"YOU ARE NOT ALONE": MENTAL HEALTH CARE CIRCLES FOR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT A UNIVERSITY IN SALVADOR, BAHIA

"VOCÊ NÃO ESTÁ SOZINHA": RODAS DE CUIDADO EM SAÚDE MENTAL COM ESTUDANTES DE GRADUAÇÃO DE UMA UNIVERSIDADE EM SALVADOR, BAHIA

"NO ESTÁS SOLO": CÍRCULOS DE ATENCIÓN EM SALUD MENTAL A ESTUDIANTES DE GRADUACIÓN EN UNA UNIVERSIDAD DE SALVADOR, BAHÍA

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ABSTRACT: This article aims to present an extension project based on care circles for university students in Salvador, Bahia. The *AconChegar* Project seeks to offer a space for listening and shared care to undergraduate students, in order to strengthen the mutual bond, share experiences of suffering, and multiply care strategies. Thirty-three care circles were carried out between 2020 and 2022 by the *AconChegar* project. In this article, we present, first, the extension project and the commitment to a certain way of understanding and dealing with suffering, and, secondly, we discuss the discontents referred to by the participants in their relationship with neoliberalism, more specifically with the idea of the "self-entrepreneur". The *AconChegar* care circles, by going against the individualization of suffering, constituted a collective way out of the discomfort and psychological suffering present at the university.

KEYWORDS: Mental health. Care circles. University. Neoliberalism. Discontents.

***RESUMO**: O presente artigo tem como objetivo apresentar um projeto de extensão de rodas de cuidado voltado para estudantes universitários em Salvador, Bahia. O Projeto AconChegar busca ofertar um espaço de escuta e cuidado compartilhado aos alunos de graduação, de modo a fortalecer o laço mútuo, partilhar experiências de sofrimento e multiplicar estratégias de cuidado. Foram realizadas 33 rodas de cuidado promovidas pelo projeto entre os anos de 2020 e 2022. Neste artigo, apresentamos inicialmente o projeto de extensão e a aposta em um determinado modo de entender e de lidar com o sofrimento para, em seguida, discutir o mal-estar relatado pelos participantes em sua relação com o neoliberalismo, mais especificamente com a ideia do "empreendedor de si". As rodas de cuidado do AconChegar, ao irem na contramão da individualização do sofrimento, constituíram uma saída coletiva para o mal-estar e sofrimento psíquico presentes na universidade.*

***PALAVRAS-CHAVE**: Sofrimento psíquico. Roda de cuidado. Universidade. Neoliberalismo. Mal-estar.*

***RESUMEN**: Este artículo tiene como objetivo presentar un proyecto de extensión de ruedas de cuidado orientadas a estudiantes de la universidad en Salvador, Bahia. El Proyecto AconChegar tiene como objetivo ofrecer un espacio de escucha y cuidado compartido a estudiantes de pregrado, con el fin de fortalecer el vínculo mutuo, compartir experiencias de sufrimiento y multiplicar estrategias de cuidado. Entre 2020 y 2022 se realizaron 33 círculos de atención promovidos por el proyecto. En este artículo, presentamos, en primero lugar, el proyecto de extensión y el compromiso con una determinada forma de entender y afrontar el sufrimiento para, luego, discutir el malestar reportado por los participantes en su relación com el neoliberalismo, más específicamente la idea del "autoemprendedor". Las ruedas de cuidado del proyecto AconChegar, al ir en contra de la individualización del sufrimiento, constituyeron una salida colectiva al malestar y sufrimiento psicológico presente en la universidad.*

***PALABRAS CLAVE**: Salud mental. Rueda de cuidado. Universidad. Neoliberalismo. Malestar.*

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Introduction

Mental health within the university environment has gained increasing attention in recent years (Lima *et al*., 2019). Cases of psychological distress and suicide at universities in Brazilian cities such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Salvador have been reported in newspapers and various media outlets, revealing a growing concern. Upon entering the women's restroom at one of the campuses of the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), one can read phrases such as "every day I think about giving up" alongside "you are not alone." The restroom doors, all covered in inscriptions, are among the spaces on campus where the presence of students' psychological suffering becomes visibly inscribed.

