Psychoanalysis and contemporary subject–work–organizations relations

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Abstract
What are the implications of the new management models, which are typical of contemporary organizations, on the subjects who depend on their work for a living? Which are the new symptoms and pathologies that define contemporary organizations? What could psychoanalytical studies contribute towards a greater understanding of the contemporary modes of subject–work–organizations relations? As answers, we should stress the relevance of deeper conversations between organizational studies and psychoanalysis, as in its extension it will offer significant potential with regard to new gazes and theoretical–methodological approaches that will allow broader visions with regard to the multiple facets that characterize the complexity of current of subject–work–organizations relations.

Key words: work, subject–work–organizations relations, organizational studies, psychoanalysis

Introduction
Throughout his elaborations on social phenomena, Freud continuously highlighted how important is the available and acting cultural material in society for the psychic working of subjectivities. Following-up on such guidelines, there has always been a broad discussion in psychoanalytical circles with regard to the dynamics of contemporary society, as it seeks to explicate up to which point the cultural context favours the production of modes of subjectification that are distinct from those that happened at the beginning of the twentieth century (Herzog, & Salzstrager, 2003).

As highlighted by Pinheiro (2003), the psychoanalytical theoretical framework is based on Freud’s clinic, working with hysteries. However, since The interpretation of dreams (Freud, 1900), the world has undergone significant changes and the current modes of psychic suffering are not the same as those that characterized the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Scientific and technological advances, the globalization of the economy and of markets, and the new shapes of the production system and of capitalist consumption have configured issues and stalemates that are different from those that characterized the time when psychoanalysis was conceived.

According to Coelho dos Santos (2000), the set of changes that defines the current stage of capitalism stems from an inversion in the relationship between supply and demand, with the consequent dislocation of the subject in relation to its object of desire: while subjected to the system human beings will become a product of the market, which will tell them what to desire, produce their needs and lead them to even consume themselves (Müller, 2000).

Centred on consumption as never before, contemporary society reveals itself, therefore, as having a strong imaginary appeal: its masters – the market and science – do not seem to be interested in the subjects’ singularity, in what they have to say, but on what they can be as disciplined and docile consumers (Müller, 2000).

Within such a context in which it is the spectacle (Debord, 1992) and the aesthetics of the I (Lasch, 1983) that will prevail, the image reveals itself as being more important than the object, the copy more important than the original. Thus, it is a society that typifies the contemporary in which what is available are flashes, data, amusement and services up to the point of saturation (Müller, 2000).
It is as if the mythical father, who in dying took with him the dimension of the total phallic jouissance and who should remain as a reference and interdiction of this jouissance to his children, should return and animate these same children, although now with the promise of participating in this jouissance. Fractured at carrying out his function, the contemporary father seems no longer to exist as an interdiction.

As Müller (2000) stresses, if modernity had already decreed if not the death, at least a distancing from God through the secularization of the world, contemparaneity adds to this the death of ideals and of the future, thus carrying out the deconstruction of the enlightenment project brought forth by modernity. Thus it is that the philosophy of nihilism, of nothingness, of emptiness, of the absence of values, references, tradition and meaning to life is installed. What seems to matter is the hedonistic and solitary pleasure of the here-and-now which, by the way, is absolutely fundamental to maintain and implement market logic. Therefore, the world is a space that has been super-recreated by signs, leading to a lack of reference for the real.

The reading of works that are essential to understanding current cultural changes, such as works by Bauman (1998), Deleuze (1992), Ehremberg (1998), Hardt and Negri (2001) and Kristeva (1993), will reinforce this crucial point: the bankruptcy of symbolic authority (Herzog, & Salzstrager, 2003).

Although there are controversies about how to define the contemporary context, or if so-called post-modernity or late modernity represents a step ahead with regard to modernity, it must be mentioned that there is a discourse that suggests something has changed or is undergoing changes, and that it has implications vis-à-vis organizations that require greater understanding.

Contemporaneity within the context of organizations

To be able to meet the demands of contemporaneity, organizations must be process-orientated and focused on their clients, they must be agile and lean, and their tasks must assume, on the part of those who carry them out, extensive knowledge of the business, autonomy, accountability and skills to take decisions within increasingly complex environments. This will then require a complete review of traditional company models, both from structural and business and work management viewpoints (Gonçalves, 1997).

