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Parents' Social Representations about distance learning for children during the COVID-19 pandemic

Representações Sociais dos pais sobre a educação a distância para crianças na pandemia da COVID-19

Maria Helena Pereira de Oliveira Araújo¹ , Maria Edna Silva de Alexandre¹ ,
Betânia Maria Oliveira de Amorim¹ , Cleonice Pereira dos Santos Camino² 

¹ Universidade Federal de Campina Grande, Centro de Ciências Biológicas e da Saúde, Unidade Acadêmica de Psicologia, Campina Grande, PB, Brasil. Correspondence to: B. M. O. AMORIM. E-mail: <betania.maria@professor.ufcg.edu.br>.

² Universidade Federal da Paraíba, Centro de Ciências Humanas, Letras e Artes, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia Social. João Pessoa, PB, Brasil.

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Abstract

Objective

Identify parents' social representations (SRs) regarding distance learning for children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

A total of 455 parents participated, with the majority being female (93.2%) and with an average age of 37.31 years ($SD = 7.305$). Data were collected through an online form and processed using the IRAMuTeQ software, which allowed for Descending Hierarchical Classification.

Results

Descending Hierarchical Classification analysis revealed polarized social representations regarding the strategy for children, with one group considering it inadequate and another viewing it as a temporary necessity, also indicating parents' affective ambivalence towards the mediation process of their children's education. These findings also indicated that social representations varied according to participants' sociodemographic characteristics.

Conclusion

It is deemed necessary for relevant authorities to consider parents' evaluation and particularities when implementing this teaching strategy for children.

Keywords: Children. Coronavirus. Education, distance. Psychology, social.

Resumo

Objetivo

Identificar as representações sociais dos pais acerca da educação a distância para as crianças durante a pandemia da COVID-19.

Método

Participaram deste estudo 455 pais, sendo a maioria do sexo feminino (93,2%), com idade média de 37,31 anos ($DP = 7,305$). Os dados foram coletados através de um formulário on-line e foram processados por meio do software IRAMuTeQ, que permitiu realizar a Classificação Hierárquica Descendente.

Resultados

As análises das Classificação Hierárquica Descendente evidenciaram representações sociais polarizadas sobre a estratégia para crianças, em que um grupo a considera inadequada e outro como necessidade provisória, sinalizando também uma ambivalência afetiva dos pais sobre o processo de mediação da educação dos filhos. Estas, revelaram também que as representações sociais variaram em função das características sociodemográficas dos participantes.

Conclusão

Julga-se necessário que os órgãos competentes considerem a avaliação dos pais e suas especificidades para a execução dessa estratégia de ensino para as crianças.

Palavras-chaves: Criança. Coronavírus. Educação a distância. Psicologia social.

The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), which causes Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), has disrupted the global routine, drawing the attention of countries to this phenomenon, becoming a prominent topic in the media, professional knowledge, government institutions, and the general population (Secretaria de Atenção Primária a Saúde, 2020). It is a global health crisis with numerous repercussions in social, economic, political, psychological, and educational dimensions (Bavel et al., 2020). Among the significant changes brought about by this new social reality, noteworthy is the way people relate to each other, as physical distancing has become the primary preventive measure for the virus (Adhikari et al., 2020; Ornell et al., 2020).

In historical terms, the SARS-CoV-2 virus first became part of the Chinese population's social dynamics in December 2019, causing an epidemic of acute respiratory syndrome. In just three months, due to intense globalization (Ornell et al., 2020), the virus spread indiscriminately to other continents, prompting the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare a state of pandemic on January 30, 2020 (Adhikari et al., 2020; Bavel et al., 2020).

The new coronavirus acts as a highly contagious infectious agent that spreads rapidly through respiratory pathways and physical contact (Adhikari et al., 2020; Secretaria de Atenção Primária a Saúde, 2020). Therefore, physical distancing measures between people were necessary to contain the virus, aiming to reduce the number of cases over time, thus preventing the overburdening of healthcare systems (Secretaria de Atenção Primária a Saúde, 2020).

The most common symptoms of COVID-19 include fever, cough, sneezing, fatigue, muscle pain, headache, sore throat, chills, and vomiting (Secretaria de Atenção Primária a Saúde, 2020; Lima, 2020). In severe cases, infected individuals may experience shortness of breath and chest tightness, which can lead to the development of pneumonia (Lima et al., 2020).

This situation contributed to what Ornell et al. (2020) called a "pandemic fear", a state of stress and insecurity that arises from the pandemic, highlighting the fear of death and other implications for social dynamics. Among these implications, particular attention is given to concerns about family reorganization, closure of public places such as businesses and schools, changes in work schedules, economic difficulties, and the need for physical distancing, which can lead to the emergence or intensification of feelings of helplessness and abandonment.

