

Open Minds

Internacional Journal

ISSN 2675-5157

vol. 1, n. 2, 2025

... ARTICLE 11

Acceptance date: 29/10/2025

FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF MENTAL DISTRESS AMONG VETERINARY MEDICINE STUDENTS

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Abstract: Mental distress among university students enrolled in veterinary medicine programs has been studied due to their high susceptibility to stress, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. Despite the volume of epidemiological research mapping the mental health of university students and its statistical correlations, there is a significant gap in the analysis of academic discourse and interactions between teachers and students. This qualitative and exploratory study investigated the perspective of veterinary medicine teachers on the mental health of students through semi-structured interviews. Seven professors were interviewed, four from public institutions and three from private institutions, in different Brazilian states. The results allowed us to argue that although veterinary medicine education has made progress in promoting dialogue and student autonomy, an outdated structure centered on the simple transmission of information persists. This traditional approach continues to influence the professional lives of graduates, impacting both their relationships with employers and with tutors and patients. The demands of the university are reflected and extended in the demands of the job market, creating continuity between academic training and professional expectations.

Keywords: Teaching, Veterinary Medicine, mental suffering.

INTRODUCTION

Mental suffering among university students has been the subject of a growing number of studies, especially in the health field, where students are more susceptible to disorders associated with stress, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse

(CARDWELL et al., 2013; CARDWELL, LEWIS, 2017; FIOROTTI et al.; 2010; LIMA et al., 2003; RIOS et al., 2019). There are several factors that can determine such cases, one of which is the age group of students (PAPALIA & FELDMAN, 2010).

On a more personal level, as a veterinary medicine professional and academic, my current degree in psychology allows me to contemplate issues I have experienced and witnessed in my previous training. Among them is mental suffering, raising questions about the perspectives through which the student body views this phenomenon and how academia can mitigate or contribute to the worsening of anxieties and psychiatric disorders among those who attend university. Veterinary medicine corroborates the statistics on mental suffering not only among students but also among trained professionals. Recent studies (we refer here to studies conducted in the United States, given that Brazilian studies focus on human medicine) maintain that the suicide rate among veterinarians is considerably higher than that observed in the general population (TOMASI et al., 2019).

That said, there is a clear need to listen to the mental suffering of veterinary medicine students. Given the methodological and ethical challenges involved in interviewing students, we opted for a different approach: analyzing faculty discourse in order to observe how academic discourse is configured in veterinary medicine, identify the main causes of psychological distress among students, and understand faculty perceptions of the factors identified, thereby developing possibilities for health and care practices for students.

Although there are numerous epidemiological studies with a methodological

focus on mapping the mental health of university students (CARDWELL et al., 2013; CARDWELL, LEWIS, 2017; RIOS et al., 2019), there are no studies that analyze academic discourse through faculty narratives (interviews), searching for verbal, nonverbal, and paraverbal elements that can contribute to a broader understanding of pedagogical practice and proposals for new paths in the teacher-student relationship.

The general objective was to investigate the perspective of Veterinary Medicine teachers in relation to the mental health of students. The specific objectives were:

- To describe and analyze the possible forms of bonding established between students and teachers from the teachers' perspective;
- To investigate possible factors that may trigger mental distress in veterinary medicine training;
- To describe how and in what ways the academic environment promotes and/or harms students' mental health;
- To ascertain whether veterinary medicine education is a repository of information or based on dialogue and the promotion of student autonomy.

THEORETICAL REFERENCE

Studies on the topic of mental distress among health science students primarily focus on students. Reviews of the national literature (RIOS, 2019) corroborate the hypothesis of a high prevalence of mental illness, with frequent use of psychoactive substances.

Cross-sectional studies with psychological scales (SRQ-20) established multiva-

riate analysis of risk factors conducted with veterinary medicine students in the United Kingdom (CARDWELL et al., 2013) and with medical students in Brazil (LIMA, 2006; FIOROTTI, 2010). The hypotheses concern the existence of different stressors during undergraduate studies. Such research with medical students points to factors such as loss of personal freedom, high course demands, and intense competition fostered in the university environment itself. The heavy workload is associated with a lack of time for leisure and sleep deprivation. Interpersonal difficulties between students and/or between students and faculty, as well as in the first interactions with patients, add to the degree of challenge. Issues such as an unfavorable teaching-learning environment, information overload, and difficulty in choosing a career path may also arise (RIOS, 2019; FIOROTTI, 2010).

