

# Social representations of puerperals about the breast in breastfeeding

**RESUMO** | Objetivo: Aprender representações sociais de puérperas sobre as mamas no período do aleitamento. Método: Pesquisa qualitativa, fundamentada na teoria das representações sociais. Utilizou-se o teste de associação livre de palavras, aplicado a 95 puérperas num Centro de Parto Normal de Salvador-Ba, no período de novembro de 2017 a fevereiro de 2018. Realizou-se a análise da estrutura das representações sociais a partir da árvore de similitude das evocações livres. Resultados: As representações sociais das puérperas sobre as mamas são marcadamente a dor e o tamanho, influenciadas por elementos periféricos que envolvem o ato de amamentar e a saúde, estando associadas as suas crenças, conhecimentos e valores afetivos. As participantes reconhecem que as mamas são partes importantes do corpo que requerem cuidado cotidianamente. Conclusão: Os achados corroboram para novos olhares para subjetividades que envolvem o aleitamento, podendo nortear práticas de cuidado em saúde que colaborem para satisfação enquanto nutriz.

**Descritores:** Período pós-parto; Aleitamento materno; Glândulas mamárias humanas; Enfermagem.

**ABSTRACT** | Objective: To apprehend social representations of postpartum women about their breasts during the breastfeeding period. Method: Qualitative research, based on the theory of social representations. The free word association test was used, applied to 95 postpartum women in a Normal Delivery Center in Salvador-Ba, from November 2017 to February 2018. The analysis of the structure of social representations was carried out from the tree of similarity of free evocations. Results: The postpartum women's social representations about the breasts are markedly pain and size, influenced by peripheral elements that involve the act of breastfeeding and health, being associated with their beliefs, knowledge and affective values. Participants recognize that the breasts are important parts of the body that require daily care. Conclusion: The findings corroborate new perspectives on subjectivities that involve breastfeeding, which may guide health care practices that contribute to satisfaction as a nursing mother.

**Keywords:** Postpartum period; Breastfeeding; Human mammary glands; Nursing.

**RESUMEN** | Objetivo: Aprender las representaciones sociales de las mujeres posparto sobre sus senos durante el período de lactancia. Método: Investigación cualitativa, basada en la teoría de las representaciones sociales. Se utilizó la prueba de asociación libre de palabras, aplicada a 95 puérperas en un Centro de Parto Normal en Salvador-Ba, de noviembre de 2017 a febrero de 2018. El análisis de la estructura de las representaciones sociales se realizó a partir del árbol de similitud de evocaciones libres. Resultados: Las representaciones sociales de las mujeres posparto sobre las mamas son marcadamente dolorosas y de tamaño, influenciadas por elementos periféricos que involucran el acto de la lactancia materna y la salud, estando asociadas a sus creencias, conocimientos y valores afectivos. Los participantes reconocen que los senos son partes importantes del cuerpo que requieren cuidados diarios. Conclusión: Los hallazgos corroboran nuevas perspectivas sobre subjetividades que involucran la lactancia materna, las cuales pueden orientar prácticas de cuidado de la salud que contribuyan a la satisfacción como madre lactante.

**Palabras claves:** Período posparto; Amamantamiento; Glándulas mamarias humanas; Enfermería.

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## INTRODUCTION

The puerperium is the period that starts right after the placenta is delivered and lasts for six to eight weeks. It corresponds to the re-epithelialization of the endometrium, and it is during this period that the woman recovers from pregnancy both in anatomical terms, as well as in physiological and biochemical terms. (1)

Normally, the puerperium involves a series of intense transformations ex-

perienced by women. These processes range from physical changes to emotional changes. The body that, in about 40 weeks, sheltered a new being, is transformed again as a result of motherhood, bringing implications and conflicts for women. In the experience of the motherhood process, the mother transforms herself as a woman and perceives herself as the same person, but now with new dimensions: in addition to being a woman, a mother. (2)

One of these transformations experienced by postpartum women is breastfeeding. Breastfeeding is the best natural method of bonding, affection, protection and nutrition for the child. It also allows for an impact on the promotion of the integral health of the mother/baby pair. (3) Breastfeeding, despite being a natural physiological process, often needs to be learned in order to maintain it, exclusively for at least six months, as recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO), due to its importance in reducing child morbidity and mortality. Health professionals are essential in promoting and supporting breastfeeding, which actually takes place after hospital discharge. Therefore, women need support from the Nurse and the multidisciplinary team for knowledge about breastfeeding management and coping with difficulties. Often this knowledge and support occur without specialized help, being performed by family members and/or other people in the community as friends, which influences the social representations about breasts and determines the practices adopted. (4)

