

# The social representation of animals and bioethics of protection: subsidies to build up humanitarian education

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## Abstract

This study aims to identify the social representations that elementary school children from a public school in Brasilia, Federal District do about animals. Four focus groups were conducted with elementary school children, and the data were interpreted in the light of bioethics of protection, which argues that moral patients that are either harmed or vulnerable to damage must be protected. The study considers that it is relevant to know the social representations of students about the animals to support effective educational measures, which will help prevent the continued instrumental value assigned to animals. The data show that this representation is based on affection and empathy for dogs and cats, and elective speciesism, related to some species. The finding is that children tend to follow a socially connoted classification, indicating the need to adopt educational measures to further break the anthropocentric pattern that guides human relationships with other species.

**Key words:** Animals. Bioethics. Education. Social representation theory.

## Resumo

### Representação social acerca dos animais e bioética de proteção: subsídios à construção da educação humanitária

O presente estudo visa identificar as representações sociais que crianças do ensino fundamental de uma escola pública de Brasília/DF fazem sobre os animais. Quatro grupos focais foram realizados e os dados, interpretados a partir da bioética de proteção, que defende que pacientes morais suscetíveis ou vulnerados a danos devem ser protegidos. O estudo considera ser relevante conhecer as representações sociais de estudantes sobre os animais, com vistas a subsidiar medidas educativas eficazes que contribuam para evitar que se continue a atribuir valor instrumental aos animais. Os dados mostram que a representação dos participantes fundamenta-se no afeto e na empatia por cães e gatos, e no especismo eletivo referente a algumas espécies. A partir dos resultados, foi possível constatar que as crianças tendem a seguir a forma socialmente conotada de classificação, indicando a necessidade de adotar medidas educativas para futuramente romper o padrão antropocêntrico que pauta as relações humanas com as outras espécies.

**Palavras-chave:** Animais. Bioética. Educação. Teoria das representações sociais.

## Resumen

### La representación social acerca de los animales y la bioética de protección: subsidios a la construcción de la educación humanitaria

El presente estudio tiene como objetivo identificar las representaciones sociales que los niños de primaria de una escuela pública de Brasilia, Distrito Federal hacen sobre los animales. Se llevaron a cabo cuatro grupos de discusión, y los datos, interpretados a partir de la bioética de protección, que defiende que los pacientes morales susceptibles o vulnerables a daños deben ser protegidos. El estudio considera que es relevante conocer las representaciones sociales de los estudiantes acerca de los animales, para apoyar subsidios educativos eficaces que contribuyan evitar que se continúe a atribuir valor instrumental a los animales. Los datos muestran que la representación de los participantes se basa en el afecto y la empatía hacia los perros y gatos, y en el especismo electivo, referente a algunas especies. A partir de los resultados, fue posible constatar que los niños tienden a seguir la forma socialmente connotada de clasificación, indicando la necesidad de adoptar medidas educativas para que un futuro se rompa con el patrón antropocéntrico que pauta las relaciones humanas con otras especies.

**Palabras-clave:** Animales. Bioética. Educación. Teoría de la representación social.

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It comes from the 1970s the greatest concern about the need to protect animals and also the intensification of the debate over the morality concerning the use that is made of them. This can be explained by several factors, such as environmental crisis that has sparked debates on issues related to man's dominion over nature; advancing scientific knowledge about the capabilities and emotions of animals, the publication of important works denouncing and questioning the legitimacy of animal exploitation as well as the emergence of bioethics<sup>1</sup>.

Since then, the movement for animals is constantly growing and has increasingly been pressing the creation of protective laws and regulations<sup>1</sup>. In Brazil, for example, it was approved the Law 11.794/08, which regulates the use of animals in teaching and scientific research<sup>2</sup>. However, still today animals are considered so they can offer or render to humans<sup>3</sup>, making it evident the predominance of traditional anthropocentric ethics in which nonhuman animals are enslaved and have an instrumental value. Thus, the exploitation of animals in society, besides being very often, is naturalized and little questioned. To name a few examples, there are animals for entertainment (zoos, rodeos, circuses etc.), food animals, animals for use in scientific experiments, extraction of skin and labor (transport and traction)<sup>3</sup>.

