

Psychic Suffering in the Work of Professors at a Federal University in Brazil: The Perspective of Clinical Sociology and Psychodynamics of Work

O Sofrimento Psíquico no Trabalho de Professores de Uma Universidade Federal no Brasil: Um Estudo à Luz da Sociologia Clínica e da Psicodinâmica do Trabalho

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between teaching activities in public higher education and psychic suffering in the workplace. The qualitative research is grounded in theoretical-epistemological assumptions of clinical sociology and the psychodynamics of work. The research questions guiding the study were: a) What situations cause psychic suffering at work among faculty members at federal public universities in Brazil? b) How do these professors cope with such situations, and what strategies do they adopt? Semi-structured comprehensive interviews were conducted with faculty members from a public university in the Central-West region of Brazil, complemented by direct observation of their work environment. The central focus of the analysis was placed on the intersubjective experiences of the interviewees, considering how they affect the individual and their relationship with their work environment. The findings indicate that the source of psychic suffering is not the nature of the work itself, but rather the sense of powerlessness to change working conditions, which has been exacerbated by increasing precariousness. This situation impacts interpersonal relationships, often marked by conflict and competition among colleagues, a result of the managerial logic that has become prevalent in public higher education. It has been noted that the political climate of the country prior to the research period, conducted in 2023, further intensified the professor's psychic suffering. In accordance with the psychodynamics of work, the

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ABSTRACT

significant pressure resulting from work organization can disrupt individuals' efforts to achieve internal psychological balance, often resulting in what is termed pathogenic suffering. In such instances, work transitions from being a source of mental well-being to a catalyst for mental or psychosomatic disorders. The study also indicates that the repercussions of psychological suffering can manifest as physical pain, depression, anxiety, and burnout syndrome, which, in extreme cases, can lead to the abandonment of a career in higher education teaching.

Keywords: Professors Career, Higher Education Professors, Psychic Suffering at Work, Clinical Sociology, Psychodynamics of Work.

RESUMO

Abordando a relação entre a atividade docente no ensino superior público e o sofrimento psíquico no trabalho, este artigo traz os resultados de uma pesquisa de natureza qualitativa, ancorada nos pressupostos teórico-epistemológicos da sociologia clínica e da psicodinâmica do trabalho. Partindo de estudos anteriores e visando pensar os nexos entre o contexto societal, a organização do trabalho e as respostas psíquicas dos professores, o problema de pesquisa foi estruturado a partir das seguintes perguntas de investigação: a) Quais situações desencadeiam sofrimento psíquico no trabalho entre professores(as) de universidades públicas federais brasileiras? b) Como esses professores(as) vivenciam essas situações e quais ações colocam em prática para fazer face a elas? Foram conduzidas entrevistas semiestruturadas de tipo compreensivas com docentes de uma universidade pública brasileira localizada na região Centro-Oeste e observação direta de seu contexto de trabalho. O foco central da análise foi colocado nas experiências intersubjetivas dos entrevistados, levando em consideração como elas afetam o sujeito e sua relação com seu ambiente laboral. Os resultados evidenciam que os docentes sofrem não pela natureza do trabalho, mas pela impotência em transformar as suas condições de trabalho, diante da precarização crescente à qual estão submetidos. Esta precarização tem reflexos nas relações interpessoais, que passam a ser marcadas por disputas entre colegas em decorrência de uma lógica gerencial competitiva que, cada vez mais, atinge o universo do ensino superior público. Observa-se, ainda, que o contexto político do país imediatamente anterior à época da pesquisa, realizada em 2023, agravou ainda mais o sofrimento psíquico dos docentes. De acordo com a psicodinâmica do trabalho, a intensa pressão originada pela organização do trabalho pode comprometer a busca de equilíbrio psíquico interno dos indivíduos, levando-os ao sofrimento chamado de patológico. Nestes casos, o trabalho deixa de ser fonte de saúde mental para ser geradora de adoecimento mental ou psicossomático. O estudo revela ainda que os efeitos do sofrimento psíquico podem ser observados nas dores físicas, depressão, ansiedade, síndrome de Burnout, levando em casos extremos à desistência da carreira de professor do magistério superior.

