people contributes significantly to nursing science and practice by highlighting that work at this stage of life is associated not only with financial security but also with aspects such as expression, belonging, and human development. These find-

ings broaden nursing's view of aging, supporting more sensitive and contextualized care practices that value autonomy, protagonism, and the meanings assigned by older people to their work careers. They also reinforce the role of nursing in the formulation of interdisciplinary strategies and in the advocacy of public policies that recognize the plurality of aging and foster accessible, intergenerational work environments adapted to the needs of this population, contributing to more active, dignified, and participatory aging.

Conclusions

The study found that work has a key role in older people's lives, going beyond financial independence to cover aspects such as socializing, lifelong learning, and mental health. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted challenges such as social isolation, adaptation to remote work, and the need for digital inclusion, reinforcing the importance of public and organizational policies that promote more accessible, flexible, and adequate work environments for this population. In addition, professional retraining and the adoption of measures that guarantee safe and ergonomic working conditions are essential to ensure that older people remain in the workforce in a dignified and healthy manner. Thus, recognizing and valuing the role of work at this stage of life contributes not only to social inclusion but also to more active and participatory aging.

Study limitations

It is worth noting that the specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the data was collected, may have significantly influenced participants' perceptions of work. Issues such as isolation, economic insecurity, and the need for digital adaptation interfered with the social representations identified, limiting the generalization of the results to other contexts.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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