The structuring dimensions of police work
As dimensões estruturantes do trabalho policial
Las dimensiones estructurantes del trabajo policial

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This article aims to investigate the structuring dimensions of the work of a military police officer in action and identify the defense strategies used by hee officer in her working context. It is a qualitative study, carried out from October to November of 2015, based on a case study of a military police officer in action, and conducted according to the assumptions of macro and microergonomic perspectives of the work, and of the activity that makes up the police routine. Data was collected through a semi-structured interview and through observation of the work environment. It was analyzed based on the technique of content analysis, and the structuring dimensions of the work. After experiencing stressful situations, the individual can maintain or compensate the losses through the use of strategies that enable new forms to perform the instrumental activities of daily life and work.
Descriptors: Work; Stress psychological; Occupational health; Police; Safety.

Este artigo tem como objetivo investigar as dimensões estruturantes do trabalho do policial militar em ação e identificar as estratégias de defesa utilizadas pelo trabalhador em seu contexto laboral. Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa, realizada no período de outubro a novembro do ano de 2015, com base em um estudo de caso de uma policial militar em ação, e conduzida segundo os pressupostos da visão macro e microergonômica da tarefa e da atividade que compõem o trabalho policial. Os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevista semiestruturada, e observação do ambiente de trabalho, analisados com base na técnica de análise de conteúdo, e nas dimensões estruturantes do trabalho. Após vivenciar situações estressantes, o sujeito pode manter ou compensar as perdas por meio do uso de estratégias que viabilizam novas formas de desempenho das atividades instrumentais de vida diária e do trabalho.
Descritores: Trabalho; Estresse psicológico; Saúde do trabalhador; Polícia; Segurança.

Este artículo tiene como objetivo investigar las dimensiones estructurantes del trabajo del policía militar en acción e identificar las estrategias de defensa utilizados por el trabajador en su contexto laboral. Se trata de una investigación cualitativa, realizada en el período de octubre a noviembre del año de 2015, con base en un estudio de caso de una policía militar en acción, y conducida según los presupuestos de la visión macro y microergonómica de la tarea, y de la actividad que compone el trabajo policial. Los datos fueron colectados por medio de entrevista semiestructurada, y observación del ambiente de trabajo, analizados con base en la técnica de análisis de contenido y en las dimensiones estructurantes del trabajo. Después de vivir situaciones estresantes, el sujeto puede mantener o compensar las pérdidas por medio del uso de estrategias que viabilizan nuevas formas de desempeño de las actividades instrumentales de vida diaria y del trabajo.
Descriptores: Trabajo; Estrés psicológico; Salud laboral; Policia; Seguridad.

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INTRODUCTION

The conception of labor conditions as one of the structuring dimensions of the work began to be built in 1970, a period in which the first ideas for some guidelines were drafted, aimed at workers whose skills were directed to "offer care"[1]. Thereafter, working conditions became the subject of research, because of their aspects related to chronic problems, such as stress and discouragement in the workplace.

Occupational stress has increased since 1990 and stress situations that affect the physical and emotional health of the subject, especially of some professionals like the police officer, have become more and more common in the work environments[2].

About the professional exercise of the military police officer, there are aspects inherent to his work activity, such as the perception of the real and imminent risk during the occurrences; the loss of colleagues in service; rules that guide the professional conduct and define action goals; the feeling of not being valued and the lack of social recognition; and the existence of hierarchical relationships, among others, are determining factors in the physical and mental health of the police officer, and can impact on the subjectivity of the individual and be a source of suffering and illness at work[3,4].

The work activity is understood as everything that, in a real situation, was not foreseen during conception, planning and organization of a task. It can be highlighted that the psychological dynamics of work reveal how and how much practice and affective experiences are influenced by the subjectivity of the individual, due to the constraints of the organization and by dominant relationships[5].

The work of the police officer has, as constant demands, the need to make agile decisions that involve some variables that make the work even more stressful (such as lack of control at the mission), exhaustive pace of work, a heavy load of work (being on duty) and the distance between the actual work and the prescribed work, which leads to a state of mental fatigue called mental or psychic load, later identified as psychic suffering[6].