The exploitation of individuals with fragile defenses is morally inadequate and unacceptable, since it disregards the possible damage being caused. Moreover, nonhuman animals are sentient beings with their own interests, but they cannot defend themselves against speciesist interests. The objectification of animals and the consequent exploitation to what they are subjected is a problem with serious moral implications and must be considered in the light of bioethics<sup>4</sup>.

In this sense, it is worth noting the relevance of the bioethics of protection as a theoretical tool for the analysis of this topic, since it refers to the ethics applied to human behaviors that can lead to irreversible consequences on defenseless beings, as it is necessary therefore to protect those who are vulnerable or susceptible to ethical damage<sup>5</sup>.

As the animals' guardian, the State should implement policies aiming at changes in man's relationship with animals. Education is essential for this purpose, especially to children, future decision makers. An effective educational intervention requires knowledge of the concepts that children of school age are building before this new context that emerges in society concerning animals and the con-

tent that is discussed in schools about them. Under such a context, this study made use of the *theory of social representations* (TSR). It is noteworthy that *social representations* (SR) are a form of knowledge developed by a given group on a social object, assuming its importance when performing duties such as guiding behaviors and facilitating communication between group members who shares those<sup>6</sup>.

Therefore, this study aims at identifying and understanding which is children's social representation regarding animals facing new and old contexts, analyzing it in the light of bioethics, as well as to reflect on possible pedagogical interventions in order to contribute to new perspectives and behaviors in relation to these human beings.

### The bioethics of protection

The bioethics of protection is a recent theoretical position in the field of bioethics. Initially, it was formulated by Latin American researchers Schramm and Kottow in order to respond to conflicts and moral dilemmas faced in developing countries' public health systems, which often cannot be solved by traditional bioethical tools, particularly principlism<sup>7</sup>. They were then extended to the practices that occur with other living beings and the natural environment, and later modified by human actions at the validity age of biotechnology, biopolitics and globalization<sup>8</sup>.

The bioethics of protection can be defined as an applied ethics relating to human practices that can have significant and irreversible effects on other living beings<sup>7</sup>. So this bioethical perspective refers to the protection of moral patients who do not have the means to, alone, defend themselves from moral agents' practice<sup>5</sup>. In order to deal with conflicts of interests and values that emerge from such practices, the bioethics of protection has three functions: beyond descriptive and normative functions, it has a protective function<sup>9</sup>.

This tool, as the word itself indicates, aims to protect, or give protection in such conflicts to the lives of all involved, human or otherwise, so that they can possibly continue "being"<sup>7</sup>. *Lato sensu*, the bioethics of protection broadens the scope of moral consideration and is applied to sentient animals as human actions can cause them harm<sup>7</sup>. This application is justified because there are collective, ecological and non speciesist interests that cannot be subsumed to the individual interests of corporations, nations, regions and species<sup>5</sup>.

It is important to highlight three types of vulnerability: primary vulnerability, susceptibility and violation. The *primary vulnerability* is an ontological condition of all living beings and hence universal, that cannot be protected as it is inherent in life, given that every living being will perish regardless of the conditions of its existence. The *susceptibility* indicates that the vulnerable beings by nature are effectively threatened; finding themselves in a situation that negatively affects their lives. The susceptibility may or may not become *vulnerability*, which refers to the state in which the living being is specifically affected by adverse conditions, which are independent of their control <sup>5</sup>.

Thus, through the exploitation of animals for human interests these living beings are susceptible moral patients (threatened) – in most cases already vulnerable (affected) – and in need of urgent protection actions. In the words of Assumpção (...) *these non-human animals reared for certain human purposes are moral patients under vulnerable situations, thus they deserve protection. Not recognizing them as such and therefore not acting to put an end to this situation, would be the same as assuming a condescending attitude toward tyranny and against the effort of ethics. Because not acting against is, in fact, an act to promote, it is the current anthropocentric moral legitimation* <sup>10</sup>.

