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THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF ABSTINENT ALCOHOLICS ABOUT ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT OF ALCOHOLISM

As representações sociais de alcoolistas abstêmios sobre as bebidas alcoólicas e implicações para aquisição do alcoolismo

Las representaciones sociales de los alcohólicos abstinentes sobre las bebidas alcohólicas y implicaciones para adquisición del alcoholismo

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RESUMO

Objetivo: caracterizar as representações sociais de alcoolistas abstêmios sobre as bebidas alcoólicas e suas implicações para aquisição do alcoolismo. **Método:** estudo exploratório descritivo com abordagem qualitativa, focado nos aspectos processuais da Teoria das Representações Sociais. Os entrevistados foram 30 membros do Centro de Atenção Psicossocial. Utilizou-se o programa ATLAS.ti versão 24, e análise temática. **Resultados:** o processo de sobriedade e superação do ao consumo problemático do álcool e outras drogas é influenciado significativamente pelo convívio social e ambiental. O uso problemático de álcool interfere diretamente na saúde mental, afetando a capacidade de interagir e manter relações saudáveis. As relações com familiares e amigos desempenham um papel fundamental na recuperação. **Considerações Finais:** as estratégias de

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prevenção e tratamento do alcoolismo devem levar em consideração as representações sociais dos indivíduos afetados e compreensão dos fatores que influenciam a obtenção ao uso do álcool, bem como a importância do apoio familiar e social.

DESCRITORES: Alcoolismo; Psicologia social; Consumo de bebidas alcoólicas; Drogas lícitas.

ABSTRACT

Objective: to characterize the social representations of abstaining alcoholics about alcoholic beverages and their implications for the acquisition of alcoholism. **Method:** descriptive exploratory study with a qualitative approach, focused on the procedural aspects of the Theory of Social Representations. The interviewees were 30 members of the Psychosocial Care Center. The ATLAS.ti version 24 program was used, and thematic analysis was performed. **Results:** the process of sobriety and overcoming the problematic consumption of alcohol and other drugs is significantly influenced by social and environmental life. Problematic alcohol use directly interferes with mental health, affecting the ability to interact and maintain healthy relationships. Relationships with family and friends play a key role in recovery. **Final Considerations:** Strategies for the prevention and treatment of alcoholism should consider the social representations of the affected individuals and understanding of the factors that influence the attainment of alcohol use, as well as the importance of family and social support.

DESCRIPTORS: Alcoholism; Social psychology; Consumption of alcoholic beverages; Legal drugs.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: caracterizar las representaciones sociales de los alcohólicos abstinentes sobre las bebidas alcohólicas y sus implicaciones para la adquisición del alcoholismo. **Método:** estudio exploratorio descriptivo con enfoque cualitativo, enfocado en los aspectos procedimentales de la Teoría de las Representaciones Sociales. Los entrevistados fueron 30 integrantes del Centro de Atención Psicosocial. Se utilizó el programa ATLAS.ti versión 22 y se realizó el análisis temático. **Resultados:** el proceso de sobriedad y superación del consumo problemático de alcohol y otras drogas está significativamente influenciado por la vida social y ambiental. El consumo problemático de alcohol interfiere directamente con la salud mental, afectando la capacidad de interactuar y mantener relaciones saludables. Las relaciones con la familia y los amigos juegan un papel clave en la recuperación. **Consideraciones finales:** las estrategias para la prevención y el tratamiento del alcoholismo deben tener en cuenta las representaciones sociales de los individuos afectados y la comprensión de los factores que influyen en el logro del consumo de alcohol, así como la importancia del apoyo familiar y social.

DESCRIPTORES: Alcoholismo; Psicología social; Consumo de bebidas alcohólicas; Drogas legales.

