



THE EXPERIENCE OF FEAR BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Objective: apprehending the experience of fear by university students during the Covid-19 pandemic. **Methods:** an exploratory, qualitative study conducted with 16 students enrolled in Brazilian higher education institutions. Data were collected in June 2020 through a virtually performed focus group using a semi-structured script with north-section questions. From the content analysis, thematic modality, the following categories emerged: Fear of the unknown and its repercussions on the lives of university students and Living going forward: challenges imposed by the pandemic and similarities with previous experiences. **Results:** the Covid-19 pandemic symbolized the new, evidenced by the participants' feeling of fear in the face of the unpredictable, loneliness, suffering and human finitude. The narratives showed changes in the lives of university students. **Conclusion:** despite its originality, the experience of the pandemic found similarities in previous experiences of stressful events that allowed participants to learn and develop their resilience.

Keywords: Students. Fear. Pandemics. Covid-19.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused profound transformations in humanity, in its modes of consumption and production, in its policies and in its relationship with the environment. In addition, the recommendations of social distancing have contributed to resignify bonds and forms of sociability. Faced with the unusual and collective novelty of the experience of the pandemic, the need for new scientific productions emerges that address the meanings of this experience⁽¹⁾.

Human activities, such as face-to-face teaching, were affected and rethought during the pandemic, considering the potential for transmission of the virus, as well as the ease of contamination. Currently, emergency remote education has been an important model adopted around the world⁽²⁾.

By turning its gaze to university students during the pandemic, the scientific literature has

highlighted the occurrence of psychological impacts suffered by this population. According to a cross-sectional study conducted in Jordan, the prevalence of anxiety was higher among university students (21.5%) than among health professionals (11.3%) and the general population (8.8%)⁽³⁾. In Turkey, 52% of the 2,051 medical students reported feeling emotionally ill during the pandemic⁽⁴⁾. In China, there was an indirect relationship between the severity of the local Covid-19 epidemic (death toll) and the occurrence of stress and anxiety among 66 university students, as well as higher rates of fear among those who were attending college outside the country^(5,6).

Also in China, a longitudinal study showed that anxiety and depression levels increased by 550 university students between the period before social distancing and 15/17 days after the onset of anxiety. This fact was associated with the scarcity of protection supplies and the perception of the extension of the school

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period⁽⁷⁾.

More specifically, the fear of Covid-19 can lead people to postpone the search for health care and predispose to the occurrence of suicide^(8,9). Since fear is a primary emotion, common to human beings, which triggers protective responses but, at disproportionate levels, can potentiate the onset or aggravate mental disorders⁽¹⁰⁾. A study conducted with 5,423 university students from Vietnam found that those who recorded higher levels of fear of Covid-19 also maintained or increased alcohol use during the pandemic⁽¹¹⁾.

Changes in teaching strategies, which are emergently focused on the use of digital tools, for example, emerge as a challenge and a potentially triggering factor of emotional distress for the university community. However, to date, scientific literature has not yet been identified addressing the perceptions of fear expressed by university students in the context of the pandemic⁽¹²⁾.

When considering the probable outcomes of fear during the pandemic and the vulnerability to which university students are subject, especially in the context of remote emergency education, it is pressing to understand fear from the perspective of this public, for the planning of actions that minimize their emotional suffering. Therefore, the question is: how do university students experience fear during the Covid-19 pandemic? What situations trigger fear and how does such emotion resonate in your daily life?

In order to answer these questions, the aim of this study was to understand the experience of fear by university students during the Covid-19 pandemic.

METHODS

An exploratory study of qualitative approach whose population was represented by students enrolled in Brazilian higher education institutions – a fact that allowed researchers to have contact with subjects linked to institutions that adopted different policies to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic, measures amending the modality of education. In March 2020, due to the pandemic, higher education institutions established biosafety plans for their units, as well as disease coping and prevention standards. In some cases, such strategies included the

substitution of face-to-face activities by remote emergency education, from the use of information and communication technologies or suspension of the academic calendar.

Both the dissemination of the research and the invitation to participate in the focus group were conducted through social networks (Facebook and Instagram). WhatsApp was another outreach tool used to invite students enrolled in higher education institutions to which researchers were linked – this strategy made it possible to reach students from different Brazilian universities. The applications of students who were interested in participating in the survey were made by themselves through a form made available in Google Forms. The registration period lasted seven days, one week before data collection.

In total, 16 university students were interested in the theme to be discussed and voluntarily enrolled to participate in the research. The participants met the following inclusion criteria: being at least 18 years old; be regularly enrolled in an undergraduate course and have internet and audiovisual resources (camera and microphone) in your home. University students who locked/suspended enrollment of the 2020.1 academic semester were excluded.