The psychic damages of the officer in action, when in suffering, do not manifest equally among the subjects who perform the same function, because there is a unique way for each person "to defend themselves". It is a process called "defense mechanisms and strategies" [5].

With this overload of work of the police officer, it is understood that this profession is composed by two types of dimensions: an objective dimension, composed of rules, conducts and conditions of work, and a subjective dimension, that brings together the meanings and directions that each subject attribute to their actions and the singular ways of confrontation in the face of the various situations[7].

For a broader analysis, it is important to highlight that the "work" variable can be analyzed from two perspectives: macroergonomic and microergonomic. The first is composed of the structuring factors and manifests itself in the context of the work. These factors can be characterized in five dimensions: work conditions, organization of work, social and professionals relations in the work environment, recognition and professional growth and work bonds and social life.

The microergonomic perspective is related to the personal cost of work (physical, cognitive, affective) and the defense mechanisms/strategies. Such perspectives can be attributed to the characteristics of a condition of well-being or not in the job[8], which, in this study, is the work in the police.

In the Brazilian setting, the number of absences and retirements due to psychological problems of professionals working in the police force increased significantly in certain regions. According to data from the Military Medical Expertise Center (CPMM), between 2008 and 2012, there were 184 definitive and temporary removals because of health problems, due to mental and behavioral disorders, such as stress and depression[9].

It is possible to observe, in the literature about this topic, that the dimensions of the work are able to create critical psychological states, mainly because the police officers are often exposed to risky situations, work overload and fatigue, situations that are often unexpected and can cause physical and psychic uneasiness[10-13].

Considering the above, the objective of this research was to investigate the structuring dimensions of the work of the police officer in action, and to identify the defense strategies used by the worker in their context.

METHODS

This is a qualitative case study research. This approach proposes a dialogue between researcher and participant that values the construction of subjective concepts based on this relation[14]. The choice for this method is justified because it allows to treat a theme more deeply by following a single case and from the context of a real situation, with the purpose of identifying contextual, pertinent and singular conditions, but that can work as references for broader levels of social determination[15].

The case study was conducted with a female police officer, 47 years old, married, mother of three children, with complete higher education, resident in her own apartment with her youngest daughter and husband. She has been working as a sergeant in a Military Police battalion in the Brazilian midwest, for 20 years and, in the corporation, performed administrative services in the past, but is currently in active duty in the category "Street cops or cops on duty". In this research, the professional will be identified by the fictitious name of Maria.

Data collection took place in a Military Police battalion that presents numerous demands concerning the structuring dimensions at work and professional wearing. The battalion had approximately 30 female police officers.

Data collection was conducted from October to November 2015. Three policewomen were active officers in this battalion, of whom two were on medical leave, and one was performing her duties and work activities, so she attended the inclusion criteria, and was included in the study.

For the realization of the interviews and for the observation of the work activity of the officer, three meetings were held, of approximately 2 hours each. A guide was used, with topics related to: tasks and work activity, understanding of the organization and working conditions, the structuring dimensions of the work context, operative/defensive strategies, professional growth and social life. To understand the work activity, observations were made about the workplace and the routine of the officer in active duty, based on the method of ergonomic analysis of work activity (EAW) [16].

As a source of data for the understanding of the institutional organization, of the functions attributed to each police patent, the occupational history and the police career, the researchers analyzed and consulted documents of the Battalion archives.

Thus, the methodological approach that involves the realization of interviews, observations and documentary analysis, is set to allow for the understanding and elucidation of situations of interest. This approach is characterized by obtaining and analyzing data about the process concerning a specific theme[17].

The data was analyzed using the content analysis technique[18]. This technique is recommended as a methodological procedure applied to the discourse of the individual, that allows obtaining encrypted data based on the inference and deduction of the researcher, with the objective of understanding what the individuals manifest or do not reveal in their speeches/discourses.

The categories were based on the five structuring dimensions of the work[8]; however, for this study, these dimensions were grouped as follows: a) conditions and organization of work; b) professional relations and professional recognition/growth; c) relation between work and social life. Resulting in three categories of analysis.

As for the ethical aspects, this study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Researches with Human Beings from the University Center of Brasilia – UNICEUB, protocol number: 44239215.0.0000.0023, as recommended by Resolution No. 466/2012 of the Brazilian Council of Health.