In the context of education, the closing of schools was a necessary measure as they are inherently spaces of unavoidable gatherings and, therefore, high risk of contagion for the novel coronavirus. Early childhood and primary education were affected by this preventive measure, as

the WHO recognized the occurrence of Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children, defined as a toxic shock with a heightened inflammatory response following exposure to COVID-19, temporally associated with viral infection by COVID-19 in children and adolescents, as a severe condition requiring intensive care (Moura et al., 2022). Although children and adolescents generally present mild and moderate conditions and lower mortality rates from COVID-19, over a period of approximately 21 months between 2020 and 2021, the Brazilian Ministry of Health confirmed 93 deaths from Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children with COVID-19 as the underlying cause (Moura et al., 2022).

Therefore, given the unpredictability of the return to in-person activities and the need for academic calendar continuity, both public and private schools started using the strategy of distance learning with children. This strategy was materialized through remote learning, which involved carrying out school activities in the home setting with the supervision of parents and guardians. It is important to note that depending on the educational context and the socioeconomic, geographical, and environmental conditions of Brazilian families, this strategy could involve real-time online classes, recorded video lessons, or the use of printed resources provided to students. It is emphasized that in this text, the references to distance learning do not refer to what is conceptually understood as the modality of *Educação a Distância* (EaD, Distance Education), regulated for Higher Education Institutions in Brazil, prior to the pandemic (Sarquis et al., 2018), but rather as a non-presential strategy for the continuity of school activities, hence the term “distance”.

Regarding the formal framework for implementing this emergency educational strategy, the Brazilian National Council of Education approved guidelines for schools during the pandemic on April 28, 2020. These guidelines suggest that states and municipalities explore alternatives to minimize the need for replacing classes that were missed when schools reopen. The Brazilian National Council of Education authorized the inclusion of non-presential activities to fulfill the teaching requirements, applicable from early childhood to higher education. This includes the use of digital channels, video lessons, virtual platforms, social networks, and other interactive devices. Regarding early childhood and primary education, there is an emphasis on the involvement of parents as “family mediators” in the teaching-learning process because, while they do not replace the essential role of teachers, parents work together to support children’s learning (Ministério da Educação, 2020).

Thus, this new social reality for early childhood and primary education has been the subject of much speculation, especially by parents and guardians who mediate the children’s learning process in the home context. This novelty in the lives of parents and caregivers required them to reinvent family interaction, divide tasks, redefine roles, and modify routines, which sometimes contributed to the burden on families, making the work challenging. Therefore, the narrowing of family contact resulting from the social confinement during the pandemic brought parents, children, and guardians closer together, enabling the upkeep and formation of bonds and affect among them. However, it is worth noting that such affect can be diverse, including ambivalent dynamics in the parent-child relationship (Azevedo, 2017).

So, this educational strategy began to permeate the daily lives of a large part of the population, requiring a balance between concerns about the health issue brought by the novel coronavirus and the educational development of children. In this sense, it becomes a relevant object of study for various fields of expertise that seek to construct and expand knowledge about this social phenomenon.

Accordingly, this study presents a contribution from the field of Social Psychology through one of its classical theoretical approaches, the Theory of Social Representations. The election of this theory to support this investigation was due to its psychosociological perspective, which considers Social Representations (SRs) as phenomena that encompass psychological, affective, social, ideological, and cultural aspects. Thus, through symbolic exchanges by means of social communication, a common knowledge about a particular object or social phenomenon is elaborated, which will guide the way individuals conduct themselves in relation to them (Moscovici, 2017).

According to Moscovici (2017), SRs are formed by two processes, of social and cognitive nature, which consist of anchoring and objectification, responsible for transforming the unfamiliar into something familiar. Specifically, in anchoring, individuals seek to attribute meaning to an unknown social object by retrieving and comparing similar contents from their memory, while objectification provides a figure for this new object, making it concrete and tangible.

It is important to highlight that SR is always linked to a group of social belonging, indicating that the same object can be the subject of different representations depending on the values and beliefs shared within the social dynamics in which they are forged (Moscovici, 2017). Therefore, there are a set of factors such as sociodemographic variables, also understood as anchoring variables, which act as core ideas for the construction of SRs about a given social object (Doise, 2002). This helps to understand, in part, why some groups are favorable to certain social phenomena while others are not, such as distance learning for children as an emergency measure during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Theory of Social Representations for understanding social thinking about certain objects in the pandemic context has also been employed by other authors, such as Do Bú et al. (2020), who investigated SRs and anchorings related to the novel coronavirus and the treatment of COVID-19 by Brazilians. The referenced study elucidated, among other things, SRs regarding the spread of the virus, uncertainties related to the pandemic, and the social, psychological, and affective implications arising from this new social dynamic. Studies like this provide theoretical and methodological support to investigate other scenarios related to the emergence of COVID-19, such as the strategy of distance learning used during the pandemic period when schools were closed. Therefore, this study represents an expansion of the literature that seeks to understand how Brazilians represent the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in different situations of their lives, innovating by prioritizing the experience of parents and caregivers in the context of distance learning for children.

