The psychodynamics of recognition in informatics outsourced work at a public institution

A psicodinâmica do reconhecimento no trabalho de informática de terceirizados de uma instituição pública

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ABSTRACT | Background: Outsourced work has considerably increased in Brazil, being currently seen as one of the main approaches to reduce the expenses of companies. However, the recognition given to outsourced workers does not match their relevance for the organizations that employ them. According to “work psychodynamics” theory, recognition is a symbolic reward for physical, cognitive and affective investment; personal identity is shaped through the mediation of recognition. **Objective:** The aim of the present study was to analyze employee recognition among IT outsourced workers at a public institution. **Methods:** Three sessions of collective interviews were conducted, lasting two hours each. The data were analyzed by means of discourse interpretation and were categorized according to the following criteria: work organization, experiences of pleasure and suffering and dynamics of recognition. **Results:** Outsourced workers feel they are recognized by their peers and system users as a function of the visibility and usefulness of their activity. However, they do not feel appreciated by formally employed colleagues, namely, their bosses. These results corroborate some studies on socioeconomic fragility and precariousness conducted with outsourced workers. **Conclusions:** Despite the lack of visibility of their work for a part of their colleagues, outsourced workers feel they are appreciated. The present study contributes to the advancement of research on work psychodynamics, as well as to overall considerations on management models and attitudes relative to the status of outsourcing within the public service setting.

Keywords | work; outsourcing; occupational health; job satisfaction; work conditions.

RESUMO | Contexto: O trabalho terceirizado tem aumentado no contexto brasileiro, sendo hoje entendido como uma das principais formas de diminuir o custo das instituições empregadoras. O reconhecimento a esses trabalhadores, entretanto, não é proporcional à sua importância para as organizações. Segundo a psicodinâmica do trabalho, reconhecimento é a retribuição simbólica do investimento físico, cognitivo e afetivo. É por meio dele que ocorre a construção da identidade. **Objetivo:** A pesquisa objetivou analisar o reconhecimento no trabalho de informática de terceirizados de uma instituição pública. **Métodos:** Foram realizadas três sessões de entrevistas coletivas, com duração de duas horas cada. Os dados foram analisados por meio da interpretação da fala e classificados nos eixos organização do trabalho; vivências de prazer e sofrimento; e dinâmica do reconhecimento. **Resultados:** Os terceirizados sentem-se reconhecidos, pelos pares e pelos usuários, pela visibilidade e utilidade da sua atividade, mas não são reconhecidos pelos colegas concursados, seus chefes. Os resultados corroboram alguns estudos realizados com trabalhadores terceirizados quanto à precarização e fragilidade socioeconômica. **Conclusões:** Conclui-se que, apesar da invisibilidade do trabalho para parte do grupo laboral, os terceirizados sentem-se reconhecidos. O estudo contribui para avançar nas pesquisas da psicodinâmica do trabalho e para reflexão dos modelos de gestão e posturas perante a situação da terceirização no serviço público.

Palavras-chave | trabalho; terceirização; saúde do trabalhador; satisfação no trabalho; condições de trabalho.

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INTRODUCTION

Work settings are undergoing considerable change since the beginning of the period of restructuration of production which started in the 1970s^{1,2}. Such restructuration strengthened the capitalist “steamroller,” affecting also countries grounded on equality principles and conscious consumption. It further extended to the way of being of people, resulting in a hostile society indifferent to peers, as a function of the focus on productivity and profit. Within this context, structural unemployment developed, pervaded by the “ghost” of non-work. When unemployed, individuals become almost nothing, marginalized and without any identity³.

Structural unemployment originated several varieties of precariousness, which resulted in activities such as domestic work in companies⁴, part-time jobs and outsourcing. Data collected in studies point to several negative effects for workers, to wit, on their quality of life⁴, mental health⁵ and profit possibilities^{3,6}. Among the aforementioned activities, outsourced work is the most noteworthy, and it currently extended to public service, as a clear example of the managerialist culture implanted in this sector⁶.

Outsourcing feeds on structural unemployment. To preserve their employability, workers subject themselves to any type of employment relationship, including outsourcing. In turn, employers have resource to a pseudo-responsible discourse to argue that the availability of jobs thus increases. The typical general precariousness of this type of employment relationship is hidden behind politically correct discourse.