INTRODUCTION

Alcoholic beverages are recognized as a legal drug, highly commercialized and easily found, which makes it easy for different groups of people to buy and consume them. Alcohol consumption is therefore a global concern due to its high incidence and the risks it poses to health. Worldwide, alcohol consumption is seen as a serious social and public health problem, causing great harm to individuals and posing challenges to controlling problematic consumption of alcohol and other drugs.¹

In the social context, it is important to highlight the influence of the media, culture, family habits and friendship circles that induce the abusive use of alcohol, which is often associated with moments of fun and socialization. This circumstance affects social relationships, as excessive use of alcohol causes problems for patients due to stigma in society,

which generates prejudice and exclusion. This distancing has an impact on mental health and minimizes the chances of recovery from problematic alcohol and other drug use.²

Because it is a chronic problem, it is common for withdrawal from alcoholic beverages to cause signs and symptoms that make it difficult for people to relate to each other due to the stress that the condition of stopping use causes. In this way, Social Representations (SR) is the knowledge that analyzes the influences and relationships between individuals in society, including their understanding of the components and realities that surround them.³

The Theory of Social Representations (TSR) investigates common sense, acquired through exchanges in the individual's daily life, in order to understand it in the face of the influences of society that stimulate and construct their way of acting and interpreting reality. Therefore, RS contribute to the development of knowledge, interpersonal relationships and

behaviors for the individual in the process of abstinence and as maintenance of this practice, reducing significant damage in the psychological, biological and social spheres.⁴

The role of nursing in this scenario is essential, because during data collection it is possible to identify issues that interfere with the individual's social and biological routine. In this sense, it is possible to design an intervention that suits their reality, applying humanized care so that the client feels welcomed. In addition, prevention and health promotion are duties that the nursing team must carry out through educational and assistance actions in the community. Social representations make it possible to understand which methods of acceptance by the patient are most effective for treatment, and thus achieve better results in the abstinence and maintenance stages.^{5,6}

In view of the countless consequences and damage to public health caused by excessive alcohol consumption, it is necessary to understand the SRs of these abstinent individuals, the maintenance of abstinence and how these perceptions directly influence their recovery. For this reason, the importance of this study is highlighted in order to fill these gaps in knowledge and advance innovative practices related to the field of alcohol and drugs. For this reason, the objective was to characterize the social representations of abstinent alcoholics about alcoholic beverages and their implications for the acquisition of alcoholism.

METHOD

The research is a descriptive exploratory study with a qualitative approach. In order to understand the results, we used a theoretical contribution from the Theory of Social Representations in the procedural dimension of the subjects of the study in relation to the topic in question. The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) criteria were adopted.⁷

Thirty people of both sexes who attended the Psychosocial Support Center (CAPS), over the age of 18, with the capacity for assimilation and verbal communication to answer the questions presented and who signed the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF) took part in the study. The data

saturation technique was used, in which the analysis carried out was unable to identify new information that would alter the understanding of the object of the research studied.⁸

The Free Word Association Technique (FWAAT) was used to collect the data. This technique provides the interviewees with evocations from which it is possible to identify the representations they have in relation to the enunciation used in the questions invoked, as well as their meanings, after which they are asked why the words were used.⁹ Thus, the following evoked words were used: Alcoholism, alcoholic beverages, abstinence, care and mental health, made available in the face-to-face form. To identify the participants, the "E" for "interviewee" was used, followed by a numerical number in ascending order by interview order.

The initial results of the data analysis were achieved by analyzing the ATLAS.ti program version 24, in which the collected material was submitted, with each item identified by the theme "documents", starting from D1 to D30, from which codes were created to identify each evoked word included in each document, providing the creation of a competition table in the software.

Topic analysis techniques were used. This constitutes a guide, which is then divided into six stages: (1) Formation of similarity between the elements; 2) The origin of the indicators; 3) The search for possible objects; 4) Continuation of the review, the main points to generate a "checklist" of thoughts and diagnoses; 5) Topic Delimitation; 6) Creation of documents with inspiring explanations.⁹

With regard to ethical aspects, the individuals taking part in the research were given an ICF containing all the interpretations, motives, aims, rights of the participant, risks and information about the researcher. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Institute of Health Sciences under protocol no. 5.175.204.