RESULTS

The case of Officer Maria highlights the process of wearing and suffering at work, expressed through her narrative about the various situations and experiences in the environment of the Military Police Corporation.

Among the main aspects highlighted by Maria in the macroergonimc and microergonomic levels in her work activity, stand out respectively: the hierarchical organizational structure and precarious working conditions; and the affective cost of the human resources involved in the performance of their occupation, as seen in Image 1.
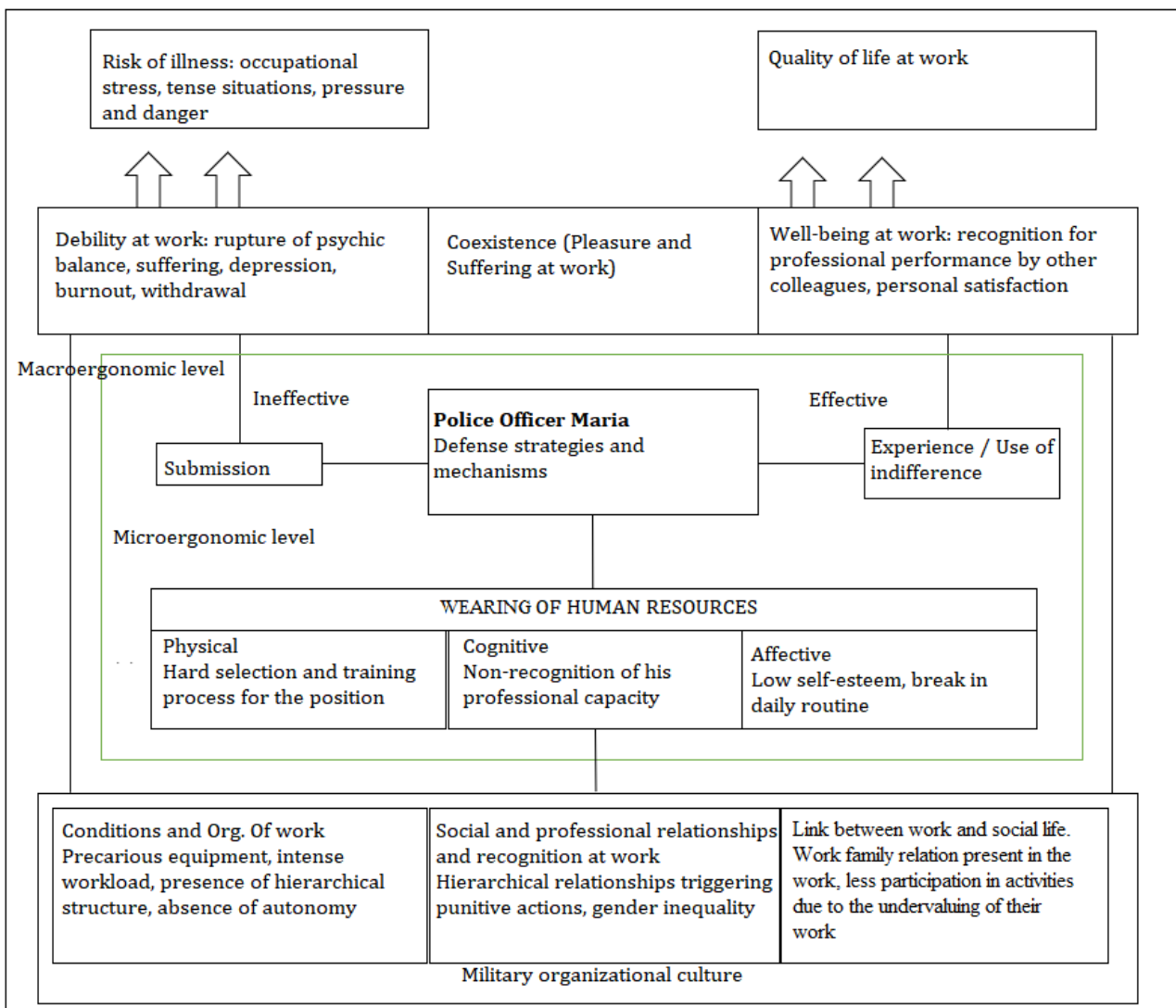
Image 1. Descriptive model of the structuring dimensions of the work of police officer Maria. Midwest, 2015. Source: Adapted[8]

The conditions and organization of the work included: the equipment, materials, instruments, institutional support and division and process of work, mission, objectives and organizational goals, working time (journey, shifts), management and discipline. The social, environmental and subjective conditions of the police were also

considered, and were understood in the aspects of affective cost, social life, hierarchical relationships, development of skills, among others.