Specifically, the aim is to gather efforts to answer the following questions: What are the SRs that mothers and fathers have of this parental condition? What are the SRs of mothers and fathers regarding distance learning for children? Which variables act as core ideas (Doise, 2002) for the specific ways of representing these social objects?

To answer these questions, the present study aimed to identify the SRs of mothers and fathers of children enrolled in early childhood and primary education regarding their respective parental conditions, as well as the strategy of distance learning for their children.

Method

This is a mixed, quantitative and qualitative, descriptive and exploratory study, grounded in the theoretical framework of the Theory of Social Representations.

Participants

Participating in this study were 455 parents of students enrolled in early childhood education and elementary and middle school, who were attending classes through distance learning strategies. Most participants were female (93.2%) with an average age of 37.31 years ($SD = 7.305$). Among them, 59.6% identified themselves as White, 33.6% as Mixed-race, 4.2% as Black, 2% as Asian, and 0.7% as Indigenous. As per their region of residence, 40% lived in the Northeast, 40% in the Southeast, 14% in the South, 3% in the North, and 3% in the Midwest region of Brazil. 68.8% of the participants had children enrolled in private educational institutions, while 31.2% in public institutions.

In terms of participants' educational level, 51.2% reported having complete or incomplete postgraduate degree, 33% complete or incomplete higher education, 14.3% complete or incomplete secondary education, and 1.5% complete or incomplete primary education. Regarding family income, 24.8% stated receiving between three and four minimum wages, 22.2% between one and two minimum wages, 19.3% above eight minimum wages, 17.6% between five and six minimum wages, 8.4% between seven and eight minimum wages, and 8.1% up to one minimum wage. 89% of the participants also stated that they had a computer, while 11% reported that they did not.

Furthermore, participants were also asked about their political orientation (specifically, in terms of political orientation, do you consider yourself left-wing, right-wing, or centrist?), with 40.7% identifying as left-wing, 42.6% as centrist, and 16.7% as right-wing. 79.6% of the participants declared disagreement with the Federal Executive Government's stance regarding measures to contain the new coronavirus pandemic, 8.1% agreed, and 12.3% neither agreed nor disagreed. Regarding the distance learning strategy, 34.3% of the participants considered it not suitable for children, 54.2% considered it somewhat suitable, and 11.5% considered it very suitable.

Instruments

The following instruments were used: a Sociodemographic Questionnaire, with questions related to age, sex, education level, income, participants' geographical region of residence, type of school their children attended, political orientation, and access to a computer at home; an instrument related to the Free Word Association Technique, which is a projective technique based on predetermined inducing stimuli chosen by the researcher for accessing semantic universes associated with a given object (Coutinho & Do Bú, 2017). It is worth noting that this study sought participants' evocations related to the stimuli of "being a mother", "being a father", and "distance learning".

Finally, two scales were used: one for assessing participants' opinions about the stance of the Federal Executive Government regarding measures to contain the new coronavirus, with the following content: "On a scale of 1 to 5, how much do you agree with the preventive measures taken by President Jair Bolsonaro to contain the new coronavirus?"; and another scale for measuring parents' evaluation of the adequacy of distance learning strategies for early childhood and elementary and middle school education, which asked: "On a scale of 1 to 5, how much do you consider the distance learning strategy suitable for children?".

Procedures

To collect data, a form which included the aforementioned instruments was created in Google Forms. This form was then shared in parent groups through social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, requesting the collaboration of those who had children participating in distance learning strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following inclusion criteria were also adopted for the sample: being over 18 years old, Brazilian, and being willing to participate voluntarily in the research. In addition, the IP (Internet Protocol) addresses of the participants' electronic devices were recorded and verified to ensure only one response was given per participant.

The data collection procedures adhered to all ethical recommendations for research involving human subjects, in accordance with the guidelines set forth in resolution number 510/2016 of the Brazilian National Health Council (Ministério da Saúde, 2016). The project was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee of Universidade Federal de Campina Grande (CAAE: 32136920.0.0000.5182, protocol nº 4.294.108).

Data Analysis

The sociodemographic data were processed using IBM®SPSS® Statistics software, version 26, which allowed for conducting descriptive analyses. For the Free Word Association Technique, the processing was carried out with the assistance of the *Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires* (IRaMuTeQ) software, enabling the development of Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) analyses. It is worth noting that this analysis is based on frequency and association tests (χ^2 tests) among the evoked words, categorizing them into axes and classes with common content.

Furthermore, DHC allowed the identification of anchoring variables (participants' sociodemographic and attitudinal characteristics) that were significant for constructing each class, thus generating the representational field of the studied social objects (Camargo & Justo, 2013). Afterward, the content of each axis and class was analyzed based on semantic specificities, aiming to unveil their SRs expressed within the framework of the Theory of Social Representations.