According to the Act 24.645/34, all the animals of the country are under the State's guardianship <sup>11</sup>. Brazil stands out as one of the few countries to treat cruelty against animals at a constitutional level. Besides the Constitution, Law 9.605/98 <sup>12</sup> is another important instrument of coercion to the practices of violence against animals <sup>3</sup>. The country is also a signatory to the *Universal Declaration of Animal Rights*, proclaimed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) <sup>13</sup>. The *corpus* of this statement makes clear the susceptibility and vulnerability situation in which animals are, and before that fact it is listed a number of devices to protect them.

This understanding is in line with the *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights* <sup>14</sup>, that although fraught with ethical anthropocentrism includes among its concerns the moral issues relating to the environment and, in particular, to animals. But according to Levai <sup>3</sup>, for the real animal protection, laws are not enough; a rigorous pedagogical strategy towards a culture of peace is needed. Based on the perspective of bioethics of protection and on commitments by the State with regard to animals, it is ar-

gued in this paper its responsibility to promote and foster new perspectives on education about animals.

## Theory of social representations

The TSR was developed from the work *La psychanalyse, son image et son public*, by Serge Moscovici, launched in 1961. This publication has the psychoanalysis and the phenomenon of this science absorption by common sense as its object of study, through communication and language, building another kind of knowledge <sup>15</sup>. The SR can be defined as (...) *form of knowledge, socially elaborated and shared, with a practical purpose, and that contributes to the building of a common reality to a social group* <sup>16</sup>.

The SR are built from information received from various sources regarding the object, such as media, dialogue among peers, laws, sciences and the contact with the object <sup>17</sup>. As a result, children are born into a world already structured by their community's SR <sup>18</sup>. In order to join the social group to which these social actors belong, in an interaction with individuals and institutions, they shall capture and elaborate the information. From then they shall contribute to their own SR for the building of society <sup>19</sup>.

There are two processes by which representations are constructed: objectification and anchoring. The objectification makes it material what is abstract, turning a concept into a concrete and meaningful image of something. In this process there is a selective construction and a simplification of the information regarding the object, some of which is more considered than other <sup>6</sup>.

The anchoring is, through some adjustments, to assimilate new elements of an object in a system of already familiar categories. By anchoring, the individual integrates the object of representation within a digestible and understandable framework to himself, according to his system of values, naming and classifying it according to the object's link with their social integration <sup>6</sup>.

We emphasize the dynamic character of the SR, as they are subject to changes due to the emergence of new representations or the reworking of the existing ones. Thus, the representations shall change either due to a new fact or information or to periods of conflict, lack of sense or something unfamiliar in representational structures of each culture <sup>18</sup>. Four functions of the social representations are highlighted:

- *Function of knowing*: social representations allow social actors to acquire new knowledge and to integrate them to previous knowledge. Moreover, they are necessary condition for social communication, allowing social exchange, transmission and dissemination of non-scientific knowledge;
- *Function of Identity*: social representations situate the individuals and groups in society, allowing them to elaborate a rewarding personal and social identity, compatible with the system of norms and certain historical and social values;
- *Function of guidance*: representations shall guide the behaviors and practices in three ways: they are directly involved in defining the purpose of the situation, produce a system of anticipations and expectations and they are prescriptive of mandatory behaviors or practices, defining what is lawful, tolerable or unacceptable in a given social context;
- *Function of justifying*: social representations allow justifying, *a posteriori*, the positions statements and behaviors, and also to preserve and justify social differentiation, helping to maintain social distance between groups<sup>20</sup>.

As mentioned before, since the 70's, discussions on the way animals are treated by humans have intensified in the academia and have achieved a significant scale in the media in contemporary society<sup>21</sup>. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important to investigate the social representations of animals.

## Method

The research was conducted in the School Class 206, South of Brasilia/DF. This school was chosen because it develops a project with one of the structural axes: *Humanitarian Education* – geared to changes in the relationship between humans and animals.

Thirty-two students participated in the study, 16 girls and 16 boys, whose inclusion criteria were: belonging to classes from the first to fifth year of elementary school and to be aged between 7 and 11 years old. Thus, we sought to ensure that they had the ability to understand the object of research, as well as whether express on the proposed activities. In order to include students of all school classes a draw was carried out, and there was also the term of free and informed consent signing (TFIC), first by

the research responsible and later by the research subject.