Data were collected in June 2020 through a focus group adapted to the online context. Data collection in the focus group was previously planned by the researchers and had three moments: presentation (when the study team presented itself, informed the objectives of the research, its ethical aspects and rules for participation) development (when the semi-structured script of questions was applied) and termination (when the ethical aspects of the research were reiterated, its final clarifications and thanks were made). The semi-structured script contained questions related to the characterization of the participants: gender, higher education institution, undergraduate and current school period, reasons for participation in the study; and the following north-story questions: 'Talk about the experiences of fear experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic'; 'In your perception, what situations triggered fear during the Covid-19 pandemic?'; 'The fear experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic had

repercussions on what aspect(s) of your life?'; 'Talk about situations of fear experienced in your life that were similar to those experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic'; 'Do you want to comment on something else?'.

A psychologist moderated the focus group, in addition to four nurses and one nursing student - all members of the research team - who helped the conduction and organization of the group and chat used for discussion – were responsible for the observation. The focus group lasted approximately two hours and the content registered in digital recorder.

The participants' narratives were fully transcribed and submitted after the brief edition, only for elimination of language vices; not harming the meaning of narratives. In order to gain access to the perceptions expressed by the participants, the material was submitted to Content Analysis, a thematic modality⁽¹³⁾.

The pre-analysis stage involved floating reading, which favored the deepening of the content of the narratives. Next, the material was thoroughly exploited, narratives were coded through nominal codes and the constitution of the corpus of analysis - which corresponded to the material that effectively generated inferences. The excerpts of the narratives were grouped according to the codes assigned, by meaning or thematic approximation, in meaning nuclei. Subsequently, the categorization was performed, condensing the meaning nuclei under titles representative of the main themes found in the narratives, and inferences were made in the selected narratives^(13,14). The names of the participants were replaced by the term

'Participant', added to a numeral (for differentiation) in order to preserve the anonymity of the respondents.

Scientific productions were used that addressed aspects inherent to the explanatory models Biologicista and Interactionist of stress as support to the analytical path and the discussion of the results, considering that there is no consensus definition among researchers in the area.

Fear is a natural and adaptive reaction, mobilized by biological and psychic processes, in the face of real and imminent threats. However, at disproportionate levels, it can generate continuous stress to the human being, so it can be considered a such event, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic^(10,15).

The study complied with Resolution N 466/2012 of the National Health Council and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul, under Protocol N 4,047,265.

RESULTS

According to Chart 1, 14 participants were women and 2 were men; 12 attended Nursing; 3, Letters and 1, Information Systems. Three (3) participants were enrolled in the first year of graduation; 3, in the second year; 5, in the third year and 5, in the last year of the course. The reasons mentioned by them to participate in the focus group were curiosity, affinity with the theme, opportunity for social interaction, need for welcoming and indication of friends.

Table 1. Characterization of the study participants according to gender, course, current school period and reasons for participation in the research. Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil, 2021.

Participant	Gender	Course	Semester	Reasons for participation
1	Female	Nursing	5 th	Need for reception and opportunity for social interaction during the pandemic.
2	Female	Nursing	7 th	Affinity with the theme.
3	Female	Nursing	7 th	Affinity with the theme.
4	Female	Nursing	1 st	Affinity with the theme.
5	Male	Information Systems	3 rd	Affinity with the theme.
6	Female	Letters	3 rd	Affinity with the theme and opportunity for social interaction.
7	Female	Nursing	5 th	Friend referral.
8	Female	Nursing	9 th	Affinity with the theme and opportunity for social interaction during the pandemic.
9	Female	Nursing	5 th	Affinity with the theme and opportunity for social interaction during the pandemic.
10	Female	Nursing	5 th	Opportunity for social interaction during the pandemic.
11	Female	Nursing	5 th	Affinity with the theme.
12	Female	Letters	1 st	Curiosity and affinity with the theme.
13	Female	Nursing	1 st	Affinity with the theme.
14	Female	Nursing	9 th	Affinity with the theme, need for reception and opportunity for social interaction during the pandemic.
15	Female	Nursing	9 th	Opportunity for social interaction during the pandemic.
16	Male	Letters	3 rd	Opportunity for social interaction during the pandemic.

The following categories emerged after the analysis of the participants' narratives: 'Fear of the unknown and its repercussions on the lives of university students', this category envisions the fear of the unknown and the changes that occurred during the pandemic in the lives of these university students and 'Living hereafter: challenges imposed by the pandemic and similarities with previous experiences', which addresses the adaptations made in this period of 'new normal' and the rescue of memories of other similar experiences experienced by them.

