


Maternal discourses on child feeding

Falas maternas sobre alimentação infantil

Recuerdos maternos de la alimentación de sus hijos

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Abstract

Introduction: Feeding appears in all explanations about human processes and actions, which confirms the fact that it is not a natural behavior, but an effect of the interaction between individuals, initiated in the mother-baby relationship. **Objective:** To identify erasures, lapses and resistance in the memories of mothers of first-born children, adolescents and young adults, about the process of feeding their children. **Method:** descriptive, exploratory carried out with mothers of children, adolescents and adults with typical development who responded to a questionnaire about nutrition. **Results:** Questions regarding breastfeeding and weaning were answered assertively, showing that these are symbolic facts, which mark maternal memories. **Conclusion:** Maternal memories of eating scenes with their children show the movements of union and separation between the interactional pair. It is possible to point out that only for the questions related to breastfeeding and weaning the answers are completely assertive, indicating that they are symbolic facts that mark maternal memory.

Keywords: Language; Feeding behavior; Memory; Attachment

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RRRP: Study design and conception; Literature review; Data interpretation and analysis; Article preparation; Intellectual review of the article; Final approval of the version submitted to the journal.

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Received: 11/21/2023

Accepted: 02/27/2024

Resumo

Introdução: A alimentação aparece em todas as explicações sobre os processos e ações humanas, o que confirma o fato de não ser uma conduta natural, mas efeito da interação entre indivíduos, inaugurada na relação mãe-bebê. **Objetivo:** Identificar apagamentos, lapsos e resistência nas memórias de mães de crianças, adolescentes e jovens adultos primogênitos, sobre o processo de alimentação de seus filhos. **Método:** descritivo, exploratório realizado com mães de crianças, adolescentes e adultos com desenvolvimento típico que responderam a um questionário sobre a alimentação. **Resultados:** As perguntas relativas à amamentação e ao desmame foram respondidas de forma assertiva, mostrando que estes são fatos simbólicos, que marcam a lembrança materna. **Conclusão:** As lembranças maternas sobre as cenas alimentares com seus filhos mostram os movimentos de união e separação entre o par interacional. É possível apontar que apenas para as perguntas relativas à amamentação e ao desmame as respostas são totalmente assertivas, indiciando que são fatos simbólicos que marcam a memória materna.

Palavras-chave: Linguagem; Comportamento alimentar; Memória; Vínculo

Resumen

Introducción: La alimentación aparece en todas las explicaciones sobre los procesos y acciones humanas, lo que confirma que no es un comportamiento natural, sino un efecto de la interacción entre individuos, iniciada en la relación madre-bebé. **Objetivo:** Identificar borramientos, lapsos y resistencias en los recuerdos de madres de primogénitos, adolescentes y adultos jóvenes, sobre el proceso de alimentación de sus hijos. **Método:** descriptivo, exploratorio realizado con madres de niños, adolescentes y adultos con desarrollo típico que respondieron un cuestionario sobre nutrición. **Resultados:** Las preguntas sobre lactancia materna y destete fueron respondidas de manera asertiva, demostrando que se trata de hechos simbólicos, que marcan los recuerdos maternos. **Conclusión:** Los recuerdos maternos de escenas de comida con sus hijos muestran los movimientos de unión y separación entre la pareja interaccional. Es posible señalar que sólo para las preguntas relacionadas con la lactancia materna y el destete las respuestas son completamente asertivas, indicando que son hechos simbólicos que marcan la memoria materna.

Palabras clave: Lenguaje; Conducta alimentaria; Memoria; Vínculo

Introduction

Eating is included in all explanations of human processes and actions, confirming the fact that it is not a natural conduct but the result of interaction between individuals, started in the mother-baby relationship¹. Eating is a human action that combines nature, culture, and subjectivity, making it a symbolic conduct. In other words, it is a biological necessity but conditioned by repertoires of socially constructed and shared practices and agreements, constituting a scene of intersubjectivity that involves emotions, feelings, projections, subjective construction, and social identity^{2,3}.