RESULTS

After analyzing the evocations with the inducing words, numerous symbolic elements emerged that characterized the initial representations without any preliminary interference from the researcher, and are highlighted in the table below:

Chart I - Elements of the free word association technique. Belém, PA, Brazil, 2022

TERM 1	TERM 2	TERM 3	TERM 4	TERM 5
ALCOHOLISM	ALCOHOLIC DRINKS	ABSTINENCE	CAUTION	MENTAL HEALTH
Retrograde	Pubs	Agony	Me	No depression
Boozer	Will	Stopping	Take care of yourself	Going crazy
Negative	Beer, wine	Stopping	Take care of yourself	Medication
Anger	Partying	Love of life	My life	Freak out
Negative	Drunkenness	Sobriety	Caution	Positive
Church	Desire	Prohibition	Family	Health
Illness	Overcoming	Sadness	Family	Hiking
Shame	Hangover	Stopping	Taking care of yourself	Forgetfulness
Escape	Spending	Another environment	Family	Treatment
Sickness	Curse	Struggle	Family	Overcoming

Based on the words related by the interviewees between their evocation associated with the inducing stimulus, we can make up the following thematic units, which contain the following meanings:

Negative effects disease - The consequences of uncontrolled use

In order to elaborate and study the expressions reported by the interviewees, based on the first trigger word, from the question alcoholism, symbolic elements emerged from the individuals who associate alcohol consumption as a bad attitude and behavior. As they represented the terms mentioned in the following expressions:

Setback, hangover, delay, cure (E1)

It's people who drink and don't have the control to stop. They drink out of control. They drink until they drop. (E3)

Anger. Many losses. I've lost a lot. (E4)

It brings back bad memories, in all areas: health, family. (E5)

Alcoholism for me is an escape from family and work problems. (E9)

I feel totally out of my depth. I'm not the person I used to be. I don't even remember the things I do. I wake up trying to remember what happened. (E10)

Those affected report feelings of shame, anger and frustration, as well as a loss of opportunities. Alcoholism affects not only the individual, but also their social environment. The interviewees point out that alcoholism causes the individual to lose control over their personality and actions which, as a result of the effects of the substance, leads to forgetting negative behaviors while drunk.

Alcoholic Beverages - A pretense of fun

In this thematic area, when the phrase "alcoholic beverages" was mentioned, the words most often expressed by the participants were "bars" and "partying", which at the time was associated with something harmful and potentially damaging, but are probably convenient insofar as it refers to a legal drug, and its use is encouraged and permissible by various segments of society. Given this, we can then define this thematic unit based on the following meanings in the participants' speeches, as shown in the following excerpts:

Bars, parties, music, you know. Everything that represents where alcohol exists, because alcohol is everywhere. (E1)

When I was 19, I started drinking, I thought it was cool, I thought it was cool, I played ball. (E2)

Fun, because for me it's a day of leisure, but then comes depression, regret, self-pity. (E4)

I'm going to drink beer, I'm going to spend, because it's everyday life. You spend it with friends. I leave work, go to a restaurant, go to a bar, have a beer and a drink, then go home. Then I go in one and then another and when I get home, I get home at three o'clock in the morning, four o'clock in the morning. (E9)

Alcohol consumption can lead to negative consequences, such as damage to health, financial problems, family difficulties, mistrust, criticism, loss of opportunities and unemployment. These consequences lead to feelings of frustration. On the other hand, alcoholic beverages are often associated with pleasure, social interaction, mass advertising and this combination can encourage alcohol consumption in various social contexts.

Abstinence - The struggle for sobriety

The term “abstinence” is related to the feeling of giving up alcohol, generating internal and external conflicts. Participants consider abstinence to be a daily struggle, but one that is necessary to avoid damaging their health.