Below are presented the thematic categories of the content analysis, obtained from the narrative of the participant.

Category 1. Organization and condition of work

The police officer's work as a sergeant consists in commanding a squad of soldiers and being responsible for the communication, construction and development in the calls related to their area of expertise. Composing the police activity, during the daily work shift, responding to calls from radio patrol, verifying the presence and performance of the soldiers that compose the squad and participating in field missions. Maria reported that cases of robbery/theft or conflict between acquaintances represent most of the calls.

The work on the streets exposes the officer to risks of physical and mental integrity losses, that arise from tense situations, pressure and danger faced every day, mainly because the occurrences involve their own safety and that of other people. In addition, the organizational structure, based on the hierarchy and discipline, the rigid process of selection and training for each position, the intense work journey and the often precarious conditions of the equipment, can also be constraints for the cops during work.

The hierarchical and disciplinary structure of the corporation is consolidated through punitive actions and/or threats. For example, during a police operation that Maria participated, after more than 8 hours of uninterrupted work, she requested to the Commander permission to withdraw from the local and satisfy her physiological needs, but was scalded and warned that she should remain on the scene:

I have always been very submissive and passive to the commands that ruled all that involves police work and on that day I peed on my pants not to defy the command of the superior, for fear of losing my job after the pressure I suffered from my commander.

The stress experienced during the daily work of military police officers can cause psychic unbalance or even trigger depression, due to constant contact with stressors inherent in this type of work. In this context, Maria reported a situation experienced during her professional career:

Yesterday there was a suicide of a policeman from my battalion, and it was in the place he worked. We were all shocked with what happened, because he was already very quiet and, at this point, the Military Police falls short, in the aspect of being aware of the officer, because you may be suffering without showing anything.

About the routine and organization of the work, she said:

My typical day is 12-hour work and then resting for 60 hours. When I'm on duty, I'm ready for anything, but I don't know what can happen. So I try not to think about going home. My routine is broken in days when I change shifts with some colleague or when I don't get any calls on the radio when I'm on patrol.

Regardless of the specificity of each institution and positioning of the public safety system, the adoption of a sequence of procedures is required, since it is elaborated for the purpose of preserving the historically constructed rules that are still present in the activities of the professionals in the area.

Category 2. Social and professional relations and recognition/professional growth

During a training course, Maria was one of the few women in the institution staff. The small feminine interest can be understood through an analysis of Maria discourse, which shows that there is an internal culture that does not value attitudes or recognizes values such as respect for equality between man and women. To exemplify, she remembered a shooting training, when her superiors underestimated her ability:

He screamed a lot and said that I would be the first to perform this task to show others what should not be done when a police officer used a gun, but he did not know that I had learned from my first husband, who, by the way, was military, to shoot perfectly well, without knocking down the bullet that we put on the top of the barrel (laughs). I executed the command efficiently and everyone was amazed by my ability and since then I became known in the corporation as an elite marksman.

The outcome of this situation, in the case of Maria, was the designation of ' elite marksman', which indicates recognition due

to her previous professional experience. However, discriminatory situations experienced in the context of work also emerged on her discourse.

In another story, training issues and gender relation were highlighted by Maria:

In my entrance to the battalion I was subjected to the training course of the Military Police (PM). I performed shooting trainings, simulation of missions in the streets, among other procedures. Because I was a woman, I suffered a lot of retaliation from my superiors and psychic pressure by my coworkers, but I never thought of quitting the police.

According to her, the relationship between superior and subordinate can often trigger psychic suffering, which reveals itself under various constraints like: low self-esteem, less participation in work activities, breaks in daily routine, living with a situation of emotional vulnerability and the medical leave itself.