In this sense, eating reflects all human behaviors and contingencies: daily rituals, traditions and customs, class and socio-economic-cultural position, health states. It is essential to note that food has always played a role, whether as a protagonist

or supporting character, in disease treatment procedures or even prevention^{4,5}. It should be noted that, primarily due to its nature, feeding is a fundamental maternal care scene, holding a central place in child development. From birth, experiences of interaction between mother and baby are organized around it, marking the beginning of intersubjective circulation. It also shapes and presents the challenges that can affect this combination^{5,6,7}.

Since Freud⁸, it has been known that sensory experiences, such as breastfeeding, are simultaneously organizing psychic experiences, determinants in subjective genesis and child development. In this perspective, it can be said that knowledge and affection begin with the mouth. In fact, what enters through the mouth serves as a support for original psychic experiences, where cognitive and affective levels have not yet differentiated⁹.

This relationship, established within the eating context, sustains the child's development

and evolves over time, with significant marks, especially during transitional periods. Therefore, the history built in the choreography presenting the circulation of actions, speech, and affections between the pair, from breastfeeding to family meals, is seen as relevant^{8,10}.

On the one hand, this history shows the process through which the child moves from a condition of total dependence to achieving autonomy and participating in family meals. While, on the other hand, it shows the operations that lead the mother to differentiate and separate from the baby, authorizing the child's autonomy and thus assuming new roles in the relationship based on a set of fundamental psychic operations¹¹.

Maternal care gained prominence in Western culture from the 18th century, combining the ideas of motherhood and mothering, in an association that ultimately attributed value to women. The concept of maternal love emerged, supporting the woman's responsibility for child care¹².

Based on the results presented by this study, it sought to reflect on maternal positioning in relation to their children. What do mothers remember? Which feeding moments leave lasting marks? Are there moments that leave no marks? Are there confusing moments? Or moments that mothers prefer not to talk about? How does feeding represent the movements of fusion and separation between mother and child? Feeding is a space where such value became unparalleled, especially when the mother began breastfeeding her babies, dismissing wet nurses, a figure present for a long time in the family structure. The mother gained recognition, value, and social standing in the feeding context, as well as enjoying significant narcissistic experiences, as reported in classical studies by Algranthi¹³, Ariés¹⁴, and Almeida¹⁵. Furthermore, by feeding her baby with her own breast, the woman re-establishes broken bonds with her baby due to birth, what Freud⁸ terms the first caesura, becoming a supporting figure in the child's process of subjectivation.

Maternity, culturally constituted, primarily resulted from medical discourse that elevated women to a fundamental position of the feeder, starting with breastfeeding. This approach positioned the mother in a primary role in the name of health and hygiene, crucial conditions for the survival of children, who, in turn, were also placed in another position, no longer considered disposable¹². Feed-

ing became linked to health, and then, much later, in the early 20th century, it was placed in a privileged place in the establishment and sustenance of subjective relationships between mother and child.

However, unlike the approach promoting feeding, even with little consideration for maternal desire, weaning is treated superficially, as if it were a natural outcome of breastfeeding¹⁶. Weaning is a poorly cared-for operation and, moreover, announces a new imposition on the mother. She must be an exemplary nutritionist in her role as a feeder, now responsible for choosing, preparing, and offering food to the child.

Currently, feeding remains a fundamental maternal care, especially as scenario of affective exchanges, the subjective constitution of the child, and constant subjective repositioning of the mother. Feeding shows the choreography of the constitutive union-separation relationships between the mother-child pair: breastfeeding-weaning; transitional feeding-child's posturing; from face-to-face feeding to side-by-side family meals; from guardianship to child autonomy^{17,18}.

Impasses that may arise in feeding scenes involve the feeder/recipient pair, mother/child. There are many studies addressing the issues that arise and are related to the child's competence and conditions^{19,20}. These studies, in the field of speech-language pathology, highlight aspects related to children's orofacial motility, and in some studies, the repercussions of these difficulties on parental behaviors¹⁹.

