

ALTERNATIVES TO DISENCHANTMENT? AN INTERNET-MEDIATED RESEARCH DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Over the past three decades, extraordinary changes have taken place in the daily lives of families with sufficiently high purchasing power to guarantee access to digital devices and internet connection. Nowadays people have access to nearly unlimited information on their digital, mobile and ubiquitous devices and are themselves information to be accessed from anywhere in the world. Not only does the internet connect people to machines, but also to other people through social networks, online games, blogs / websites and the most diverse digital platforms, such as Facebook, Google, Uber, Ifood, Netflix, Tinder and Spotify. The notions of time and space are transformed, and we start to live in a hybrid space, where real and virtual coexist. In parallel with the use of digital platforms, balance and health started to be sought, more and more, by means of psychotropic drugs, whose consumption starts in childhood and makes us wonder what this world is, which saddens, shakes, bewilders, and disenchant. It is in this sense that people seem to be adapting to a new historical moment in which a large part of thoughts and feelings disturbs them. By struggling against those, human beings struggle against their own humanity. Some other problems came to light with the COVID-19 pandemic: the physical contact restriction confined people to their homes, where they often found even more discomfort and, in many cases, violence of all kinds. On the other hand, digital technologies have enabled social isolation to be circumvented, given the countless possibilities for interaction that they offer. Therefore, this study aims to reflect on the possibilities of personal and social action in the face of challenging situations, towards the construction of assertive and respectful, non-coercive relationships. To this end, based on Behavior Analysis concepts, we attempt to clarify the extent to which the same circumstances that cause pleasure can justify an increasing difficulty in dealing with frustrations, boredom and other emotions identified as being negative, taking into account consideration the internet use during the COVID-19 pandemic. To illustrate this perspective, we present an internet-mediated research, developed this year with ten families, aiming the creation of spaces for dialogue and reflection between a child and its mother or father, favoring the quality of the relationship between them and the child's self-esteem. We point out that participants, as well as us all, can reinvent contemplative activities alongside greater proactivity.

Keywords: *Digital platforms, internet-mediated research, COVID-19, behavior analysis.*

1. Introduction

1969 was the year that man stepped on the moon and the first steps towards the internet were taken (Collins, 2019; Curran, 2016). Three decades later, Bauman (2000) unified, under the term "liquid modernity", the idea that something had been lost in human relations, in terms of consistency and stability. More pessimistic and more optimistic views have been added around the human experience, which, through the clash between culture and nature, values, and impulses, had already been meticulously investigated by thinkers from different areas, such as Nietzsche (1998) and Freud (1930).

Skinner (1986), resuming the debate with the intention of clarifying what can be done to build an eventual peace between desire and satisfaction, indicated that contentment cannot be found disconnected from taking action. It is interesting to note that, just a few years later, there was a growth in the availability of access to digital devices and the internet, when contemplative attitudes started to become increasingly present in the daily life.

Around these circumstances, this study aims to reflect on the possibilities of personal and social action in the face of challenging situations, towards the construction of assertive and respectful, non-coercive relationships. We present, as an example, a research that uses the internet to bring together

people from the same family who, isolated in their homes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, found themselves with limited conditions to practice the types of actions that would allow them to naturally achieve greater balance.

2. Third millennium

The third millennium is marked by relations mediated by the internet and, therefore, by innovations that precede it. The 1960s and 1970s were fundamental for the development of all the technological communicational apparatus that exists today. Computers were generated in World War II and were born in 1946 in Philadelphia, United States. Before that, there were already some experiments with warlike ends (Castells, 1999). However, it was in the 1960s that computers came to be seen as communication machines (Streeter, 2011).

In the 1970s there were thousands of young people in Silicon Valley, in the United States, who had fun making radios, high-fidelity amplifiers and telecommunication technologies (Lévy, 1993). It was in this context that the personal computer was invented. In 1976, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak founded Apple to market a personal computer, the Apple 1. From then on there has been the development of microprocessors, miniaturization and lower prices of these technologies, allowing them to be popularized and be part of people's routine (Castells, 1999).

The publication of information on mobile digital media, in turn, was made possible thanks to the process of miniaturizing phones and computers in addition to the emergence of the mobile internet (Goggin, Ling, & Hjorth, 2015; Westlund, 2014).

Mobile phone services have been available since the 1960s and from the late 1970s and early 1980s they began to be commercialized (Goggin et al., 2015). In the 1980s, cell phones only had the function of calling. The first digital cell phones appeared in the 1990s with the second generation (2G), making it possible to send and receive SMS (Short Message Service) and browse the internet through the WAP protocol (Wireless Application Protocol) - even though the speed of data transmission was low and the cost high. Currently, the fifth generation (5G) is already available in some countries. Apple's iPhone and iPad launches in 2007 and 2010 are considered milestones in the history of mobile digital media (Pellanda, 2009). With each new function added to these devices, they would become more like computers.