Category 3. Relation between work and social life

The policewoman also talked about the implications of the suffering experienced at work in her personal life. She remembered an episode that marked her life: on a typical day's work, she received an anonymous tip on the radio of an unconscious abandoned girl in an isolated place, with signs of sexual abuse. Upon arriving at the scene, she noticed that the girl was her daughter:

My heart felt like it was going to burst, I was sweating cold. I couldn't think straight, I remember I was indecisive if I should act like a mother or act like a real cop who honors her uniform. What did I do? I took my daughter, put her in the car and took her to the nearest hospital. At that moment I did not honor the oath I made, I had the attitude of a mother, because I could not wait for help, when I arrived at the hospital they told me that if it had taken a little longer she would have died. Can you imagine how guilt I would be? I think now that it was best to be done, I did it and it comforts me a lot.

This situation of extreme pain and anguish experienced by Maria shows a difficult side of the work that often compromises the subjective values of the individual, imposing itself as a source of suffering proportional to the nature and intensity of the conflict. From that perspective, the policewoman verbalized:

I looked sideways and saw my colleagues who were witnessing the scene, I was already imagining the

possibility of the rest of the battalion knowing what was going on there.

Despite this experience, Maria currently conducts the calls the same way as before, but has developed some strategies that guarantee greater protection:

I enter a shell, to feel nothing, I act only when commanded and at all times I give my best.

DISCUSSION

Understanding the magnitude (macroergonomic dimension) of the work of the military police requires, in addition to the material, technical and environmental conditions, the understanding of the organizational and precarious aspects of the work, of the risks and issues of insecurity, about stress and decision-making, power relations, rigid forms of management and exhaustive journeys of work, that directly impact the quality of life and health of these workers.

About the organization of the military police, the current *modus operandi* of the professionals is based on a structure and concepts of 1942 and are based mainly on two pillars: discipline and hierarchy[19]. The presence of disciplinary conducts and hierarchical relations was observed in Maria's speech, when she reported that she was reprimanded by the commander, her superior, in a police operation.

The rigid and imposed organizational structure, based on control and domination, reduces the possibility of maneuvers that the worker can do to perform his task, that is, the organizational inflexibility restricts the autonomy of the subject in his performance and consequently influences the subjectivity, in the satisfaction and in the suffering of the workers[20]. In her narrative, Maria talked about the existence of low-quality equipment and instruments, and the precariousness of the actual working conditions existing in the military police.

Added to this, there are inherent aspects to the profession like the situations of high risk and lack of safety, mainly because the police officer is immersed in tense settings, violence, social disputes and death, and the professional can suffer physical and emotional consequences[21].

These findings corroborate with studies that point to inappropriate working conditions, involving restrictions of financial resources for equipment maintenance; precarious work environment; lack of organizational support (technologies, remuneration policies, capacitation, and others). But it also highlights the exposure to situations of vulnerability and risk and the hierarchical relationships, as the main causes of suffering and illness of this profissional[4,19,22,23].

This study pointed out, through the report of a military police officer, the existence of suffering in the work relationships and in the daily routine, due to the lack of safety generated by the possibility of attending stressful and unpredictable occurrences every day.

The structural dimension of professional recognition is decisive in the motivation of the worker. When the quality of work of the professional is recognized, it leads to a perception of their efforts, anguish, disappointments and discouragement[24]. So, all the suffering, when understood, was not in vain. The professional contributed to the organization of work, and at became a different subject compared to who she was before receiving recognition. The process of recognition can lead the professional to the construction of their identity.

From this perspective, in the case of the performance of the police in particular, aspects of recognition, appreciation and validation of the performance are fundamental to promote the potential necessary to perform tasks or to perform well during a mission[25].

Another important aspect is that Maria faced, for being a woman, constraints related to discrimination and the lack of professional recognition of her fellow police officers and of her commander, because they judged that the role of a shooter could not be attributed to women.

In Brazil, women's work is characterized by the existence of discrimination, repression, humiliation and disrespect, which can represent an important source of stress[26]. Studies conducted in Minas Gerais[27], São Paulo[28] and Rio Grande do Sul[29], corroborate with the findings of this study by showing that despite the particularities of each state, all have inequalities between male and female police officers.