In this sense, women can be vulnerable to conflicting feelings that can affect the mother and child relationship, since their bodies were seen only for themselves, now it is seen as a social appropriation for the exercise of motherhood, especially for breastfeeding. Throughout the experience of this binomial, breastfeeding reveals itself with different meanings, beliefs, myths and

ideologies formed around society and insecurity in relation to the puerperal woman's ability to care and nurture. (5)

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cesses that involve the social, cultural and structural context in which the

woman-mother-nurse is inserted. For decades, breastfeeding was not considered something natural, there was no bond between mother and child, in many families the children were fed by enslaved women, the "wet nurses", a common practice in the slave period, a trade in Brazil before and after abolition. Motherhood only started to be valued and breastfeeding encouraged in the late nineteenth century and studies on the risks of cross-breastfeeding were emerging, showing that the practice may have contributed to the existence of myths about strong or weak milk that interfere until today in breastfeeding. (6)

These experiences acquired in the historical context established within society result in different meanings regarding breastfeeding, interfering in the way women act, think and feel about it. In view of this, breastfeeding is influenced by social impositions that will define how breastfeeding will be conducted. (6)

Breastfeeding is currently still considered a taboo, the breast that feeds the child is the same one that plays an important role in their sexuality. (7) Conflicts between the maternal breast and the erotic breast often cause bodily sensations of discomfort and confusion in some puerperal women, such as alterations or abnormalities, a complete change in their self-image, which can embarrass the roles of woman and mother.

We sought, therefore, to address the issue of breasts from the perspective of breastfeeding, the maternal breast and the social transformations that influence the lives of women in the puerperal period, based on the Theory of Social Representations (TSR), through which it is possible to understand the interpretations and meanings that groups and subjects have about social objects, with a focus on the knowledge constructed in the daily lives of social groups – common sense knowledge.

Social representations give meaning to, guide and guide social groups. They form practical knowledge both because they are part of the experience, which involves a historical, cultural and spatial context, and because they guide the subjects' communications and behavior. (8)

In this way, when providing humanized care, the nurse and the multidisciplinary team have the role of empowering women in the puerperium in view of their new reality as a mother regarding their breasts, which were previously essential for their female image and sexuality, now it's something that reflects her ability to nurture another human being, reinforcing the bond between mother and child.

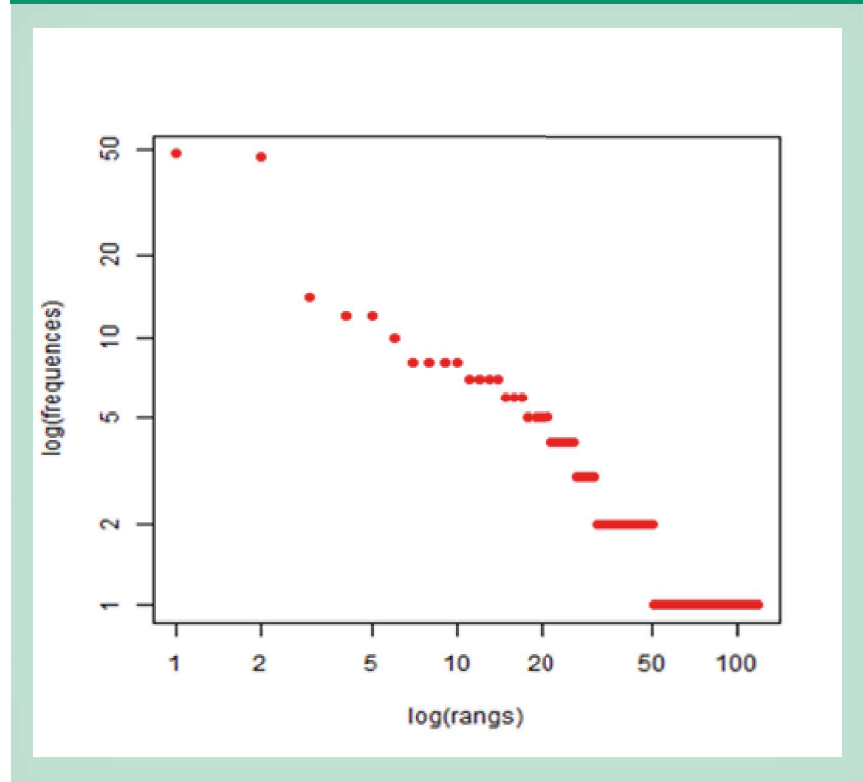
Therefore, linking the ideas of nursing mothers about the breasts to social representations, this research had as a guiding question: what are the social representations of postpartum women about the breast? Therefore, the objective of this study was: to understand the social representations of postpartum women about their breasts during the breastfeeding period.

