

# HOW DO CHILEAN SENIORS PEOPLE THINK ABOUT ARGUING?

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# Aims and participants of the research

This project investigates orientations toward interpersonal arguing among Chilean seniors (N = 243), having a mean age of 72 years.

Their responses to survey items indexing argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, argument frames, personalization of conflict, and power distance are reported.

A second sample of Chilean undergraduates (N = 80) was collected for comparison.

# Chile is old

In CH population dynamics have been changing noticeably since the mid-1990s, and seniors are becoming a larger proportion of the population (INE, 2018).

According to the population census of 2017, the proportion of people over 65 compared to those under 14 tripled between 1992 and 2017.

The 2018 projections of the Chilean National Institute of Statistics (INE, 2018), indicated that by 2020 the country will have nearly the highest life expectancy in the world: the average age of life expectancy would be 82.2 years for women and 77.4 years for men.

In 2007 there was one older adult for every 2 children under 15 years of age. By 2050, that there will be two adults for each child younger than 15. The next decades will see a substantially rising population of citizens aged 80 years or more.

So the reality is unequivocal and shows a clear pattern: Chile is an aging country.



## Aging and Personality

Soto, John, Gosling, and Potter (2011) found that 65 years old were much more self-disciplined, unassertive, and altruistic than most adolescents, that neuroticism declined over the later age ranges (with sex differences tending to disappear), and that neither extraversion nor openness to experience changed much over the later age span.

Reiter, Kanske, Eppinger, and Li (2017) compared healthy younger (age 18-30) and older (age 65-80) adults in Germany and found no age differences in empathy, but a very noticeable increase in compassion in the higher age group. So, while the personality of a young adult may still be recognizable when he or she is 65, some changes are still expectable.



# Aging and Aggression

Argument-related aggressiveness seems to fall off with advancing age.

Studying about 600 working Americans (mean age 37), Schullery and Schullery (2003) found that argumentativeness (the inclination to engage in challenge or defense on the issues) declined with age.



Diehl, Coyle, and Labouvie-Vief (1996) compared older (age 60-69) and elderly (age 70+) adults with younger ones: When asked how they cope with stressors, older respondents were less impulsive, more analytical, and less aggressive, compared to the younger age groups.



All this work generally suggests that argumentative aggressiveness declines with age, but we do not have an extensive data record relating to people aged 60 or more, which was the minimum age of respondents here.

Birditt and Fingerman (2005) in an interview study of almost 200 Americans aged 13 to 99 years, reported that adolescents were most likely to exit a conflictive situation than the oldest subsample, and that the oldest group was most likely to exhibit loyalty (that is, standing by the person or situation that might otherwise have been objectionable).

They concluded, “older people appear better able to ‘pick their battles’ than younger people” (p. 126).





# Research questions

- We reduced the length of the multi-item scales for the convenience of our older sample but included all the measures mentioned above. Consequently, we made the decision also to collect a modest sized sample of college-aged Chilean adults for comparison with our primary sample, the elderly, using the same instruments.

We pursued the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do Chilean seniors and undergraduates compare on the measures in use here?
- RQ2: How do males and females compare on those measures for the two samples?
- RQ3: How are the measures correlated within each sample?

# Method

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The primary sample was 243 seniors, aged 60 or more. Their average age was 72 (SD = 6.0). Men were 46% of the sample, and women 54%.

87% of the study respondents were receiving a pension. Participants' average monthly household income was about \$960,000 (CLP). This is equivalent to about \$1,500 (US) or €1,300.

The participants were recruited in three different geographical metropolitan areas of Chile: Region of Coquimbo, in the center north of Chile; Santiago, the center of Chile; and Concepción, center south of Chile.

They were contacted in retirement homes via the Chilean National Services for Elderly People.

The comparison sample was 80 college-aged Chilean residents living in Concepcion, all of whom were recruited from the two main universities of the city: University of Concepción, and Catholic University of the Most Holy Conception. They were equally divided as to sex. For Chileans aged 15-29 years, males are 51% and females 49% of the population (United Nations, 2017).

# Discussion and conclusion

Seniors were less likely to argue, especially for play.

Seniors were more interested in asserting dominance and were less cooperative and civil.

First, the fact that people aged 65 and above were more self-disciplined and argued when important matters are at issue (such as status and respect), could be in line with the fact that other linguistic competences decrease.

Ulatowska (1985) noted that older adults had problems when they had to retell stories, summarize texts or establish the moral of a story. These reductions in the capacity of producing certain types of discourse and in the density of informational content and cohesive references of narratives suggest that perhaps elderly people use argumentation only for the occasions when something substantial is under disagreement.

