

Special Section “Work and Health in the Face of Contemporary Metamorphoses”

Precariousness of working activity among professional psychologists

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Received: April 8th, 2022.

Accepted: June 28th, 2022.

Section editors: Cleverson Pereira de Almeida and Josep Maria Blanch.

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Abstract

This article recovers theoretical operators considered crucial for the approach to the precariousness of working activity. Such operators configure the evolution movement of the concept of dirty work to precarious work. This critical evaluation is based on the argument that the process of precariousness is not only restricted to external aspects, related to the conditions of professional practice, which can be sanitized, but it also encompasses aspects related to the dynamic that is necessarily established between the individual-worker and their professional gender through their work collective. From these theoretical operators, the conditions of professional exercise of Brazilian Psychology are analyzed to prove sufficient aspects to configure important indications of the precariousness of such professional craft. This analysis concludes with a list of possible alternatives for the training of future professionals and the resumption of quality of life in the real work of psychologists.

Keywords: precariousness of working activity, professional gender, working activity, health, development

PRECARIZAÇÃO DA ATIVIDADE DE TRABALHO NO OFÍCIO DA PSICOLOGIA

Resumo

O presente artigo recupera operadores teóricos considerados cruciais para a abordagem da precarização da atividade de trabalho. Tais operadores configuram o movimento de evolução do conceito de trabalho sujo para o de trabalho precário. Tal avaliação crítica apoia-se no argumento de que a precarização não se restringe apenas a aspectos externos, relacionados a condições de exercício profissional passíveis de higienização, mas abarca, igualmente, aspectos relacionados à dinâmica que se estabelece necessariamente entre o indivíduo-trabalhador e seu gênero profissional, por meio de seu coletivo de trabalho. A partir desses operadores teóricos, analisam-se as condições de exercício profissional da psicologia brasileira, de forma a evidenciar aspectos que indicam a precarização de atividade profissional. Esta análise se conclui com um rol de possíveis alternativas para a formação de futuros profissionais e a retomada da qualidade de vida no âmbito do trabalho real de psicólogas e psicólogos.

Palavras-chave: precarização da atividade de trabalho, gênero profissional, trabalho, saúde, desenvolvimento

PRECARIEDAD DE LA ACTIVIDAD LABORAL EN LA PROFESIÓN DE PSICÓLOGOS

Resumen

Este artículo recupera operadores teóricos considerados cruciales para el abordaje de la precariedad de la actividad laboral. Tales operadores configuran el movimiento evolutivo del concepto de trabajo sucio al de trabajo precario. Esta evaluación crítica se basa en el argumento de que la precariedad no se restringe solamente a aspectos externos, relacionados con las condiciones de ejercicio profesional que pueden ser saneadas, sino que también abarca aspectos relacionados con la dinámica que necesariamente se establece entre el individuo-trabajador y su género profesional, a través de su trabajo colectivo. A partir de estos operadores teóricos, se analizan las condiciones de la práctica profesional de la psicología brasileña, con el fin de evidenciar aspectos que indican la precariedad de la actividad profesional. Concluimos nuestro análisis con una lista de posibles alternativas para la formación de futuros profesionales y la reanudación de la calidad de vida dentro del trabajo real de psicólogas y psicólogos.

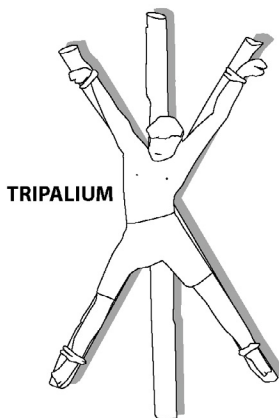
Palabras clave: precariedad de la actividad laboral, género profesional, trabajo, salud, desarrollo