Against this backdrop, the *AconChegar* project was created as a shared care initiative, whose first edition took place between 2020 and 2022. It provided a space for female university students to cultivate mutual care through health promotion and the welcoming of psychological distress. The outreach program was linked to two Scientific Initiation projects, each employing distinct methodologies. This article focuses on the description and analysis of the extension experience.

A literature review conducted for this study revealed a growing concern with this subject: since 2018, the number of publications addressing mental health in universities has risen considerably. In 2019, a national survey by the *National Forum of Pro-Rectors for Community and Student Affairs* (Fonaprace, 2019) identified a high prevalence of psychological distress and mental illness among university students. Furthermore, suicide has been identified as the second leading cause of death among university students (Santos *et al.*, 2017).

The literature highlights that entering university is often marked by significant life changes that may produce distress or mental illness. These include living away from family and established social networks for the first time (Diniz; Aires, 2018; Souza; Lourenço; Santos, 2016; Oliveira *et al.*, 2014); the need to manage time differently, balancing multiple activities (Dias *et al*., 2019; Diniz; Aires, 2018); and adapting to academic performance demands to which new students are unaccustomed (Vieira-Santos; Paiva; Mendes Pacheco, 2023; Dias *et al.*, 2019; Diniz; Aires, 2018; Oliveira *et al.*, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic and the social isolation it imposed further intensified these factors, exacerbating academic challenges (Mota *et al*., 2021; Silva *et al.*, 2021; Rocha *et al*., 2021; Antúnez *et al.*, 2021).

Most studies addressing so-called "psychological disorders" rely on quantitative methods aimed at identifying vulnerability and protection factors. For instance, low levels of social skills correlate positively with anxiety (Borba; Hayasida; Lopes, 2019) and depression

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(Bolsoni-Silva; Guerra, 2014). Research on suicide follows a similar trend: being in the early semesters (Silva; Faro, 2020) and the use of psychoactive substances (Machado *et al.*, 2020) have been identified as risk factors, while engagement in religious practices (Silva; Faro, 2020) and strong interpersonal relationships (Machado *et al.*, 2020) emerge as protective factors.

A notable gap, however, lies in studies that consider the intersections of gender, race, and class. Nonetheless, Lameu, Salazar, and Souza (2016) found that women exhibit higher levels of stress, as do students living in public or private student housing with limited family contact. Reis (2020) also notes that stress is prevalent among university students, particularly women, who often experience a range of somatic symptoms.

Santos and Castanho (2021) highlight the racial barriers that Black students face throughout their university experience and how these impact their sense of belonging, often leading to psychological suffering. This distress may be intensified among quota students, who are exposed to multiple vulnerabilities. In this regard, Reis (2021, p. 12, our translation) states that "psychosocial support is essential to equip quota students for their permanence in the university, by providing for their needs." These studies underscore how socioeconomic, gender, and racial markers shape the university experience and are fundamental to understanding students' experiences of suffering.

Reis (2019) reinforces this discussion by presenting the experience of the *Center for Pedagogical and Psychosocial Support to Students* (NAPE), developed at the State University of Bahia, Campus XVIII. The NAPE emerged from student demands and began in 2016, offering individual psychotherapy sessions. In 2018, *Integrative Community Therapy* (ICT) circles were introduced, reaffirming the importance of promoting shared care spaces within academic environments:

> [...] the adoption of collective, low-cost approaches such as ICT proved essential, yielding positive results for participating students, and ensuring the expansion and continuity of care at a time when public higher education institutions face crises that may impact both students' quality of life and the quality of institutional support (Reis, 2019, p. 8, our translation).

In a similar perspective, the *AconChegar* project initiated shared care circles, based on the understanding that an individualistic logic is insufficient for the production of care. Instead, mutual support and the sharing of experiences are essential. Furthermore, from a psychoanalytic standpoint, it is crucial to deepen discussions that consider the *social bond*, since a large body of research continues to treat suffering as an individual disorder, isolating it from its sociocultural context.