Lesnau and Santos (2013) pointed out that in Brazil there are shortcomings inherited from a technical education system, where veterinarians graduate without emotional preparation. The authors highlight the avoidance of the topic of "death," creating extremely technical guidelines.

According to Rios and Sirino (2015), there are other anxiety-inducing factors such as physical resources (financial and human): the demand for health services exceeds supply (in teaching hospitals), a factor of dehumanization in human medicine. In veterinary medicine, we have additional issues, such as the psychological impact of euthanasia as a professional routine, the higher frequency of deaths (either due to the much shorter life cycle of patients or due to technical resource constraints) concomitant with the attachment between guardians and their pets (DEPONTI et al., 2023).

Thus, one of the questions that arises in this scenario is: “What is proposed today in the teaching of veterinary medicine?”

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

The research is qualitative and exploratory in nature. The information collection procedure was based on semi-structured interviews with a previously structured script with professors from the Veterinary Medicine course at public and private institutions. We stipulated as inclusion criteria that the professors be from different disciplines of the Veterinary Medicine course currently taught at Brazilian universities. The aim was to obtain a sample of participants with the largest number of professors with the greatest possible variability in areas of practice (, “Reproduction, Nutrition, and Animal Production,” “Pathology,” and “Epidemiology/ Preventive Medicine”), within the possibilities and feasibility of the project. Participants were recruited by convenience sampling. Initial contact was made by email available in a public document—the Lattes curriculum vitae of potential participants. During the initial contact, the Information Letter and the Free and Informed Consent Form were made available. The rest of the sample was composed of snowball sampling, that is, based on participant referrals. We defined as an exclusion criterion teachers who had already taught classes to the researcher during her training.

We obtained seven participants, four from public institutions (two in the state of São Paulo, one in Rio Grande do Norte, and one in Paraná) and three from private institutions in São Paulo, capital. All interviews were conducted remotely, for the con-

venience and choice of the interviewees, and recorded with their permission. The Google Meets platform was used, selected for its security (encryption in transit), ease of access (free of charge), and the possibility of organizing new free meetings if the 60-minute limit was exceeded. The Information Letter and TCLE were made available to participants via email in PDF format for electronic signature and are available in the appendix. The information collected was transcribed and subjected to discourse analysis according to the method recommended by Foucault.

Discourse Analysis is an approach in the field of linguistics and communication that emerged in France in the 20th century, in dialogue with other fields of knowledge, such as Sociology and Psychoanalysis. Jacques Pêcheux deals with discursive formation based on the premise that discourse is woven from many others and that enunciation itself always occurs from a socio-historical place (GADET, 1993). According to Caregnato and Mutti (2006), “it can be said that the corpus of discourse analysis consists of the following formulation: ideology + history + language” (p. 683), such that:

(...) the subject is not individual, but subject to the collective, that is, this subjection occurs at the unconscious level, when the subject affiliates with or internalizes the knowledge of the collective construction, becoming the spokesperson for that discourse and representative of that meaning (p. 681).

There are different strands in the field of discourse analysis. In this work, we used Michel Foucault's perspective, which dialogues with historical materialism and psychoanalysis. This perspective takes into account that enunciative (or speech) acts are inscribed in larger discursive formations and according to a regime of truth. Consciously or not, we are obeying a socially established set of rules, so that "the 'things said' are therefore radically tied to the dynamics of power and knowledge of their time" (FISCHER, 2001, p. 204).

Fischer (2001) points out that, just as Foucault's work (1978/2004) identifies the coexistence of heterogeneous utterances in psychiatric discourse, the same phenomenon can be observed in other enunciative formations, such as in the media. We start from the premise that this is also valid for Veterinary Medicine and Academia. Once faced with the produced text, it is necessary to delimit the thematic axis, establishing discursive excerpts when finding and characterizing frequent repetitions. In these excerpts, it is necessary to identify the confrontation of heterogeneous meanings that lie in the memory of the enunciator, unconsciously marking the discourse. The interpretation is then made between interdiscourse and intradiscourse, "reaching the positions represented by the subjects through linguistic marks" (CAREGNATO & MUTTI, 2006, p. 682).