Palavras-chaves: Carreira Docente, Professores do Ensino Superior, Sofrimento Psíquico no Trabalho, Sociologia Clínica, Psicodinâmica do Trabalho

Introduction

According to the WHO (World Health Organization), depression¹ is one of the leading causes of absenteeism in the workplace. This global organization reports that it impacts over 264 million individuals of all ages across all continents (WHO, 2020), representing approximately 3.37% of the global population. In Brazil, the situation is even more concerning, with 5.8% of the population—equating to 11.5 million people—suffering from depression. This marks the highest rate in Latin America and the second highest in the Americas, only behind the United States (FIOCRUZ, 2017). Moreover, a survey conducted in 2024 by the Ministry of Social Security in Brazil reveals over 470,000 work absences due to mental health disorders, particularly anxiety and depression. This figure reflects a staggering 68% increase compared to the previous year, highlighting a mental health crisis that has prompted the Federal Government to implement stricter measures, such as updating NR-1, which sets forth guidelines related to health in the workplace. Going forward, this issue will be monitored within companies and may lead to fines for non-compliance (CASEMIRO; MOURA, 2025).

Depressive disorders have become one of the leading causes of non-fatal health losses. Between 1990 and 2007, there was a 33.4% increase in the number of years lived with disability, measured by YLDs² (Years Lived with Disability), across all ages. These data indicate that depression became the third leading cause of YLDs in 2007 (JAMES et al., 2018).

Together, stress, depression, and anxiety are the main causes that interrupt work activities and account for 46% of absenteeism. A recent study conducted in the United Kingdom compared the levels of stress experienced by professionals in various types of professions and concluded that teachers and professors experienced twice as much stress, depression, and anxiety as the average of other professionals (BAPTISTA et al., 2019).

- 1 Depression is a chronic and recurrent psychiatric disorder, characterized by mood alterations, profound sadness, and feelings of hopelessness. Depression is classified under code F33 in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD).
- 2 YLDs – Years Lived with Disability refer to the number of years individuals live with a disability or health condition, adjusted for its severity. This metric also encompasses the incidence and prevalence of disability over time, as defined by the Global Burden of Disease, Injuries, and Risk Factors Study (2017).

In another study examining the environment of higher education institutions in Brazil, Soares, Oliveira, and Batista (2017) suggest that professors, as a collective group, tend to experience higher levels of depression. The authors attribute this phenomenon to the challenging working conditions that educators face within their professional environments. Consequently, there has been a notable rise in the use of psychotropic medications among professors.

When examining the work environment of professors, several factors can be identified as stressors. These include the constant need for professional development and the demand for meaningful engagement in the social context in which they work. While it is true that stress and other psychological issues are related to the teaching profession, it is important not to attribute these problems solely to internal or external circumstances. The professional and personal skills required for teaching extend beyond the workplace (SOARES; OLIVEIRA; BATISTA, 2017). Both individual and collective responses involve psychological aspects that influence the desire for recognition, the construction of identity, the use of sublimation strategies, and practical reasoning (BUENO; MACÊDO, 2012), among other factors.

In Brazil, faculty members have been facing an increasingly competitive environment, with the presence of stressors and factors that cause illness (SOARES; OLIVEIRA; BATISTA, 2017). Delprato and Chudgar (2018) warn that aspects related to the qualification demands of professor in public and private higher education institutions go beyond learning needs and can be perceived as central to professional development and career growth.

Lima and Lima-Filho (2009) identify that the relationships between the teaching work process and the possible physical and mental illness among professors at a public university stem from working conditions. The authors highlight psychological strain and emotional exhaustion, among other consequences resulting from the exercise of professional activity.

The situations observed in the higher education work environment are considered psychosocial factors that contribute to physical and mental work overload. Consequently, these factors affect the satisfaction, health, and well-being of workers (LIMA; LIMA-FILHO, 2009). The nature and context of university professors' work in Brazil share common aspects with the profession globally, such as a critical perspective on social systems, pressure to generate and publish knowledge

(LEE, 2014), the need for ongoing professional development (LIESA-ORÚS et al., 2020), teaching classes, and managing natural conflicts within workgroups (SMITH; FREDRICKS-LOWMAN, 2019; HEFFERNAN; BOSETTI, 2021). However, there are notable differences in the practice of teaching in higher education in Brazil, particularly concerning public institutions. The environment poses numerous challenges, including issues related to infrastructure (DE NEGRI; CAVALCANTE; ALVES PATRICK, 2013), access to resources, the relationship between academia and society, and government policies impacting higher education (MANCEBO; MAUÉS, 2006; DEUS, 2020). In this context, Baptista et al. (2019) point out that there is a higher prevalence of mental health issues among professors in public universities compared to their counterparts in private universities.