The creation and development of the internet resulted from the union of military strategy, scientific cooperation, technological initiative and countercultural innovation. The internet emerged in 1969, when the United States Department of Security Research Agency (ARPA) created a computer network called ARPANET (Castells, 1999; Streeter, 2011). In the 1990s, the development of Ted Nelson's hypertext, using Tim Berners Lee's HTML language, developed the World Wide Web (www), which facilitated the spread of the internet. In the same decade, the spread of the mobile internet began.

Digital mobile devices, especially smartphones, are responsible for the wider access to the internet because they cost much less than desktop computers and laptops. Currently, the most diverse activities of our daily lives can be mediated by digital platforms, such as Facebook, Google, Uber, Ifood, Netflix, Tinder and Spotify. These platforms are "(re)programmable digital infrastructures that facilitate and shape personalized interactions between end users and complementors, organized through systematic collection, algorithmic processing, monetization and data circulation" (Poell, Nieborg, & Van Dijck, 2020, p. 4).

At first, after the emergence of the web, cyberspace was considered disconnected from physical reality. Understanding that the connection through mobile digital supports transforms the space experience by placing remote contexts within present contexts, Souza e Silva (2006) proposed the definition of hybrid spaces for "mobile spaces, created by the constant movement of users who carry portable communication devices continuously connected to the internet and other users" (p. 24).

Due to the intense use of digital platforms during the Covid-19 pandemic, Lemos (2020) stated that we are not experiencing social isolation, but physical isolation: digital media, according to the author, "help to combat loneliness, whether for fun, remote work, psychosocial support, or seeking information about the various dimensions of the pandemic. This is a fundamental difference in relation to other forms of social isolation implemented by other epidemics" (para. 3).

3. Disenchantment and reinforcement

When reflecting on the advances of humanity, Harari (2016) concludes that the biggest health problems of today can be prevented with healthy eating and, more than ever, people die from old age. As such, "the average human being is far more likely to die from bingeing at McDonald's than from drought, Ebola, or an al-Qaeda attack." On the other hand: "more people commit suicide than all killed by soldiers, terrorists and criminals combined" (p. 12).

Use of psychotropic drugs since childhood and increasing difficulty in dealing with emotions make up the same phenomenon: the reality that provides us with the basis for having a good life, disenchant us. Much of the thoughts and feelings are disturbing, and as we fight them, we fight our own humanity and turn any possible satisfaction into more frustration and boredom.

These circumstances, however, are not as new as they may seem. More than thirty years ago, Skinner (1986) wondered what is wrong with everyday life in the Western world and his answers remain current for the West and also for those who have reached a similar standard of living, even if they live in countries that represent, according to Hall (2016), “the rest”.

To understand Skinner’s and, therefore, Behavior Analysis reasoning, we need to consider that there are two types of reinforcement - positive and negative. The negative reinforcement corresponds to successful escapes and avoidances, and the positive is central to the analysis of the discontent of the wealthiest people - precisely those who seemly could have a good quality of life (Skinner, 1976, 1965).

In positive reinforcement, we come in contact with reinforcers, like in watching television and cycling. Obviously, nothing is equally reinforcing for all people, but we tend to feel good about what is reinforcing to us. In addition, we need not consciously realize the effects that relationships have on us so that they affect us (Skinner, 1965).

When trying to answer why we are not satisfied even with so many reinforcers available, Skinner (1986) draws attention to the difference between reinforcers with whom we come in contact through the adoption of more contemplative (like watching television) or more active postures (like riding a bicycle). The search for an explanation led him to the history of the human species.

Nowadays, we can do many things with pleasant consequences, but they are often quite different from what we did during much of the history of the development of the human species. Our organism is the product of thousands of years of evolution in which the sensation of pleasure depended on chains of extraordinarily complex actions. For a long time, there was no food in the refrigerator, kept at a step of the hands, or a remote control that would turn on a device and put us in front of other places or other times. Merely contemplative actions certainly did not guarantee our survival (Skinner, 1986).

In the clash between phylogenesis and culture, there are daily practices that represent the loss of the inclination to act, which allowed us to survive as a species. Thus, “where thousands of millions of people in other parts of the world cannot do many of the things they want to do, hundreds of millions of people in the West do not want to do many of the things they can do” (Skinner, 1986, p. 568). An example is the presence of elevator operators, so that we, who no longer need to climb stairs, avoid even pressing a button corresponding to the desired floor. Automation has been exponentially increasing the number of examples, but if we consider the simple following of rules, which guarantees accurate movements towards what we want, we will see how much we no longer need to experiment, make mistakes, discover, and invent.

Engaging in contemplative activities is not bad - on the contrary. We would not have art without those who admire it and we certainly had no culture without rules. What hurts is the imbalance, when contemplative activities take up almost all of our free time. In a movement to remedy the hardships of easy access to pleasure, now transformed into the difficulty of experiencing the sensation of pleasure, health professionals, such as Melo, Oliveira and Vasconcelos-Raposo (2014), tirelessly repeat that we must do physical activities so that we can have balance, including mental.