Argumentation, of course, is an activity highly demanding in cognitive and linguistic resources.



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Stine-Morrow et al. described what is known as self-regulated language processing. This is cognitive self-regulation that consists in self-monitoring and self-control of memory, comprehension, learning, and performance.

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People behave as though they are making decisions related to the effort involved in the assignment, attention, and the selection of processing strategies, emission or displacement of answers, and the velocity of task resolution (Véliz, Riffo & Arancibia, 2010).

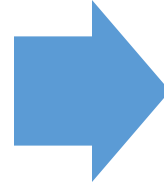
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There could be a strong connection between cognitive deficits and self-regulation, which increases with age.

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Argumentation is often cognitively effortful, and so seniors might be particularly likely to turn away from in favor of some more routine social behaviors.

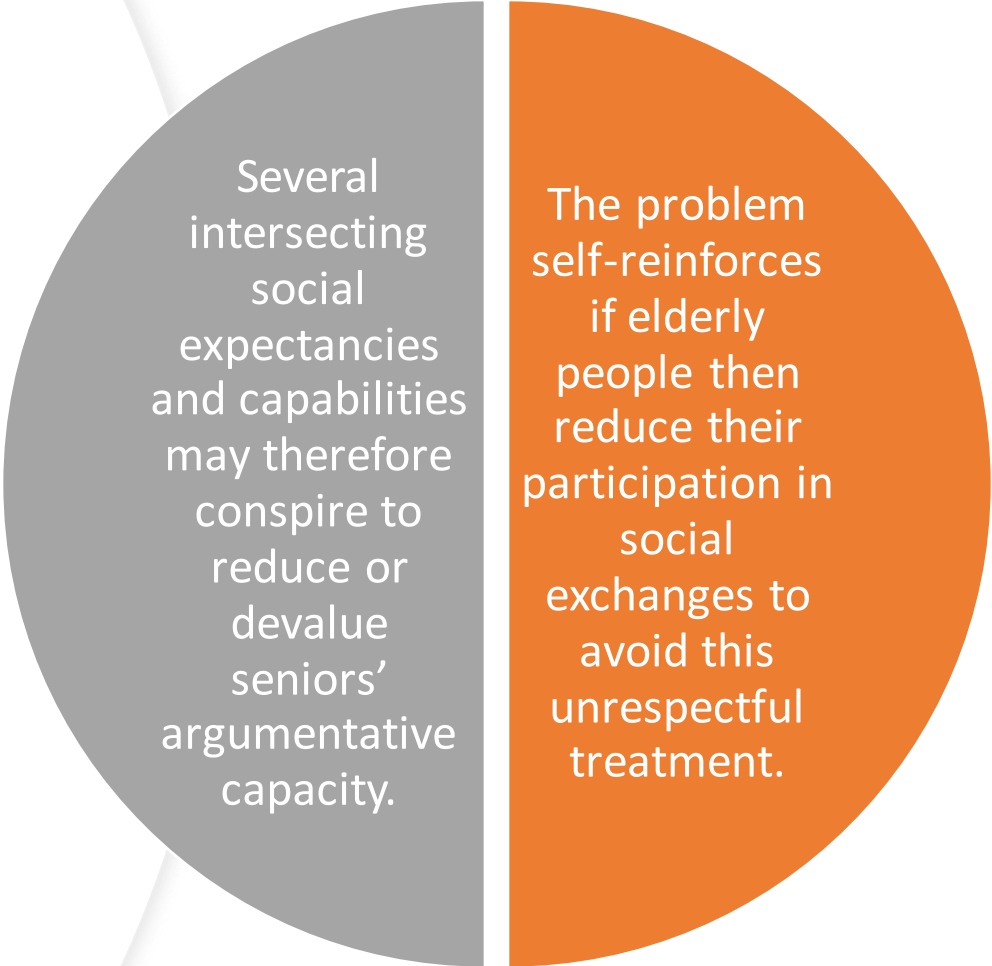
Moreover, seniors' heightened tendency to self-regulate might well be anticipated and reinforced by younger people, particularly in emotional or affective social exchanges.



The term elderspeak is used to refer to the way in which younger people talk to old people (this can be similar to the way many talk with babies, called babytalk).