Thus, the study puts forward hypotheses about how academic discourse is configured and the ways in which it affects the mental health of veterinary medicine students, identifying discursive elements that may provide support for further studies and, ultimately, contribute to proposals for intervention.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The objective of this stage of the work is to analyze the most relevant excerpts from the interviewees' reports. The questions and answers were grouped into three thematic categories for analysis: student profile, challenges in teaching, and mental distress at university and in the job market.

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT PROFILE

The first aspect addressed in the interview script refers to the "ideal" and "real" profiles pointed out by the interviewees. For identification purposes, we numbered the interviewees from public institutions starting with the digit 100 (101 to 104) and those from private institutions starting with the digit 200 (201 to 203), totaling 7 interviewees.

Interviewee E101 has been teaching for 8 years and currently teaches a course on pig production at a public institution. The student profile he observes is that of students who are "very studious, but insecure." Although they are diligent, he observes a lack of practical initiative in contrast to their commitment to their studies: "(...) perhaps they are more studious than they really want to get their hands dirty, to experience the animal." He also comments on an expectation of working in a wildlife/exotic animal clinic, with no interest in animal production, which denotes a conflict with the reality of the market. This description of the cosmopolitan student fits with what the professor defines as **the "snowflake student"**: "(This) ... issue with students, maybe they're a little afraid, insecure, right? I think that's a pretty critical point nowadays, right? I even joke s times that students are a little

like ‘snowflakes,’ right? If you give them too much heat, they end up melting.”

The issue of **insecurity** and **lack of leadership in learning** appears repeatedly in the interviews. E103, who has been teaching for 12 years in the field of Surgery and Anesthesiology at a public institution, mentions that he encounters “several different profiles, some very insecure, others less insecure, very confident at times... Sometimes they have more confidence than judgment (...).” He also observes “students who are very executors and may have difficulty developing well in subjects that require a lot of reasoning.”

E104 has been teaching for eight years. Today, he teaches Dog and Cat Nutrition at a public institution. The professor does not believe there is an “ideal” student profile and has noticed changes in the attitude of today’s students compared to when he was an undergraduate:

I think we make a comparison, perhaps because we are new, between how we were and how they are. But I don’t believe we are ideal. In fact, I think we were far from ideal. We were very much like, ‘Oh, the teacher said so, it’s right! Period, let’s go, it’s over.’ And you have to sit there for four hours listening to the class, and if it’s not really going to add anything to you, man... And I don’t know if that’s ideal, I don’t think so (E104).

E104’s statement reveals the student’s recognition of their autonomy and a shift from the traditional paradigm of the teacher’s authority as the sole holder of knowledge.

In private institutions, there are reports of performance problems among some students and other issues related to unrealistic expectations regarding the course. E201,

who has been teaching for nine years in the area of Small Animal Clinical Medicine at a private institution, observes a division between students with a “biological profile” and those with a “mathematical profile” who have difficulty assimilating “inexact” aspects of biological processes. Another difficulty is students who seek veterinary medicine because they “don’t like people,” with relational and communication difficulties, which leads to greater challenges in the job market with “animal guardians becoming increasingly demanding.” The interviewee mentions **immediacy** as a marked characteristic of the current generation of students, permeating expectations about the job market and remuneration:

I think there has been a change over the years; the immaturity of students entering the course now is a little greater (...). What I notice in the change in course graduates is immediacy. They have this idea that, for example, they will start working, they will start an internship, and they will earn what their friend who studies business administration and is doing an internship earns (...). The current generation wants everything yesterday. They want a good salary yesterday, they think they will graduate and immediately go on to graduate school (E201).

Also at a private institution, E202 has been teaching for two years in the areas of Animal Product Technology (TPOA) and Ruminant Production. The interviewee characterizes the student as someone who

“often appreciates animals, but not medicine itself,” noting “difficulty in terms of memory, in terms of retaining knowledge, because it is a very content-heavy course.”

Here, we observe an emphasis on the need for different teaching-learning models, based on the cognitive individuality (skills and abilities) of each student. At the same time, there is a considerable difference between the reports from public institutions and private institutions regarding the view of student performance if we compare the statements of E101 with those of E201 and E202, for example. While E101’s statement reveals a student profile with very high self-expectations, the difficulties observed in the statements of E102, E201, and E202 are more related to students who are not very engaged (E102 and E201) or who have difficulties assimilating the volume of program content (E202).