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In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, published in 1930, Freud discussed humanity's constant pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain, as if happiness were a state that could be attained and maintained. However, the founder of psychoanalysis identified three enduring sources of suffering, which remain strikingly relevant today. According to Freud (2010 [1930]), human discomfort may arise from:

> From one's own body, which—fated to decline and dissolution—cannot even dispense with pain and fear as warning signals; from the external world, which may strike us with powerful, inexorable, and destructive forces; and, finally, from relationships with other human beings (Freud, 2010[1930], p. 31, our translation).

As a result of the disharmony between instinctual drives and civilization, Freud situates malaise as an intrinsic component of the human experience in the world. Suffering has always been present, indeed; yet, as Christian Dunker (2015) writes, not all sufferings have remained the same. According to the author, suffering changes over time, taking on different forms depending on the historical period and social context. Unlike malaise, which is defined as a form of distress resistant to naming, suffering is inseparable from language. In this sense, both malaise and suffering are articulated through the social bonds within which the subject is embedded.

As pointed out by Safatle, Silva Júnior, and Dunker (2021), with the rise of neoliberalism worldwide since the 1970s, the conflictual dimension of suffering has been increasingly erased. In this new grammar of suffering, the conflict that Freud identified in 1930 between the subject and the social bond—and its normative constraints—is replaced by an understanding of suffering as a neurobiological dysfunction, located in the brain and explained by neurotransmitter imbalances. As these authors argue, neoliberal logic promotes the individualization of conflict. Suffering is pathologized and individualized, and pain is reframed as a disorder or disease rather than integrated as a dimension of everyday human experience.

Therefore, in order to analyze and intervene in the current manifestations of suffering and malaise within the university, it is essential to consider the broader context in which the institution operates. This context is marked by neoliberalism in its multiple dimensions—whether through the precarization of universities, its operational logic, or its effects on the subjectivities of those within it. Identifying, naming, and acknowledging the modes of suffering that emerge in universities requires attention to the diverse forms of social relations at play. It is crucial to emphasize that neoliberalism extends beyond administrative and legal procedures;

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it shapes modes of subjectivity and governs how suffering itself is managed. In this regard, considering the university context, we highlight that the ways of being and relating within academic life have undergone significant transformations, which were further intensified during the pandemic. Throughout this article, we present and elaborate on this discussion.

Thus, this study aims to present the outreach project "*AconChegar: rodas de cuidado*" which took place between 2020 and 2022 and was directed toward undergraduate students at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA). Through *AconChegar*, we sought to develop a specific way of engaging with suffering—one marked by relational contact and the collective sharing of care.

AconChegar: Methodological Procedures

"[…] *while one eye weeps, the other spies the horizon in search of a solution*".
(Conceição Evaristo, 2014, p. 114, our translation)

The proposal for *AconChegar* emerged in response to the intensification of reports of psychological distress and illness within the university environment, as well as the limited number of initiatives addressing mental health care on campus. The immediate trigger for the project's inception in 2020 was the COVID-19 pandemic (Coronavirus Disease 2019) and the accompanying social isolation, which produced suffering and psychological strain among university students. The project sought to establish a shared space of care for this group, aiming to strengthen mutual bonds and promote the exchange of life experiences.

AconChegar was coordinated by two professors and psychologists from UFBA's Institute of Psychology, while the facilitation of the care circles was conducted by three undergraduate psychology students, with alternating participation by the professors. All ethical requirements related to listening practices were observed in accordance with the Professional Code of Ethics for Psychologists. Later, after recognizing the potential of the care circles, a research project was developed, submitted to, and approved by the Research Ethics Committee (Protocol No. 4.953.364). Regarding participation, enrollment was open to undergraduate students from the São Lázaro campus—encompassing Psychology, Social Work, Gender and Diversity Studies, History, Social Sciences, Philosophy, and Museology—as well as from the Interdisciplinary Bachelor's programs.