For the data collection, focus groups were used in order to observe the reaction of the subjects before the speech of others and also the divergences and the consensus emerging on a topic. The focus group becomes an “entity in itself” and develops a shared identity, a “we” that ultimately generates a closer everyday environment in which subjects consider the opinions of others in formulating their responses<sup>22</sup>.

Four focus groups were composed during the month of July 2011, led by a moderator and an observer. Each group comprised eight students and the meeting had an approximate duration of 35 minutes. Because we were dealing with children, we have chosen a playful procedure, in which the four focus groups were requested to build a story, collectively, based on the following quote: *On a sunny day, Eduardo/Cecilia went for a walk. As they were walking they saw an animal...* From this quote, the children were encouraged to answer some questions in order to express what they think about the animals and the relationship established with them.

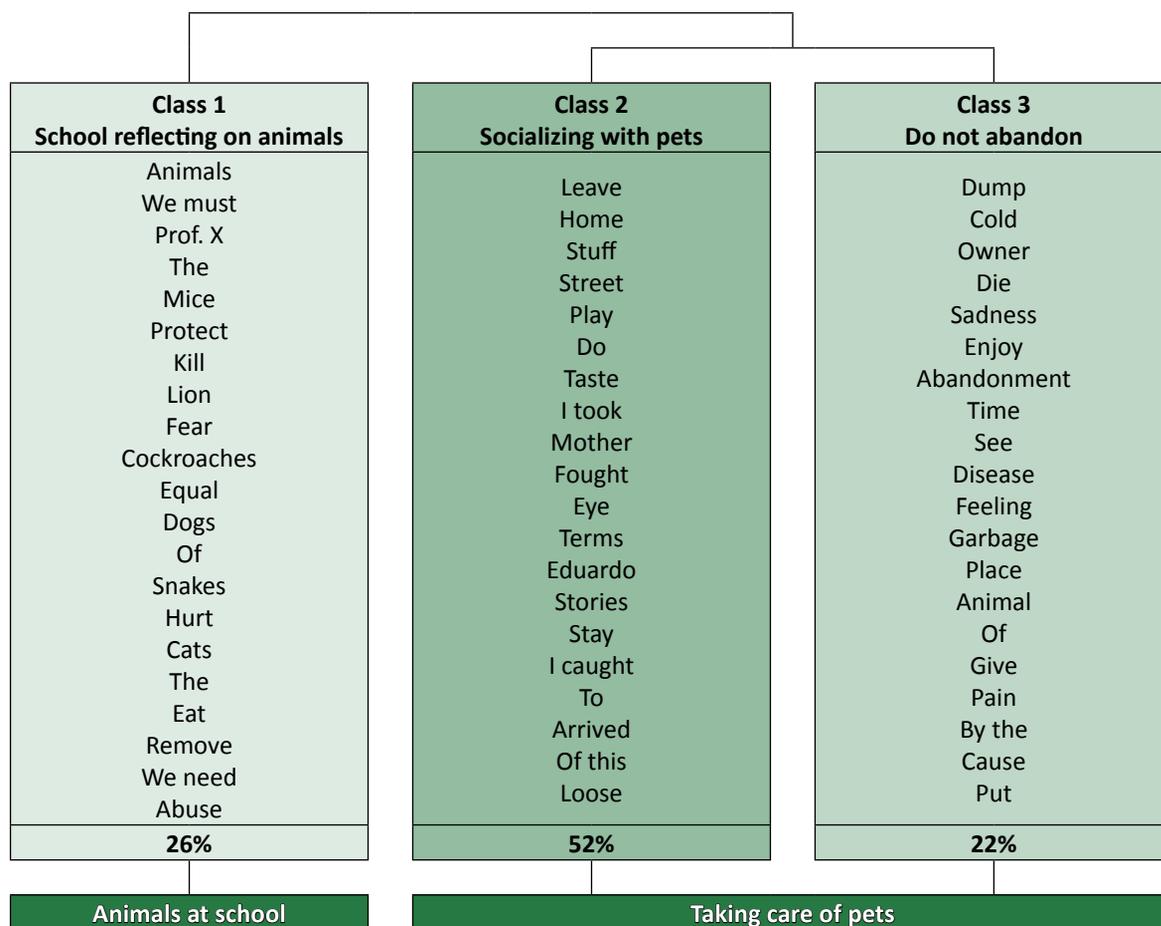
The focus groups' audio was literally transcribed and placed in the audio format needed to be analyzed by the Alceste software (*Analyse Lexicale par Contexte d'un Ensemble de Segments de Texte*) for lexical and semantic analysis of the text through the synthesis and organization of the most important information. The program allows identifying recurrences and unequal contexts, considering similar and repetitive linguistic groupings. The following moment involved the realization of the *descending hierarchical classification* which forms axes and classes of words as a function of frequency, of the association between words and of these with their classes (chi-squared calculation) – a process that allows the reconstitution of the “collective discourse”<sup>23</sup>.