Human working activity has been present in several human narratives throughout history, starting with Judeo-Christian biblical narratives (Peixoto, 2017). God-Creator himself, in this biblical text, is essentially a worker: “In the beginning, God created Heavens and Earth” (Genesis 1:1); “By the seventh day God had finished his work of creation and *rested from all His work*” (Genesis 2:2, emphasis added). At the same time that the biblical text marks the centrality of human work in the very mythical constitution of our human trajectory, by mentioning the central and, in the first instance, divine meaning of the work by the Creator, it also marks the fall in disgrace of the human race, which is accompanied by the emergence of irreversible degradation of working activity: there will henceforth be a lot of work to be done, and this work will be essentially painful, to be carried out with the sweat of each worker’s face, the only way to provide for themselves. The work follows the noble work of creation in the midst of “thorns and weeds”, which will accompany the man-worker until he “[...] return[s] to the land from which it was formed”, dust from which man was made, dust to which he will hopelessly return.

The precariousness of work activity returns to the historical scene during the classical Greco-Roman period, with the distinction between free men and enslaved people. The military legions of the Roman Empire innovated by instituting professionalized military service; professional Roman soldiers were often remunerated with salt servings, a social valuable at the time since salt was the only way to keep food and take care of wounds – from which the Latin term *salarium* comes for this type of payment. It equally comes from this time the use of the Latin word *trepalium* (or *tripalium*), originally an instrument to prepare arable land, but also used to inflict pain and torture. From *trepalium/tripalium*, the term used to designate working activity in several European languages, derived: *travail* (French), *trabajo* (Spanish), *trabalho* (Portuguese), *traballo* (Galician), *treball* (Catalan), *trivalliu* (Logudorese Sardinian), *traballu* (Campidanese Sardinian). It is of interest to note that, in the case of the Italian language, the term derived *travaglio* did not come to be applied to working activity in general, but instead to women’s labor during a child’s birth. This etymological path of the emergence of the word *work*, in which the semantic range of the meanings of *effort* and *suffering* are mixed, will have consequences for the approach of work as a human activity in various domains of problematization.

Figure 1

The tripalium



Note. From “Tripalium”, by Manu Roquette, 2019, April 29, Wikipedia (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tripalium>). CC BY-SA 4.0.

Therefore, the social representation of *precariousness* and *degradation* of human work arises in a historical context of physical suffering associated with external conditions of work activity. This perspective gains new nuances in the 50s of the last century with the proposal of “dirty work” by the exponent of American sociology at that time, Everett C. Hughes (Hughes, 1958, 1962). The concept of “dirty work” alludes to working activities and professional domains characterized by strongly negative social representation, and this is for a varied number of reasons, from moral reasons (as in the case of the professional profession of prostitutes) to reasons related to social disgust itself, as in the case of garbage collectors, gravediggers (buriers), and technicians in the examination of corpses.

The aforementioned heterogeneity of types of social revulsion led Pedro Bendassolli and Jorge Tarcísio da Rocha Falcão to propose a critical analysis of the concept of *dirty work* (Bendassolli & Falcão, 2013). These authors, when addressing the diversity of types of work activity encompassed by the concept of dirty work, proposed two justifications for overcoming this concept and replacing it with the one of *precarious work*: first, dirty work would be compromised by a sort of metatheoretical deterioration resulting from such undue expansion of scope, according to the analysis of “conceptual exhaustion” proposed by Koppe (2012); secondly, and the more crucial aspect, the issue of social repulsion based on dirty work would not address a particularly important aspect of the precariousness of work activity – the referencing of such activity by a *professional genre*. This point was resumed by Falcão et al. (2020) when comparing professional activities related to elementary school teachers and technicians in the examination of corpses, both categories in activity in the municipality of Natal, in Rio Grande do Norte. This analysis showed

significant evidence of precariousness within the teaching category, despite this professional group having superior social prestige when compared to technicians of corpses examination, whose professional context is characterized by unhealthy and dangerous working conditions. If, on the one hand, teachers had a certain social prestige (as a professional category), on the other, they revealed a feeling of “loneliness” and “worthlessness” in the approach to their main professional challenges and in achieving the ideal of “well-done work” (cf. Clot, 1999, 2008). Regarding the group of technicians of corpses examination, despite the low social desirability as an option of socio-professional insertion (Messias, 2017), they had clarity about their specific professional challenges, such as opening, peering, and recomposing the corpses before returning them to the families. These professional requirements and criteria, established by the respective *professional genders*, are turned into concrete professional practices by the *professional collectives*. In this context, teachers complained of “loneliness” in relation to their professional gender (cf. confirmatory research data obtained by Andrade & Falcão, 2018).