#### METHOD

It is characterized as exploratory research with a qualitative approach, based on the theory of social representations, through the structural approach. This approach is defended by Abric, with contributions from Celso Sá, based on the theory of the central nucleus, which seeks to demonstrate the internal organization of social representations in terms of cognitive content, based on the central and peripheral system. (8)

The setting for data production was a public maternity hospital in Salvador-BA. This maternity hospital is a state reference in the care of women and their reproductive health. New mothers who experienced childbirth in that maternity hospital participated in this research. The 95 postpartum women

Figure 1: Zipf diagram, Statistical graph. Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, 2017.



Source: analysis corpus processed by IRAMUTEQ 0.7 alpha2 software

participating in the research signed an informed consent form, which explained the nature of the research, its objectives and methods, having the free will to abstain from the condition of participating in the study.

This material is linked to the scientific initiation pilot project entitled "Women in the puerperium and breastfeeding: social representations and practices in health" and is approved by the Research Ethics Committee under opinion nº 1.361.381. Data production took place from November 2017 to February 2018 by applying free word association techniques (TALP - técnicas de associação livre de palavras). This production was updated in the analysis for the current publication in 2021, considering the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic that we have experienced since 2020. Despite this, it is worth noting that qualitative research data are not outdated considering the

social group and the studied problem.

After the period of approximation with the puerperal women, the application of an instrument consisting of socioeconomic data and TALP with the inductive stimulus: breast-feeding breasts was initiated. Postpartum women were asked to recall up to five words.

The technique of free association of words, due to its spontaneous character, allows a much easier and faster access to the semantic elements of the studied object. (8) The application of TALP took place in the maternity ward, individually and on days and times previously scheduled with the participants.

The evocations of the participants were organized and processed in the software Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires (IRAMUTEQ), which allows for statistical analysis. (8) The IRAMUTEQ software, developed by

Pierre Ratinaud, is free, with a free font, based on the R software, which allows the processing and statistical analysis of elaborated texts.

In the textual statistical analysis from the evocations, through the IRAMUTEQ Software, a similarity tree was obtained, guided by the hierarchy of the values of the connections between the terms and their adjacencies to identify co-occurrences between the words. This analysis is based on the theory of graphs and, consequently, highlights the indications of the connection between the terms, which contributes to the knowledge of the structure of a textual corpus, pointing out the common elements and specificities in function of the illustrative variables indicated in the analysis. (10)