Precarious conditions of labor and flexibilization of the employment relationship do not undermine the relevance of outsourced workers. To understand that their work is not merely restricted to the execution of the prescribed tasks is crucial⁷. As a fact, it is characterized by greater engagement with work and development of know-how pervaded by bonding and affection⁶.

Within the public service setting, outsourcing was established as an attempt to spare financial resources and make the government more agile and effective. Outsourcing is regulated by Decree-Law No. 200/1967, which applies to various types of services, except for the so-called “exclusive State activities” and “auxiliary services linked to activity-means⁸.”

Outsourced or not, work plays a structuring role and has social and psychological relevance for people⁹. Therefore, expecting recognition proportional to contributions and effort is only fair. Recognition is anchored in the collective consciousness, and within psychodynamics of work theory it doubly understood as “acknowledgment” and “gratitude.”

When the highest hierarchical levels recognize that technology, support, standards and studies notwithstanding, work is only possible thanks to workers who think, are experienced, devoted and engaged, and invest physical, cognitive and affective efforts, then recognition appears as acknowledgment. In this case, to recognize means to understand that workers perform their activities in spite of the reality imposed on them.

Yet, according to Martins and Mendes¹⁰, the most common manifestation is recognition involving gratitude, which derives from a judgment of the work performed¹¹. People seek this type of recognition for what they do, not for what they are¹¹. It is a matter of a judgment made according to its relationship with reality and that falls on both visible and invisible work.

According to Dejours¹², recognition involves two spheres: judgment of usefulness and of beauty. The former concerns the usefulness of the technical, social and economic contributions of individuals, and is made by supervisors, subordinates or customers (vertical judgment). The latter, and harsher, concerns the quality, uniqueness, originality and distinction of a task, and might only be made by peers, i.e., by the ones fully acquainted with the rules and state of the art (horizontal judgment). Judgment of beauty is expressed in its vocabulary: “nice work,” “nice way of doing¹².”

The theoretical-methodological framework for the present study was Dejourian psychodynamics of work. According to Dejours, recognition is a form of symbolic retribution that derives from the contributions individuals make to labor and the engagement of their subjectivity and intelligence.

Although countless studies reinforce the relevance of work settings and recognition for the well-being of workers, both factors only do is to become more perverse^{8,13} and cause suffering and disease. For instance, work-related mental disorders and their consequences are becoming increasingly more critical¹⁴. In turn, recognition

is becoming ever more scarce and difficult to obtain. The situation of information technology (IT) professionals is no different.

Public and private institutions are becoming increasingly dependent on IT, to the point that unavailability might result in the interruption of almost all their activities.

The overall idea is that all should work perfectly. The work of IT professionals is therefore characterized by overload and anxiety, mainly as a function of the perfectionism and pressure analysts impose on themselves, as well as of their inability to stop thinking about the programs they are developing after hours. Insecurity resulting from developing a complex system with no certainty it will work, and pressure for precise and infallible outcomes¹⁵ pervade this activity. In consequence, the dynamics of recognition as concerns IT workers is complex, since their work does not become visible when is successful, but only when it fails. Well-done work tends to vanish amid larger processes.

As a function of the aforementioned considerations, the aim of the present study was to analyze the dynamics of recognition of the work of outsourced IT workers at a public institution. More specifically, we sought to:

- characterize the organization of the IT employees' work;
- detect and describe the recognition received peers and supervisors;
- characterize the impacts of the dynamics of recognition on the participants' feelings of pleasure and suffering at work.

METHODS

The present study was performed from the perspective of psychodynamics of work theory^{16,17} along three steps:

1. pre-research;
2. research;
3. validation.

The method used included collective sessions with groups of workers subjected to a same model of organization of work, interpretation simultaneous to data collection and proper analysis at a later time. Interviews were performed in November and December 2011. In turn, the discussions with the control group and

supervisors lasted about eight months from January to September 2012.

PRE-RESEARCH

Seeking to perform observations at the IT department of a public institution, we contacted two directors. We communicated them our interest in investigating the working conditions of outsourced workers, with emphasis on the dynamics of recognition and their feelings of pleasure and suffering from the perspective of psychodynamics of work theory.

The workers were first contacted by the directors and by the president of the IT analyst association at the institution through e-mails describing the study, its goals and methods and frequency of meetings.