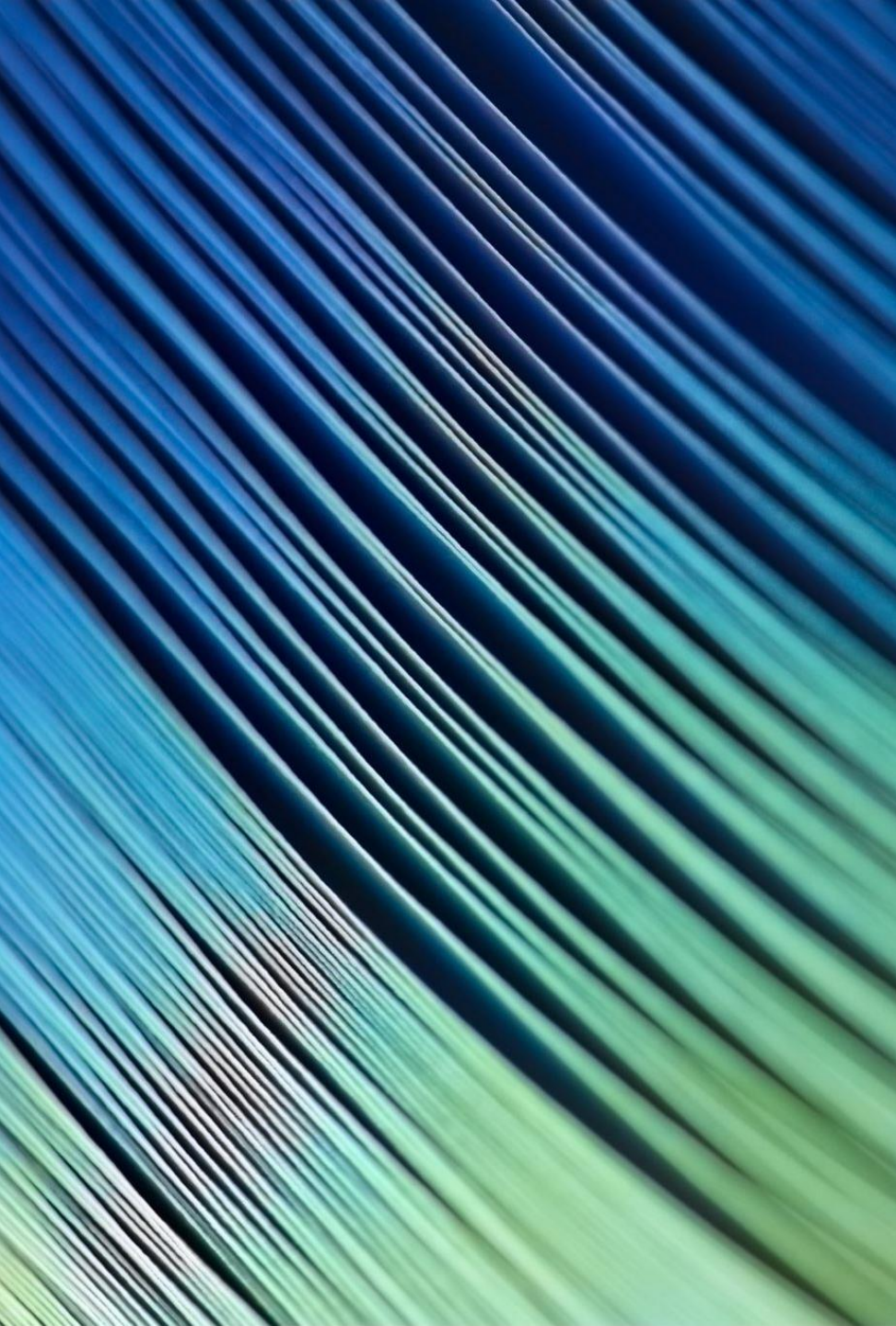


Elderspeak is polite talk in which younger people try, justified or not, to avoid in advance problems of communication when talking with the elderly. By assuming that seniors cannot follow detailed arguments, younger people may restrict seniors' exposure to argumentation.



Several intersecting social expectancies and capabilities may therefore conspire to reduce or devalue seniors' argumentative capacity.