As the circles were attended predominantly by women, all nouns in this article are inflected accordingly. Thirty-three care circles were held between August 2020 and September

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2022, with the majority of participants identifying as women, Black, and non-disabled. The circles were held biweekly in the evenings via Google Meet, lasting approximately 90 minutes, and averaged 12 registrations per session, with active participation from about six students. Registration was conducted through Google Forms, with the link included in the event announcements, which were distributed through WhatsApp groups and departmental mailing lists.

Discussions followed a free association format, without predetermined themes, in most meetings. However, some thematic sessions were organized in collaboration with course workgroups and the Psychology Student Directory. The sessions were not recorded, in order to provide a safe and comfortable environment for self-expression. At the end of each meeting, the extension students and the supervising professor remained online for a brief evaluation, reflecting on facilitation strategies and the main themes that emerged during participants' discussions. Recurring topics included the impacts of digital life; longing for in-person encounters on campus; academic overload; accelerated routines; and lack of time.

Subsequently, each facilitator documented these reflections in an individual journal, noting salient themes, participants' remarks, and personal impressions. These journals were shared among the facilitators and supervisors, and for the development of this extension report, they were analyzed collectively to identify recurring themes.

A common theme in participants' accounts concerned the ways the pandemic had affected their daily lives. Faced with social isolation, students experienced disruptions to their usual routines, leading to weakened social bonds. Several participants emphasized the value of spontaneous encounters in the university corridors before the pandemic. These recurrent expressions were categorized under "The Fragilization of Bonds and the Power of Everyday Encounters." Another recurring theme was the feeling of anxiety and inadequacy regarding academic demands, often leading to profound subjective suffering. These narratives informed the construction of the second analytical category, "You Have to Keep Pushing Forward and the Feeling of Insufficiency," in which we discuss how individual psychological suffering and illness reflect broader social structures shaped by neoliberal logic.

The decision to focus on what recurred in participants' statements stemmed from the understanding that, in psychoanalysis, repetition reveals something that insists, demands recognition, and therefore requires naming, acknowledgment, and elaboration. Accordingly, the journals were first read to identify recurrent elements, which were then grouped into thematic categories and analyzed in light of the theoretical framework and literature review.

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Our approach to conducting the discussion circles was guided by psychoanalysis as a listening device, understanding "device" as a "multilinear ensemble composed of lines of different natures" (Deleuze, 2016[1988], p. 359, our translation). By "making see and making speak" (Deleuze, 2016[1988], p. 360), the device can generate subjectivation insofar as it allows the emergence of a particular subject (Checcia, 2010). In the case of the analytic device, through the proposal of free speech, we sought to listen to the subject of the unconscious—the one that does not coincide with the ego or consciousness and that is inseparable from the Other, being constituted within the social bond (Lacan, 1985; Aires *et al*., 2021).

Psychoanalysis, as a listening device, can be actualized in multiple contexts, including group practices such as the *AconChegar* project. Our goal was not to provide a group psychotherapy space, but rather to foster care through the construction of an environment in which students could articulate their suffering in words, within a welcoming and non-judgmental setting. This allowed anguish, anxiety, sadness, and frustration to acquire some symbolic framing. Thus, a space was created in which speech was addressed and recognition of particular ways of being in the world could emerge.

As a specific feature of group practices, the one who speaks also listens to others in their struggles. Consequently, while participants may identify with the experiences of others, they can also recognize difference, which enables the acknowledgment of alterity. In our role as facilitators, we consistently emphasized what was unique in each experience, while simultaneously pointing to shared paths. In other words, we reaffirmed, at every moment, that there is no ready-made formula for dealing with suffering—what makes sense for one person does not necessarily make sense for another—and that it is possible to create one's own ways of coping and responding to what afflicts each individual.

Having presented the structure of the discussion circles, we now turn to the findings that emerged from these encounters. Below, we present excerpts and recurring statements from the circles that illustrate the forms of suffering expressed by the students.

The fragilization of bonds and the power of everyday encounters

The *AconChegar* project took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the weakening of existing bonds and the virtualization of daily life, as social isolation became a necessary health measure to contain viral spread. Consequently, online classes remained the

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norm until 2022. This raises an important question: what were the impacts of this new scenario on the university students who participated in the project?

