

**SOCIAL DISTANCING: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONDITIONS OF HIGHER
EDUCATION STUDENTS DURING THE PANDEMIC**

***DISTANCIAMENTO SOCIAL: AS CONDIÇÕES PSICOLÓGICAS DE ESTUDANTES
DO ENSINO SUPERIOR DURANTE A PANDEMIA***

***DISTANCIAMIENTO SOCIAL: LAS CONDCIONES PSICOLÓGICAS DE LOS
ENTUDIANTES DE EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR DURANTE LA PANDEMIA***



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ABSTRACT: This work is an excerpt from the research titled "Social Distancing: Relationship Between Psychosocial Context and Emergency Remote Teaching of Higher Education Students," which aims to investigate the psychosocial conditions of students at a private university in the interior of Rio de Janeiro. To do so, a self-administered virtual questionnaire was used through the Google Forms platform, consisting of forty-five questions divided into three axes. Among the research axes, an effort was made to understand the psychological conditions of the students, triggered both by the COVID-19 pandemic and the experience with emergency remote teaching. The research results revealed adverse psychological effects such as anxiety and depressed mood, which will be presented throughout the article to contribute to expanding knowledge regarding the mental health of higher education students and developing support strategies for these students.

KEYWORDS: Social distancing. Psychological conditions. Emergency distance learning method.

RESUMO: Este trabalho é um recorte da pesquisa intitulada “Distanciamento social: relação entre o contexto psicossocial e ensino remoto emergencial de estudantes do ensino superior”, que tem como objetivo investigar as condições psicossociais dos estudantes de uma universidade particular do interior do estado do Rio de Janeiro. Para tanto, foi utilizado um questionário virtual autoaplicável, através da plataforma Google Forms, composto por quarenta e cinco perguntas divididas em três eixos, dentre os eixos de investigação buscou-se conhecer as condições psicológicas dos alunos, deflagradas tanto pela pandemia de COVID-19, como pela experiência com o ensino remoto emergencial. Os resultados das pesquisas apresentaram efeitos psicológicos negativos, como ansiedade e humor deprimido, que serão apresentados no decorrer do artigo para contribuir na ampliação de conhecimento acerca da saúde mental de estudantes do ensino superior e a construção de estratégias de apoio para estes estudantes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Distanciamento Social. Condições psicológicas. Ensino remoto emergencial.

RESUMEN: Este trabajo es un extracto de la investigación titulada “Distanciamiento social: relación entre el contexto psicossocial y la enseñanza remota de emergencia de estudiantes de educación superior”, que tiene como objetivo investigar las condiciones psicossociales de los estudiantes de una universidad privada del interior del estado de Río de Janeiro. Para ello se utilizó un cuestionario virtual autoadministrado, a través de la plataforma Google Forms, compuesto por cuarenta y cinco preguntas divididas en tres ejes, entre los ejes de investigación se buscó comprender las condiciones psicológicas de los estudiantes, desencadenadas tanto por la pandemia de COVID -19 pandemia, así como la experiencia con la enseñanza remota de emergencia. Los resultados de la investigación mostraron efectos psicológicos negativos, como ansiedad y estado de ánimo depresivo, que serán presentados a lo largo del artículo con el fin de contribuir a ampliar el conocimiento sobre la salud mental de los estudiantes de educación superior y la construcción de estrategias de apoyo para estos estudiantes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Distanciamiento social. Condiciones psicológicas. Enseñanza remota de emergencia.

Introduction

This work is part of the research entitled "*Distanciamento social: relação entre o contexto psicossocial e ensino remoto emergencial de estudantes do ensino superior* (Social Distancing: Relationship Between Psychosocial Context and Emergency Remote Teaching of Higher Education Students)," which aimed to understand the psychological and social conditions that impacted the academic performance of higher education students at a private university center in the interior of the state of Rio de Janeiro during the COVID-19 pandemic in the year 2020. In this article, we will present the results demonstrating the psychological conditions triggered by the pandemic experience, which led to social distancing and the need for emergency remote teaching. The research was conducted using a mixed methodology, with both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

The pandemic in Brazil began in March when the Ministry of Health (VALENTE, 2020) declared recognition of community transmission of COVID-19 throughout the national territory (VALENTE, 2020). Measures to combat the pandemic were decreed and were to be implemented by public and private organizations in accordance with the protocols of the World Health Organization (WHO).

According to the National School of Public Health (ENSP/FIOCRUZ, 2020) social distancing requires citizens to stay home, limiting personal contact as much as possible. The mandatory social distancing led to the adoption of new teaching strategies, such as using technology for continuing studies and transitioning from in-person education to emergency remote teaching.