In terms of the type of professional that the Veterinary Medicine course aims to train, the responses were divided into two subcategories: one of a more market-oriented nature, in the sense of meeting the demands of the labor market for a certain type of professional, and another of a more ethical-philosophical nature, which concerns the values and ideals sought in the professional in training. Respondents E101, E103, and 201 showed signs of the first type of discourse: “Professionals who have the minimum ability to finish college and be able to practice the profession” (E201).

(I seek to train) **problem solvers** (...). And more specifically in my area, you will work on a farm (...), which involves meeting the demands of the producer

and generating an economic advantage for them (E101).

Within the subjects I teach, I would like professionals to have the **minimum ability to perform**, even if with difficulties, even if not super skilled, but with confidence (E103).

E202, E302, and E104, on the other hand, gave answers more in line with the second type. E104 states: “I work to **train professionals who think**.” E202 states that its goal is to “**train thinking individuals**.” E203 goes even further:

To train critical people (...). You know if that knowledge is really a fact, right? If it’s not just someone’s opinion. But mainly responsible citizens, **to make people aware of decisions that impact not only their lives, but the lives of animals and the lives of other people and other animals** (E203).

Regarding the relationship with students, E201 teaches at a private institution and points out a positive characteristic of this type of institution in relation to public institutions with regard to the teacher-student relationship:

There is another teacher who teaches with me, who is from a public institution, right? And she says that she feels a distance from the teacher, right? She always had this

view that the teacher is like a god, and that it's difficult to access them, to talk to them, right? (...) I see that within private institutions, at least within XXXX, we are very open. Teachers are very close to their students and much more involved (E201).

However, the statements by E101, E103, and E104, both from public institutions, indicate a close relationship with students. While E101 characterizes his teaching as "horizontal, as far as possible," E103 and E104 portray their personal teaching experience with enthusiasm. E103 states:

I think it's amazing that we can train professionals. To help train these people who will be working as our colleagues in a few years. So, for me, it's an experience in which, if I had to do it all over again, I would choose the same paths, because for me it's extremely positive, rewarding... personal and professional fulfillment (E103).

CHALLENGES

Gaining students' attention appears as the main challenge in five of the seven interviews, with some teachers highlighting the relationship with the education system. E101 reports: "(...) outside Brazil, in Europe, the United States, students have a much lighter class load, right? They end up studying a lot on their own. So I think it would be very difficult here in Brazil, because we don't have that culture." E201 identifies the

main challenge as the student's difficulty in "understanding themselves as responsible for their learning," attributing this initiative to the student.

The difficulty of adapting to the education system also involves the issue of the volume of course content, according to E202:

I think they start to develop a certain **anxiety** when they realize that the volume of material is very large (...). I think that when we go into this vein of anxiety, it's because that person, that individual, is giving too much importance to what they are doing. But when it appears, when they start to get very anxious, for example, during a test, they end up becoming more emotional and unable to think clearly (E202).

In the same vein, E103, who teaches Anesthesiology, points out:

And the difficulty we really have is the **volume of material**. They have a lot of difficulty, especially with anesthesiology. It is considered a difficult subject. The failure rate is high because they are, they are very executors, many of them (E103).

We see that the difficulty in assimilating the content of the subjects is partly attributed to the outdated teaching format, partly to the intrinsic characteristics of the

subject (content-based course), and partly to the current configuration of the excess of available information. In this scenario, E202 affirms the need to adapt the Veterinary Medicine curriculum matrix in this sense:

I think there will come a point where these sciences will be so developed that it will not be possible to have everything in one course. Either we extend the course to six years, or some areas will have to be broken up a little. (...). Combined with this, I think we can't lose sight of the fact that we are living in a time when we have access to a lot of information. If we remain so content-focused, I think it will be very difficult for students to keep up. We see that the failure and retention rates for the semester are sometimes quite high (E202).

E202 reports experiencing a lot of anxiety and apprehension about performance, even having sought medical attention at the time due to anxiety symptoms:

For me, it was more negative, I think. But look, I remained functional, I never dropped out, I never failed a semester. (...) But it was a very difficult experience for me, one that I never imagined would be like that. So, my big problem was dealing with **such a large volume of information**. I just couldn't do it. (...) And when I finished the course,

during my final project, it was the first time I had to seek treatment for anxiety (...). And that's when I had to seek my first treatment (E202).