However, there are fewer studies when it comes to maternal contingencies in the scene, despite the mother being inevitably integrated into the etiology of impasses or problems. By contingencies, we mean maternal perceptions and feelings regarding the feeding scene that is constantly established between her and her child: breastfeeding, weaning, offering pasty and solid foods, placing the child in suitable positions for feeding toward autonomy and family meals, building preferences, and social adaptations^{21,22}.

Studies on maternal perception and feelings involved in the feeding scene are essential as they may help to understand the impasses and problems that may arise. It should be noted that maternal behaviors, with the mother in the position of a feeder, are psychologically and culturally defined⁷. This history is built over time and, therefore, primarily

exists in memories, as marks that persist from maternal experiences in feeding scenes^{21,22}.

Mothers' memories can provide information about cultural, social, and emotional factors that influence feeding practices, which, in turn, could help health professionals develop interventions to promote healthy and appropriate child feeding practices. Furthermore, maternal memories of their experiences with feeding can help identify factors that favor or hinder the initiation, duration, and exclusivity of breastfeeding, weaning challenges, and routes in the development of eating practices^{21,22}.

An investigation into a possible difference in memories related to the feeding of mothers of first-borns, children, adolescents, and adults carried out in a recent study²¹ concluded that memories remain vivid regarding breastfeeding and weaning, despite the time that has passed. Thus, it can be said that these scenes are fundamental for building the relationship between the mother-child pair and, therefore, maintain value and meaning for mothers.

The aforementioned study was conducted through a questionnaire applied to mothers, consisting of 20 questions ranging from the desire for breastfeeding, full and absolute guardianship of the child by the mother, to family meals, a symbolic place of child autonomy. Therefore, these questions implicitly investigate the fusion-differentiation movements between the interactional pair, being important operations in the infant's subjective constitution.

Purpose

To identify omissions, lapses, and resistance in the memories of mothers of children, adolescents, and young adult firstborns regarding their children's feeding process, from breastfeeding to family meals, and to identify fusion-separation movements represented by feeding scenes.

Method

This is an exploratory, descriptive research.

This study used the database from Arouca's research²¹ (approved by the Research Ethics Committee), aiming to investigate maternal memories of feeding scenes involving their children at different age periods (childhood, adolescence, and adulthood) to identify potential differences in

memories of these scenes. In this research, thirty (30) mothers completed a questionnaire about the feeding history of their children, from breastfeeding to family meals, divided into three groups (ten mothers of children, ten of adolescents, and ten of young adults).

The criteria for age groups were based on the variable (time) noted in some similar studies, related to the influence of emotions on memory for providing personal information.

Participants were selected by convenience: mothers of children, adolescents, and adults with typical development who were available to answer a questionnaire about their children's feeding development and agreed to sign an Informed Consent Form (ICF).-

The instrument used was a clinical questionnaire called "Mothers and Feeding," designed to identify maternal perceptions and feelings in feeding scenes.

The questionnaire, developed and used in previous studies^{21,22}, consists of 20 questions (Q), 12 yes/no questions, and 8 questions with options of "I don't know/I don't remember/I prefer not to answer," structured around four content domains: 1 - Before Breastfeeding: maternal expectations about breastfeeding; 2 - During Breastfeeding: processes, maternal sensations, and interaction with the baby; 3 - Weaning: the weaning process and professional support/guidance; - Feeding Transitions: maternal perceptions, sensations, and feelings during the transition period, chosen feeding procedures, maternal actions in changing foods, interpretation of the child's reactions to new foods, participation in shaping the child's taste, and respect for infant preferences; introducing the child to family meals.

Data collected from the Google Form were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The results were presented according to the content domains that make up the questionnaire structure.

Results

Before breastfeeding

All mothers answered affirmatively to the initial question about the desire to breastfeed.