Studying the psychological suffering experienced by professors in public higher education institutions in Brazil is important for several reasons. First, it is necessary to identify the specific situations that trigger this psychic suffering at work. Second, it is essential to explore the individual, collective, and organizational consequences that arise from this suffering. Finally, understanding how these individuals experience these situations and the coping strategies they employ can provide valuable insights.

Understanding the subjectivity and intersubjectivity related to teaching work allows the understanding of the workers' consciousness regarding the denial or rationalization of suffering and illness related to work (VILELA; GARCIA; VIEIRA, 2013). The individual or collective responses mapped from an analysis grounded in the psychodynamics of work and clinical sociology can serve as emancipatory elements for both the individual and the group. They also have the potential to lead to management practices capable of anticipating situations that would provoke psychic suffering and their consequent outcomes.

Thus, the research that underpinned this article was structured around the following research questions: a) What situations cause psychic suffering at work among faculty members at federal public universities in Brazil? b) How do these professors cope with such situations, and what strategies do they adopt?

This manuscript is presented into five sections. The first one is this Introduction, which outlines the general scenario of work-related illnesses and presents the relevance of the research and the research questions. The second section discusses

two theoretical approaches that were used for analyzing the data generated from the fieldwork. The third section provides clarifications about the methodological approach and research strategies. The fourth section includes the data analysis, where theoretical concepts are articulated with the interviewees' statements. By the end of this section, the research questions have been answered. Finally, some concluding remarks are showed, pointing out the limitations of the study.

Theoretical-Epistemological Framework

This section presents central elements of the two theoretical-epistemological approaches on which this study is supported: clinical sociology and psychodynamics of work.

It is important to emphasize that the theoretical-epistemological perspective adopted in this study represents one among several possible approaches that researchers may employ to examine the relationship between human beings, work, and organizations. As Torres (2019) observes, analyses of this triad within the field of Administration—since its inception during the Industrial Revolution—have predominantly favored approaches aimed at enhancing productivity, even when the human subject is ostensibly placed at the center of inquiry.

The research underpinning this article, however, adopts a distinct epistemological orientation, deliberately departing from the dominant paradigms in the field. It seeks to critically examine, through a lens that questions the prevailing status quo, the underlying causes of psychological suffering experienced by faculty members at a federal university. Such suffering may lead to diminished motivation for professional and personal development or even disillusionment with the academic profession itself. Aligned with this epistemological stance, the study aims to explore how the interplay of various factors within the context of academic labor at a public university contributes to psychological distress. In doing so, it considers not only organizational and institutional dynamics but also broader national and international socioeconomic and political forces that shape the working environment.

In the interest of epistemological coherence, and also due to spatial constraints, the article intentionally omits analyses that, while relevant in certain respects,

diverge significantly from the theoretical premises adopted herein. An example of such work is Paula's doctoral dissertation (2015), which, although thematically adjacent, is grounded in the theoretical framework of Quality of Work Life (QWL). QWL models—without delving into the nuances among them—are fundamentally managerial in nature, aiming to provide workers with psychological and emotional support primarily to serve productivity and efficiency goals within organizations. This instrumental orientation stands in contrast to the critical perspective adopted in the present study.

The theoretical-epistemological basis followed here focuses on the view that contemporary neoliberal management “corroborates the generation of anguish [and illness of individuals] by denying the conflicts that exist between the objectives of people and the objectives of companies”, because for companies there is no other logic other than high profitability and productivity (TORRES, 2019, p.128). It should be noted that Brazilian public universities have operated under the aegis of neoliberal business management since the 1990s (MANCEBO, MAUÉS & CHAVES, 2006). It is understood that the paradox between what is advocated by management theories – including QWT models – and the practice of neoliberal management over workers (GAULEJAC & HANIQUE, 2015) distances the proposal of this article from QWT studies. The theoretical-epistemological orientation adopted ultimately aims to collaborate in understanding the work factors that distance individuals from their emancipation as human beings, for whom work is constitutive of psychic formation and personal fulfillment (DEJOURS, 2012).