Fear of the unknown and its repercussions on the life of university students

From the subjects' perspective, the pandemic proved to be an unexpected, unknown and mystical phenomenon. His narratives extolled this period through expressions such as "came out of nowhere," "no one was prepared," "it's a discovery," "you need to know more," and "there must be a divine purpose to it."

Based on the terms used by the students in their narratives, it is thought that the experience of the pandemic was perceived as a "difficult", "crisis", "chaotic" and "shocking" moment. The following excerpt illustrates this statement:

[...] my wife works as a nursing technician. She is in the fight face to face, and we see that she is also going through a tough time. She comes home and has all those precautions she has to take. It's complicated, a million things go through our heads. She comes home and raises her hand to heaven (**Participant 5**).

Thus, it can be affirmed that the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic was permeated by several feelings, such as: fear, concern and anguish; all linked to this period and its consequences (transformations, adversities and losses). The following excerpt exemplifies this proposition:

[...] I am a nursing academic and nursing technician. I'm directly connected to what's going on. How can we deal with these issues of anxiety, loss, grief? What will post-Covid be like? We are already starting to prepare to return to activities (**Participant 4**).

In this scenario, marked by uncertainty and the unpredictable, it was common to experience fear, accompanied by anxiety and frustration, especially when dealing with situations that escaped the control of the participants:

[...] here in the city reopened everything, even with the high peak, and now we do not know. At the University, we have no class, no distance, and there is no provision for return. We are discussing return strategies, even without knowing when this will be, but knowing that it will be different. There are a lot of things that we think about, but we don't know if it's going to work or not, it generates a little anxiety and fear. It's this fear of the new, of not knowing that time, whether it's a small period, if it's big. (**Participant 9**).

The fear of the disease, given the loosening of restrictive measures of freedom (isolation and social distancing) and, consequently, greater social mobility in several municipalities, were among the most commented issues. A relevant conflict was observed, that is: the participants' adhering to restrictive measures of freedom contributed to the feeling of loneliness; and the resistance to adhere to such behaviors generated a feeling of guilt. The report below illustrates these statements:

[...] Here in the state is just me and my husband. My whole family is from Bahia, and I was supposed to have gone there last month for the birth of my nephew. I don't know when I'm going to meet him. We're in that worry if we go, get into it, get there... What about our relatives? What about our family? It's a desperate fear that you don't know if on tomorrow you'll see the people you like. It is difficult this question of wanting to travel and not being able to (**Participant 13**).

Here, the participants referred to the experience of the pandemic as "prison," in which, even if there was the will and the possibility to exercise the right to come and go, "this could not be done" - a fact that generated frustration. The following excerpt exemplifies this feeling:

[...] I'm not with my parents, I'm here (in town) alone and, whether I like it or not, I'm feeling a little isolated from the world. Among all the

fears I feel, I feel a funny fear that is not to catch the corona but to transmit. We feel trapped, as much as we're not trapped, but that's the feeling. I have time, money and a willingness to go, and I can't do that. I think it's a big frustration (**Participant 9**).

In summary, the complexity of the panorama of the Covid-19 pandemic has given rise to uncertainty, exposing weaknesses and limitations of the participants in the face of this global problem; and contributed to the fear of the unpredictable, loneliness, suffering and human finitude.

Living from now on: challenges posed by the pandemic and similarities with previous experiences

It is considered that the training process of the university students has undergone alterations in the face-to-face interruption and/or substitution of the academic activities during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is due to the insertion in a study process dependent on the Internet, virtual environments and remote classroom platforms, in addition to the change in the active way students participate in classes. The following narrative exemplifies how this change was perceived by the participants as a new and, at the same time, challenging situation:

[...] in our institution we had both Distance Learning (EAD) and online classes. So, it was double work. I think that's going to make us more independent and confident or more frustrated, angry. You have to create skills you've never seen in your life. You're thrown into your home learning how to work with a system you've never seen in your life, use a tool you've never used, take distance learning, online. I think for those who chose face-to-face college was a challenge, no one wanted to be in the EaD. Comes the frustration of often not being able to do everything (**Participant 4**).

In a broader perspective, the changes experienced by the participants, more specifically in the formative process, were symbolic and illustrate the emergence of the 'new' during the pandemic. This moment was characterized by overload of activities and fear of "not being able to take care"; and,

consequently, required adaptation development of new skills. The following excerpt exemplifies this feeling:

[...] our demand only increases, working from home, studying at home, increases three times more. You have to take care of the house, the college, the son. That's a lot! I spend the day sleepless; I have to take care of it and it's eating away. When I see it, I've been sleepless for days (**Participant 2**).