The most frequent reason for breastfeeding was the baby's health, with the bond also being mentioned as a reason in groups 1 and 2, and only health in 100% of responses for group 3.

Regarding guidance on breastfeeding from professionals, nurses/pediatricians and obstetricians provided the most guidance, with a notable emphasis on nursing professionals.

During Breastfeeding

100% of mothers in group 3 breastfed their children from birth. In groups 1 and 2, 90% of mothers answered affirmatively to this question, and 10% answered negatively.

Nutrition is reported as the main factor in breastfeeding guidance, especially for mothers in group 3, followed by the baby's positioning during breastfeeding, primarily for mothers in group 1, and lastly, the bond.

90% of mothers stated that breastfeeding started from birth in both groups 1 and 2.

Regarding the duration of breastfeeding, there was a wide range of responses in group 1, ranging from 6 months to over 24 months in 20% of cases. In groups 2 and 3, this duration is more limited: between 1 and 12 months (70% of cases) in group 2, and 6 months for the majority (70%) in group 3.

The main sensations reported during breastfeeding were pleasure, satisfaction, and joy. However, emotional bonding was mentioned by 60% of mothers in groups 1, 2, and 3.

Most mothers (80% in group 1, 90% in group 2, and 90% in group 3) report that their babies breastfed well.

All mothers (100%) in all groups indicate that there was interaction between them and their babies during breastfeeding.

When asked about how they interacted with their babies, mothers responded: caressing (40% in groups 1 and 2, and 50% in group 3), talking (30% in groups 1 and 3, and 50% in group 2), and eye contact (30% in group 1 and 20% in group 3).

In groups 2 and 3, 100% of mothers report that their babies reacted to their expressions during interaction. In group 1, 80% reported a reaction.

In all groups, the baby's gaze was pointed out as a privileged means of reacting to mothers' expressions during interaction.

Weaning

Regarding weaning, in all groups, the majority of mothers claim that weaning was smooth (90% of mothers in groups 1 and 3, and 80% of mothers in group 2).

In all groups, there is an indication of a lack of guidance for weaning. In group 1, 60% received guidance, and 40% did not; in group 2, 50% received guidance, and 50% did not; in group 3, 40% did not receive guidance.

In groups 1 and 2, pediatricians were most frequently mentioned in providing guidance on weaning, followed by family members. In group 3, information about the involvement of nurses and pediatricians is present. "I don't know" and "I don't remember" responses were reported in all groups.

Alternating between breast and bottle was the most cited way of weaning.

Nutrition transition

Feeding transition is an operation that almost all mothers in all groups enjoy executing: 100% of mothers in groups 1 and 3, and 80% in group 2.

Most children accepted the feeding transition well; according to 90% of mothers in groups 1 and 2, and 100% of mothers in group 3.

All mothers in all groups said they enjoyed offering new food.

Regarding the location where they fed the child, 50% of mothers in group 1 reported using a high chair, and 40% of mothers in groups 2 and 3 did the same. A stroller was also reported as a response for 30% of mothers in groups 1 and 2, and 50% of mothers in group 3 used a stroller.

Talking and encouraging good eating habits were responses to how the interaction took place during feeding. 80% of mothers in group 2 and 40% and 60% of mothers in groups 1 and 3, respectively, responded in this way.

Two years is the age range where children's autonomy is most frequently mentioned by mothers (50% in group 1, 40% in groups 2 and 3).

Children began participating in family meals between 1 and 2 years (70% in groups 1 and 2, and 80% in group 3).

Most mothers indicate that they talked about the taste of food, with 70% of mothers in group 3 answering affirmatively to this question.

About respecting the child's taste in meal preparation, 90% of mothers in group 1 answered yes, as well as 70% of mothers in groups 2 and 3.

Discussion

Breastfeeding is a highlight of the bond between a mother and a baby, in a generally pleasurable reconnection of the pair, with important emotional content taking center stage, alongside and despite cultural and social pressures that are generally considered determining factors. It is important to note that all responses to the questions in this domain were provided, indicating the high value of these experiences for each individual and the pair. These are memories that do not fade away.