As reported by the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (GAMEIRO, 2020), both social distancing and the excessive use of technology, as well as the situation of working and studying from home, can lead to a range of psychological effects, including anxiety, depression, stress, and fear. The pandemic can also cause psychological distress due to the fear of contagion, stress related to safety protocols and the use of new hygiene practices and social interactions, as well as the forced adaptation to new teaching modalities, combined with grief over the loss of loved ones and concerns about the social and economic consequences of this historic moment.

All these aspects underpin the debate on the psychological conditions of Brazilian citizens. This work aims to provide elements to contribute to developing support strategies for students who have suffered emotionally due to social distancing and adapting to emergency remote teaching. It should be noted that psychological distress continues to resonate today, even in 2023. The Pan American Health Organization warns of increased cases of psychological

distress in the post-pandemic period caused by job loss, social isolation, and grief marked by the incidence of anxiety and depression (PORTAL OPAS, 2022).

Methodology

For data collection, a self-administered virtual questionnaire was used through the Google Forms platform, consisting of forty-five questions divided into three axes: psychological conditions, social conditions, and access to technological tools. Specifically, only the results related to the psychological conditions axis will be presented in this article.

The virtual questionnaire was administered to students at a higher education institution in the interior of the state of Rio de Janeiro during the year 2020. The sample consisted of 225 students over the age of 18, representing approximately 18.75% of the enrolled students in the institution. The initial proposal was to reach a sample of 519 students, a quantity based on other similar research, such as "*Ansiedade, depressão e estresse em estudantes universitários: O impacto da COVID-19* (Anxiety, Depression, and Stress in University Students: The Impact of COVID-19)" (MAIA; DIAS, 2020), which had a sample of 619 university students, corresponding to 24.2% of the enrolled students in the institution, and in the research titled "*Covid-19 – Estudantes da Unilab no Ceará* (Covid-19 - Unilab Students in Ceará)" (MACHADO, 2020), which had 810 participants, representing 22.5% of the total undergraduate students of the institution.

The questionnaires were distributed by class representatives through WhatsApp groups, accompanied by an inviting message to encourage participation. The initial deadline set for data collection was one month, but was later extended to two months. These months were October and November of 2020. In this context, two hypotheses were formulated: the demotivation resulting from the nine-month extension of the pandemic and the exhaustive use of digital means, combined with the excess of questionnaires to be filled out, a tool widely adopted within the institution. It is essential to highlight that the study included the participation of students from various undergraduate courses and fields.

Regarding the qualitative analysis of the collected data, a literature review was conducted to provide theoretical support on social conditions, psychological conditions, and access to technological resources for developing our instrument. In this perspective, qualitative research presupposes an analysis and interpretation of more profound aspects of the complexity of human behavior, in other words, "[...] it provides a more detailed analysis of investigations,

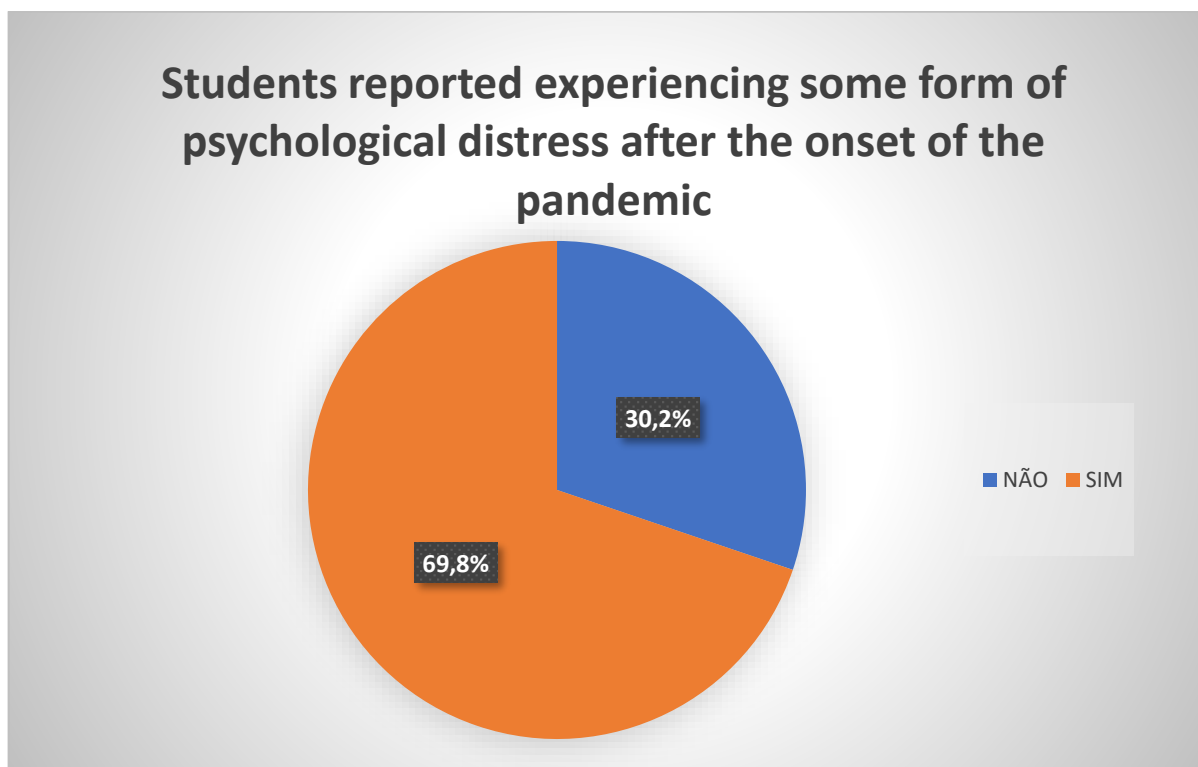
habits, attitudes, and behavioral trends" (MARCONI; LAKATOS, 2005, p. 269, our translation). Although this work presents only the results of psychological conditions, it is understood that these cannot be separated from social and economic determinants. The study of psychosocial conditions requires careful attention to various factors, focusing on the political, social, and economic context. This is because remote teaching depends on access to technological tools, which are intrinsically linked to these factors, and significant health issues within the time frame in question. In this context, the literature review played a crucial role in analyzing the results.