It is crucial to recognize that the transition period into university life is, in itself, filled with challenges: adapting to a new rhythm of academic demands, understanding the dynamics of a new institution, and being distant from the familiar social network to which students were previously accustomed (Dias *et al.*, 2019; Diniz; Aires, 2018; Souza; Lourenço; Santos, 2016; Oliveira *et al.*, 2014). In this context of major change, the construction of a support network appears in the literature as a key element for university retention.

Santos (2009), in a study on quota students, proposes two forms of university retention: material and symbolic. The former refers to the university's responsibility to provide material conditions for quota students to successfully complete their academic journey; the latter highlights the importance of subjective support in navigating this process. Such support emerges, for instance, through the creation of bonds that foster a sense of belonging and recognition (Santos, 2009).

It is also essential to draw upon the concept of intersectionality to emphasize that students are affected in different ways depending on the social markers that shape their experiences—such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. According to Moreira (2021, p. 140, our translation), "the unspoken racism that hovers within academia produces harmful effects on subjectivity, as it operates as a disorganizing factor of the psyche." In other words, racism generates suffering that manifests both materially and relationally, with distinct impacts when intersecting with gender and sexual orientation.

The online learning model, in turn, made the construction of meaningful bonds more fragile and challenging for most participants, often leading to feelings of loneliness. Some students reported a lack of motivation to attend remote classes, recalling how the physical classroom environment used to inspire them, unlike virtual learning, which often left them feeling tired and unengaged. Moreover, being confined to a single physical setting—for many, their bedroom—blurred the boundaries between different daily activities and disrupted their sense of routine.

A shared reflection among participants was that university life extends beyond the classroom walls, encompassing the everyday interactions that make up student life: carpooling, walking together to the bus stop, chatting in the hallways, standing in line at the university cafeteria, or spending time in the common courtyards.

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For one participant, in-person study was far more constructive, as it allowed for the creation of bonds, the power of shared encounters, and collective care—all of which made her feel less alone. Another participant vividly recalled a rainy day when she and her classmates were waiting for the bus after class; what could have been an unpleasant situation instead became a cherished, affectionate memory.

In the unprecedented context created by the pandemic, many social bonds were disrupted. However, in an effort to promote mental health, certain strategies emerged or became more frequent to mitigate students' anxiety and distress during social isolation—one example being tele-counseling, as described by Liberal *et al*. (2021). Another important resource was group experiences reported by Silva *et al*. (2021), Rocha *et al*. (2021), and Antúnez *et al.* (2021). According to these authors, the sharing of anxieties, concerns, and common difficulties strengthened bonds among students and fostered a sense of belonging to the university environment, thereby serving as protective factors for mental health during the pandemic.

In our activities, we observed a certain ambivalence toward the virtual format. While participants acknowledged some benefits of being able to occupy multiple spaces simultaneously, the prevailing subjective effects were fatigue and distraction. Some students reported that online learning felt more convenient and less physically exhausting compared to in-person classes. They pointed out that aspects of face-to-face education—such as commuting to campus, crowded transportation, and the rising cost of public transit—caused significant physical and emotional strain in their daily routines.

Among those who had experienced university life before the pandemic, a tone of nostalgia emerged as they reminisced about moments shared with peers and recognized the stark difference between online and in-person learning in terms of the quality of interpersonal connections. One participant, now pursuing her second undergraduate degree, recalled how friendships formed during her first, fully in-person degree were crucial to enduring the "ups and downs" of university life. In contrast, her current online experience had made it difficult to build relationships with classmates and professors. She described how beginning university during the pandemic prevented her from establishing deeper bonds with peers in the first semester, which was entirely remote.

In contrast to the accounts emphasizing the advantages of in-person study, one student shared that she did not identify with that experience, as she had often felt lonely on campus. For her, the online environment was preferable because it made her feel protected. This moment was particularly meaningful, as this student regularly attended the *AconChegar* meetings,

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typically engaging through the chat function or through attentive listening rather than active verbal participation. During this session, however, she brought forth a different perspective on academic life, one rarely expressed by other participants in *AconChegar*.