RESEARCH

Participants

Seven outsourced employees participated in the present study — considering all three interview sessions — all of whom were male, with average age 34.65 years old and 7.5 years, of work at the institution, on average.

Instrument

A semi-structured script was used in the collective interviews. The fundamental questions which served as point of departure for the development of more detailed narratives were:

1. speak about your work;
2. how do you feel at work?;
3. what are the difficulties you meet in your job?;
4. what do you do to overcome such difficulties?;
5. what are the strategies you apply?;
6. how are the relationships between departments and people at the institution?;
7. how do you feel working here?;
8. what is the meaning of being an outsourced it employee at this institution?;
9. are you appreciated/recognized?

Procedures for data collection

Three collective interview sessions were conducted at the training area of the institution; each session lasted two hours and occurred at one-week intervals. The length of

the intervals was selected to allow time for the participants to reflect on their narratives and feelings, and eventually to share with colleagues the content of the discussions and their feelings about the topics addressed — and often discovered.

Two groups participated in data collection: the research group, which comprised the participants, and the control group, composed of investigators who provided support to the research^{16,17}.

The interviews were performed in a room in the training area of the institution, on Fridays in the evening. Each interview lasted about two hours.

The participants were requested to sign an informed consent form. In the first meeting, detailed explanation was given about psychodynamics of work theory (which grounded the present study) and the study methods. Authorization was requested to tape and transcribe the interviews for later analysis. All the participants agreed and signed the informed consent form describing ethical issues and procedures in detail.

Data analysis

Following data collection, the interviews were transcribed to enable a more elaborate interpretation, which was performed with the help of the control group. The results were presented at least five times to the latter, followed by broad-scoped discussions and contributions to analysis.

The data were subsumed under the following categories:

- organization of work;
- feelings of pleasure and suffering;
- recognition.

Following their interpretation, the control group discussed the data according to Dejours^{12,13} prescriptions for interpretation. As a function of the aims of the present study, we chose to focus on topic recognition.

Data analysis was based on the interpretation of narratives and their distribution across three pre-set categories, to wit:

1. analysis of demands;
2. analysis of the psychodynamics of work;
3. analysis of the mobilization of workers as a group.

Validation/feedback

Feedback was given to the participants at the onset of the second and third sessions. A synthesis of the narratives collected in the previous meetings was read aloud, together with the validation of their content. After all the participants manifested their agreement, the new interview began. At the end of the third session, a synthesis of the discussions was performed, which was approved by the participants after having been given the opportunity to question or make changes in the content.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected from the participants' narratives evidenced experiences of peer recognition, are recognized by system users — as a function of the usefulness of their work — and in lesser degree also by supervisors.

They pointed to a modality of organization of work based on a perverse rationale, as outsourced workers perform (often the same) tasks in the same environment as employees with different employment status. As is known, the way work is organized might be a cause of illness, with particular negative effect on the mental health of workers⁵.

The employment relationship of outsourced workers is fragile: their salary is about 25% lower than the one of regular employees within an organization that scarcely establishes affective bonds with them, but sees them as disposable:

They keep telling us we might go away at any time. They don't need to keep reminding us of this all the time, we're well aware ... No one likes to feel like this (...) disposable.

Workers are overloaded, within a work environment that imposes rigid standards, rhythms and schedules. Their tasks include programming, code analysis, configuration of network servers and customer service. However, in situations considered to be the most simple and to be solved *in loco*, the corresponding tasks are exclusively assigned to the outsourced employees. Such tasks are particularly exhausting in terms of problem solving and interpersonal contact.

Moreover, even when such simplest, or less complex tasks, are seen by the outsourced employees as actually complicated and difficult (and demanding interpersonal relationship skills) they were described as second-rate. Such tasks included:

- solving problems related to accessories (printers, keyboards, mouse, screens);
- solving problems with e-mail sending;
- configuration of operational systems – Windows;
- configuration of network access;
- access to internal systems and office-specific software, etc.

The outsourced employees are in charge of providing assistance to people with these problems. As a rule, the initial contact is made by telephone, but in many cases direct in-person contact with users is necessary. Although outsourced workers perform their work side-by-side with regular employees, their situation is more precarious than the one of the latter. The reason is that whenever cuts will be made, or someone has to be assigned to a stressful task, the ones chosen unavoidably are the outsourced workers.