MENTAL SUFFERING

Regarding the mental suffering of students, the perceptions of teachers about suicide statistics in Veterinary Medicine and possible precipitating factors were addressed: the job market outlook, the reality of the already trained veterinarian, the current student profile, study and work overload, frequent contact with death in various dimensions (slaughter, euthanasia), and the still deficient support from the University on such issues.

Job market outlook and the reality of the trained professional

The reality of the job market for professionals and the suffering caused by the outlook were identified issues, also encompassing the devaluation of the profession (socially and financially) and the lack of unity within the category (E201). E104 illustrates a scenario in which graduates or recent graduates find themselves: "A good part of our students, he/ , sees no prospects. So they say: 'Man, what's up? What am I going to be? You know? What am I going to do?'" (E104).

We note that E104 attributes responsibility to the trained professional for the graduate's "disillusionment" regarding entry into the job market. E103 corroborates this perspective:

He is on call, but the clinic does not pay him to be on call all the time. He does not stay at the clinic; he is called to provide care. Then, at the end of the day, he closes the clinic and leaves the animals there without support. (...) But he cannot stay, because the next day he has to go back there to continue his work. This causes distress, causes anxiety: “What am I doing with my life, what am I doing with the lives of these animals?” And poor pay is another thing that I think causes a lot, a lot, a lot of dissatisfaction and puts the boys into depression. Those who are successful have no rest (E103).

“Those who are successful have no rest.” This last sentence echoes in several testimonials and raises the debate in a broader sphere, which is the neoliberal model of labor exploitation, brutal in the health sector, where emotional demand adds to physical fatigue: “I think that veterinarians tend to work three shifts a day and, depending on the area, also on the third shift, weekends. It is uninterrupted work” (E202).

In the neoliberal model of labor exploitation, the veterinary profession still faces the challenge of remuneration, which is much lower than that of doctors, for example. E202 draws attention to the practice of workers opening a company and being hired as a legal entity, without the labor rights listed in the Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT), a prevalent reality in the hiring of on-call workers in small animal clinics:

Not least because it is a poorly paid field. I think it is a field that people socially consider to be attractive. However, I do not perceive that professionals are valued either financially or from the point of view of... Do you understand? The law is not being complied with. I observe that there is a (...) pejotização (sic). (...) What is this about increasingly reducing the benefits of these professionals so that they work longer hours (E202).

Along with the issue of professional compensation, we can't forget the financial difficulties faced by pet owners, another challenge that's pretty typical in small animal clinics and that can affect professionals:

I think that the clinic sometimes ends up being very thankless, right? In the sense that you strive to solve the animal's problem and sometimes the owner does not have the resources to pay for adequate and appropriate treatment for the animal. (...) Well, I know that I can solve the animal's problem, but (...) the guardian cannot pay. So that sometimes ends up undermining us inside (E101).

E104 adds that the lack of remuneration ends up compromising the training and quality of the professional's service:

You're going to have a recent graduate who will earn 180 reais, and he needs to eat! No, it's no use turning around and saying, "Wow, but it was medical malpractice because he couldn't get the patient." Man, he didn't, he didn't learn that in college, you know? "Oh, but he had to specialize." (...) Pay for specialization, how? You know? So, it's a discussion that I see as much more serious in that sense. And does it include the financial factor? Yes. (E104).

Profile of the current student and overload

E201 believes that the increase in manifestations of mental suffering is general and not restricted to veterinary medicine students or professionals. He recognizes that this distress existed in the past but was less communicated due to cultural issues. E103 refers to the concept that students from rural areas would be more "rustic," expressing less emotion and symptoms of emotional distress, using the term "country boy":

I think they... I don't know if this is **something that applies to society as a whole**, but I have the feeling that people are more fragile. In the past, I thought that boys were more like country boys, that is... rustic, where you can say things and people don't get offended so easily. Today, I feel like people are more sensitive, and

sometimes the same phrase you say ends up offending people or upsetting them or causing some kind of distress or anxiety that I didn't see so much before (E103).

She identifies relevant issues such as the use of Ritalin to improve academic performance and perceives students as more emotionally fragile: "Yes, I see them with... many in treatment for anxiety and depression. Many take medication."

I think maybe they already had all these anxieties and now they're being diagnosed, or else they're using things that cause anxiety, for example, everyone takes Ritalin. And then, I don't know what the effects of Ritalin are, but I don't think it's good (laughs)... for those who don't need it (laughs)! So there is a **lot of pressure to perform**, and then they self-medicate with medications that may have side effects and then generate anxiety... (E103).