Results and Discussion

Regarding the difficulty of adapting to emergency remote teaching, 78.1% of university students reported experiencing challenges. Many students mentioned not having the financial means to sustain a stable internet connection or adequate equipment, such as computers and tablets. Furthermore, due to all family members being at home, equipment was shared, often hindering proper access. Another geographical challenge was the location of residences, which limited internet signals, and online learning was incompatible with practical classes. Students reported an increase in situations of anxiety, stress, depression, and uncertainty in this scenario.

These psychological conditions were the second-highest item in terms of the percentage. A total of 69.80% of the students reported experiencing some form of psychological distress after the onset of the pandemic (Chart 1). Next, we observed the demotivation related to the continuation of remote academic activities. Among the participants, 68.2% stated that they felt demotivated. These results suggest that the sudden shift in the mode of study and the social distancing resulting from the pandemic were the primary exacerbating factors regarding the students' mental health in the research.

Chart 1 – Students who reported experiencing some form of psychological distress after the onset of the pandemic⁴



Source: Authors (2023)

Among the symptoms related to psychological distress, the following were identified: anxiety (84.4%), despondency (73.4%), irritability (69.9%), and insomnia (57.2%). These results align with the research conducted by the educational technology company Chegg Inc. (THOMAS, 2021), which identifies that approximately three-quarters (76%) of Brazilian university students experienced compromised mental health during COVID-19. This is among the highest levels among the surveyed countries, alongside the United States (75%) and Canada (73%). Of the 76% of Brazilian university students who reported changes in mental health, 17% stated having had suicidal thoughts, 21% sought help for mental health issues, and 87% mentioned an increase in their stress and anxiety levels.

Maia and Dias (2020) conducted a study with university students in Portugal intending to explore the levels of anxiety, depression, and stress during a comparative period between 2018/2019 and the pandemic period following the emergency suspension of classes in 2020. The research revealed a significant increase in psychological distress (anxiety, depression, and

⁴ Blue color signifies "No," and red color signifies "Yes."

stress) among university students during the pandemic compared to normal or pre-pandemic times.

According to data obtained by Barros *et al* (2020), in the research titled "*Relato de tristeza/depressão, nervosismo/ansiedade e problemas de sono na população adulta brasileira durante a pandemia de COVID-19* (Report of Sadness/Depression, Nervousness/Anxiety, and Sleep Problems in the Brazilian Adult Population During the COVID-19 Pandemic)," the frequent feeling of sadness/depression affected 40% of Brazilian adults, and the frequent sensation of anxiety and nervousness was reported by over 50% of them. Among those who did not have insomnia issues, more than 40% began experiencing it, and nearly 50% of those who already had it reported worsening their condition.

Feelings of sadness, anxiety, and insomnia revealed higher prevalence's among young adults. Irregular sleep can be recognized as a symptom resulting from this stressful factor, exacerbating or even triggering certain psychiatric conditions.

One of the study's most striking findings pertains to thoughts of death. Among the 173 university students who participated in the research, 32 reported having such thoughts. The prevalence of suicidal ideation was already significant among university students, as indicated in the fifth edition of the University Student Socioeconomic Profile Survey (2021). The report describes the landscape of psychological distress found among students, with thoughts of death and suicidal ideation being the most concerning data: 10.8% and 8.5%, respectively. When considering the previous edition of the survey, the prevalence of thoughts of death and suicidal ideation increased by 68.8% and 107.0%, respectively. Despite the seriousness of these findings, the topic continues to be a taboo worldwide, and the stigma associated with it only worsens the situation, prompting reflection on the extent to which the pandemic has contributed to these rising figures (NOVA, 2021).