All mothers from all age groups studied stated that they intended to breastfeed and did so from the birth of their children. In different age groups, most mothers indicate that breastfeeding occurred until their child was 6 months old, with some mothers of young children reporting an extension in breastfeeding time, which seems to express an effect of breastfeeding encouragement programs that were reinforced in the past^{23,24} but have been updated in different periods, especially recently when the discourse on natural feeding consolidates. Intellectual information, cultural rituals, and social expectations shape breastfeeding, but the psychological aspect of the act, which seems to be determinant, should not be disregarded^{6,7}.

The responses show that speaking, looking, and caressing the baby are the privileged gestures to enact this connection, spontaneously performed and rewarded by the baby's gestures and gaze. Several studies indicate that adult gaze directed at the child in caregiving situations plays an important role in their development, and the child is sensitive to the presence and direction of this gaze²⁵ from an early age, as well as to the sound of the human voice, especially the mother's voice.

When highlighting the affective aspect, it is necessary to include in the discussion the determination of unconscious contents in breastfeeding, which may fail or even be refused. This is also expressed in maternal responses to the question about sensations during breastfeeding, where pain is pointed out as a recalled sensation. Expressing feelings, sensations of any nature and intensity, points to the multifaceted constitution of the act of breastfeeding, even when it causes discomfort. However, more recently, scholars show that the decision to breastfeed is not just an objective act but rather an act in which subjectivity takes a prominent place²⁶, and it can be either pleasurable or not.

Weaning, on the contrary, represents the beginning of separation between the mother and the child, important for the child's subjective development and the subjective repositioning of the mother. Weaning is a significant operation in the infant feeding process, as it includes not only a change in the content, taste, texture, and volume of food, with the consequent use of unfamiliar tools for consumption, such as a spoon but also the repositioning of the child. The child can no longer consume food in the supine position, having to move away from the maternal embrace, going to the stroller or high chair, for example. This cesura, which seems to be only spatial, is also and above all psychic, and various consequences¹⁶ may arise for both the child and the mother.

Note that in this domain, some responses like "I don't know," "I don't remember" emerge, indicating areas of shading in these memories involving separation movements between the pair.¹⁰ Furthermore, it brings to the mother the need to compose other representations of the connection between her and her child, of bodies no longer amalgamated but facing each other, with food as an intermediary between them. A novelty that can have an impact¹⁶.

However, soon, the scene begins to mobilize the mother, who reaffirms herself in the position of feeder and, notably, as a partner of the child. Despite some setbacks in the weaning process, mothers express pleasure with the offering of new foods and the creation of new feeding scenes, a fact observed in all age groups studied, confirming the importance that assuming the feeder position has in the construction of subjectivity within the motherhood process^{9,10,12}. This is reaffirmed by the equally pleasant reaction of the child. The answers to questions involving the theme of introducing food express this. Speaking with the baby during the feeding scene sets the tone for this entanglement situation¹.

With weaning, the introduction of complementary foods that meet the child's nutritional needs is necessary. This introduction to food is influenced by various factors, among which the mother's performance becomes relevant, as it constitutes the fundamental element in caring for the child. Maternal care focuses primarily on the child's adequate nutrition, and thus, the weight gained or lost by the child becomes an indicative of health, causing insecurity and anxiety, since nutritional

management ends up being mainly maternal responsibility¹².

The preference for sweeter and less consistent foods seems to be, among other things, a matter of pleasure and strengthening relationships for social, cultural, affective, and psychological eating practices. These practices derive from knowledge, experience, feelings, and highlight the bond with the mother, as she constitutes the fundamental element in caring for the child. It seems to be precisely because of this complexity that, in addition to taking care of nutrition, the mother also takes care of the relationship and her role as a provider. In this sense, the satisfaction in offering new foods and the sweetness of it are understood, a fact well remembered by Lévy-Strauss's words²⁶. Some maternal reports collected in the study attest to the child's preference for less consistent foods.