While on the one hand there is this image of the "country boy," a figure from the past who was not diagnosed with mental disorders, today we see the emergence of the hypersensitive student, the "snowflake student" (E101). Concomitant with this fragility is an association with insecurity, a deep fear of making mistakes, and the need for teachers to be careful with their communication.

In the case of students at private institutions, where the course is part-time and the reality for many is the reconciliation of study and work in the opposite shift, a mental overload is added to the student. E203 comments in particular on the vulnerability of scholarship students:

Perhaps this is an overload of work, because people generally work, right? Because sometimes people work in the morning, work in the afternoon, and study at night. (...) Because it is a private college, we suspect that most students are financially well off, but that is not always the case, right? So there are many scholarship students who may have this self-imposed pressure of “hey, I am, I need to do better in the course” (E203).

Dealing with death

Contact with death is a reality for healthcare professionals, but veterinarians face idiosyncratic situations such as slaughter and euthanasia. Regarding slaughter, a professor of TPOA (Technology of Animal Products, a subject in which techniques for slaughtering farm animals are taught) was interviewed. She works at a private university that does not have a teaching slaughterhouse (and therefore has no contact with the experience of live slaughter). Perhaps for this reason, the issue of slaughter does not appear as a relevant difficulty in E202’s report. The interviewees point to a need for greater preparation of students for the challenge of dealing with death, touching on the

role of the University and the approach and preparation in the curriculum as a proposed solution:

I believe that this statistic is closely related to the fact that... let’s say, the autonomy that veterinarians have in deciding about an animal’s life. For example, if we take the issue of euthanasia, right? (E202).

I think it would be really important for us to better prepare students for these issues of grief and loss. I think it would be important to have more specific training in this area. (...) Yes, I think it should actually be included in the curriculum, right? (E101).

E102 associates the difficulty of dealing with death with the more urban profile of students and also associates women with a more “sentimental” type: “Students who are more attached to small animals, pets, they are more sentimental. (...) There are many women, right?” (E102). Once again, clinical medicine seems to be the area where difficulties are most evident. E102 reports his suffering in relation to experiences of death and diseases that are difficult to control:

I went through an outbreak of enterotoxemia in the group of animals I was experimenting on, right? And many animals died, thirty-odd animals died in the space of two weeks. I became ill. My student, who

was a PIBIC scholarship holder and had to accompany all the necropsies together with the pathology professor, also became ill (E102).

Thus, when asked if she believes that **compassion fatigue** is the main factor associated with the psychological suffering of veterinary medicine students and professionals, she summarizes: “The animals suffer and that makes me sick. And that makes me sick” (E102).

When asked about the university’s support in these matters, she states that not only does it fail to provide support, but it also commits crimes with regard to the care of animal welfare and good euthanasia and slaughter techniques:

It fails too much, it fails too much. The university, in general, fails too much, commits crimes, does not follow the law, does not follow it. (...) So, CONCEA legislation says everything about how the facilities for the animal should be, there must be quarantine, there must be a proper place for euthanasia, there must be... And universities don’t have that. (...) If we report it, it will come back to haunt us. Do you understand? (E102).

University involvement and support

Based on the interviewees’ reports, private universities seem to invest more in psychological support services for students,

but student participation is insufficient. E201 notes that such programs are more focused on learning difficulties than on providing support in situations of mental distress. Even so, there is resistance to seeking the service: “I think that even when several teachers recommend it, (...) teachers often want to make this referral. But very few students accept it” (E202).

E203 sees a deficiency on the part of the university in terms of **preparing teachers** to deal with critical situations and identify mental distress in students in order to obtain the best referral. E203 reports an occasion when a student experienced a crisis in the classroom and the teacher felt unable to help her:

There was a case that happened to me (...), where at the end of the class there was only one person left, a girl (...). And then at the end of the test, she started crying, like, copiously, and I said, “What do I do now?” There was another teacher with me (...) who was more experienced. She talked to her, and we discussed these programs, but it’s something we have support for, but we still don’t have this: “This happened. What do I do? Who do I refer her to?” (E203).

In interviews with professionals from public institutions, the helplessness seems even greater, since they are not even aware of the existence of psychological support services for students. The working conditions of teachers imply a certain institutional hel-

plessness in the face of crises and psychological suffering of students, coupled with the excessive workload not only of students but also of teachers themselves.