The dimension represented by the relation between work and social life could be observed when Maria described the work-family relationship during the experience of attending her own daughter in a call. The work-home relationship is an aspect of life that can become an extension of the time lived in the working environment and can also influence the welfare at work, because they are strongly affected by individual factors originated from experiences linked to real situations lived on the job[30].

The disciplinary and hierarchical relations related to the officer patents lead to a devaluation of the individual, low self-esteem and the loss of subjectivity[31], impacting on the health of the police officer. It may even be one of the causes that lead to the wearing of the worker on the job as well as in their social life.

The power relations in the military corporation were evidenced in Maria's narrative when she highlighted her submissive and passive posture in relation to the commands received by superiors, that are often in detriment of her well-being. Systems where domination is predominant operate through surveillance, time management and space delimitation to produce and maintain power. At the same time there is a productive and submissive work force[32].

Workers subjected to a system of control and domination based on threats and punitive actions live constantly in fear. This fear is permanent and generates blind obedience and even submission[24].

Maria stated in her speech that she '*has always been very submissive and passive*', which highlights the submission as one of the strategies used by her to face the embarrassment experienced during her work. In this context, when the subject assumes a submissive position before someone dominant, they necessarily enter a process of loss[33]. In the case of Maria, the use

of the submission strategy (ineffective) could have triggered suffering or illness.

In another embarrassing situation, Maria felt exposed during a police call where her daughter was the victim, which led to suffering and caused defense mechanisms, that sustained her in a normal call, to be deconstructed and rebuilt on new bases, which strengthened her[34].

It can be observed that the ease or difficulty of Maria to remain less emotional in situations inherent to her work and to cautiously dose her suffering during a police operation, constitutes an individual defense strategy[26] that can be triggered at any time. To bring this phenomenon more broadly into the context of police work, it is noted that the way many professionals deal with their experiences is to block the feelings, because it is, according to the statements of some police officers[1], easier to block bad situations related to work than trying to absorb the various demands that arise at the time of the conflict.

Defensive strategies are necessary for the protection of mental health against the effects of suffering but can also act as a trap that desensitizes the worker against what makes them suffer. In addition, they also make ethical suffering tolerable. This is important because workers can commit, in their work, acts that they morally condemn[26].

It can be observed, however, that Maria triggered emotional resources to confront the intensity of the work situations, after the difficult experience of attending her own daughter. Even though she was temporarily removed from work after this operation, Maria sought to become indifferent and insensitive to this kind of suffering to avoid future diseases when she returned to her activities.

Thus, the work of the military police is permeated by insecurity and fear, because of the many situations that expose them, on a daily basis, to an imminent risk of life.

The relationship between the mind and the body, the experiences during the calls and the stress and the constraints can trigger the suffering, being one of the factors responsible for health afflictions of the police in the work enviroment[35]. In this context, it is becoming more and more frequent for an emotional response to emerge as a way to remedy the impacts from the environment in which the professional is inserted.

CONCLUSION

Based on the objectives traced it was possible to identify some common feelings present in the context of police activities, like: insecurity, anxiety, fear, shame and anger, all the above intertwined with gender issues. In addition, police management practices may potentially lead do diseases, especially due to the nature of the demands in a police operation, or due to the existence of oppressive relations.

It is important to promote discussions and investments in projects that contemplate police work, gender issues and psychic suffering, as well as to develop specific public policies based on the interface between mental health and work. It is a way of ensuring the that the demands of the subjects are understood, from a perspective that sees the social processes as inherent to the daily lives of people in distress.

To validate the issues raised and to promote awareness of managers in the public system, it is necessary to develop new researches, with a greater number of participants, so that the limitations of this study can be overcome, making it possible to prove how becoming a police officer can lead to diseases.

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CONTRIBUTIONS
Karoline Bernardes Torres was responsible for the design and writing of the text, organization of sources and/or analysis, and for data collection and treatment. **Daniela da Silva Rodrigues** collaborated in the design of the study, in its analysis, in the critical review of the article and in the orientation of the work. **Ioneide de Oliveira Campos** collaborated on the critical review of the article.