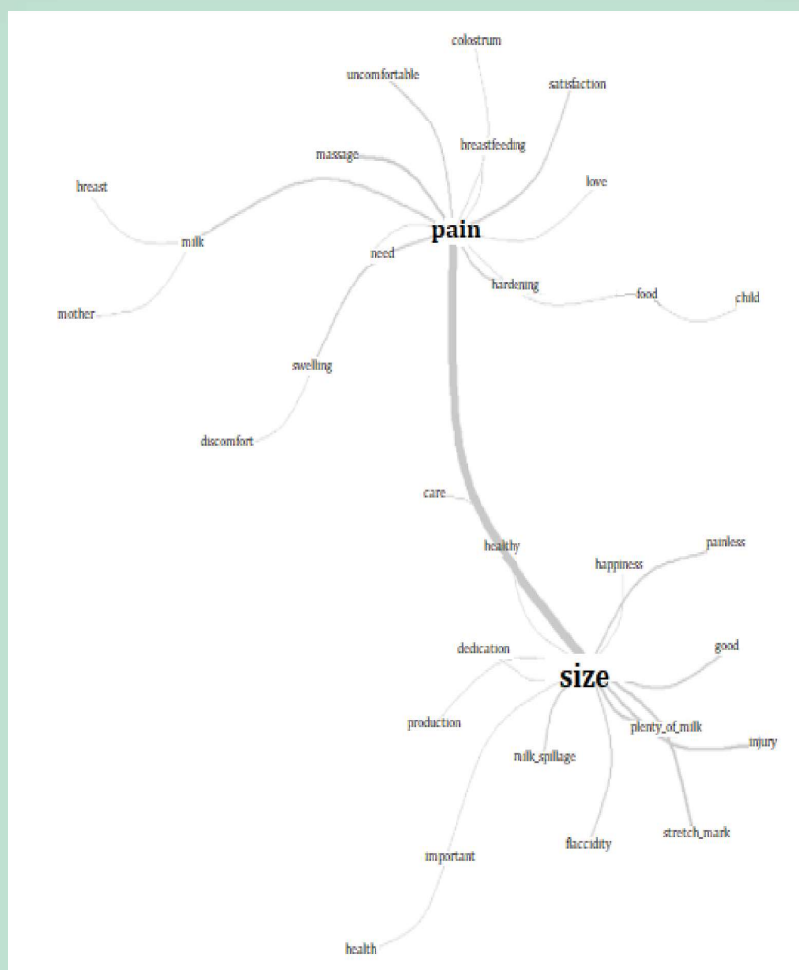
## RESULTS

The results are presented from the sociodemographic characterization followed by the description of the similarity tree. The studied group consisted of 95 postpartum women, with a predominant age group of 19 and 21 years (14.25%), revealing that it was formed by young women, with a median of 21 years.

Considering the 95 participants, 72 answered about self-declared color, with (41.8%) self-declared brown and (26.6%) black. These two skin colors, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), make up the black race..

As for religion, the majority (36.63%) claimed to have no religion, followed by reference to the Catholic religion (22.78%). Family income was classified based on the minimum wage, established by the Presidency of the Brazilian Republic in the amount of R\$ 937.00 (nine hundred and thirty-seven reais), in force in the months of data collection. Thus, the largest proportion was concentrated with 1 minimum wage (42.57%) followed by 29.70%

**Figure 2: Tree illustrative of the similarity analysis of free evocations of postpartum women for the inducing stimulus of what you think about breasts during breastfeeding. Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, 2017**



Source: analysis corpus processed by IRAMUTEQ 0.7 alpha2 software

of income between 1 and 2 minimum wages.

When analyzing the type of occupation of the participants, the largest number is students (28.71%), followed by salespeople or commercial service providers (26.73%). 23.87% reported acting as a housewife and autonomous and health professionals (6.93%), working as housekeepers (1.98%) declared they were unemployed (1.98%).

These findings indicate that an important part of the study participants were exercising an economic activity and/or inserted in the labor market,

however, it can be observed that around 30% were students.

As for education, 98% of the mothers reported having completed high school (including incomplete and complete elementary and high school). And, with regard to birthplace, (69.30%) of the interviewees stated that they are from Salvador and (29.70%) were born in cities in the state of Bahia.

The objective of describing the profile of participants in a research on social representations is extremely important, since one of the criteria for research based on this theory is the

existence of a social group that shares, through communication, experiences about a certain social phenomenon. (9)

In response to the stimulus "what do you think about breasts during breastfeeding?" Data were processed with a number of 95 participants who responded to the evocations about the breasts.

The number of occurrences was 382, the numbers of shapes were 118 and hapax was 68, the average occurrence per text was 4.02. For data analysis, a similarity tree was used, which organizes the words through axes, enabling the identification of correlation between them.

Thus, the studied data were fitted in the Zipf diagram (Fig 1) and the analysis constructed a statistical graph where equivalence was observed between the evocations, the lexical analysis of similarity preserved from the IRAMUTEQ.

Zipf's DIAGRAM follows Zipf's Laws that allow estimating the frequency of occurrence of words in a given scientific and/or technological text by determining the region of concentration of indexing terms, or keywords, so that it becomes visible when a small group of words occurs many times and a large number of words has a small frequency of occurrence. The participants' evocations, despite undergoing lemmatization, still presented a significant number of words that appeared only once.

The similarity analysis, as shown in Figure 2, shows a wide semantic range between the expressions pain and size that make up two nuclei of meaning. These terms were the most frequent and co-occurring. They are in the central axis of the similitude tree with a strong connection between them and describe both limiting experiences, as they are associated with physical and emotional discomfort, and concerns with transformations and changes in the volume and shape of the breasts.

In a general analysis of the similitude tree, on the pain axis, it is noted

through connections, the primordial connection with the terms milk, har-



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dening and massage, for the relief of pain provided by this care. Following this line, the uncomfortable expression

reaffirms the need for further guidance that the postpartum woman needs in relation to breast care.