Students participated voluntarily in the study with the proper parental consent and the TFIC signing. The project was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Brasilia (UnB).

## Results

From the analysis of the four focus groups' corpus, which has been conducted by Alceste, three classes divided into two main themes have emerged, as shown in the dendrogram (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Dendrogram with the total corpus structure obtained from the narratives of children (N=32)



Axis 1 – Animals at school

• Class 1 – The school reflecting on animals

This axis is composed of Class 1 and corresponds to 26% of the analyzed corpus. It comes to what has been discussed about the animals in the classroom and the students' placements in relation to some of them. Thus, you can assign the following speech to the subject: *"The X teacher said we shall not hurt nor mistreat animals because they are equal to us. She also said we need to take the dogs and cats of the street because they do not know how to get anything to eat. In addition, she taught that we shall not kill the animals but protect them. But we think that the lion is fierce and don't need to be protected. And the snakes, rats and cockroaches either. They are scary and then we kill them"*. This speech meets the speech of children on the content covered in class and their understanding on how animals should be treated by humans.

The lessons most remembered by students relate to maintaining physical and emotional health of animals, such as not abusing, not killing, protecting and generally taking care for the animals. Pets like dogs and cats were remembered due to the dependence to receive care from humans in order to live. In addition, the wild animals were featured in this class among the other issues discussed at school, as they were destitute of protection due to the exploitation they face, such as trafficking and hunting. There was also a recommendation not to buy them as pets. The emphasis of the speech focuses on the consequences of these practices for the animals:

*"That we shall not mistreat animals, that we shall take care of them, give them love and be in union with them"; "is that we cannot take any wild animal into our house because if we carry them we will not be able to handle them. Like, if we bring a macaw to live with us it will want to fly one day, and as the*

glasses are transparent it can slam its face in the glass and break the beak"; "It's like in our class, they say wild is not pet. Teacher X even has a shirt."

It was also observed many references about sentience and animal rights. The rights which were studied with these children are defined in the *Universal Declaration of Animal Rights*<sup>13</sup>, being the most cited rights those related to the following articles: Article 2, a) *Every animal has the right to be respected*; b) *Man, like an animal species, cannot exterminate other animals or exploit them violating this law; he has a duty to put his knowledge in the service of the animals*; c) *Every animal has the right to health care and protection of man*; Article 3, *no animal shall be submitted either to maltreatments or to cruel acts (...)*.

Children also mentioned the equality between human and nonhuman animals denying human superiority over others, when making the following statements: "That their life is worth the same as our"; "Take care of them because they also have feelings"; "Do not mistreat. Teacher X lent me a movie where animals are... equal to us"; "That we are also animals, just that we are rational animals and they are irrational animals"; "They are the same, equal to us, just don't think the same way we do".

In this class the group has highlighted the importance of protecting pets (such as dog, cat, rabbit, and birds), endangered animals and the wild ones that arouse more sympathy (e.g., elephant and giraffe). The reasons cited regarding this protection was: "They suffer a lot"; "They are cute"; "They may disappear forever"; "They cannot take care of themselves". Among the animals that do not deserve protection, the most commonly cited were cockroaches, spiders, scorpions, rats and snakes, with the justification that they are "disgusting"; "dangerous" and "loathsome".