Therefore, a new set of organizational principles becomes the prescribed one, and it is one that is based on a dynamic allocation of resources, point-to-point communications, work organized into teams, projects and networks, results assessed by performance and on defining organic organizational borders.

As highlighted by Albuquerque (1999), the demands put forth by a constantly changing environment, the renewed needs presented by clients, rapid technological evolution and deep, ongoing social changes have pressured organizations with regard to the imperative for a new conception about management, one that will favour flexibility, innovation, creativity, productivity, and product and services quality.

According to these guidelines, there is a demand for workers whose profile offers new characteristics such as being proactive at problem-solving and when facing unusual situations, the ability to work as a member of a team and to think and act within interlinked and increasingly complex systems.

Nevertheless, authors such as Fischer (2001) believe that the emergence of these new concepts and demands bring forth new contradictions that current organizations need to overcome when defining and putting into practice their new management models. If, on one hand, organizations have never needed so much of what is most human before—creativity, feelings and sensitiveness—on the other hand they continue to encourage the creation of work environments where this characteristic finds little space to prosper. They actually incite competition among people; change the psychological contract between workers and the organization, which is traditionally centred on the loyalty–stability pact; intensify the rhythm of work; and strengthen the links between performance and results.

It is worth highlighting studies that have analysed the implications on workers borne by flexibility processes in work relations (Rifkin, 1995) or even by the adoption of new management arrangements and models that are centred on the notions of virtuality, networks and competencies.

As a consequence a common point is highlighted; namely, the setting-up of increasingly tenuous links between companies and workers; the fear, on the part of workers, of not being competent enough to be valued and to have the chance to set up some kind of relationship with the organization; and in the absence of perspectives with regard to one’s career in the long term.

Currently, such processes have become more common and they are already present at several types of organizations. However, and specifically in dealing with this issue, it is necessary to gain greater understanding about its implications on subject–work–organizations relations.
Contemporaneity and new modes of subject–work–organizations relations

As a result of the set of changes that have defined contemporary management systems with regard to subject–work–organization relations we must highlight, among other aspects, the fact that workers now have to live with the insecurity of finding work and earning enough money to maintain themselves, thus being forced to manage themselves as owners of their own careers.

Furthermore, as highlighted by Sennet (1999), the non-existence of the long term is an issue that corrodes trust, loyalty and mutual commitment. It is obvious that trust can be a purely formal issue when the people involved agree to a commercial transaction or depend on others to follow the rules of a game. In general, however, the deepest trust experiences are informal, and depend upon the building of social ties that take time to be established, as they grow their roots slowly in the crevices and gaps at institutions. Nevertheless, the author believes that the new management models, as they are based on transitory teams, hinder the emergence of strong social bonds, thus affecting commitment to the organization and leading to consequences to the personal and family spheres.

At the same time, Chanlat (1996, p. 45) points out up to what point the question of work ethics has been devalued nowadays. After all:

...how to maintain ethics based on efforts, discipline, work that is well done, on the profession and on a long learning process when, on the one hand, all of society leads us to consume and to take immediate advantage, every day, of all that is going on?

Evans (1996, p. 29) also points out the change from work ethics based on duty to another based on hedonism as a dominating trend. As the author states:

...before that we had work driven by the duty to support the family, by the duty towards the company, by the duty towards the employer. This sense of duty and obligation is running out, and currently, the new kind of ethics being incorporated is based on amusement and efficiency.

Furthermore, Evans points to the quest for autonomy, for control over one’s own life, as another remarkable social trend. According to him, besides seeking a fit between work and people’s capabilities, organizations should take into account each one’s interest for working and how much they enjoy doing what they do, and offer them a work environment that is based on the values of autonomy, trust and clear objectives.

Due to this scenario, values such as obedience and an exchange of sacrificing one’s personal life for job security give way to the demand for workers who think like independent professionals, workers who are employable and can move at a speed that is proportional to their talent (Souza, 2000).

The concepts of loyalty, the bonds of affectionate links to organizations, therefore, are significantly changed: nowadays, one’s loyalty is to oneself and to one’s career, and no longer to organizations or to community.

Within the scope of this set of changes that characterizes society and, in particular, contemporary subject–work–organizations relations, it is worth investigating more deeply some aspects such as their implications on workers’ subjective experiences; the new forms of subjectification and the modes of psychic suffering that emerge from within the context of work, as well as the defence mechanisms forged by the subjects of work vis-à-vis the new organizational arrangements and management models to which they find themselves submitted.