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#### DISCUSSION

The centrality of the word pain as one of the core meanings seems to take into account memory for what is described by other mothers or for having felt pain in previous breastfeeding. The word colostrum, which is the first milk to be produced, has the characteristic of being expelled in small amounts, until the milk goes down, which makes the breasts firmer and can also cause painful sensations. (10)

Representations are formed to guide social interactions, facilitate communication. This process takes place through two mechanisms based on social memory and the past conclusions of a group, anchoring and objectification, and it is through them that objects gain concrete quality in the social reality. (8)

The second core of meaning, shaped in its centrality by the term size, is connected with the words production and plenty of milk, indicating the idea of the mothers' concern when bringing in their bulge words such as stretch marks, extravasation of milk and flaccidity. This connection set makes it possible to infer that there is a representation that the breast may become deformed and lose its beauty.

The perceptions that postpartum women have about their bodies, specifically the breasts, during breastfeeding are linked to their body image before pregnancy. Self-acceptance of the body is closely linked to the aesthetic stan-

dards of the idealism of the perfect body that should not be lost as a result of postpartum and breastfeeding. These social patterns create psychological pressures that affect self-image, generating negative consequences on their self-esteem and sexuality. (11)

With regard to the term health, there is a concern with the injuries that may occur in relation to, namely, the correct way to breastfeed. Care and a healthy way of experiencing motherhood bring happiness and a good relationship with the child and with yourself. The release of oxytocin during breastfeeding promotes maternal pleasure, a feeling of well-being, which some women were able to relate to being pain free at this time.

In this study, it was evidenced that the social representations of postpartum women about the breasts are associated with their beliefs, knowledge and values related to myths about female bodies and the care necessary to maintain shape and beauty as socially conformed. Other authors also reveal that myths and beliefs directly influence breastfeeding and, as a consequence, early weaning. (5, 12)

One of the possible causes that justify early food supplementation, according to the mothers, is that the breasts fall with lactation. (13) Thus, the authors highlight the importance of health professionals getting to know the maternal daily life and the sociocultural context to which they belong to improve dialogue and break paradigms since the adolescence period. Breastfeeding, in addition to being biological, is something determined and conditioned by society, it consists of something impregnated with ideologies and delimitations that result from visible conditions in society. (14)

The act of breastfeeding is associated with beliefs and myths regarding breasts that are cultivated to this day. In this sense, the breasts, while representing male sexual stimulation and a

symbol of femininity for women, are also related to the act of nourishing and



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feeding the baby, having a dual character in the woman's life. (12)

When seeking to identify sociocul-

tural factors, myths and beliefs of nursing mothers that are potential causes of early weaning, a study showed that excessive concern with the aesthetics of the breasts after breastfeeding is the factor most reported by women. (5)

Similar results were found in a study whose objective was to demonstrate the perception of the nursing mother in relation to the influence of popular myths and beliefs in the influence of adequate nutrition for infants. (5) During the research, a bibliographic survey was carried out where 50 studies on the researched object were found. The results showed that breastfeeding mothers often believe in the myth that breasts fall out after breastfeeding, making them feel insecure about their bodies.

The social environment requires knowledge about breastfeeding and sexuality, it is feasible to carry out actions aimed at health education involving such issues in order to break paradigms and demystify taboos. Knowing that culture has a great influence on the attitude of women regarding their sexual experiences and breastfeeding practices. (15)

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In this sense, the importance of further guidance that postpartum women need to have during pregnancy and postpartum is highlighted. In the thought of the group of study participants, they indicate the concern with the breasts and the body, perceptions with the body come next to beliefs, knowledge and affective values.

One of the aspects highlighted in this study was pain, it is common for postpartum women to feel pain in the first days of breastfeeding. A survey on

the challenges faced by women during breastfeeding indicates that the main difficulties are “sore, full and hot breasts”, a common difficulty among postpartum women, since excess milk production causes pain. (17)

By identifying the existence of this representation of pain, the health professional can qualify their care process in this aspect with a view to the woman's contentment in the breastfeeding process. The women's satisfaction with the care and experience in the pregnancy-puerperal period is relevant in the care process, affirming itself in the

good practices in assistance to women recommended by the World Health Organization. (18)

#### CONCLUSION

The social representations of postpartum women about breasts in the puerperium are associated with their beliefs, knowledge and affective values and are seen as limiting factors in the breastfeeding process.

Study participants recognize that the breasts are an important part of their body that require care in the breastfeed-

ing process in order to keep them in good shape and with the structure they had before pregnancy. The breastfeeding process is remarkably associated with pain and the size of the breast.

The professional nurse and the multidisciplinary team participate in the construction of this care for the breasts, ensuring maternal and child health. Thus, this production corroborates the health practices in breastfeeding, enabling the enrichment of knowledge of health professionals and supporting new strategies and policies for the health of women and children.

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