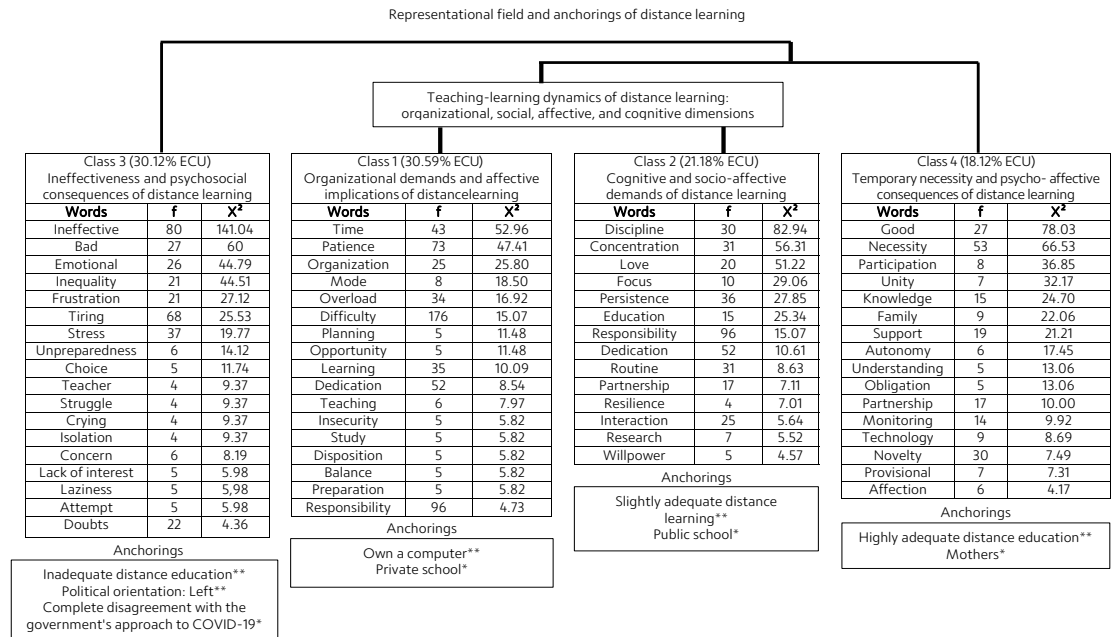
Results

The results regarding the representational fields of the social objects "being a mother", "being a father", and "distance learning" will be presented based on the DHC partitions, which gave rise to the thematic axes and classes, also highlighting the significant social anchoring variables for their formations.

Representational Field and Social Anchorages of "Being a Mother" and "Being a Father"

Regarding the participants' evocations for the stimuli "being a mother" and "being a father", DHC captured 84.18% of the Elementary Context Units (ECU) of the corpus, allowing for the identification of three different classes constituting the representational field of the social objects in question (Figure 1). These classes are divided by axis 1, called "Sociofamilial Roles", which includes classes 1 and 2, in contrast to class 3, which alone makes up axis 2, referred to as "Affective Ambivalence of Mothers and Fathers".

Figure 1
 Representational field and social anchorings of “being a mother” and “being a father” Brazil, 2023



Nota: * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.001$. ECU: Elementary Context Units.

Class 1, entitled “Psychosocial Attributions of Mothers and Fathers”, concentrated 26.63% of the ECU and had significant contributions from the social anchoring variables related to the population of the Northern region, participants with complete or incomplete postgraduate education, and those earning between 1 and 2 minimum wages. This class addresses the psychosocial functions performed by mothers and fathers in the sociofamilial context. It is worth noting in this class a range of radicals and words between $\chi^2 = 111.84$ (Education) to $\chi^2 = 5.00$ (Trust). The second class, which also belongs to axis 1, was named “Affective Reciprocity in family dynamics” and retained 34.20% of the ECU of the corpus, not being associated with any of the anchoring variables in this study. Therefore, it presents consensual objectifications to the researched group regarding the existential conditions of “being a mother” and “being a father”. Furthermore, radicals and words were observed in the range of $\chi^2 = 27.22$ (Affection) to $\chi^2 = 3.87$ (Love).