Other excerpts of the narratives suggest that fears and uncertainties experienced in the Covid-19 pandemic were related to social and economic issues, in addition to those specific to the educational field, which could interfere in some way in the lives of participants in the short, medium and long term. Participant 14's reflection illustrates this finding:

[...] beats a despair. We are already in the pandemic, we do not know what the world will be like after it passes, especially Brazil. What's it going to be like after? What's it going to be like if I fail, what am I going to do? If it's already hard to get a job now, which you'll say with the crisis coming, without training. This fear is very exhausting, exhausting, more tiring than the activities themselves. (**Participant 14**).

Previous experiences that, as well as the pandemic, triggered fear and need for adaptation, such as: unplanned pregnancy, admission to new employment, school approval, admission to higher education, among others were mentioned by the participants. The following excerpt illustrates this fact:

[...] I suffered that same fear of change when I got pregnant when I was 16. It was a phase that everyone expected a lot from me, and I had a right course. I went a direction no one expected, least of all me. I didn't know what it was. Go back to that story of the charge, of the account. It's interesting to stop and think about it. It was such a momentous change (of the pandemic) and it made me stop and reason: it will change my routine! (**Participant 2**).

Based on the above, the Covid-19 pandemic symbolizes a new moment in the participants' lives, which brings changes to life and daily life, and challenges to be overcome and, consequently, generates fear, insecurity and resistance. This situation is similar to

previous experiences related to the perception of opportunity to gain experience from stressful events and to deal with their negative effects.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that university students experienced fear during the Covid-19 pandemic and that, in addition to this feeling, there were concerns, anguish, exhaustion - related to the overload of activities - and difficulties in dealing with changes in studies, work, coexistence, life and their existence.

These manifestations are compatible with those of the stress response alarm phase of the Biogenicist model called General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS). They are accompanied by tachycardia, sweating, headache, changes in blood pressure, irritability, fatigue, muscle tension, feeling of exhaustion and gastrointestinal changes. Stress is seen here as a physiological defensive reaction of the organism in response to any stimulus; therefore, immediately after the confrontation with the stressor, the body tries to defend itself from the challenges and threats to its integrity through the basic mechanisms mentioned above⁽¹⁶⁾.

It is noticed that this initial moment is followed by the resistance phase, whose objective is the adaptation of the organism to the stressor. The characteristic signs of this phase include anxiety, social isolation, sexual impotence, nervousness, changes in appetite and fear⁽¹⁷⁾. Therefore, the participants' narratives showed fears and anxiety associated with the perception of the pandemic as an unpredictable, unknown, chaotic phenomenon and permeated with uncertainties.

The next phase of this explanatory model, identified as 'near-exhaustion', is based on the experience of weakening and inability of the individual to adapt to the stressor, a fact that can cause mild but not disabling health problems. Prolonged exposure to the stressor (third phase) can lead the individual to exhaustion, when there may be loss of adaptive capacity, deterioration and death⁽¹⁸⁾.

In the present study, the findings suggest that the changes caused by the pandemic

aroused experiences of fear similar to those observed in previous experiences lived by the participants, such as: unplanned pregnancy, admission to new employment, school approval, admission to higher education, among others. The narratives indicate that these events were perceived, initially, as a threat of disorder and, later, as an opportunity to reconfigure the world itself.

In these scenarios of suspension of certainties emerges the need to manage risks related to mental health; therefore, it is important to conceive of uncertainty as something not necessarily negative or unadaptive, and to consider that working on uncertainties can broaden the awareness of them as part of life and the experience of coming-to-be a powerful tool in coping with adversities⁽¹⁹⁾.

At this point, it is important to highlight the Covid-19 pandemic not only as a stressful situation with which subjects may have difficulty dealing with and facing, but that the fear generated by it is individual - that is, it is not universal - nor, nor linear. Thus, stress is understood as a psychosocial phenomenon, of biological implication, represented by any stimulus that demands adaptation effort on the part of a person or social system^(20,21).

According to the explanatory stress model called the Interactionist Model, the person elaborates a cognitive evaluation about the type of event and its meaning, possibilities and strategies of coping and adaptation when faced with the stressor⁽¹⁶⁾. However, stressors, which depend on this cognitive assessment of the subject, are influenced by sociodemographic variables that condition the perception of their influence, a set of values and beliefs of the individual⁽²²⁾.