The contemporary world and its implications on workers’ subjective experiences

According to Paoli (2000), the times, cultural, social and political contexts to which one belongs will largely determine one’s subjectivity. This will be expressed through one’s production and, more broadly, through one’s position vis-à-vis the world. Thus, Carvalho (2005, p. 117) stresses that:

...to understand the meaning of subjectivity it is necessary to examine what there is of concrete in the activity; it is necessary to examine man’s actions on work and on movement, which is translated by the motions over which this activity orients itself, which also reveals itself to be a source of knowledge for the subjects: here lies the issue of subjectivity, which must be considered as an integral part of these subjects’ objective working conditions.

And he adds:

...subjectivity could never be simply a reality that is internal (which it never was) to the subject, as if it could be reduced to being only a driving tool to guide these subjects. Subjectivity would be, prior to anything else, the interchanging and dynamic manifestation between the internal and the external. It is through the movement of appropriating the external (a space of objective externality – work object – and also a space of subjective externality – the self as an object) that subjects make of their work activity, that the internal (interiority space) is
formed and builds itself. Subjectivity would be to think of oneself as a mechanism that is able to operate a precise act within an ongoing process: the act of work, which is thus anticipated by an externality towards interiority. (Carvalho, 2005, p. 126)

Such understanding seems to lead to the Foucaultian notion of subjectification (Foucault, 1990a, b, 1999), which is preceded by the words forms, modes, indicating that subjectivation constitutes a social process of generation (Prata, 2004).

As can be perceived, subjectivity is understood here as something to be produced. To treat subjectivity as a production means saying that it is not present at the origin, but must be created. The production of subjectivity deflates any notion of pre-social subjectivity, as it leads us to a constant social process of generation (Prata, 2004).

According to Prata (2004), if there is a relationship between the subject and his subjective experiences, it can equally be said that there is a relationship between forms of sickness and the appearance of new forms of subjectivation. It is also possible to broaden such assumptions by proposing new questions, such as: why does a certain form of suffering dominate certain times? Up to what point do these forms of sickness reveal mutations in individuality within a specific time frame?

Based on this reference framework, it could be considered that the contemporary experience in subjectification is articulated by certain forms – specific ones – of sicknesses, while the subjective experience of modernity articulated others or caused them to prevail; and what about the organizational context? How have these transformations experienced within the workplace forged the production of new subjectivities?

As to the effects of the new management models on workers, the bibliography in the field of management has suggested the absence of consensus, and it is possible to identify authors who range from pessimistic to optimistic views (Humphrey, 1991; Leite, 1993, 1996; Salerno, Hirata, Ferreira, & Marx, 1992; Weil, 1991; Wood, 1991).

Using these perspectives, the authors call our attention to the new profile of workers – participative, conscious and responsible – that is apparently being drawn on the innovation front and could consist in several kinds of benefits to them in terms of concrete improvements in working conditions. Adding to these views, which emphasize the trend towards integrating the work of creating and executing to the enrichment of tasks and the valuation of labour, which companies seem to be incorporating mainly through participative systems, there are opposing others who point to the fact that these new forms of managing have been accompanied by new problems related mainly to the implications brought about by the new organizational configurations on workers’ subjectivity and mental health, which indicate the emergence of new forms of occupational suffering and illnesses.

As well as the illnesses whose focus is the body in its physical dimensions – muscular tiredness, back pains, wounds and illnesses stemming from the physical conditions of work – typical of the industrial era, new symptoms and illnesses can now be found which have the dimension of the Psy as their privileged target: anxiety, depression, stress, burnout and panic syndromes, plus a wide range of new afflictions.

In summary, at the same time that organizational innovations might mean the possibility of richer, more autonomous and creative work for some, they can also represent more stressful and work for others. These innovations bring on new challenges, paradoxes and contradictions whose effects on workers in general, and specifically with regard to mental health and forms of subjectification, deserve to be better understood.

Contributions by psychoanalysis to organizational studies

As highlighted previously by Coelho dos Santos and Sant’Anna (2009), such a discussion seems to direct us, by means of the various paths through which we led it, to the symbolic myth of the father in the Freudian primitive horde.