These contrasting narratives illustrate the diversity of experiences within the *AconChegar* care circles and, by extension, within the broader experience of university life. In the online model, all other university spaces—where informal interactions and spontaneous exchanges typically occurred—were largely eliminated, reducing the university experience to the virtual classroom. As several participants highlighted, this environment often felt impersonal, with students appearing only as small squares on a screen, many with their cameras turned off.

From listening to the participants, we noted how the specificities of the online format contributed to the weakening of affective bonds, thereby diminishing the sense of belonging to the university community and the feeling of being recognized within it. This weakening, in turn, intensified the suffering associated with feeling alone in navigating the challenges of university life. Drawing on Freud's (2010[1930]) three sources of human suffering—the body, the external world, and relationships with other human beings—we can consider that the pandemic period brought all three into question. The external world, in which the coronavirus itself emerged, was profoundly transformed by its presence. The relationship with one's own body also changed, as the virtual space expanded to occupy most daily activities. Finally, relationships with others were deeply affected, as individuals found themselves in restricted bodies, deprived of physical contact, and living under the persistent fear of contagion. One of the most evident effects of the absence of physical contact was the weakening of affective bonds, which in turn impacted interpersonal relationships.

"You Have to Keep Pushing" and the Feeling of Insufficiency

> *"We are exhausted and running. Exhausted and running. Exhausted and running. And the bad news is that we will remain exhausted and running, because exhausted-and-running has become the human condition of our time.*"
> (Eliane Brum, 2016, our translation)

In this section, we address accounts united by a shared feeling of not doing enough or not being enough in the face of the demands placed upon oneself—demands deeply shaped by neoliberalism, which mediates not only socioeconomic relations but also the very way

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individuals relate to themselves, encouraging them to become entrepreneurs of their own existence or "enterprise-selves" (Dardot; Laval, 2016).

We refer to *neoliberal suffering* as the form of distress, anxiety, and worry that stems from a mode of subjectivation shaped by market logic and production. Beyond structural transformations in higher education and the increasing precarization of public universities, the *AconChegar* circles revealed how the neoliberal ethos—grounded in competition, high performance, and self-responsibilization for failure—penetrates subjectivity and becomes a source of suffering among students. Thus, the notion of the *neoliberal subject* is a valuable analytical tool to name and understand the malaise and distress that circulate within the university setting.

Neoliberalism is more than a set of political and economic norms and regulations; it is, fundamentally, a *rationality* (Dardot; Laval, 2016). According to Safatle, Silva Junior, and Dunker (2021, p. 7, our translation), neoliberalism "shapes our desires and, in this sense, neoliberal performativity also has ontological effects on the determination and production of suffering." In other words, what is at stake is a mode of subject formation—how individuals are constituted in their subjectivity, in their daily practices, and in their way of being in the world with themselves and with others.

Education in general, and the university in particular, are not exempt from this neoliberal spirit, even though they remains among the main arenas of critique and resistance to this *modus operandi*. According to Aires (2021), Brazilian universities began to reposition themselves toward the market in the 1990s. Since then, neoliberal logic has permeated universities in Brazil (and worldwide), reducing them to instruments of professional training. The presence of neoliberalism in universities reveals itself through the growing demand for performance, directed both at professors and at students.

Within this context, neoliberalism in the university emerged clearly in the participants' accounts from the *AconChegar* discussion circles. Complaints about lack of time, accelerated routines, guilt for resting, excessive self-demand, external pressure, and stress were recurring themes in their narratives. For instance, one participant described living in a constant state of anticipation, always thinking about what she should do next or which new problem she needed to solve, accompanied by the feeling that engaging in activities perceived as "useless" was a waste of time.

"Anxiety" was a recurring term among the participants of *AconChegar*, used to describe a form of suffering characterized by excessive worry—whether about academic tasks or other

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activities. These concerns shared a common temporal dimension: a future-oriented, accelerated sense of time. One student referred to this as “academic anxiety,” describing the feeling of attending classes and learning content without knowing exactly where she was headed. Although she had only recently entered the university, she was already worried about graduation, questioning whether she would be professionally prepared. Other students voiced similar concerns about their professional futures—whether they would find employment and whether their degree would truly equip them for the job market.