According to statistical research conducted by Dutra (DUTRA, 2012) involving 637 psychology students from two universities (one public and one private) in the cities of Natal-RN and João Pessoa-PB, information was collected from 374 psychology students from the primary public university in the state.

The results are concerning, as among the 637 students who responded to the research questionnaire in RN, 52.45% reported having thoughts of wanting to die, and 48 of the surveyed students, representing 7.5% of the total, had attempted suicide. In the results of the study conducted in João Pessoa-PB, the data is even more alarming when compared to those from RNs. Among the 374 students who responded to the questionnaire, 43 individuals had attempted

suicide, representing 11.49% of the population participating in the research. Such findings alone would be sufficient to justify further studies to gain a greater understanding and reflect on the psychosocial and existential factors and aspects that contribute to these acts.

It is believed that various factors bring about thoughts of death. Specific causality cannot be determined. Such thoughts significantly impact more vulnerable populations, both from a psychological, social, and physical perspective. Data released by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2019 indicates that the majority of youth suicides coincide with the period of education and the transition from adolescence to adulthood. In Brazil, there has been an annual increase in the suicide rate among university students since 2002, and the country holds the top position in Latin America in this scenario.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the discussion of mental health has intensified in the classroom. Mental exhaustion is a recurring theme throughout the semester; however, it has significantly increased with the onset of the pandemic. Social isolation, exacerbated by financial crises, challenges balancing work, study, and domestic responsibilities, and the need to adapt to a remote teaching model have all contributed to the current situation. Thus, it has been observed that the experiences initiated by the pandemic have exacerbated a condition already characteristic of the academic population.

The study identified other findings that can be added to the elements above to trigger or exacerbate psychological distress. As mentioned by the participants, the dimensions of life most affected by the pandemic were culture and leisure (70.7%), followed by plans (68.9%).

Clemente and Stoppa (2020, p. 475, our translation) tell us that:

[...] not only the restriction of the use of leisure spaces and equipment translates into a sociocultural barrier identified in leisure during the time of Covid-19, primarily reflected in the closure of parks, museums, clubs, theaters, cinemas, beaches, and other places, which are gradually resuming their activities with the necessary health protocols, but also the limited home structures for leisure for most people translate into a barrier.

In this sense, it is understood that leisure abruptly ceased to exist for these students in the usual sense, leading to a change in their social interaction routines. When it comes to plans in 2020, many students had to cancel, postpone, or, at the very least, express uncertainty about whether they could materialize their goals. People who invested energy, money, and time to organize and plan their dream trips, a wedding, moving to a new house or city, and even changing jobs had to put everything on hold until further notice, not without some feelings of frustration and powerlessness.

The major concern highlighted pertains to the reverberations of the pandemic scenario. In 2023, people still suffer from the experiences of the pandemic, with the intensification of pre-existing psychological distress. They are still seeking ways to alleviate their pain. From the perspective of government authorities, the consolidation of health, education, and social assistance policies is awaited to mitigate social inequality, ensure equity, contribute to the reduction of suffering, and strengthen support centers.

The Student Support Program offers free counseling to students through the Applied Psychology Service and the school clinic of the Psychology course at the Barra Mansa University Center. Efforts are also made to develop support and assistance initiatives for vulnerabilities and difficulties caused by the academic environment.

Final consideration

Social distancing, a measure adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic, and emergency remote learning have produced adverse psychological effects, with symptoms consistent with anxiety and depressed mood disorders. These conditions had a detrimental impact on the psychosocial dynamics and, consequently, influenced the students' learning process participating in the research. Additionally, it called into question life plans. The combination of these factors, along with the regulation of cultural and leisure activities, as well as elements related to the social dimension, such as inequality, unemployment, and lack of access to essential consumer goods, may pose a risk to the mental health of students, potentially even triggering suicidal thoughts.

The research in question holds importance in the face of the delicate current scenario we collectively experience, as it can contribute to the development of individual and collective care strategies aimed at the mental health of higher education students. Furthermore, it underscores the need to draw attention to the seriousness of the situation among undergraduate students grappling with suicidal thoughts and thoughts of death.

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Authors' contributions: **Amanda Almeida Duarte** - Contributed to data collection, results and discussion, project development, statistical data analysis, methodology construction, and graphics creation. **Fernanda de Souza Alves** - contributed to data collection, results and discussion, project development, data manipulation, article writing, and theoretical framework construction. **Milene Santiago Nascimento** – Guided the project from its inception, including the introduction and final considerations, and contributed to the last review of the written work.

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