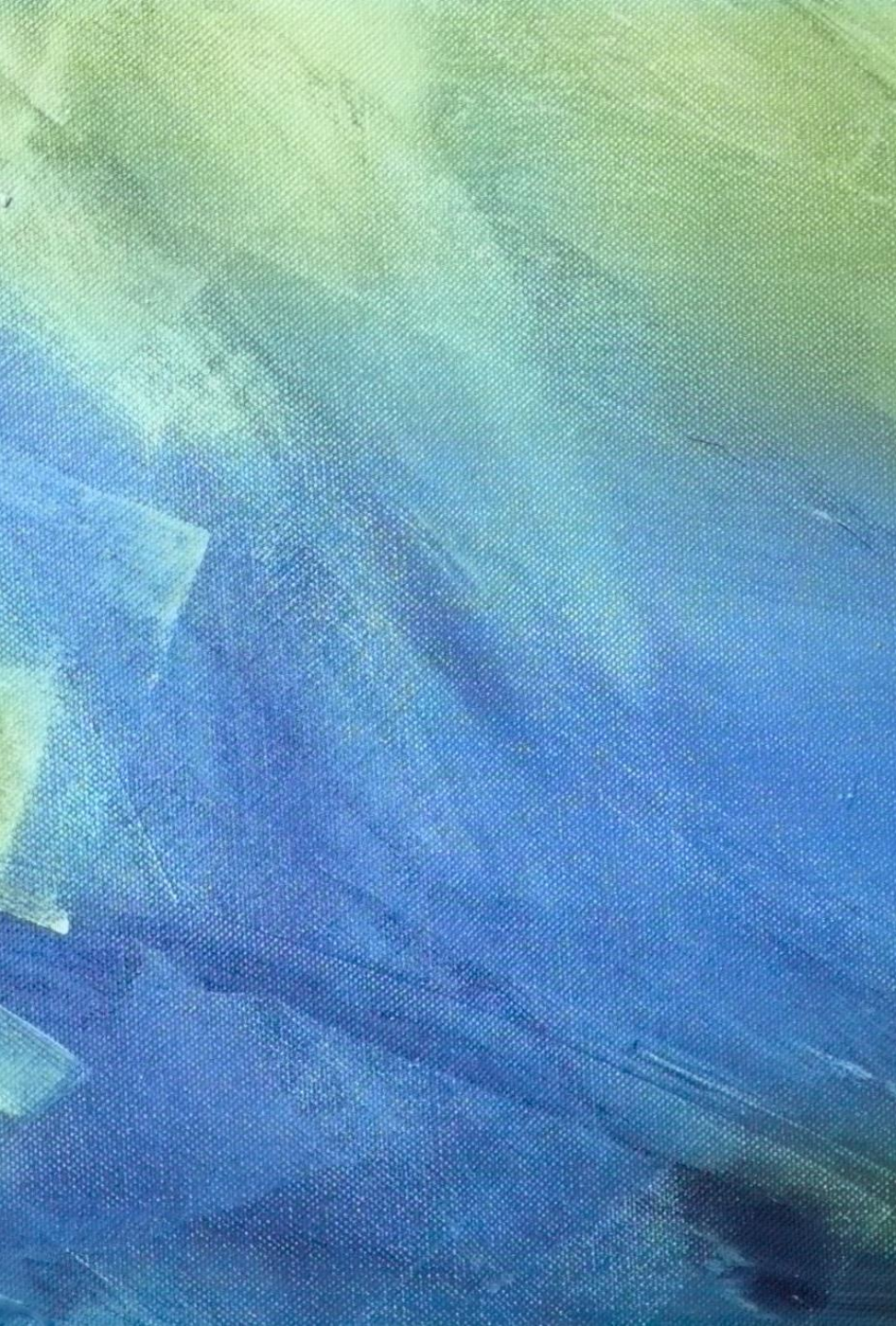
The problem self-reinforces if elderly people then reduce their participation in social exchanges to avoid this unrespectful treatment.



From a broader Chilean socio-historical perspective, the different and complex argument motivation dynamics in Chile (in both young and elderly people), could be explained by using the *impressionable years* or *critical period* hypothesis, which points out that events experienced early in adolescence and early adulthood have a strong effect on communicative attitudes in later life.

Recent Chilean political history and socialization constitute a critical period for everyone who experienced the dictatorship during 17 years (from 1973 to 1990), and possibly for children raised by those who lived as adults during that period. Those times, which required compliance and discouraged free criticism, may have deeply affected the way in which people behave in social disagreement via arguing today.





Self-censorship due to the dictatorship during their childhood and early adolescence may explain people's tendency to avoid confronting normal conflicts and disagreement in adult life. In Chile, people presently aged 60 to 75 years were between 20 and 35 years old at the beginning of the dictatorship, and during the first 10 years of the new democracy (from 1990 to 2001). They experienced aggressive, sometimes violent, political communication, accompanied by an official aversion to justice.

The fear of returning to a military ruling and the fragility of the transitional democratic period (1990 to 2001) could contribute to a precarious notion of direct verbal personal conflict, demobilizing people from all social backgrounds to dissent, particularly those who have had little education. We wonder if this general socio-cultural background of elderly people could explain a substantial part of the way elderly Chilean people think about argumentative behavior.