When the researcher inserts a mouse in place of the animal of their choice in the construction of the story, the speeches are replaced by the following connotations: "He would want, or to scare the mouse away, or he would practically want to kill the mouse"; "Because many people feel disgusted by rats and do not like them"; "He'd kill it"; "Catch it is what he wouldn't do"; "He would poison"; "Oh, or maybe someone would do something with the mouse"; "An experiment. Yes, an experiment with it"; "Still, he would kill. It could transmit diseases".

## Axis 2 – Taking care of pets

### • Class 2 – Socializing with pets

This class represents 52% of the analyzed corpus and in it an organized speech around this social group daily experience with pets arises. Noteworthy is the affection, the benefits resulted from the relationship with the animal, as well as their "negatives aspects", referring especially to the mess that they eventually make. All these aspects of living with animals arouse empathy, care and emotional bonds.

Based on the terms that give more meaning to this class, you can build the collective discourse, i.e., the one most widely shared by the group, without specifically referring to any subject: "I really like dogs and to play with them. So when I saw an abandoned dog in the street with a pint in the eye, like me, I got the puppy and took him home to take care of him. When my parents arrived home, they fought with me and said that we cannot support and keep him. My mother said that dogs make a mess, give a lot of work and stuff. But I will not let him loose on the street".

It should be noted that in the four stories built in the focus groups all animals found by the characters were domestic. In two of them the animal was a dog and in the other two, a cat and a horse cart driver; i.e., animals in the urban context and that are part of the daily life of those children, as exemplified by the responses to the question "What did Eduardo feel?", proposed to facilitate the discussion in the focus groups: "Joy"; "A feeling of love in his heart that warmed his heart forever"; "He liked to have a puppy to play with"; "He liked to have a friendship with him"; "He liked it because he had a pint in the eye and Eduardo also had a pint in the eye, and then they were alike".

When referring to these animals, the words used by the participants were, among others, "love", "affection", "friendship" and "fun", revealing a universe of positive aspects, from which the affect markedly stands out. In addition, the company provided by the animal is highlighted as one of the best gains in the interrelationship: "Eduardo liked that he was joyful, was affectionate"; "Partner"; "Playful"; "What he liked the best was that he was a fellow"; "Yes!".

Regarding the abandoned animals, children had revealed that in such a situation the animals are helpless, which raised careful wishes and behaviors in order to protect or minimize their suffering: "I feel sad because if they had a home to live they would not be starving, would not be messing in the trash".

In this class, the “mess” made by the animals has been highlighted as a negative aspect of living with them. At this point there were differences because some students suggested the animal’s physical punishment and even abandonment. This idea, however, was refuted by most children for whom this behavior is considered normal and therefore, although unwanted, deserves a peaceful reaction: *“He tore the curtain. Scratched the sofa and peed. Eduardo was astonished. He felt angry”*; *“He sent the animal back to the street”*; *“... Jeez! I do not agree with her!”*; *“Neither do I! Because all cats do that when they have nothing to play with... like a ball of wool. They want to scratch something”*; *“He could put the cat of doom”*.

This Class and Class 3, following, are related as both address the issue of abandoned animals (dogs and cats) – and here they are complementary. But with the difference that Class 3 focuses exclusively on this issue.

• **Class 3 – Do not abandon**

The third class is representative of 22% of the analyzed corpus. It addresses three aspects related to the problem of abandoned dogs and cats: the reasons why people abandon their animals; the suffering of these animals in the streets; and the imperative not to leave them, along with alternatives presented to avoid this practice. It is possible, from the most repeated words in the focus groups and by the initial reading of speeches, to assign the following statements to the participants:

*“The dog’s owner put it into the trash. The abandonment was due to the animal’s disease and because he did not want to see the animal die. And he was there in pain, cold and sadness. The owner should have enjoyed more time left with him, or give it to a friend, not throw him it away into the trash”*.

In all the stories elaborated, the character found an animal that was abandoned and suffering on the streets. Faced with this fact, all the characters, sensitized to the situation, take the animal home in order to take care of him. The most cited and discussed reasons for abandoning are, by the children: financial difficulties, illness and unwanted animal behavior: *“Because he made a mess”* *“Yeah, there are some people who get a dog and treat him well just in the beginning. If it does something wrong, he takes him back into the street right away”*; *“That person who left it is not very fond of animals”*; *“Or, sometimes, could not afford to take care of it right”*.