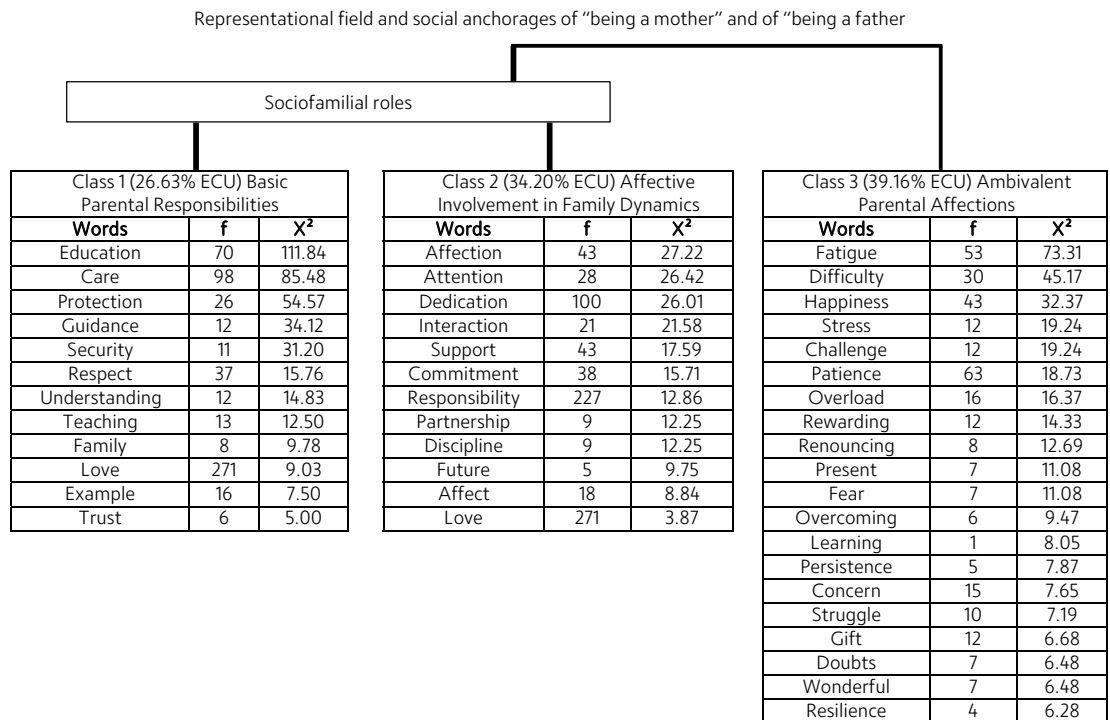
Class 3, related to the “Affective Ambivalence of Mothers and Fathers”, retained 39.16% of the ECU and did not anchor to any of the sociodemographic variables in the study, indicating that it encompasses a type of content that is consensual among the participants regarding the researched social objects. It is worth noting that the range of radicals and words captured by the evocations ranges from $\chi^2 = 73.31\%$ (Fatigue) to $\chi^2 = 6.28$ (Resilience).

In this analysis, it was understood how the participants in this study represent the condition of being a mother and a father. However, to complement the overall objective of this investigation, we also sought to identify the SRs and anchorings of distance learning. Accordingly, the results of the analysis regarding the DHC of the stimulus of distance learning, which represents a “new” phenomenon that has become part of the daily lives of these parents due to the COVID-19 pandemic, will be presented next.

Representational Field and Social Anchorings of Distance Learning

The collected data, processed through the analysis of DHC, resulted in the dendrogram shown in Figure 2. This analysis considered 93.41% of the total ECU in the corpus, resulting in the formation of axis 1, titled “Dynamics of Teaching-Learning in Distance Learning: Organizational, Social, Affective, and Cognitive Dimensions”, which grouped classes 1 (Organizational Aspects of Distance Learning) and 2 (Cognitive and Socio-affective Aspects of Distance Learning). In the arrangement of this dendrogram, there is also class 3 (to the right of axis 1), called “Inefficacy and Psychosocial Implications of Distance Learning”, and class 4 (to the left of axis 1), called “Temporary Necessity and Psycho-affective Implications of Distance Learning”.

Figure 2
Representational Field and Social Anchorings of Distance Learning Brazil, 2023



Nota: * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.001$. ECU: Elementary Context Units.

The first class of axis 1, which addresses the socio-affective issues that arise in the process of distance learning, 30.59% of the ECU was retained, with radicals and words ranging from $\chi^2 = 52.96$ (Time) to $\chi^2 = 4.73$ (Responsibility). The significant social anchor variables in the construction of this class were “owning a computer” and “having children enrolled in a private educational institution”. As for class 2 of axis 1, it highlights the socio-affective and cognitive aspects that permeate distance learning, being more representative of the group of participants who consider it an inadequate strategy for children and have children enrolled in public schools. It is worth noting that this class captured 28.18% of the ECU, with radicals and words ranging from $\chi^2 = 82.94$ (Discipline) to $\chi^2 = 4.57$ (Willingness).

Classes 3 and 4 are opposite to each other. Class 3 refers to inefficacy and a set of psychosocial implications resulting from the process of distance learning. It accumulated 30.12% of the ECU and has a range of radicals and words from $\chi^2 = 141.04$ (Ineffective) to $\chi^2 = 4.36$ (Doubts). Regarding social anchoring variables, this class includes participants who considered the distance learning strategy

to be inadequate for children, those with left-wing political orientation, and those who completely disagreed with the Federal Executive Government's stance on measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conversely, class 4 addresses distance learning as a temporary necessity with psycho-affective implications. It should be emphasized that the significant social anchor variables in the construction of this class are related to the female sex and participants who considered distance learning a highly suitable resource for children. This class retained 18.12% of the ECU and presented a range of radicals and words from $\chi^2 = 78.03$ (Good) to $\chi^2 = 4.17$ (Affection).

