PLEASURE AND SUFFERING IN ORGANIZATIONS:
AN INTRODUCTORY SUMMARY TO THE WORK
PSYCHODYNAMIC THEORY

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents a review on the work psychodynamic theory. The goal is to contribute with education actions of undergraduate students in disciplines related to work and organizational psychology, but not in psychology courses. Throughout the article, the main concepts of the theory are systematized: the experiences of pleasure and suffering arising from the work as well as illnesses, and how the defense strategies used by employees work towards avoiding such suffering. Finally, there is a reflection on the work organization in the majority of companies at the present and in what way such organization is related to the lives of its employees.

Key words: Work psychodynamic. Psychology. Work organization. Education.

1 Title in Portuguese: Prazer e sofrimento nas organizações: um resumo introdutório à teoria psicodinâmica do trabalho. English version by TANNER, Claudia Marilia Ramos. 2013

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to present an introductory review on the theory known as Work Psychodynamic and its possibilities of use for undergraduate students from the areas related to Business Administration, Production Management, Management Processes, Workplace Health and Safety and other related areas.

The interest in developing this article arose from the need of the authors, professors in charge of the disciplines related to occupational psychology, but in undergraduate courses not related to the psychology field. It was necessary to present texts to the students that addressed the theoretical foundations of these disciplines in a simplified way. Thus, it would be possible to include them in the lesson plans of the disciplines that are already overloaded with content.

It is important to emphasize that there are more complete and profound theoretical reviews about the theme of this article. However, the authors’ intention is to systematize the main concepts of the Work Psychodynamics in an introductory text. In this way, its presentation and exposure becomes better understood and accepted for those not familiar with the psychology area.

The article is structured as it follows: first, it presents the Work Psychodynamic theory, its origins and development in Brazil. In the sequence, some of its main concepts are presented, such as the subjectivity processes, represented by the histories of pleasure and suffering experienced at work and the possible illnesses related to them. Finally, it is discussed the current situation of work in organizations and its impacts on the individuals’ lives.

Work psychodynamic

The Work Psychodynamic is a clinical organizational psychology approach developed in the 1990s by the French researcher Christophe Dejours. It has been consolidated in Brazil due to the efforts of researchers and psychologists such as those from the Organizational Psychology Department of Universidade de Brasília - UNB, led...
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The object of the Work Psychodynamic studies is the dynamic relation between the work organization and the processes of workers’ subjectivity expressed by experiences of pleasure and suffering, and the action strategies adopted by the workers to mediate the contradictions of the work organization, the social pathologies and the process of health and illness at work.

According to Mendes (2007), the goal of the psychodynamic consists of the speech analysis and listening to workers, aiming at enabling workers to understand, elaborate and interpret their suffering in a public space for discussion. In this way, it is possible the reconstruction and re-signification of subjectivity and collective processes, since

[...] falar do sofrimento leva o trabalhador a se mobilizar, pensar, agir e criar estratégias para transformar a organização do trabalho. A mobilização que resultado sofrimento se articula à emancipação e reapropriação de si, do coletivo e da condição de poder do trabalhador. Nesse sentido, ‘ser sofrente’ é constituinte do humano e do trabalho, não é um mau sinal em si mesmo, sendo apenas a negação do próprio sofrimento e do sofrimento do outro’ (MENDES, 2007, p. 31).

Therefore, the work psychodynamic has its focus on the dynamic relations between the individuals’ psychic structure and the work context in which they are in (MENDES, 2007). For the author, the work context consists of the following set: (i) work organization, (ii) working conditions and (iii) workplace relations. For Mendes (2007), 'work organization' is the division of labor, the job content, the power relations that involve the hierarchical system, the modalities of command and the liability issues. It is understood as "working conditions" the physical, chemical and biological environments, the hygiene and security conditions and the anthropometric characteristics of the workstation. Finally, the "workplace relations" are all human ties that are originated in the work organization in the hierarchical relations among managers, supervisors and other workers (MENDES, 2007).

According Tamayo (2004), the experiences of pleasure and suffering are the result of three different dimensions: (i) the worker’s subjectivity of worker which

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represents the person as unique with his/her history, desires and needs; (ii) the work context, standards and conduct policies, the demand for efficiency; (iii) the collectivity, interpersonal relations between equal and different hierarchical levels, norms and values of social harmony at work.