As in describing the reasons why the animals in the stories were abandoned, the children started to discuss alternatives to avoid the animal from being helpless in the streets: *“But if it was ill he should have enjoyed more his company, as in the movie Marley. Marley was almost dying and the owner hasn’t abandoned him. Until a while after he died and the owner has not felt the pain of throwing him in the trash so that he needed to survive the garbage”*; *“He could have put him in a shelter for him to be adopted by another family”*; *“He could have given it to a family member or a friend”*.

The abandonment consequences to the animals were emphasized and described mainly based on sentience. So, they refer to the physical suffering (hunger, pain, cold) and also emotional (fear, loneliness, sadness): *“Eduardo took the kitten out of the roof in order to take care of it”*; *“He was sorry for the kitten as he thought: ‘Oh, he must be hungry, feeling cold. Without love’. And then he grabbed him and took him home to take care of him”*.

**Discussion**

The statements allow us to affirm that the content of the student’s social representation concerning animals is strongly linked to the figure of pets: dogs and cats. These two species are certainly the ones with which the participants have more contact, inside or outside home, and with which they establish very close relationship based on affection and care. The presence of these animals in the representation was expected, given that the object must be part of the daily lives of individuals analyzed. *Representations participate in the construction of reality, which only exists as such in the interactions of individuals or groups with social objects* <sup>6</sup>.

There is a large presence of these animals in urban areas, living with people. Besides this very close interaction, there is currently a growing trend in Western society in nurturing loving relationships with these animals, making them family members. This fact may be partly explained by the benefits that this relationship brings to humans <sup>24</sup>.

For children, for example, pets can provide companionship, safety, comfort, fun and affection, as well as teaching responsibility, stimulating care behavior and promoting respect and compassion for animals and nature, providing children with opportunities to learn about the animals and the facts of life <sup>25</sup>. Besides the affection, it was observed in this

social group a large empathy for the situations involving mainly abandonment and its consequences for physical and emotional suffering to the animal.

Empathy can be defined as the ethical exercise of putting yourself in another's place in order to evaluate a situation, which may lead to concern about something or someone but himself. Thus, empathy plays an important role in the development of a more careful behavior and even the extension of the circle of morality<sup>26</sup>. With the ability to empathize it can be seen that the other's suffering is similar to ours, allowing reason and emotion to work together in order to find a truly ethical behavior<sup>26</sup>.

According to Segre<sup>27</sup>, *the condition of human empathy, which we also call for compassion (shared passion, which is not charity or charities) and that the philosopher Levinas has characterized as "otherness" (...) is necessary so that we can "think bioethics"*. It is worth noting the important role that empathy seems to fulfill in relation to an ethical concern with these animals. Apparently, empathy fosters the search for an ethical conduct and a look related to the animals, respecting them and valuing them for their own characteristics.

The fact that in the four stories the character takes the abandoned animal home calls our attention to the weakness and suffering of the animal, and their willingness to help them. But due to the impotence in real life, subjects project what it is that they would like to do in order to get the animals rid of a situation of suffering, which can be summarized in the action of "taking care" that was strongly present in all groups.

The emphasis on the abandonment of animals in the stories is possibly due to the empathy and the fact that the abandonment of animals is a common practice in cities, easily noticeable by the large number of animals on the streets. According to estimates of the World Health Organization (WHO), there are approximately 500 million abandoned dogs around the world. In Brazil, there are about 25 million abandoned dogs and 10 million abandoned cats<sup>28</sup>.

Due to this situation a questionnaire was necessary, because whether the abandonment is such a frequent practice it demonstrates that dogs and cats, although appointed as the animals most esteemed by society, are still often regarded as objects that can be discarded<sup>29</sup> when they do not meet expectations or desired interests. The sale of puppies, driven by the *pet* market, as well as advertisements and films primarily targeted at children, make those animals become objects of consumption, "things"

that can be acquired without having awareness of the implied responsibility<sup>29</sup>.

Another point that corroborates the statement of an instrumental value given to these animals is anthropomorphizing, which implies in assigning them human characteristics and concepts rather than their own. By placing jewelry, clothing, shoes and dye the animal's hair, for example, the animals' interests and the respect to their very nature remain in the background<sup>30</sup>.