Discussion

The perspective of veterinary medicine professors regarding the mental health of students was presented from different aspects in this study. The first concerns the ambivalence in the forms of connection, which was sometimes close and sometimes distant (insofar as professors said they did not have enough contact with students to be able to identify forms of suffering). Based on this simultaneous proximity and non-proximity, some potential factors that precipitate psychological distress were suggested, which are present from the student phase but seem to reach their peak in trained professionals entering the job market. The main factors are pressure to perform, insecurity/fear of making mistakes, *fatigue/burnout* resulting from attempts to balance studies and work (in private institutions where the course is part-time), and intense and peculiar contact with death (euthanasia, slaughter).

Although much progress has been made in the academic environment in promoting students' mental health (as evidenced by the existence of support programs at one of the private institutions where three of the interviewees work), in other respects the University still indirectly promotes this illness, insofar as it echoes the neoliberal discourse of performance and productivity that permeates the individual from their training: the professional ready to meet the demands of the market.

As for the teaching-learning process, while there is concern and commitment on

the part of teachers to student autonomy, there is also evidence of suffering generated by a "very content-heavy" course, in the words of one interviewee, which brings us back to the process of dehumanization indicated by Rios and Sirino (2015) that permeates health and education practices in an intimately related way, constituting what Paulo Freire (2006) defined as the "practice of domination." In this case, the system (educational and market-based) in relation to teachers and students pressures for productivity. Freire describes a traditional form of teaching where all life processes are transformed into things, hindering the development of student autonomy and a critical and sensitive view of reality and the world. In the case of the interviews conducted, a certain dialectical movement was noted in relation to the traditional teaching model based on the exhaustive transmission of content () and the framing of students within market logic from the outset of their education.

It is possible to relate Freire's perspective on how neoliberalism implies insidious control over the supposed choices of subjects, as Laval states when commenting on Michel Foucault's work: "it is through the medium that the subject becomes governable, an adaptable medium in which the individual is 'free' to act as they wish, just as a fish is free to swim in its aquarium" (LAVAL, 2021, p. 40). Thus, neoliberalism presents itself as a mode of production of subjects, permeating "strategic relations" that constitute the social world and shape subjectivities" (LAVAL, 2021, p. 39). Thus, while veterinary medicine education has made significant progress in promoting dialogue and student autonomy, important traces of a structure centered on the mas-

sive deposit of information remain. This archaic structure will reverberate in professional life, whether in professional-employer relationships or in relationships with tutors and patients, since the market's demand on students is an extension of the University's demand on them.

Neoliberal ideology refers to the systems of beliefs, values, and representations that sustain and legitimize certain social, political, and cultural practices in contemporary society. Through language, ideologies are both perpetuated and contested. Language is the medium through which discourses are constructed and transmitted. In discourse analysis, attention is focused on how discourses are structured, what linguistic choices are made, and how these choices contribute to the production of specific meanings (CAREGNATO & MUTTI, 2006, p. 682). From this perspective, the use of the terms "snowflake student" by one of the interviewees and "country boy" by another is noteworthy. The first term denotes a demand for "resilience," a demand that the student endure situations without showing signs of emotional fragility ("a little heat and he melts"), which explains the logic of exhaustion and anxiety in this population. The statement referring to the "country boy," or "rustic," is at the other end of the same axis, that is, the expectation of resistance or the ability to endure discomfort or aversive situations beyond what would be expected. These two expressions were, in our view, the most illustrative of what appears to be the central point of tension in relationships in the academic context of Veterinary Medicine, which, as we have seen, is the beginning of a problem that will extend into professional life.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The interviews allow for reflection on the purely academic perspective that disregards the personal and emotional circumstances of students. E104 suggests that only a professional trained in psychology has the necessary skills and sensitivity to deeply understand these issues and adequately guide both students and teachers.

This converges with the idea that the educational system needs to provide and integrate more robust psychological support. For teachers, this means recognizing and caring for their emotional needs so that they can better perform their educational role. For students, it means recognizing and dealing with the emotional complexities that can affect their learning and well-being. There is a need for a more humane and sensitive approach in educational institutions, where both teachers and students can receive the psychological support necessary to face the personal challenges that may arise throughout the teaching and learning process in a context as complex and sensitive as veterinary medicine.

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