The participants rated the socio-professional relationships as good, extending beyond the workplace — “We go out together on occasions.” Differently, managers were seen as authoritarian and insensitive to the unfavorable status of their employment relationship, i.e., they have to work more, perform more complex tasks and are subjected to poorer conditions: “Then they come and complain again whenever I don’t do things their way;” “Such treatment, for most of us, means diminishing our work;” “It’s clear we’re subordinates.”

The participants reported feelings of insecurity, uncertainty and humiliation, not less because their employment relationship is continuously put into question at the legal level: “It’s GAO [General Accountability Office] that kills us...” Yet, communication and cooperation are harmonious and solidary: “We help each other in customer service.”

Cooperation mitigates the constant feeling of being threatened and ensures a minimum of affective balance and also in interpersonal relationships. According to Potiron¹¹, cooperation is the means that allows formulating less contradictory judgments as concerns recognition.

Dejours¹³ delved deeper into this concept upon stating “the dynamics of recognition in work situations suggests that cooperation cannot be separated from economy, identity and mental health.”

The participants reported to feel they are recognized by users, but not by the regular employees who are their supervisors and represent the organization.

User recognition seems to be the reason that motivates them to keep on working and attribute new meanings to the experience of suffering. As Merlo¹⁸ observed in regard to the work of IT professionals, they often do the impossible for customers, because when the latter are satisfied their mistakes pass unnoticed. Contrariwise, when customers are dissatisfied, even fully correct procedures are put into question.

The esthetic judgment (beauty) of their work is impaired by the reports written by managers, who believe outsourced workers work less and worse than regular employees.

Outsourced employees also face problems with communication and cooperation derived from competition and quarrels with workers allocated to other departments. Yet, they help each other, because they collectively see themselves as a category in a less favorable social situation within the institution.

When having problems with computers, as a rule, users cannot continue performing their tasks. Under such circumstances, technicians appear as “saviors,” and are well seen in consequence. This tiny contact gives technicians back a sense of the relevance and meaning of their work, and makes them feel as extremely important. Many users know the technicians by name and request their services in recognition of their good work. The fact users, in the role of judges, mention them is an explicit recognition of their usefulness¹¹.

When providing assistance to customers, outsourced employees have resort to operational and zeal strategies¹³ for their work to be successful and more effective a very low cost. Through the use of small devices and personal software they are able to improve the service they provide.

The desire for recognition is a legitimate one. However, workers have to overcome so many hindrances derived from the organization of work, that they end by accepting the little recognition given to them. Outsourced workers, in particular, are restricted by their employment relationship

and the perversity of the organization of work, which, for instance, makes people with large differences/inequality among them work together side by side. In addition, organizations make profit of the need of employment and create different work conditions that are non-negotiable, as neither is the organization of work as such. To be sure, outsourcing itself is a manifestation of such meanness, as a function of the denial of its inherent precariousness under the argument that jobs are being created, no matter the fact that constitutional rules are being transgressed.

According to Dejours¹³, subjective mobilization clusters together modalities of individual engagement to obtain pleasure in the execution of tasks. Action is needed for this purpose. Mendes¹⁶ considers that subjective mobilization is a way to give new meaning to suffering, manage the contradictions in the organization of work and transform work into a source of pleasure.

As to the rationality of work, as predicted by Dejours¹³, production, social and health rationality do not go hand in hand. Somehow the productive rationality is successful, because the work is actually done. However, the social rationality (detected in the participants' narratives) is compromised, as the supervisor/subordinate relationships are unhealthy, and the management style is rigid and exclusively centered on hierarchy. As to the health rationality, also suggested by Dejours¹², no case of disease was found (along the study and in as much as it could be perceived in the contact with the participants during the interviews). On these grounds, in agreement with the literature, we might infer that there was not agreement among the three types of rationality.

In regard to recognition, Dejours observes that the three types of rationality hardly occur simultaneously. For this reason, judgments or assessments at work should not be exclusively grounded on efficacy criteria. Analysis of the participants' narratives showed that the aspect of productivity cannot be put into question.

As concerns social rationality, the results indicated satisfactory relationships and expressions of solidarity at work. From the perspective of users, the social aspect favors the recognition of outsourced employees, whose main task (to provide telephone or in-person assistance to computer users) basically involves direct interaction with customers.