The critical movement of revision of the theoretical concept of “dirty work”, linked to the withdrawal from external precariousness of working activity (accompanied by a compromised social representation of it), leads us to consider some other theoretical operators necessary to the new circumscription intended for this process of the precariousness of the working activity. This effort will be the focus of the next section of this article, analyzing the precariousness of psychology as a professional activity in Brazil.

Precariousness and degradation of working activity: Central theoretical operators

The allusion we have made to the work from the biblical roots of the Old Testament, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, highlights the centrality of this activity for the constitution of psychosocial identities of individuals, as well as for the historical development of the economy and the societal functioning as a whole. This point persists in contemporaneity in terms of what is conventionally called the “principle of the centrality of work”. According to this principle, work cannot be restricted to the means of obtaining purchasing power (despite being so) or considered a central phenomenon for the comprehension of socio-economic-political and historical structure – despite the pertinence of this treatment path, as evidenced by the Marxist tradition of analysis (cf. Marx, 1867/1975). The work, in the sense explored here, is configured as a human activity of a semiotic nature, therefore founded on superior mental processes (cf. Vygotski, 2014); in this context, as Marx (1867/1975) rightly observed:

A spider performs operations like those of a weaver, and a bee overcomes more than one human architect when building its hive. *But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best bee is that he represents in his mind the construction to be made before turning it into reality* (Volume 1, Part 3, Chapter VII, Section 1).

The semiotic character mentioned by Marx, therefore, necessarily situates work in the context of a dialogy, in which the individual-worker interacts with other workers, in the specific

context of a collective of work, through this dynamic within this collective, with a professional gender not directly tangible, but *real*, and otherwise source of reference for this individual. More explicitly, Yves Clot assimilates, within the clinical approach of work activity, the concept of textual genre, originally proposed by the Bakhtin Circle (cf. Bakhtine, 1977), to the concept mentioned here of professional gender, which he defines as “[...] a professional respondent that, going through the professional activity of each worker [referenced by this genre], puts this worker precisely at the intersection of the past and the present”. In this sense, Clot (2008) points out that the professional genre is the generic respondent of the *métier*, or, in the original in French, *répondant générique du métier*. The *collective of work*, in turn, is also defined by Yves Clot (2008) as a constitutive instance of the real work activity, which encompasses several workers, a common set of tasks, a common language, internal rules to work, or, in the original in French, *règles de métier*, and lasting respect for such rules on the part of workers (p. 147). This respect should be considered in the context of a dynamic process that allows possible collisions between what the rules of office establish and the eventually creative and innovative initiatives that the individual-worker provides for the realization of such rules in the context of real or accomplished work (cf. Falcão, 2019).

There are two important points to be recovered and highlighted here: first, the principle according to which there is the *prescribed* work, that of the rules and demands of instances external to the individual-worker, and the work effectively *performed*, the one that results from the effort and initiative of the individual-worker to account for what is demanded of them; a central point of theoretical reference, here, concerns the principle according to which the work performed will never reproduce completely, faithfully, the prescribed work: there will always be a “gap” or discontinuity between prescribed work and real work (cf. Clot, 2008); this discontinuity brings a potential and a danger: the potential of professional gender innovation due to the *stylizing* contributions of the individuals-workers in the day-to-day process of their activity, and the risk that these contributions exceed the intangible and non-explicitly defined limit of what is acceptable by professional gender, and what is rejected. The stylization mentioned above is also another theoretical operator that the present clinical approach to the activity of work, advocated by Yves Clot, recovers and adapts from the Bakhtinian approach of the textual genre and its possibilities of generating singular “styles” (still linked to a genre – cf. Bakhtine, 1977).