CLINICAL SOCIOLOGY

Clinical sociology, or psychosociology, is an approach to the human and social sciences that aims to bring together diverse dimensions that permeate the individual in order to understand him or her in all his or her complexity. Thus, the understanding of human phenomena is promoted through the articulation between the psychic and social dimensions, as is found in studies in the fields of psychology, social psychology, sociology, anthropology, and even economics (NUNES; SILVA, 2018).

In this way, clinical sociology proposes to carry out an analysis of society through the appreciation of the articulations between social determinisms and psychic determinisms, addressing topics such as suffering at work and internal conflicts

related to social issues and social identity (GAULEJAC, 2014). Clinical sociology has as its key question the questioning of the subject's side, riddled with intrapsychic elements, especially of an unconscious nature, but also due to the fact that this subject is inserted in a social universe (BENDASSOLLI; SOBOLL, 2011). Therefore, it seeks to investigate the reciprocities between the individual and the collective, the psychic and the social, considering that the factors that affect the worker's mental health will also depend on the economic, ideological and political dynamics that permeate the production process. Using this theoretical approach to analyze the condition of federal university professors, as is the case in this study, therefore presupposes relating the social, economic and political context of these workers, bringing into the analysis legal issues and those related to public policies related to higher education. This is because the work environment of these professors depends on regulatory resolutions and measures that are directly linked to decisions made by bodies that are beyond their control.

THE PSYCHODYNAMICS OF WORK

The objective of the psychodynamics of work is to analyze the dynamics and functioning of the psychic processes activated by the subject's confrontation with the reality of work. It focuses on suffering and pleasure at work, and its organization (SELIGMANN-SILVA, 2011; PENA; REMOALDO, 2019), considering its dimensions (BOUYER, 2010) and the "intra and intersubjective processes mobilized by the work situation" (DEJOURS, 1992, p. 149).

The relationship between the individual and the work activity is composed of the organization of work on the one hand and, on the other hand, by an individual endowed with a personality, a life story and a psychic apparatus that transform him/her into a unique human being, who will respond in a singular way to the environment in which the work activity is developed. Thus, the aim is to analyze the individual's psychic dynamics in relation to reality and to the actual situations faced in the activity.

This theoretical approach uses the categories of prescribed work organization and real work. Prescribed work is everything that is related to an imposed work institution, which "translates into planning, task objectives, behavioral rules, standards, management, pressures and regulations of operating modes" (FLEURY; MACÊDO,

2013, p. 160). Real work is given by what, in the concrete situation of the activity, challenges the prescription, requiring the individual to use creativity to fully exercise his or her profession. (FLEURY; MACÊDO, 2013)

When the organization of work imposes significant constraints on individuals' ability to engage creatively in their activities, particularly in navigating the gap between prescribed tasks and the realities of work, there is an increased risk of psychological illness. This theoretical perspective emphasizes the concept of a dynamic balance between suffering and pleasure derived from work. It posits that all forms of work inevitably involve suffering, which may manifest in either creative or pathogenic forms. Besides, when individuals are able to effectively bridge the gap between prescription and reality, they can transform this suffering into a source of personal fulfillment, development, and psychological growth. In such cases, the pleasure derived from meaningful engagement compensates for the inherent suffering. Conversely, when individuals lack the internal resources required for this transformation—often due to intense pressures arising from the organization of work—their psychological equilibrium may be disrupted, potentially resulting in mental illness or psychosomatic disorders (FLEURY & MACÊDO, 2013).

Accordingly, the emergence of illness is fundamentally linked to the organization of work and to how individuals perceive and respond to it, particularly in relation to their integration within, or exclusion from, a collective social environment (DASHTIPOUR & VIDAILLET, 2020). Suffering arises when the relationship between the individual and the organization becomes saturated—when the individual has exhausted their intellectual, psycho-affective, cognitive, and adaptive capacities in attempting to cope with the work context. At this point, there is no longer a viable means of reducing tension, marking the onset of suffering (DEJOURS, 1992, 1999, 2010). This heightened level of tension in relation to one's work experience can lead to significant psychological changes, which also tend to affect the worker's personal life.