Discussion

The analyses of the Descending Hierarchical Classifications allowed us to understand the representational fields of the existential condition of "being a mother" and "being a father", as well as of distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting their consensual elements and specificities. It was possible, therefore, to identify a set of social anchorings (sociodemographic and attitudinal variables) that acted as core ideas (Doise, 2002) in constructing different ways of representing these social objects. Thus, these results will be discussed below to elucidate the identified SRs and their implications for social dynamics.

Regarding the results obtained through DHC for the inducing stimulus of "being a mother" and "being a father", it was possible to identify a representational field composed of two axes. In the first axis (Sociofamilial roles), representational contents related to a set of functions typically expected of parents in the family nucleus were observed. It should be emphasized that the SRs related to these roles go beyond meeting a child's basic needs (such as food, housing, and hygiene), directly involving social, moral, affective, and subjective issues.

Specifically, class 1, a component of this axis, brings forth evocations associated with "psychosocial attributions of mothers and fathers". This class highlights the social role of parents in the education, guidance, and teaching of children, indicating that education is not solely the responsibility of educational institutions but involves the forming of a link between parents, school, students, and society. In this sense, the education portrayed in this class does not refer only to literacy, but also to moral and affective education based on care, respect, understanding, love, and trust. Thus, the role of parental socialization in the social formation and construction of values in children is evident (Moraes et al., 2007).

Furthermore, this class had as a social anchoring variable participants residing in the North region of Brazil, showing that despite having the second lowest Human Development Index in the country (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2019), there is a valorization of issues related to education, guiding their behaviors (Moscovici, 2017) towards a possible improvement in this indicator. Another characteristic associated with this class, which helps understand the value placed on education, is the participants' level of education, since it consisted of the SRs of parents with complete or incomplete postgraduate degrees. It can be inferred from this that education is part of their individual experiences and, therefore, shapes their behaviors towards the educational process of their children, valuing it.

Monthly family income, specifically between one and two minimum wages, also constituted a significant anchoring variable for class 1. This seems to reveal a recognition of the potential of education for individual development and improvement of social and economic status, indicating a source of protection and security for children. It is important to highlight that this SR of education

as an agent of social and economic transformation has been widely disseminated in society, fueling hope for better living conditions among the lower-income population (Silva & Silva, 2014).

Class 2, also belonging to axis 1, does not possess specific social anchorings and is understood as a consensual representation among the participants in this study. It refers to a SR that emphasizes “affective reciprocity in family dynamics”, consisting of a mutual exchange of affection (care, attention, dedication, love, among others), capable of generating satisfaction for both parents and children. However, these aspects require reflection, as the content of this class may also refer to an SR of an ideal type of family relationship present in the Brazilian society’s collective imagination, where parents and children share positive affections that are readily reciprocated (Estrela et al., 2018). This hypothesis seems plausible considering the data on domestic violence in Brazil, where 28.5% of femicides occur within the home (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, 2019). Another relevant aspect concerns the data of child violence in the Brazilian context, showing that, in 2018 alone, over 76 thousand reports of this nature were registered (Ministério dos Direitos Humanos e da Cidadania, 2019). These examples converge to the evidence that not all families are functional and not always guided by positive affective reciprocity, also indicating the presence of negative affect, as revealed by class 3 in this representational field.

Class 3, “affective ambivalence of mothers and fathers”, appears in opposition to the classes of axis 1, although, like class 2, it also does not have specific social anchoring variables and is consensual among the participants of this study. Therefore, an SR emerges regarding the exercise of parenthood, which reveals that this process is permeated by both positive and negative emotions, relating to tiredness, difficulties, overload, stress, fear, doubts, patience, gratification, happiness, presence, wonder, and gift. In this regard, these results cast doubt on the social construction of parenthood, especially motherhood, as an inexhaustible source of personal satisfaction and an intrinsic capacity to assume this role (Lins et al., 2015; Silva & Silva, 2014).

It is worth noting that the duality or even coexistence of positive and negative feelings in parents during the exercise of parenthood has been observed in other studies (Azevedo, 2017). Considering the guiding nature of conduct assumed by an SR (Moscovici, 2017), this ambivalence can either facilitate (positive pole) or hinder (negative pole) the parents’ mediation process in the distance learning of their children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this sense, it is important to reflect on the experience of parents in accompanying their children in the process of distance learning, seeking to understand what these SRs reveal about this educational strategy. In line with this, the DHC of the stimulus “distance learning” revealed elements constituting parents’ SRs regarding this mode of teaching, which became a part of their daily routines due to the impossibility of their children attending schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on axis 1 of this representational field, SRs related to the dynamics of teaching and learning in distance learning were observed, with salient aspects in the organizational, social, affective, and cognitive dimensions. Class 1 of this axis is anchored in profiles of participants who have children studying in private schools with a computer at home, indicating that they come from families who are “well-off”, allowing them to have these social privileges, unlike those who do not share this reality. The content of this class shows that this group perceives distance learning as an opportunity that allows their children to persist in their learning. However, this group also shares SRs marked by the difficulties encountered in this process, especially related to the organizational dimension, such as the challenge of managing time to attend classes, requiring patience and dedication to plan, prepare, and balance their routines.