Finally, relating to the health rationality, outsourced employees seem to exhibit an "unstable stability." According to Dejours, the health rationality is that which prevents the subjective world from being destroyed by work and condemn professionals to disease and death.

The participants were not ill, but exhibited manifestations of stress, which lead us to infer, based on data in the literature (Dejours^{12,13}) that their physical and mental health might come to be impaired in the near future. The rationale underlying outsourcing is perverse and cynical¹⁹, and the labor relations are unhealthy. In addition, from the ethical perspective, a restrictive barrier hinders any attempt at honest evaluation of outsourced employees. First, because their actions must extend beyond the prescribed ones if they are to succeed in their work (e.g., to install some specific software, use keys to open and check the situation of computers, and more especially, not to record a new call for time not to count again from zero; thus they succeed in solving problems faster, however, fully outside the rules). And second, because their working conditions are patently cynical and ambiguous.

In loco assistance affords outsourced employees an occasion to have contact with their customers and develop some bond with them. The feedback for their work is immediate, including expressions of recognition under the aspect of gratitude, and often also under the aspect of acknowledgement. The visibility and relevance of the tasks performed by them are evident, even though they might be less complex than the development of a system. Outsourced employees observe that considerable technical knowledge is required to perform their job, which is a source of pride. Then, as they do not compete one with another, an atmosphere of solidarity and companionship develops when one technician helps another meet the demands.

The result is a group with a strong identity, despite the feelings of being discriminated and having lower status. They succeed in giving new meanings to their suffering and transform it into pleasure, by emphasizing the meaning of their work and applying these strategies to mitigate job insecurity. Facing adversity, these professionals find meaning in what they do, and use work as "metaphoric resonance" to cope with anguish and desire⁹.

When the model of organization of work adopted is indifferent to the employment situation, personal history and physical, cognitive and affective investment of workers, the latter find the solution to preserve their pleasure at work within themselves. Restless people create ways to preserve their mental health and strengthen their identity within the pleasure/suffering at work duality. When a group feeling is the present, in addition to having effect on the individual alone, such mobilization extends to the group.

According to Moraes and Vasconcelos¹⁹, “the possibility to attribute meaning to the activity performed is precisely inscribed within the dynamics of recognition by instituting itself as legitimate path of access to the experience of pleasure at work.” As Mendes¹⁶ stated, recognition is the means through which workers acquire symbolic meaning.

CONCLUSIONS

The participants identified the perversion of the model of organization of work to which they are subjected, particularly in regard to the fact that their work becomes more visible when it is ill succeeded, and not the other way around. This is to say, users remember these outsourced workers when things do not work well, while expectably they should be remembered when systems work perfectly well (as this would be an evidence of well-done work). However, coping with this situation is difficult due to insufficient subjective mobilization, also as a function of the precarious employment relationship.

In regard to both the aspects of acknowledgment and gratitude, outsourced employees feel they are recognized only as a function of their relationship with users and the

possibility, based on their know-how, to solve problems and manifest competence. The organization of work as such does not enable recognition, due to lack of concrete institutional mechanisms to attribute value to the work of professionals.

Judgments of usefulness and beauty derive from the relationship with the regular employees. Once again, the organization of work does not favor the dynamics of recognition.

The pleasure the participants feel at work derives from the attribution of new meanings to their suffering mediated by their strong group identity, which was developed to deal with “others,” in this case, the regular employees.

We expect that the present study will contribute to the advance of research in the psychodynamics of work by bringing elements for the understanding of the dynamics of recognition within the specific setting of outsourcing and IT work. Our goal also was to trigger reflections on the situation of outsourcing in public service.

As limitations, we might mention the small sample size. Although the number of subjects is not a determinant of the quality of the data within the context of psychodynamics of work, a larger number of interviews might allow capture elements likely to afford a more thorough understanding of the dynamics of recognition.

As research agenda, we suggest the performance of additional studies on outsourced workers at the analyzed institution and their relationship with the regular employees. Such studies might eventually enable the formulation of organizational strategies able to promote the employees’ well-being.

Finally, the present study shows that the glamour of technology does not suffice to give meaning to the work of IT professionals. Once again, the data indicate that recognition is related to the meaning of work and to pleasure in its execution.

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