Dejours (1987, 1992, 1997 and 2000) says that from the confrontation between the individual’s psychic structure and the work context emerges two types of contradiction between the individual and the organization: one contradiction is related to the match between the imaginary register produced by the individual as the result of the personal history with the reality register, produced by the working situation. Another contradiction is related to the match between the diachronic register - the unique history of the individual, his/her past, projects and desires - with the synchronic register, composed by material, social and historical contexts in which are embedded the working relations.

Moreover, according Dejours (1992, 1997), the work has two dimensions: temporal and spatial. The temporal dimension articulates data related to the singular history and the present situation of the individual, once it comes from the subjectivity previous to the working situation built ontogenetically. The other dimension – the spatial - concerns to the fact that the processes are experienced not only inside the organizations, but also outside them, with impacts on both social and domestic space of the worker.

It means that, despite the conditions experienced in the work organization are similar to several workers, and the pressures from the work also affect them in a similar way, each individual will react differently according to each person’s personality traits. In addition, the impacts of this relation on mental balance will not be restricted to the work environment. They will be also part of the overall condition of existence.

So, there is a contradiction or inconsistency between the diachronic and synchronic dimensions that cause suffering and may end in mental and psychosomatic illness, according to the personality organization of each individual. On the other hand, the repercussion between these registers enables pleasurable experiences. The way workers live the pressures from work arises from the experiences of pleasure and
suffering that they go through. Such experiences are manifested by means of the strategies used to cope with them (DEJOURS, 2000).

For Dejours (2000), the suffering and the social injustice itself is trivialized throughout the process, as the defense strategies against the suffering prevent the worker from being conscious of the causes and from facing them objectively. It is also the author’s opinion that in order to relieve the suffering, it is often necessary to deny the perception of its cause. The result is that the suffering and injustice arising from the labor exploitation are accepted. This ends up by influencing the social and existential condition of the individual, once the suffering is experienced and internalized as something natural and as the only possible reality. Consequently, attempts at transgression of such reality are prevented (DEJOURS, 2000).

Suffering experiences and defense strategies

At its extremes, the Work Psychodynamic has the mental illness at one side and the feeling of psychological well-being at the other one. Two conditions are necessary in order to have a balance between the extremes at work. The first condition is that the intellectual, motor or psycho-sensory requirements for task execution must be in accordance with the individual capacities, and it can be a source of pleasure. The second, the work content must be a source of enhancive satisfaction (DEJOURS, 1974, 2000).

The obstacle to enhancement occurs when there are not any organizational conditions for the establishment of symbolic resonance. The individual cannot benefit from working to dominate his/her suffering and transform it into creativity. When this happens, it is formed a vicious circle in which the suffering contributes to destabilize the individual, culminating in illness. Thus, the defense strategies are alternatives that allow the worker to endure suffering without becoming ill. (DEJOURS, 2000).

Mendes (2007) presents a summary of the defense strategies proposed by Dejours. Mended defines them as rules of conduct developed and performed by workers. They vary according to the working situations and are characterized by subtlety, ingenuity, diversity and inventiveness of the workers so that they can undergo suffering.
without getting ill.

According to Mendes (2007), Dejours categorizes three types of defense strategy: (i) protection defenses, (ii) adaptive defenses and (iii) exploration defenses:

(i) The protection defenses consist of compensatory ways of thinking and acting, that is, the situations that cause suffering are rationalized in these cases. Thus, suffering is avoided by alienating from its causes. (MENDES, 2007).

(ii) In contrast, the adaptive defenses are based on the denial of suffering, which requires great physical and socio-psychic investment of the worker (MENDES, 2007).

(iii) Finally, the exploitation defenses are related with the defense mechanism of the ego of submission (MENDES, 2007).

For Mendes (2007), there is “uma articulação entre um funcionamento perverso da organização e o comportamento neurótico que os trabalhadores passam a assumir, submetendo seu desejo ao desejo da produção” (MENDES, 2007, pg. 39) in both cases.

According to Dejour (1987, p. 22) “a sublimação, diferentemente de outras defesas, garante, frente ao sofrimento, uma saída pulsional, não destruidora para o funcionamento psíquico e somático, enquanto que a repressão é limitante para o jogo pulsional”.