It is also emphasized that, according to the content of this class, the objectifications of SRs (Moscovici, 2017) regarding the dynamics of distance learning are guided by affective elements such as overload, fear, and insecurity, aspects already observed by Brooks et al. (2020) in a review of the psychological impacts of quarantine. This proposition may be justified by the greater rigidity and density in the methods and content of private schools, in comparison to public schools, which adopt strategies to keep students focused on productivity and diligent completion of the school program (Sampaio & Guimarães, 2009).

Class 2, on the other hand, highlights SRs related to parents' concerns about the cognitive maturity and affective aspects of their children in the experience of distance learning. This was evident from the following objectifications (Moscovici, 2017): discipline, concentration, focus, and love. This class is anchored in participants who have children studying in public schools and consider distance learning to be less suitable for children in elementary and primary education. Such social anchorings can reveal how these parents' experience with public education in Brazil is marked by issues related to precariousness (Martins, 2018), which are also present now during the pandemic.

Furthermore, explanations related to persistence, dedication, responsibility, resilience, and willingness of these parents to continue their children's education are found, despite recognizing the difficulties encountered in mediating this teaching-learning process. Moreover, there is a need for partnership and interaction among parents, schools, educators, and students to maintain the educational structure in the best possible way (Saraiva-Junges & Wagner, 2016; Soares & Farias, 2019).

The participants in this study also provided evaluative content regarding the relevance of distance learning for children, especially in classes 3 and 4. Class 3, "Inefficacy and Psychosocial Implications of Distance Learning", highlights an SR of distance education objectified through negative adjectives such as "ineffective" and "bad". Such evaluation was justified based on psychosocial aspects related, for example, to emotions, inequality, frustration, fatigue, stress, unpreparedness, laziness, and disinterest.

This SR calls for reflections on the feasibility of distance learning for children, as well as on the parents' ability to provide the necessary support to their children in this process. As demonstrated by this class, distance learning during this pandemic period has been a source of stress, both due to the unpreparedness of caregivers and the adaptive difficulties students face in this new learning modality. Furthermore, its content seems to expose the widening of social inequalities that the process of distance learning can promote, given that the necessary resources for its implementation, such as internet access, computers, smartphones, and a suitable study environment, may not be a reality for all Brazilians. Regarding adequate access to digital technologies, it can facilitate the process of distance learning; inaccessibility, on the other hand, poses a barrier to effective teaching, as indicated by relevant literature (Queiroz et al., 2022).

It is worth noting that the significant social anchoring variables for the construction of class 3 consisted of parents who consider EaD completely unsuitable for their children, revealing, as affirmed by Moscovici (2017), the predominant role of SRs regarding a specific object in formulating one's stance towards it. The participants in this class are also considered to be politically left leaning, historically associated with a range of progressive ideas that view education as a promoter of social justice (Gouveia, 2009), differing from distance learning, which, according to the participants in this study, can contribute to social inequality. Finally, another significant variable in this class relates to parents who strongly disagree with the federal government's approach to COVID-19. This anchoring is likely related to the fact that the government authorized the use of distance learning activities during the pandemic (Ministério da Educação, 2020), aligning with the SRs in this class, which perceives this mode of education as ineffective.

In terms of the evaluative dimension of distance learning, we have class 4, “Temporary necessity and psycho-affective implications of distance learning”, where it can be observed an SR based on the consideration of its implications. Parents who share this view of representing this strategy indicate that, given the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent impossibility of returning to in-person classes, distance learning would be a temporary alternative to ensure the continuity of school activities. However, they emphasize the psycho-affective aspects that this educational process entails, which seems to subsidize the evaluation and SR of distance learning as a viable alternative that even brings secondary benefits to family dynamics.

Thus, the representational content of this class denotes that this education modality requires participation and has facilitated certain affective actions such as support, partnership, caring, and understanding between parents and children. Therefore, to make the unfamiliar familiar (Moscovici, 2017), that is, to grasp what this new mode of teaching that has become part of the reality of these families entails, parents resorted to psycho-affective anchoring.

In this regard, two social anchoring variables are also noteworthy, which were significant for the construction of class 4. One variable refers to participants who evaluate distance learning as highly suitable, which justifies the representational content focused on its relevance. Additionally, this class was socially anchored in mothers, who constitute most of the sample in this study, revealing them as the primary caregivers responsible for the educational support of their children. This raises reflections on socially established gender roles, where the obligation to provide emotional and educational needs for children is still predominantly assigned to women/mothers (Azevedo, 2017; Estrela et al., 2018).