Feeding transitions exhibit the movements of the mother-child pair toward the child's autonomy and also the complete separation between them. In these domains, responses like "I don't know," "I don't remember" also emerge, indicating some gaps in memories. This is an important moment because it consists of the child's movements toward a different subjective condition and a different social role, which may be related to these gaps.

According to responses from mothers of young adults, children begin to assume some food independence between 1 and 2 years old, being able to participate in family meals. This apparently early independence seems significant for this age group in the study. On the other hand, this independence comes later in other age groups, and consequently, family interaction during meals also occurs later, as observed in responses to questions about when the child started eating on their own and participating in family meals^{18,28}.

Studies indicate that the child's separation from the mother, with whom they have maintained a fusional relationship, is expressed in feeding when there are manifestations of selection, preference, and refusal. Initiatives to deal with utensils and dispense maternal assistance also begin, demonstrating pleasure and joy in participating in family meals. This behavior in feeding is equally reflected in bathing and dressing situations, a set that generates ambivalent feelings in mothers, between pleasure and anxiety due to the difficulty in controlling these situations²⁷. It should be noted that mothers of older children indicate a later independence,

prompting reflection once again on the cultural aspect of caregiving practices, as child autonomy was not a goal to be achieved early on at a certain point in time.

Interestingly, mothers mostly position children appropriately for food consumption, as indicated by responses to the question about where they fed the child, which is important for various aspects: psychomotor, nutritional, and interactional. Studies on the feeding posture of preschoolers show that children have behaviors related to the chain of eating behaviors, with few cases where this is not observed, preferring to walk around or even lying down²⁸. In other words, children are fully inserted into the feeding scene from an early age, heading towards family meals^{17,18}, an expression of a fundamental symbolic behavior, commensality. Food, transformed by culture, also takes on a social function, bringing humans together, known as "commensality," a contingency that establishes and reinforces sociability. It is through the kitchen and table manners that the most fundamental social learning takes place, allowing a society to transmit and enable the internalization of its values²⁸. Feeding is one of the ways to create and maintain social bonds, constituting important foundations for the continuous development of interactions between the baby and its parents.

Child autonomy expands, reaching situations of choice and food preferences. It is known that the mother gradually introduces the child to family eating habits, offering certain foods in certain preparations with privilege.

In other words, taste, preferences, and refusal/acceptance of food are effects of a construction between the child and their caregiver; they are not naturally given. The food choice process, most of the time, is not solely based on nutritional options but on the influences of everyday social interaction, which may be present in family relationships but also in any other communal places that allow exchanges between those sharing a meal²⁸.

Maternal responses to questions about discussing food tastes and respecting the child's taste may show this. However, it should be noted that there are responses like "I don't remember," and, quite frequently, "no" responses, especially for the last question (did you respect the child's taste?), indicating perhaps a tendency of mothers to fulfill the nurturing role properly, emphasizing certain foods that may not necessarily be to their children's lik-

ing, prioritizing nutritional value. Or, perhaps, as a way to maintain the child in a certain symbolic confinement represented by family customs, an original belonging structure²⁹. Thus, escaping from this would show that the child is more distant from the initial bonds.

Conclusion

Maternal memories of feeding scenes with their children show the movements of union and separation between the interactive pair.

It can be noted that only for questions related to breastfeeding and weaning are the responses entirely assertive, indicating that these are symbolic events that mark maternal memory. In contrast, for answers to questions from other domains, there are shaded areas, lapses, and confusions, which may be linked to difficulties encountered in the process.

It is essential to emphasize the importance that women attribute to their role as feeders, with manifestations of pleasure involving food transitions and the care of gradually introducing the child into the social situation of eating, which ultimately stages the separation of mother and child.

Further research on this topic is suggested in order to enhance knowledge on the mother-child relationship, a source of subjectivation and child development.

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