I see it as positive, because I see the person who is fighting for their sobriety. (E5) Abstinence immediately brings agony, cold sweats, paleness, great anxiety, you know, that's part of it. (E1)

Abstinence is like that: the time you spend without ingesting alcohol, because our body needs to be treated without alcohol in order to stop drinking once and for all. (E3)

Struggle, because it makes you want to. Then I fight [...]. (E10)

Abstinence from alcohol is considered to be the voluntary deprivation of alcoholic beverages as a turning point in their lives, the result of a conscious decision and a personal struggle. This determination results in significant benefits, including well-being for their family, personal safety and an improvement in social relations between people in their community.

Mindfulness - The practice of self-care and reasons not to relapse

The statements of the participants in this research confirm the importance of family and social interaction in overcoming problematic consumption of alcohol and other drugs. For a better understanding, below are the statements of the social actors in this research:

Family and home. I look after them a lot, my two children. I worry about them a lot (E6).

Careful in my case: I always speak in the first person, right, because I know that if I go to the bar, I'm going to drink (E1).

Positive, caution reminds us to be careful with something, there's no such thing as too much caution. (E5)

So it's more the sisters who live here and they all take special care of me. My family has helped me a lot. Our family is very close.” (E7)

Care for me, as they say: is taking care of my family and that it's reciprocal, right. Family first, then I want to look after myself and my wife. That's what caring is. And then our family life becomes more peaceful, right?

The process of sobriety and overcoming problematic consumption of alcohol and other drugs is significantly influenced by social and environmental interaction. Relationships with family and friends play a fundamental role in recovery. The family plays a leading role in the individual's recovery, offering emotional support, encouragement to change and a safe environment. In addition, the positive influence of those close to them helps to reduce the desire to consume, strengthen the motivation to change and promote a healthy life.

Sobriety - The path to living in society again

In this segment, we express how uncontrolled alcohol consumption has physical, social and, above all, mental consequences for the addict, according to the following statements by the participants:

It comes to mind that if you don't take care of yourself, you could get sick in the head or go crazy (E_2).

When I have an outbreak I don't know anyone, I don't see anyone, and the next day I don't even know what I've done. So that's what I think about myself, right. Mental health is my treatment, because I get well, I'm great.” (E4)

Taking medication, because alcoholics can damage their brains because of alcohol. (E3)

For me, mental health, as they say, is a treatment I'm doing, right, to achieve abstinence from alcohol and with that, to get my family to be happier with me, so we can go out, go for a walk, go to the woods, you know, so we can go to the museum. (E9)

Anyone with healthy mental health is a person capable of living in society. (E5)

The interviewees' statements highlight mental health as a crucial factor in social and family relationships. Problematic alcohol use directly interferes with mental health, affecting the ability to interact and maintain healthy relationships. The daily struggle to re-establish social relationships is a constant

challenge. Treatment seeks not only to overcome addiction, but also to recover mental and physical health.

DISCUSSION

Alcohol abuse causes a number of the aforementioned harms, but the consumption of this substance causes a cascade of consequences related to the biological, mental and social aspects of the user. Biologically, the effects of alcohol on the human body are dependent on the amount consumed, which can include intoxication and poisoning, injuries to oneself and others, gastrointestinal and liver diseases, neuropsychiatric conditions, cardiovascular diseases, strokes, diabetes, perinatal conditions, infectious diseases, and social and economic consequences.^{10,11}

Thus, the resulting biological and psychosocial problems can lead to a series of somatic disorders in the body. In the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), we can find various definitions related to pathologies and the effects of alcohol, the most prominent of which is delirium tremens. This is a type of acute alcoholic delirium and represents the most severe form of withdrawal for those who stop drinking alcohol.¹²

Therefore, we can state that the most appropriate definition to characterize alcoholism is the one that describes the individual who has lost control over the use of alcohol, which is due to the organic need to maintain a certain level of ethanol in the body. High levels of anxiety, depression, insomnia, traumatic experiences, relationships, the appearance of parallel psychopathologies, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), are clearly evidenced in the study.¹³