In general terms, the two analyzed representational fields elucidated SRs that complement each other regarding the parental condition and the process of distance learning for children during the COVID-19 pandemic. These representations indicate parents’ concern for their children’s education beyond formal issues, highlighting social and psycho-affective aspects as well. This scenario deserves attention because this educational strategy emerges as an emergency measure within the pandemic context, requiring parents to mediate their children’s learning and thus strengthening their bonds with the educational institution and increasing interaction with their children to continue with school activities.

A portion of parents represented distance learning for children as viable during the pandemic, while another part displayed representational content and unfavorable attitudes towards this education modality. However, both groups point out a set of difficulties inherent in distance learning, highlighting the need for reflections on this new dynamic that arises for families and schools.

It is worth noting that this new mode of delivering education, along with the underlying psychological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Brooks et al., 2020), seems to intensify affect, even highlighting their ambivalence. Thus, as observed in the analyzed representational fields, mediating children’s education is an opportunity to strengthen family bonds in a positive way with love and care, while, at the same time, it represents a challenge permeated with difficulties, exhaustion, and stress. In this way, despite distance learning being represented as a “temporary necessity” for the moment, it can, in many cases, function as a stressful event for families.

Distance learning for early childhood and primary education is indeed something new in the reality of Brazilians, which implies challenges for all the agents involved in this process, demanding new skills and resources, especially from parents, to deal with this mode of education. As seen in this study, fulfilling the programmatic school content cannot be the sole priority. It is also necessary to pay special attention to the difficulties and psycho-affective and social dimensions involved in

implementing distance learning during the pandemic. Given this context, it is important for relevant authorities to consider the family mediators' assessment of the execution and effectiveness of distance learning for children, reflecting on the performance of the school year that is being obtained.

Furthermore, it is crucial to reflect on the social and economic conditions of families, including aspects related to the adequacy of the home environment for the formative process and pedagogical interaction, as well as access to the minimum technological resources required for distance learning. To consider these issues as intervening factors in the teaching and learning process leads to an educational model that, even in an emergency modality, is democratic and encompasses educational formation beyond mere curricular fulfillment.

In addition to the empirical contributions presented and discussed in this study, it is also noteworthy that from a theoretical perspective, this research demonstrates the relevance of the Theory of Social Representations to make sense of phenomena that emerge in social dynamics. Specifically, the results of this study indicate the importance of not only describing the representations that were discovered but also identifying the sociodemographic, attitudinal, and ideological anchorings that contribute to the formation of different modes of representing social objects. Furthermore, this study observed how the psycho-affective dimension can regulate SRs and how they, at the same time, constitute a possible expression of emotions.

Although this study has contributed to many clarifications regarding parents' SRs of distance learning, it has some limitations that would benefit from reflection and possible expansions in future studies. Specifically, there is a lack of homogeneity in the collected sample, with a predominant participation of mothers and a small percentage of fathers. Another issue is the need for a more balanced sample representation from other Brazilian regions, being that there was a predominance of participants from the Northeast and Southeast regions. An additional limitation is that most participants had children enrolled in private schools, which requires a more homogeneous sample, as this variable can influence SRs of the experience with distance learning for children. Therefore, it is suggested that new studies aim to address these gaps by homogenizing the sample to better understand how sociodemographic and attitudinal variables constitute core ideas (Doise, 2002) for the construction of social thought about the investigated social objects.

Conclusion

This study highlights the need for new research programs that encompass other key variables for understanding the process of distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as for verifying the feasibility of this type of strategy for other possible emergencies. In this regard, it is deemed pertinent for new studies to investigate the SRs of the children themselves undergoing distance learning, as well as those of teachers and students in secondary, technical, and higher education. It is also necessary to understand the experience of distance learning for students with special needs, given the obligation to provide equitable education.

Furthermore, the results of this study indicate the importance of further investigations that delve into mental health issues among the agents involved in the dynamics of distance learning, such as students, teachers, and family mediators, as this can affect its implementation. It is suggested that such studies employ methodological strategies that provide participants with a greater opportunity to express themselves, such as in-depth interviews, to capture the nuances inherent to the subject matter in more detail. However, it reinforces the illuminating power of SRs as a guide to understanding the experience of different social groups with this new educational reality.

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Contributors

Conceptualization: M. H. P. O. Araújo, M. E. S. Alexandre, B. M. O. Amorim and C. P. S. Camino. Data curation: M. H. P. O. Araújo, M. E. S. Alexandre, B. M. O. Amorim and C. P. S. Camino. Formal analysis: M. H. P. O. Araújo, M. E. S. Alexandre, B. M. O. Amorim and C. P. S. Camino. Investigation: M. H. P. O. Araújo, M. E. S. Alexandre, B. M. O. Amorim and C. P. S. Camino. Methodology: M. H. P. O. Araújo, M. E. S. Alexandre, B. M. O. Amorim and C. P. S. Camino. Writing – original draft: M. H. P. O. Araújo, M. E. S. Alexandre, B. M. O. Amorim and C. P. S. Camino. Writing – review & editing: M. H. P. O. Araújo, M. E. S. Alexandre, B. M. O. Amorim and C. P. S. Camino.