The theoretical lens of work psychodynamics allows, in this study, to identify the stressors of the internal organization of work in public universities that result in the psychological problems expressed by the interviewees. As mentioned above, the political and economic resolutions of the macrosocial environment are decided at the government level. However, they directly affect the daily lives of professors,

as they lead to work overload due to a lack of hiring, investment in infrastructure, among other measures that will be described below.

PROFESSORS AND PSYQUIC SUFFERING

The teaching profession is one of the professional categories most exposed to conflicting and highly demanding work environments. Some stressors are directly linked to the profession, while others are derived from the context in which the work of these professionals is carried out (ALVES; NETO, 2019). When engaging with professors in higher education institutions, it is essential to consider several key factors. These include the quality of relationships with managers, colleagues, and students, the availability of necessary resources for effective teaching, the desire to change professions, and overall health perceptions. According to Baptista et al. (2019), these factors are particularly prevalent in public institutions, and their impact can lead to psychic suffering, such as Burnout Syndrome.

Additionally, Baptista et al. (2019) note that professors in public higher education institutions often face uncertainties and insecurities related to their profession, individualism, and heavy workloads. They also identify specific factors affecting private higher education institutions (HEIs), such as the diversity and heterogeneity of these institutions, as well as the flexibility required to navigate different areas of education more easily.

According to Lima and Lima-Filho (2009), in public universities the precarious working conditions of professors are more present due to the laws of the market expressed in the dominant orientation in educational policy, which imposes constraints on public universities that range from competition mechanisms used to adapt them to the logic of the market, to the pure and simple threat of privatization.

The neoliberal ideology advocates for the privatization of sectors traditionally associated with social rights—rights that have been arduously secured through decades of labor struggles—began to take shape in the central capitalist countries during the 1970s. In Brazil, this trend towards privatization significantly intensified throughout the 1990s, predominantly under the auspices of multilateral international financial institutions aligned with the interests of central capitalist states. This paradigm shift has fundamentally redefined public universities, transforming them from conventional social institutions into “neo-professional, heteronomous, operational,

and competitive organizations” (MANCEBO, MAUÉS & CHAVES, 2006, p. 43). The ramifications of this model have included, among other factors, a systematic rationalization of resources, which involves the delegation of public responsibilities to private entities that are expected to either “replace or supplement the governmental role in higher education. Furthermore, this new framework has precipitated the implementation of management evaluations aimed at exerting control over the education system, alongside curricular reforms and significant modifications to the nature of teaching work” (MANCEBO, MAUÉS & CHAVES, 2006, P. 44).

Oliveira, Pereira and Lima (2017) note that in the logic of public institutions there are some specific points. The first is that teaching, reflexivity and critical thinking have always been distinctive marks of the knowledge produced and disseminated in these institutions. However, they gave way to reproduction, expressed by the enormous quantity of articles that effectively add little new to their areas of knowledge, becoming merely a bargaining chip for publication points. According to the authors, some professors end up withdrawing from teaching, internship and extension activities, as well as from students, to focus on the “nobler” tasks of preparing texts for conferences and publications. In this scenario, there is a clear increase in work overload for professors, and it becomes common to work beyond the 40 hours per week stipulated in the contract, with the workday being extended to weekends, taking up leisure and rest hours.

This whole context makes Brazil one of the countries with high rates of health problems, discouragement and dissatisfaction among professionals in higher education, especially in public institutions (COSTA; JÚNIOR; TORRES, 2017). These health problems, especially those related to psychic suffering, are analyzed below. First, it is necessary to clarify the methodological approach and research strategies adopted in the research that supported this article.

Todo esse contexto faz com que o Brasil se torne um dos países que possuem altos índices de problemas de saúde, desânimo e insatisfação entre os profissionais na docência superior, em especial em instituições públicas (COSTA; JÚNIOR; TORRES, 2017). Esses problemas de saúde, sobretudo aqueles relativos ao sofrimento psíquico, são analisados a seguir. Antes, cabem esclarecimentos sobre a abordagem metodológica e as estratégias de investigação adotadas na pesquisa que embasou esse artigo.

Methodological approach and research strategies

The research underlying this article employed a qualitative methodological framework, which is particularly suited for exploring the subjective meanings of individuals' experiences and the contextual factors that shape these experiences from their perspectives (LAKATOS; MARCONI, 2002; HAGUETTE, 2013; FLICK, 2018).