In the field of meaning production to which we are submitted as semiotic beings, Bubnova et al. (2011), from bakhtinianana theoretical matrix, state that *all words are directed at someone and are from someone* (there are no neutral words, which exist on their own), and saying words that could be shared by someone else is only possible in response to something that was said before us. It is in the process of verbal communication, interaction with others, that someone becomes a subject, forging their own self. The “I” (myself) only exists to the extent that it is related to a “you” (another person): to be means to communicate, and an “I” is someone to whom another person has addressed as a “you” (Bubnova et al., 2011, p. 271). The appropriation of this Bakhtinian theoretical matrix by the Activity Clinic, in terms of the dynamics that are

established between professional genders and working individuals, through collectives of work, emphasizes that the work activity will always have a *recipient*, the instance that prescribes it, in addition to a reference according to the professional *métier* involved. It also establishes that it is in the context of the confrontations between individual-worker and professional gender that the individual-worker specifies their path to perform the well-done work, in view of a greater or lesser power to act (Clot, 2008).

Each worker lives, therefore, in a constitutive dialectical tension with the professional genre that refers to their professional activity: they cannot become a mere ventriloquist doll who only pretends to articulate what their operator actually speaks; in a diametrically opposite sense, they cannot completely refuse this gender referencing, since this would lead them to a dangerous contravention and, at the limit, to a loss of professional affiliation. As it metaphorically illustrates the myth of Icarus, it is necessary to seek the point of balance between the proximity of the sea of the professional gender, whose waters can drown the one who flies too close to them, and the heating sun of free and singular stylization, whose heat could melt the wax of the wings, with equally tragic result. In addition to these two poles producing *dramatic collisions*, it is also necessary to consider a third condition: the one in which the worker is in a context of exhaustion, weakening, or even disappearance of the professional genre, in the case of professional crafts in the process of disappearance, or of those professional offices in a situation of heterogeneity of referencing by diverse professional genres.

This seems to be the case of Psychology as a professional domain, which would justify the analysis of such heterogeneity, the elements that constitute it, and the expectations that await it. This is the discussion of the next section.

The deterioration of the work activity in Psychology as a professional domain

In a world dominated by banal forms of spirituality such as reiki, positive psychology, neoxamanism, astrology, Zen meditation, tantric sexuality, what everyone seeks is a universal harmony that calms the greatest of all spiritual temptations ever: the temptation of despair. But, as everyone knows, these forms of consumer spirituality are all false. Products addressed to the bearer of a miserable narcissism (Montaigu, 2020).

The word “profession” originates from the Latin *professionis*, meaning the *act or effect of professing*. This act of professing is initially closely linked to the conviction of beliefs, values, or commitments. From the 18th century on, the term acquired a new meaning: the act of exercising a craft, a science, or an art. Professions arise in response to the demands and needs of societies at a given historical moment. With Psychology, it was no different, with the aggravating factor of inserting itself in a contemporary historical context of demands for well-being accessible by ways not always sufficiently rigorous, as suggested in the citation that opens this section.

According to Yves Clot, work that *cannot be done* by certain workers from a professional domain has serious consequences on these workers, and this becomes even more serious when

there is no clear perspective on the work to be done (Clot et al., 2021). Already in a report dated 1949, by the realization of the Bulder Conference, aimed at the discussion about the search for scientific circumscription for psychotherapeutic activity, George F. J. Lehner (1952) writes in his concluding report: "I am afraid that in spite of our efforts we have left therapy as an undefined technique is which is applied to unspecified problems with non-predictable outcome" (p. 547).