This notion of *usefulness* and the instrumental view of education—as a mere pathway to employability—is one of the defining transformations of education under neoliberalism (Aires, 2021). Many participants described feelings of not doing enough or of being insufficient within this process, directly tied to the idea that “success” in university depends solely on the individual’s ability to persevere and manage everything on their own—an idea deeply rooted in neoliberal logic.

Another manifestation of this anxiety appeared in the difficulty of slowing down or allowing oneself to rest, as well as in reports of having no time for pleasurable activities. Once again, a productivist and utilitarian conception of time emerges—one in which leisure, idleness, or any activity without a specific goal of self-improvement is deemed “useless” or unimportant. While such suffering can indeed be understood as part of the natural adaptation process to university life—characterized by new challenges and greater autonomy (Dias *et al.*, 2019)—it cannot be dissociated from the broader neoliberal demands that frame this experience.

From several accounts, it becomes clear that the greater freedom offered by university life can also generate anxiety, as many students feel isolated and overburdened by internalized expectations. This form of suffering reflects the *entrepreneur-of-the-self* logic: the notion that each individual must independently manage their own life, time, and emotions, bearing full responsibility for their success or failure (Dardot; Laval, 2016).

Contrary to the idea of an *individual* as an undivided, autonomous entity, psychoanalysis conceives the *subject* as constituted within the field of the Other—within language and culture—in an inherently divided structure. This conception can already be found in Freud, though articulated through a different vocabulary, most notably the concept of the *psychic apparatus*. In Freud’s model, the psychic instances—the Id, Ego, and Superego—are not detached from the social environment (Freud, 2010[1930]). The Superego is the instance that regulates, surveils, and punishes the Ego, maintaining constant vigilance and evaluating whether the Ego acts according to the ideals it has internalized—ideals that are themselves

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culturally determined (Pena; Moreira; Guerra, 2020). Lacan, in turn, reinterprets the Superego in relation to the *death drive*, positing that it issues a single command: *enjoy!* This imperative traps the subject in an endless cycle of repetition, since nothing ever feels sufficient to satisfy it (Pena; Moreira; Guerra, 2020). For both Freud and Lacan, the Superego operates as a punitive force; however, while Freud's Superego functions through prohibition, Lacan's operates through the imperative of enjoyment—an injunction to *do more*.

Although there are significant differences that will not be discussed here, both Freud's and Lacan's perspectives understand the Superego as being constituted through family romances and cultural ideals, and as an instance with a potentially destructive impact on the subject (Pena; Moreira; Guerra, 2020). When suffering is associated with language, it is also related to the ideals of a given historical period. Thus, the demands related to the "entrepreneur of the self," which circulate around imperatives such as "you can't stop," "you have to do it," "you must give your best," and "everything depends on you," are articulated with the Superego insofar as they represent commands that are, on one hand, never sufficient and, on the other, if not fulfilled, lead to the subject's punishment. In many cases, the result is a pervasive sense of inadequacy, frequently reported by the participants.

In this sense, the rhetoric of maximum effort, self-responsibility, and individualism drives the subject to demand too much—often excessively—from themselves, producing a form of suffering with considerable pathological potential. This becomes even more severe in contexts where social bonds are weakened or where the logic of solidarity is absent, as when information about navigating academic life—from basic bureaucratic procedures to research scholarship opportunities—is not shared among peers.

Final Considerations

This study aimed to present the *AconChegar* extension project, a series of care circles held between 2020 and 2022. The idea of creating this space for undergraduate students arose from the growing reports of suffering and mental distress within the university environment. Thus, the experience of the care circles, by offering a collective space for speech and listening, enabled participants to articulate their suffering through words and direct it toward others, fostering recognition and the shared sentiment described by many as "you are not alone."

The act of recognizing and naming forms of suffering—and the way in which we do so—transforms how we relate to them. It is, therefore, a political exercise (Dunker, 2015).