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews (HAGUETTE, 2013), utilizing a comprehensive approach (KAUFMANN, 2013). A total of 17 interviews were carried out between June and September 2023 with undergraduate and graduate faculty members from various disciplines at a Brazilian federal public university located in the central-western region of the country. The selection of this institution was based on convenience, as one of the authors had readily accessible connections with the professors, allowing for a more open discussion of this sensitive topic.

All interviews followed a semi-structured script and totaled 655 minutes of recording. The average interview time was approximately 40 minutes. It is worth noting that the research followed all the ethical principles required by academic rules, which aim to protect the research participant in Social Sciences and Humanities so that the investigation does not cause them any risk or harm, according to Guerriero and Minayo (2019). Before conducting the interviews, there was prior contact with the professors by telephone, in which they were informed of the research topic and the study approach, in general terms. During this contact, authorization to record the conversations was requested and obtained. Regarding the data management plan, the recordings were partially transcribed by the interviewer herself and saved in a Google Docs folder for the exclusive use of the authors of this article. In the recording of the interviews, fictitious names were assigned to the professors, in order to preserve the identification of the study participants. For this reason, it is impossible to know at any time who the interviewees were and in which public higher education course or institution they work, even after accessing the raw data from the investigation.

The selection of interviewees followed the "snowball" technique. This method involved conducting initial interviews with individuals from the interviewer's network, and then asking those interviewees to suggest other potential participants who fit the desired profile and are willing to take part in the research.

It is important to add that, in previous conversations with the interviewees and also after the interviews were recorded, it was possible to extract some information and perceptions through direct observation of their workplace. This observation was considered relevant to the study, as it contributed to the interpretation of the meanings of the experiences lived by the interviewed subjects (HAGUETTE, 2013), as well as to the analysis of the meanings that psychic suffering has for them to adopt certain attitudes that they believe to be the most appropriate for the moment. The important aspects of what was said on these occasions were later noted and included among the data constructed in the research.

This study adopted the epistemological stance of clinical sociology and work psychodynamics, recognizing as legitimate and true the reality as seen and told by the subjects' narratives, reconstructed through the interviews (BENDASSOLLI; SOBOLL, 2011). However, it did not use the clinical intervention recommended by the two approaches, given their complexities and the demands of training and specific preparation for such.

The decision to conduct this study based solely on theoretical analysis to understand the subjects' experiences was considered legitimate by one of the leading researchers in the field of work psychodynamics in Brazil, Ana Magnólia Bezerra Mendes (MENDES, 2007). According to the author, even in the absence of direct intervention, studies that document and analyze work-related mental illness are valuable contributions to the field of work psychodynamics. In 2007, Ana Magnólia Mendes founded the Laboratory of Work Psychodynamics and Clinical Practice at the University of Brasília (UnB), serving as its coordinator for ten years. She remains actively engaged in research and intervention activities related to this field, both nationally and internationally.

In this context, we argue that through in-depth interviews and direct observation, the study was able to offer meaningful insights into the psychic suffering experienced in academic work and the strategies employed by individuals to cope with it. Utilizing the life narrative method (BERTAUX, 2010; 2014)—a listening technique widely applied in clinical sociology—it was possible to gain a deeper understanding of key episodes in the participants' lived experiences. These narratives are presented in the following section.

Presentation and analysis of data

At the end of the 17 interviews, it was noted that some themes had become recurrent in the narratives of the interviewees. The analysis of the data in conjunction with the bibliographic research allowed us to understand that most of the complaints of the professors are due to the organization and working conditions that have gradually undergone reformulations and precariousness of various kinds. The relationship of the professors with their peers, with students and with the hierarchies and regulations, in this organization of work, as we will see in the statements of the interviewees recorded below, brings about a psychological imbalance that has led to mental and psychosomatic illnesses, as reported by them. Based on the psychodynamics of work, we can infer that the interviewees for this study constantly go through psychological decompensations, unable to transform their psychic suffering in the development of their activities into creative suffering. As Fleury and Macêdo (2013, p. 160) point out, “the prescribed organization of work, composed of rules and norms linked to the logic of productivity, tends to be disconnected from the needs and desires of people and from the real activities of work”, thus leading to the psychological imbalance that triggers illnesses.