The historical process of formal regulation of the profession of psychologist in Brazil met, simultaneously, social needs and movements of professionals who already exercised their work in the country. Law No. 4119, promulgated on August 27th, 1962 by the Brazilian president João Goulart, provides for formation in Psychology and regulates the profession of psychologist. At the present moment (the year 2022), when the professional activity of psychologist celebrates its 60th anniversary in Brazil, there are 422,733 professionals enrolled in the regulatory councils system, but the number of graduated psychologists is higher than that, since a portion of these graduates do not work in professional domains of Psychology, and, consequently, does not enroll in the Regional Councils of Psychology. These data bring embedded in it the growth of the number of graduated psychologists in Brazil, especially from the 1990s (an increase of more than 20%) and the first decade of 2000 (an increase of more than 50%), according to Lisboa and Barbosa (2009, p. 729), relatable to the expansion of the offer of Psychology programs in private institutions: there were more than 80% of private institutions among new institutions authorized in 2006, reaching 89.7% of private offer of education in Psychology. This growth, which, at first sight, could be interpreted as positive, as social recognition of a profession that gains new spaces and attracts young candidates, reveals, in turn, the great offer of psychologists in the context of Brazilian society, in a process that contributed to the degradation of this professional craft. Additionally, it should be emphasized that Psychology has expanded the list of practices associated with psychological doing. If in its early days it was a profession limited to the fields of education, clinical practice, and the management of what was called "human resources", there are currently 13 specialties formally recognized by the Federal Council of Psychology, characterizing the plurality of professional practice in Psychology in Brazilian contemporaneity, either in terms of diversity of practices or in terms of the available places of action of psychologists. Psychology as a professional domain was, in its early days, accused of being an "elitist" profession; today, in contrast, it contributes to health and social assistance policies, seeking to more largely contribute to the democratization of the access of the general population to psychological services (Yamamoto, 2000). Oliveira (2021), in his master's thesis, draws attention to the historical importance for workers in health domains of the approval of Law 8,742 of 1993, known in Brazil as the Organic Law of Social Assistance (*Lei Orgânica da Assistência Social* [LOAS]). LOAS regulates the organization of health policies around a unified system: the Unified Social Assistance System (*Sistema Único de Assistência Social* [SUAS]). In a work focused on the approach of the work activity of designated psychologists, within the scope of career positions in the states of the federation, to the monitoring of so-called "homeless populations" (or "populations in vulnerable situations"), Oliveira (2021, p. 5) observes that such services were systematized in terms of

Specialized Service for Homeless Population. They are described, in Brasil (2011, p. 29), as a service offered to people who use the streets as a space for housing and/or survival, with the purpose of ensuring care and activities directed to the development of sociability, with a view to strengthening interpersonal and/or family bonds that favor the construction of new life projects. This same author also observes that, in addition to the desirability of the rules that established this workspace and social commitment of the psychologists, such rules do not guarantee, by themselves, due clarity about the work to be done. The consequence of this seems to be the illness of professional psychologists in charge of offering the services recommended by the rule-based SUAS. Oliveira (2021), who is a researcher and also a professional psychologist inserted in the context of these activities, writes:

With regard to the problem of workers [psychologists and social assistants], being personally in this condition, I realized that the daily work at the Pop Center offers many challenges, which, due to their dynamics, affect the health of these professionals. The constant contact with this reality – trying to enable a decent care to this population, and, in turn, the low effectiveness of interventions, since the problem of the PSR [Person in Street Situation] is a complex and multifaceted problem, which is part of other macrosocial determinants – negatively affects the service workers. In my case and colleagues, it appeared through tiredness; frustration around the feeling that efforts do not yield results; high level of stress; difficulties in sleeping; nightmares evoking service situations, usually some situation concerning violence, threat, or some strong emotion, provoked by frustration at a follow-up of a case (Oliveira, 2021, p. 8).