When children participating in the study have argued that abandonment is not justifiable, they emphasized the consequences for animals which, being sentient, suffer from great distress. From this finding, therefore, follows the human responsibility to protect and care for them. It is thus demonstrated an ethical concern related to the physical and emotional well-being of animals, the maintenance of which depends on human beings.

The concern with the fragility of nonhuman animals is a concern of bioethics, as these can easily move from a state of vulnerability to a state of susceptibility and/or damage vulnerability<sup>5</sup>. In this sense, Schramm argues that besides being normative and descriptive, bioethics has a third function, also practical and socially relevant, which is to protect individuals against threats from human practices that may affect them<sup>31</sup>.

It is of great importance that within the social representation of these children regarding animals' bioethical references related thereto, such as care, protection/vulnerability, respect and responsibility shall be present. And further, these shall be applied to their education. However, these positive bioethical implications are restricted only to dogs and cats, for though other animals have appeared in this representation, they do not have the same importance in the view of children, nor are similarly considered.

According to the results of Axis 1, children showed non anthropocentric approaches performed in the school context. It is what can be inferred from the statements about equality between human and nonhuman animals, and the emphasis on the suffering caused to wild animals when exploited. In this case, it differs from many of the approaches that focus on the number of animals killed or taken from nature and how this can harm the future of mankind<sup>32</sup>.

Advancing in the discussion concerning the need to protect animals it has become explicit the differentiation in the treatment of different animals. It is what is called elective speciesism which consists

in treating animals differently in order to protect some species and discriminate others. In elective speciesism, some animals that arouse sympathy or compassion in a way that it is considered important to protect their interests are elected. However, they remain indifferent to the suffering of animals that are not within the scope of predilection culturally circumscribed<sup>33</sup>. This is the case of the difference between dogs and rat's treatment.

According to Naconecy<sup>26</sup>, the common sense thinking is prejudicially discriminatory and morally inconsistent with cultural roots: *It is true that the more socially distant from us an animal is, the lesser we will feel sympathy for him. This explains the traditional humanitarian concern for dogs and cats, and no sensitivity for rats... Even if dogs and mice shared the same zoological skills that would make them objects of our ethical concern.* Finally, it is emphasized that the SR within this social group regarding animals appears to be rooted in the urban social context in which they live and tends to follow the shape that society deals with the different animals according to their interests.

### Final Considerations

According to the social representation identified in students regarding animals, it can be stated that it is grounded in the emotional bond and care of these subjects in relation to pets, dogs and cats. This means that when participants think about the animals, they specifically think on those two and to them they relate important bioethical references, among which we highlight care, responsibility and protection.

The core elements that generate this representational system are therefore linked to the figure of these two pets and the anchoring of this representation is made within those subjects' everyday

reality. Other animals, though present in the representational system, are not central and do not have the same importance. Nevertheless, there is an evident tendency of these children to follow the way that society treats the various animals, i.e. through elective speciesist. The elective speciesism, that divides and conceives animals differently, allows identifying implications that go in the opposite direction of the ideas disseminated by bioethics. Thus, for certain animals, children tend to conceive them with an instrumental value.

This framework can be explained partly by the fact that, even the school addressing several different issues about animals through humanitarian education, in the construction of social representations process subjects select and filter information so that only a few are seized. To this, it adds the fact that the approaches in the school context, as well as other sources of diffusion of new looks concerning the animals, may be too recent to bring about real change. In this way, the school cannot overcome the force of certain social rootedness related to animals, but it helps to strengthen the assimilation of some important ethical values in relation to dogs and cats, which may contribute to the dissemination of respect to other animals.

These results do not disqualify the initiatives that seek new pedagogical, non-anthropocentric and non speciesist approaches, such as the humanitarian education. But it indicates that these studies need to be intensified and continuous, because, as they are before such old ways of seeing and treating animals, changes will be gradual and slow and intervention will be increasingly necessary and with proper government support. Under such a perspective, we highlight the responsibility of states to promote public policies aiming at changing the way men and women relate to animals. To achieve this purpose, education is an indispensable tool, especially for children, future decision makers.

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**Participation of the authors**

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