For Dejour (1992, 2000), it can be stated that work has broad effects on psychic suffering and it may contribute to aggravate it, leading it to a possible somatization and illness. However, it may also subvert it in pleasure, contributing to a sense of well-being or acceptance and resignation, at least.

**Pleasure experiences**

Ferreira and Mendes (2003) state that the pleasure experiences present the following characteristics:

- They are originated from the benefit that work cause for the body and for the relationship with people;
- Their main causes are found within the dimensions of the organization,
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conditions and the working relationships that consolidate the production context of goods and services;

- They are indicators of well-being at work in the form of a deliberate evaluation that something is going well and, therefore, it is an indicator of psychic health;
- They are manifested by means of gratification, achievement, recognition, freedom, valuation and satisfaction at work.

For these authors, the pleasure experiences are one of the meanings of work, because it enables the balance and psychic structure by generating identity. Besides, it allows the expression of the subjectivity that is built based on the confrontation between the psychic and the social (FERREIRA and MENDES, 2003).

Dejours (1997) says that there are points of congruence between the diachronic and synchronic dimension in the relation of the individual with the work context. It creates space for symbolic resonance by allowing the revival of ambiguity between the childhood drama and the work drama. Regarding the symbolic resonance, the author explains that “exige condições muito articulares de concordância entre o teatro real e o teatro interno dos fantasmas e da história singular [...] é necessário que a tarefa tenha sentido para o sujeito, tendo em vista sua história singular” (DEJOURS, 1992, p. 134).

The symbolic resonance happens by means of a mechanism denominated sublimation psychoanalysis which corresponds to a change of the object and the end of the pulsatory nature. For psychoanalysis, the pulsatory nature is a particular type of pressure or force that makes the organism move to a goal. It means that, the body excitement, or state stress of the body causes the pulse, and the body is impelled to empty this excitement or to get rid of this stress directing it to a goal. (LAPLANCHE and PONTALIS, 2008).

Laplanche and Pontalis (2008) state that sublimation is a type of modification of target and goal that takes into account the social evaluation. That is because “a pulsão é sublimada na medida em que é derivada para um novo objeto não sexual e que visa objetos socialmente valorizados” (LAPLANCHE; PONTALIS, 2008, p. 495). The canalization of the sexual pulse for a secondary purpose is able to put at the disposal of
work extraordinarily large amounts of force. Although its objective and goal moves with the sublimation, the pulse maintains its original intensity.

By means of work, the individual engages in social relations and he/she transfers to them the issues inherited from the past and from his/her affective history (DEJOURS, 1992). In order to activate this transfer in the encounter with the work situation, it is necessary that the task has a meaning for the individual. By reviving this psychic drama, the individual seeks self-fulfillment, by means of recognition in the social field. “O reconhecimento é a retribuição fundamental à sublimação” (DEJOURS, 1997, p.158).

Sublimation aims to carry out a useful and socially valued activity in order to provide to the individual the sense of wholeness and love from his/her early childhood. Therefore, once it aims socially valued objects, sublimation is a social process and historically situated.

The judgment of social value can only be given by other than the individual. In this way, all creation will assume a confrontation between the action and the recognition of the other in two registers in the work organization: by means of the hierarchy and by means of peer recognition (DEJOURS, 1992; 2000).

The sublimation has an important role in the achievement of identity by means of social recognition (DEJOURS, 1992). It is based on the other’s vision that the individual builds the image of him/herself (ENRIQUEZ, 1974).

It is the recognition that will allow the worker to become a single and a unique individual. Each time the worker solves the problems which are given to him/her and he/she gets social recognition of the work, he/she is also the sufferer, because he/she receives a subjective recognition of his/her ability to exorcise the anguish and dominate his/her suffering.

Unease in work organizations

When the work organization promotes the symbolic resonance, the feeling of well-being often gives rise to a constant feeling of unease, presented as anxiety, depression, stress, among others (GAULEJAC, 2007).
Acting as a place of symbolic resonance, sublimation and, therefore, libidinal investment for the individual, the organization causes another kind of psychical violence, even if its repressive force is decreased. In this case, the psychological violence would be linked to paradoxical experiences that the individual lives in the organizations (GAULEJAC, 2007).

The model of work organization is made of mechanisms for managing people, aiming at providing the libidinal investment of individuals in the organization. If this evokes the narcissistic dimension and allows the worker to fulfill his/her ghosts of omnipotence and his/her wishes of success on the one hand, it causes an intense psychic accession and his/her dependence on the other hand.