While we were thinking about these issues, the year of 2020 began and a pandemic that would put us indoors full time, surrendered to the sophisticated contemplation that the internet provides and that guaranteed, for many, social contact and a source of income.

4. Internet mediation: An example of family intervention

Started in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has put reality in new terms. Serious problems were added to the health crisis. For example, restricting people to the limits of their homes has generated a huge increase in domestic and family violence (Evans, Lindauer, & Farrell, 2020). Remote activities, such as home office and homeschooling, were also accompanied by a considerable increase in stress experienced on a daily basis (Homayoun, 2020).

In addition, the pandemic destabilized the hypothesis of Harari (2016) regarding the era of natural epidemics having come to an end and hindered the proactivity encouraged by Skinner (1986). An important challenge became how to fight contagion and, at the same time, counterbalance contemplative activities to reduce the destructive impact that they usually promote.

Digital technologies have, in a way, overcome social isolation, given the countless possibilities for interaction that they offer. We briefly present a study conducted this year at the Universidade da Amazônia (UNAMA), which foresaw the formation of face-to-face groups of children in schools, but needed to be remodeled due to the pandemic. The use of literary texts was maintained in interventions mediated by the

internet that brought together members of the same family. WhatsApp enabled the sharing of interventional material, such as Google Forms and children's storytelling videos available on the YouTube¹ platform. At the end of the process, a form was sent only to the adult participant with questions regarding the child's assessment and his own (Darwich, Carvalho and Moura, 2020).

We paid special attention to the creation of non-coercive spaces for dialogue and reflection between the child and his mother or father in order to favor interaction at that moment, but also to serve as an example for all social exchanges (Sidman, 1989). We encouraged the adult to show closeness and affection, with presentation of clear but flexible rules and limits, which characterizes the democratic or authoritative parenting style, favoring the healthy development of the child (Santrock, 2014). Attention to the child as a person, with their strengths and deficiencies to be overcome and with space for authentic expression of thoughts and feelings should be especially favorable to self-esteem (Guilhardi, 2002).

In addition, the use of storytelling aimed to open space for the pleasure of reading, writing and sharing own creations, evaluated by other studies of ours. Thus, we also seek to indirectly combat the problem of school dropout (Darwich & Garcia, 2019; Darwich, Nunes, & Souza, 2020).

The sample comprised ten pairs of participants, each one from the same family and with children aged 4 to 11 years, from Brazil and Portugal. In this sense, the parents acquired the role originally assigned to the researchers, staying with the child, talking to the child and filling out forms.

Six children's books were selected, with different challenges and overcoming strategies. From the books, videos were edited by the research group, and the questions on the forms were created. An average of six questions per form related the story told in the video to the children's experiences and emphasized the possibility of practical actions in different contexts. Two categories of analysis were created to assess the favoring of children's self-esteem by adults: attention to the person and attention to behaviors. As a result, the adult participants revealed that the research provided moments of positive exchange with the children and made it clear to them the value of having family dialogue.

5. Conclusions

For Behavior Analysis, most of our life experiences correspond to the intertwining between the contexts in which we participate, our actions and the consequences they generate, regardless of whether we consciously perceive the changes we cause in the world, and therefore, in ourselves (Skinner, 1965, 1976). This would explain why it is so often difficult to put into practice what we want, even though theoretically it just depended on moving in that direction.

Generally speaking, the same circumstances that generate pleasure can justify an increasing difficulty in dealing with frustrations, boredom and other emotions identified as negative. Astonished by his own emotions, the human being tries to control them at any price and ends up paying with his own health (Skinner, 1986).

In a pandemic situation, researchers and participants were able to share activities carried out through the internet and digital technologies. Thus, communication mediated by the internet reconfigured behaviors, but also research practices. In the example described here, we brought together a parent and a son or daughter, out of a total of ten families. The results demonstrate positive effects of the attention received by the child for having the adult watching video with him, reading questions and writing down the answers in the absence of charges or other pressures.

The pandemic offered our research group new possibilities to not only study resilience, but to put it into practice. Like Skinner (1948), we find it necessary to always try new alternatives, maintaining proactive postures in response to the challenges we face. The procedures we created for internet-mediated intervention are also suitable for face-to-face group intervention, as in the case of conversation circles. We hope to contribute to debates that unfold in even more researches aimed at building citizenship and more harmonious and non-coercive social relations.

We ended by remembering *The Little Prince* (Saint-Exupéry, 2000) who, in front of a seller of pills to quench his thirst that allowed him to save fifty-three minutes a week, thought: "if I had fifty-three minutes to spend as I liked, I should walk at my leisure toward a spring of fresh water" (p. 63).

¹Our videos can be found in the "Reading with the Experiential Groups" playlist on YouTube. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLx6cJKqj-gtcaqAq3SJf8sE2ICRuYMx_0.

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