The above considerations suggest that Psychology has been under pressure for changes, and these have required this professional domain to widen its borders to expand dialogue with other professional fields. However, a reflection must inevitably be made from this scenario, seeking to include the conceptual network that characterizes Psychology, associated with a multiplicity of professional doings (*acts of métier*). It is worth resuming recurrent reflection on how much Psychology education could follow up this process, emphasizing that a Brazilian graduate psychologist has the prerogative to exercise any professionally recognized practices.

Brazilian curriculum guidelines highlight the diversity and theoretical multiplicity of Psychology, as indicated by Resolution No. 597, September 13th, 2018, which establishes formal recommendations concerning general curricular principles for undergraduate students of Psychology in Brazil (Brasil, 2018). This diversity reinforces the need for theoretical articulation between a research-based education and intervention methodologies; encourages the integration of psychologists from different areas of activity of Psychology with other professionals; stimulates the entry and performance of the psychologist in different contexts and their participation in the construction of public policies; considers the complexity and multidetermination of the psychological phenomenon; aims at critical understanding of social phenomena; strengthens the dimension of psychology's social commitment to the promotion of well-being, considering social needs and human rights. Thus, psychology is characterized as a multipurpose profession, in

interface with other fields of knowledge and with a set of practices that can be applied in different situations. In this context, it is necessary to question the extent to which psychology as a professional worker has a professional genre sufficiently circumscribed to the point of offering the rules of *métier* that will allow the characterization of well-done work, quality work, which is the basis, in fact, for the quality of life at work (Clot et al., 2021). Psychology as a work activity, in contemporary Brazilian times, brings some of the elements discussed here in the sense of the characterization of processes of the precariousness of this professional domain.

Final considerations

We seek, in this article, to reinforce the principle according to which the precariousness of work activity should not be restricted to a certain list of “dirty” works, inherently problematic due to the external working conditions that characterize them. However, research data focused on socially valued professional activities, such as elementary school teacher (Andrade & Falcão, 2018), show a situation of precariousness much more established and verifiable than what is observed in “dirty” professions, characterized by negative social representation (in the tradition of “dirty work”), as the case of technicians in the examination of corpses (Messias, 2017; Falcão et al., 2020). These technicians reveal larger consciousness about the paths of work well done in the inspection of corpses, unlike the loneliness and lack of referencing of elementary school teachers, trying desperately and alone to deal with their students “who do not learn”.

De Gastines and Desriaux (2021) emphasize that the job well done is the key to health at work. The path to well-done work, in turn, does not find sufficient subsidies in work prescriptions, however detailed they may be. The well-done work is referenced by the collectives of work, by the colleagues involved in the same *métier*, capable, in their interlocations, of constructing, dialogically, the circumscription of this well-done work. As a result, there can be no reference to the well-done work in the absence of professional gender, or in its explosion in terms of multiple niches of activity. What does the psychologist do? When is it possible to affirm that this psychologist has done their *métier* well? Suppose the answer to these questions is difficult. In that case, this fact is connected to the diversity and richness of the field of psychology as a domain of knowledge production and mastery of professional activity. However, it also alludes to the considerable risk of precariousness of the professional activity of this psychologist. The work that is not done is harmful to the mental health of the worker, but the work to be done by this worker, in a situation of lack of reference by the professional gender, generates even more suffering and mental illness.

This article is published in the year Psychology reached its 60th anniversary as professional activity, as it was formally established in Brazil on August 27th, 1962. There are currently more than 440,000 Brazilian psychologists who practice a so-called profession of care, attention, questioning, and empathy with each other. In almost six decades of regulation of the profession in the country, Psychology has often required, on the part of its professionals, ethical reflection, more effective professional training, and commitment to the unrestricted defense of human rights. If

Brazilian psychology in its early days was charged due to an elitist and fragmented praxis, currently, the challenge of the profession lies in the establishment of theoretical and methodological parameters that ensure the exercise of a practice that faces the concrete problems of our reality, contributing to the psychology professional being an agent of transformation of Brazilian society. This is a relevant and challenging task that requires the development of the professional gender of Psychology in order to ensure the professional reference psychologists need.

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