It is known that the narcissism unites the ego libido (self-preservation) and the object libido (sexual). Thus, by means of narcissism and the imaginary function, the individual seeks for the narcissistic satisfaction in the reality dimension (by means of the acting of the ideal ego) connecting the pleasure principle and the reality. Or rather, he/she attempts to reduce the principle of reality to the principle of pleasure (ENRIQUEZ, 1974).

The human being is constituted from the other. Therefore, it is in the other that evidences of existence, acceptance, status, security, esteem, among others are sought. However, there is not any certainty in relation to the effectiveness of this search and the desire can never be satisfied. This is what Enriquez (1974) also states. For the author, the desire comes from the desire of the other. In other words, it is desire of recognition, because we only exist when we are recognized by the others.

According to Enriquez (1974), the fight in the organization is a search for identity, for recognition, since the self-image is formed from the image that the others make of themselves. The organization sets the individual in the search for identity and recognition, because it is the place where each one can attempt to carry out his/her projects and desires.

It is also Enriquez’s opinion (1974) that the organization challenges the individual to prove his/her existence. It allows the expression on the particular narcissism and the desire for omnipotence, and it reinforces the illusion of a single and solid ego. Moreover,
it establishes elements of social identity such as role, position, status, values and responsibilities. These elements are proposed as collective representations (images), so that the members of the organization shape to them. The organization stands as an object of identification and libidinal investment by the individuals that are linked subjectively to it. (SCHMITT, 2003).

Faria (2008) states that by using the individual’s desire, the organization is repressive and this entails alienation. The organization speaks on behalf of the individual who loses control over his/her own desires and dreams and, as a result, the individual becomes unconcerned to the decisions about him/herself.

In this form of work organization, the violence consists in the psychical dependence that is established between the individual and the organization (GAULEJAC, 2007) because the more the individual identifies him/herself with the company, the more he/she gives up his/her own autonomy.

According Gaulejac (2007), the unconscious fear of losing the love of the loved object, (in this case, the company with which the individual identifies him/herself) is represented by the fear of failure, for not being on a par with it and for not being recognized. This fear is used by the company for its own benefit.

On the part of individuals, the consequences of the experience of this relation are tension and anguish. There are contradictions between the individual’s ego that feels the pressures from disrupting the work organization and needs to defend itself, and the individual’s ideal ego that requires more achievement and satisfaction in a process that binds, links and submits the individual to the organization.

So, pleasure can be experienced directly through processes of sublimation. It makes possible the pulsatory discharge when in contact with certain production contexts, and indirectly, the re-signification of suffering and the transformation of work situations by means of the collective mobilization (FERREIRA and MENDES, 2003).

In this sense, the Work Psychodynamic is not only a theory, but also a way of acting in the organization. It aims to facilitate the re-signification of pleasure and suffering experiences by allowing individuals to recover to themselves the meaning of work. It also permits them to pursue transformative actions from the experiences of
adverse situations (MENDES, 2007).

This presentation ends with a quotation by Mendes (2007) that summarizes well the understanding of the Work Psychodynamic role. According to the author, “o comportamento saudável não implica a ausência de sofrimento, e sim, as possibilidades internas e externas de o indivíduo transformar o sofrimento por meio da tomada de consciência das suas causas, dos conflitos e frustrações que o geraram” (MENDES 2007, p. 46).

FINAL COMMENTS

The understanding of the psychical dynamics that is behind people’s performance at work is essential to have a more complete understanding and a more critical look of what is at stake when the subject matter is the management in the organizations.

Therefore, it is argued, that the teaching of work and organizational psychology is of utmost importance to show students the fundamentals regarding the concepts worked in these areas. Such concepts are related to motivation and leadership, whether by means of the disciplines like people management, organizational behavior or similar ones in undergraduate courses in addition to the psychology course.

It is hoped that this article provokes the curiosity in students of undergraduate courses related to Business Administration, management of all types of resources (such as People Management, Production Management and other managerial processes). In this way, the students can understand the extent of the impacts of the management forms on subjectivity and on the workers’ life in a general way. And, with this, they can reflect deeply on their practice and responsibility in organizations, whether as leader, supervisor, manager, among other positions that they aim to occupy.
REFERENCES


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