Therefore, several situations imposed by the pandemic scenario can be potential stressors, such as: risk of contracting a little-known disease and with real possibilities of death or relevant sequelae; social distancing and isolation, personal and economic losses; therefore, it can be harmful to people's health⁽²²⁾. Concerns in the university context, as observed here, also focus on the threats to the professional and economic situation that students aim to achieve in the future, that is,

the social place they wish to reach through their academic training. Such concerns are related to those related to adaptations to remote education and make up an exhaustive process for these individuals.

Common indicators of stress, anxiety and fear, substantiated by findings in studies based on the Interactionist perspective^(21,23), were identified in the participants' narratives, such as: concern, frustration, exhaustion, nervousness, guilt, isolation and difficulty in making decisions. In addition to these indicators, one can observe in the reports the meanings attributed by them to the experience of fear during the pandemic (unexpected, unknown and mystical phenomenon). In addition, the subjects also demonstrated fears related to the disease and its consequences, as well as previous experiences perceived as threatening or challenging that required adaptation attempts, such as the pandemic.

It is emphasized that the present investigation was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, which accounts for a large number of diagnosed cases and deaths caused by the disease. At the same time that it was possible to understand the fear experienced in this context, the authors recognized that such a scenario may have exacerbated their reactions, which would represent a limitation of the study. Another limitation is that the data were produced only through a focus group session;

therefore, there is a need to deepen information provided by participants in future new meetings.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Covid-19 pandemic symbolizes the 'new' for university students and has contributed to experiences of fear related to the unpredictable, loneliness, suffering and human finitude. Despite its originality, the experience of the pandemic resembled previous experiences with stressful events faced by the subjects, besides allowing these individuals the possibility of developing their resilience.

The present study deepened the understanding of the experience of fear among university students during the Covid-19 pandemic and contributed to the production of scientific knowledge on this subject, bringing subsidies that support the strengthening of strategies for promoting mental health, which can be planned and implemented by universities, and aimed at this population. Moreover, the findings may support actions directed at the university public in other contexts, such as those related to public health emergencies and consequent restrictive measures.

A VIVÊNCIA DO MEDO POR ESTUDANTES UNIVERSITÁRIOS DURANTE A PANDEMIA DE COVID-19

RESUMO

Objetivo: compreender a vivência do medo por estudantes universitários durante a pandemia de COVID-19. **Métodos:** estudo exploratório, qualitativo, realizado com 16 estudantes matriculados em instituições de ensino superior brasileiras. Os dados foram coletados em junho de 2020, através de grupo focal realizado virtualmente, utilizando-se um roteiro semiestruturado com questões norteadoras. A partir da análise de conteúdo, modalidade temática, emergiram as categorias: Medo do desconhecido e suas repercussões na vida de estudantes universitários e Viver daqui por diante: desafios impostos pela pandemia e semelhanças com experiências anteriores. **Resultados:** a pandemia de COVID-19 simbolizava o novo, evidenciado pelo sentimento de medo dos participantes frente ao imprevisível, à solidão, ao sofrimento e à finitude humana. As narrativas mostraram mudanças no viver dos estudantes universitários. **Conclusão:** apesar de seu ineditismo, a vivência da pandemia encontrou semelhanças em experiências pregressas de eventos estressores que possibilitaram aos participantes aprender e desenvolver sua capacidade de resiliência.

Palavras-chave: Estudantes. Medo. Pandemias. Covid-19.

LA VIVENCIA DEL MIEDO POR ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS DURANTE LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19

RESUMEN

Objetivo: comprender la vivencia del miedo por estudiantes universitarios durante la pandemia de COVID-19.

Métodos: estudio exploratorio, cualitativo, realizado con 16 estudiantes inscriptos en instituciones de enseñanza superior brasileñas. Los datos fueron recolectados en junio de 2020, a través de un grupo focal realizado virtualmente, utilizando una guion semiestructurado con cuestiones orientadoras. A partir del análisis de contenido, modalidad temática, surgieron las categorías: Miedo a lo desconocido y sus repercusiones en la vida de estudiantes universitarios y Vivir de aquí en adelante: desafíos impuestos por la pandemia y semejanzas con experiencias anteriores. **Resultados:** la pandemia de COVID-19 simbolizaba lo nuevo, evidenciado por el sentimiento de miedo de los participantes frente a lo impredecible, a la soledad, al sufrimiento y a la finitud humana. Los relatos mostraron cambios en el vivir de los estudiantes universitarios. **Conclusión:** pese su carácter inédito, la vivencia de la pandemia encontró similitudes en experiencias anteriores de eventos estresantes que permitieron a los participantes aprender y desarrollar su capacidad de resiliencia.

Palabras clave: Estudiantes. Miedo. Pandemias. Covid-19.

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