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Throughout the circles, participants repeatedly expressed discomfort with the online teaching model, particularly fatigue and exhaustion from the long hours spent in front of screens and the overwhelming number of virtual activities. The lack of breaks and the constant pressure to multitask, though advantageous in some ways, led to considerable emotional exhaustion. Moreover, the reduction of the university experience to the virtual classroom weakened interpersonal connections among students. Having a support network is essential for navigating academic life, yet many participants reported difficulties in building meaningful relationships, often leading to feelings of isolation.

We also identified a form of suffering with significant pathological potential, stemming from the extremely high standards students impose on themselves and the perception that they are the only ones struggling. Feelings of inadequacy frequently emerge through comparisons with others, as students see themselves as falling short of an unattainable ideal. This situation is exacerbated in contexts where social bonds are fragile or where solidarity is lacking. It is crucial to consider that the intersectionality of gender, race, and class can intensify this suffering.

The decision to discuss this recurring malaise through the lens of neoliberalism arose from the connection between these narratives of suffering and the logic of the entrepreneur of the self. Thus, we advocate for naming and sharing these experiences in a way that situates the subject within their relationship to ideals and social bonds, rather than interpreting them as isolated disorders. When each person is compelled to manage their life individually, there is little time or space left to care for others—a condition aptly captured by the popular saying, “each one in their own square.”

Another effect of neoliberalism in education concerns the production of research itself. Much of the scholarship addressing so-called “psychological disorders” relies exclusively on quantitative methods aimed at identifying vulnerability and protection factors, such as levels of social skills that indicate a person’s tendency to develop anxiety (Borba; Hayasida; Lopes, 2019) and/or depression (Bolsoni-Silva; Guerra, 2014). The same is true of studies on suicide. In this context, suffering tends to be conceptualized as an individual phenomenon, detached from social bonds.

In the *AconChegar* circles, most participants were Black women. Therefore, it is not possible to disregard the impact of these social conditions on students’ experiences and how they influence mental health. While this study considered the relevance of intersectionality in analyzing the results, it is noteworthy that issues of race, class, and gender did not explicitly

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emerge as complaints among the participants. In this sense, although not directly expressed by the students, it is possible to infer that the logic of the "entrepreneur of the self," grounded in individual responsibility, constructs a universal subject that may intensify suffering—often unnamed—among Black individuals and women. When this logic intersects with the material and subjective barriers that Black women face in the university setting, such as the difficulty of feeling a sense of belonging and recognition, the level of suffering may be further amplified.

A limitation of this study lies in the fact that *AconChegar* took place in a virtual format, which created a paradoxical space. On the one hand, participants frequently reported dissatisfaction with the virtualization of everyday life; on the other, the sharing of care and experiences in the circles was only possible through an online platform—the only feasible alternative amid the social isolation imposed by COVID-19. Thus, although physical contact was absent, another form of presence was established as a mode of care, allowing *AconChegar* to be recognized by participants as an important tool for health promotion and illness prevention throughout the academic semesters.

Not being alone—and not feeling alone—within the university environment emerges as a potential means of preventing psychological distress and promoting students' mental health, fostering shared and collectively constructed care through interpersonal connection. The care circles, therefore, represented a collective response to suffering, challenging the neoliberal logic that insists on individualizing and pathologizing all forms of distress. Accordingly, we argue that the creation of other shared spaces of care, grounded in attentive listening—whether through extension projects or student-led initiatives—can serve as essential alternative models of student support in the face of neoliberal demands.

Unlike the anonymous words scrawled on bathroom doors, the circles constituted a meaningful space for collective sharing, where students could express their worries and anxieties, be recognized in their suffering, and listen to and acknowledge others in theirs. The belief that "I'm the only one going through this" was disrupted through this process, enabling the understanding that each person, in their own way, grapples with the challenging experience of being at the university.

Thus, *AconChegar* became a sustained effort to create a space not aimed at productivity, skill enhancement, or career preparation, but rather a place where students could simply *be*—without the pervasive discomfort.

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