In Totem and taboo (1913) Freud proposes, above all, an analysis of the origins of society. According to the myth, in mankind’s prehistoric times men lived grouped into hordes and were completely under the control of an all-powerful male. However, the brothers got together one day and killed and devoured the father, thus ending the primeval horde regime. After the father’s murder, a fraternal clan arose which sketched out the first social organization.

Overpowered by a feeling of revulsion against the father, the sons had the chance to recognize themselves as equals for the first time, which favoured the group’s make-up and cohesion. Nevertheless, once reaching this first moment, the hostile impulses directed at the father were replaced by gentle feelings; the latter were replaced by a feeling of remorse soon afterwards (Freud, 1913).

A deep feeling of guilt forced the brothers to renounce the clan’s women and forbid the death of the totemic animal, the murdered father’s symbolic replacement. Thus, due to the emergence of the feeling of guilt, the dead father became stronger than he had been when he was alive (Freud, 1913).
From such a perspective, the driving factor for the rise of culture set the dead father in the place of an ideal, instituting it as an object that must be feared and venerated. Thus, the paternal function became a symbolic support for subjectivities, consisting of the indispensable guarantee to install the illusion of equality and fraternity among the social body’s members (Coelho dos Santos & Sant’Anna, 2009).

To aim for social cohesion and, consequently, the possibility of making use of the benefits it brings, the subjects should renounce their immediate pulsional satisfactions, be they either sexual or aggressive. The idea of culpability linked to a transcendent law would ensure that any attempt to occupy the father’s place would be doomed to failure (Freud, 1913).

If, according to the Freudian viewpoint, the leader is thought to be the reincarnation of the omnipotent figure of the primitive horde’s father, then he deserves to be placed as a representative of a symbolic order. As it is thus installed in the place of the ideal of the I of each one of the collectivity’s members, Freud (1930) suggests that it is exactly the figure of the leader that supplies the final guarantees to insert individuals into the social arena.

Currently, due to the tearing of the social tissue, such dynamics no longer find an echo. In fact, we find a strong tendency on the part of the eminently abandoned subject to seek a way to include himself in the social pact at any cost. Of those, seeking to rescue some value or reference that can support him that can make it possible for him not to be left out, he establishes massifying and alienating group formations (Coelho dos Santos & Sant’Anna, 2009).

Based on such assumptions, it is possible to stress that the bankruptcy of symbolic authority and the emergence of the most diverse mass and organizational phenomena, whose effectiveness lies in the illusion that the state of abandonment, could be remedied easily by inserting the subject into those group formations (Coelho dos Santos & Sant’Anna, 2009).

At the organizational level, the regime of networks and increasingly horizontal organization structures have led to the fragmentation of work roles. All these have split the place of the father, which has been diluted by the fluctuation of positions and no longer works as a model of an identity and a representative of the law. The desire of the other is no longer the desire of a paternal other; it is the one of any other, one that is variable and contingent (Coelho dos Santos & Sant’Anna, 2009).

When faced with the panorama that has been delineated, it is easy to perceive the need for new ways to understand the organizational phenomenon, including its discourses and values. As suggested by Sant’Anna, Carvalho and Fonseca (2009), greater attention must be paid to the potentialities of the psychoanalytical referential by carrying out reflections, notably on aspects such as: (1) the unfolding of malaise within the context of contemporary labour and organizations; (2) the new ways interject control within the context of these organizations and their implications to workers’ psychic dimension; (3) the new organizational arrangements vis-à-vis the notion of the decline of paternal authority; (4) the new modalities of social bonds that emerge within current organizations, guided by virtuality and by new technologies that significantly alter notions of time, distance and space; (5) the subjective implications of the rupture of the traditional psychological contract between company and employee, based on the binominal safety–loyalty, towards emphasizing the dyad freedom–results; (6) the perverse groupings within the current organizational environment; (7) the typical ambiguities, contradictions and diasporas displayed by a risk society (Beck, 1992); and (8) the emergence of new symptoms and pathologies stemming from the current work context.

In conclusion, we should reinforce the relevance of the deeper conversations (Clegg, Hardy, & Nord, 1999) between management and other fields of knowledge. Among them we find psychoanalysis which, throughout its extension, presents a significant potential that should be explored more deeply with regard to new gazes and theoretical–methodological–conceptual approaches that can afford more encompassing visions about the multiple facets that characterize the complexity of subject–work–organization relations in contemporaneity (Coelho dos Santos, & Sant’Anna, 2009; Sant’Anna, Carvalho, & Fonseca, 2009).

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