The RS of alcohol is influenced by the media, culture, family and friends, associating it with fun, socializing and escaping from reality. The media plays a significant role, presenting alcohol in an attractive way through advertising, minimizing risks and normalizing its consumption through music and audiovisual resources, recreational meetings and after work hours, for example. This makes it difficult to recognize alcohol-related problems. However, at a certain point, people can recognize the implications of use and adopt positive practices, redefining their RS and minimizing the negative influence of this external information.^{14,15}

Alcohol consumption in Brazil is a governmental concern due to its wide accessibility and low cost. Its psychoactive effects affect mental health, but the fear, shame and frustration associated with alcoholism lead to difficulties in adhering to treatment, life-threatening risks, strained relationships and the breaking of emotional bonds. These factors make it difficult for alcoholics and their families to reintegrate into society.¹⁶

Withdrawal syndrome causes physical and mental repercussions due to the lack of the substance in the body, which is why the struggle becomes constant, as activities and distractions are needed to meet the body's need for alcohol. For this reason, individuals try to reaffirm to themselves the desire to abandon this practice as a form of mental stimulus, through affirmative words, trying not to go to places that trigger relapses and understanding the change in habits and routines to achieve full sobriety.¹⁷

The Harm Reduction Policy is defined as a public health strategy that aims to mitigate vulnerabilities, respects autonomy and recognizes the uniqueness of the individual. Since stopping use is not a reality that everyone wants or achieves, they cannot be prevented from the right to health care, as advocated in the doctrinal principles of the SUS. In this way, the subject becomes the protagonist of their care and the health institution becomes a strengthener in the adoption of new life practices, which is why this policy needs to remain in mental health services.¹⁸

The Singular Therapeutic Project (PTS) is a tool advocated by the National Mental Health Policy, built by the multi-professional team through a few steps that help to detect the areas of the user's life and understand their relationships. It also includes the family, a social group that awakens feelings of protection and the willpower to overcome challenges, generating great potential for contributing to positive advances in therapy. Thus, CAPS Alcohol and Drugs III is one of the types of CAPS that works with PTS and is responsible for treating individuals with problems related to problematic alcohol consumption and their social reintegration in a humanized way.²⁰

The segregation of individuals from the social environment due to problems related to alcohol consumption is closely related to the failure of sobriety, since individuals who are inserted in the labor market, are self-employed or participate in other work activities, remain abstinent from alcohol use for longer periods.¹⁹

The research has practical implications in terms of improving the therapeutic approach and strengthening family and social support for individuals in recovery, as well as theoretical implications by advancing the understanding of RS linked to abstinence and the factors in the acquisition of alcoholism, and developing conceptual models to understand the advances in treatment. Furthermore, knowing and recognizing this context can help reduce the stigma associated with alcoholism and raise awareness about the risks of excessive alcohol consumption.

Although this study has made a significant contribution to understanding the SRs of abstinent alcoholics, there are

limitations regarding a sample made up of participants from a CAPS, which may not be representative of the general population, since local social determinants influence the way people see and overcome challenges due to cultural, social and economic factors.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Problematic alcohol consumption was perceived as a condition that affects the individual, family and social network, where individuals consider that abstinence, although challenging, is an effective way of overcoming or mitigating the effects of alcoholism, family and social support is fundamental for recovery, and the treatment offered at CAPS is essential for progressing with the treatment through the PTS and the management of an interdisciplinary team, making the individual participative and offering the necessary autonomy in this process. Thus, strategies for the prevention and treatment of alcoholism must take into account the social representations of the individuals affected and an understanding of the factors that influence alcohol use, as well as the importance of family and social support.

Therefore, this research contributes significantly to understanding the SRs of abstinent alcoholics and the maintenance of abstinence, offering advances through the identification of the main SRs of the group studied, evidence of the importance of family and social support in recovery, contributions to the development of effective strategies for the prevention and treatment of alcoholism and subsidies for improvements or the formulation of effective, achievable and humanized public policies in mental health.

Although the study does not cover a population sample that describes the reality of all Brazilian regions, it fills gaps in the literature on the problem presented, provides support for future research and encourages reflection on all the complexity that involves the individual in this scenario.

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