The constant precariousness of the work of federal professors is a result of the dismantling of public federal higher education, especially since the 1990s. Fleury and Macêdo (2013, p. 152) analyze that the economic crisis of capitalist countries in this historical period led to the “blaming of the State (...), [which was] accused of being inefficient and [of being] marked by privilege”, and thus should be reduced to a minimal State to leave free space for the private sector to act, including in basic areas such as education and health, which are the object of social struggles for their transformation into rights. According to Fleury and Macêdo (2013, p. 153), “universities in Brazil (...), especially public and federal ones, are experiencing the transformations arising from this new logic [neoliberal, free market] and are trying to adapt to it”. In this sense, the authors explain that a series of legal devices were created to expand the scope for private higher education institutions to operate and, at the same time, reduce the resources allocated to federal universities. Step by step, changes were made that altered the “role of the State in higher education, assuming control and evaluation of HEIs and disassociating itself from its role as a maintainer” (FLEURY; MACÊDO, 2013, p. 154).

Internally, federal public universities were incorporating the productivist and mercantilist logic of management of private institutions, adopting productivity indicators. Simultaneously, federal budget cuts to higher education have intensified competition for resources among federal universities, contributing to the widespread deterioration of the system. This decline is evident in reduced investments in infrastructure, limitations on the expansion of academic and administrative staff, and stagnation or reduction in workers' compensation, including that of faculty members. This broader macroeconomic and political context exerts a direct influence on the daily professional lives of university professors, as explored in this article. From the perspective of clinical sociology, it is understood that workers are deeply affected by their social and economic environments, which may contribute to a loss of motivation and profound dissatisfaction with their work. In such conditions, individuals may cease to recognize themselves as fully engaged professionals, experiencing a rupture in their identification with their occupational role.

In this sense, there is a rupture between their identity and the social identity to which, until recently, they belonged. In this study, four categories were identified that express the presence of psychic suffering at work according to the experiences of the professors interviewed. They are a) Workplace and its precariousness; b) Interpersonal relationships and the social environment of the university; c) Political, economic and social context; and d) Academic productivism and its effects. In the statements of the interviewees, in all categories, we can confirm the personal dynamics of anguish and demotivation related to conditions belonging to the organization of work.

CATEGORIES THAT EMERGED FROM THE FIELDWORK

Workplace and its precariousness

This category highlighted the workplace and its precariousness as a structural issue, highlighting the lack of financial support from the State as one of the major problems currently facing federal public universities. Facts such as the dismantling of educational institutions by the government were highlighted, thus making the work of both professors and administration difficult and even damaging the environment for students.

It is important to note that during the interviews that were conducted in person on campus, it was possible to observe that much of the university furniture was da-

maged and not properly maintained. This was also evident in the building structure. It was also found that some professors shared their rooms with up to 3 colleagues, thus making it impossible to meet students when they were all together at the university.

The precariousness of the structure was observed through speech such as: “There is a lack of human resources for research work, and even laboratory, because the existing laboratories are small and there are no hired technicians”. Or even in the following excerpt from an interview transcribed below:

“Today, federal universities are not providing an adequate physical structure, either for professors or students. For example: my course is held in a building that does not have a space, a bench, a place, a room, for these students to stay during class breaks”.

Several professors have reported that the recent pandemic, caused by the coronavirus, has had some benefits. They believe that working from home provides them with a better environment than the university setting for completing their tasks online.

The reports corroborate the studies by Lima and Lima-Filho (2009), which indicate that not only physiological and biochemical changes affect these professionals. The lack of infrastructure also affects them in several ways: insufficient staff, work overload, lack of materials, equipment, administrative support and an inadequate environment. The precariousness related to the lack of materials and even in relation to professors’ salaries is evident in the following statements:

“A few days ago, I needed materials such as cardboard, rulers and paintbrushes to prepare and conduct a class with students participation dynamics [...]. In sum: I had to buy them with my own money, because I wanted to do something different in the class, using active methodology, so I bought them”.

“Regarding the economy, we professors have had our salaries frozen since 2012. [...] So it’s like that, I had a car, and I don’t have it anymore, I can’t afford to keep it. It’s all a question of a deterioration in the standard of living that the salary can’t keep up with”.

The assertions regarding the deficiency of financial resources and personnel align with the analyses presented by Serva et al. (2016). The authors underscore that the institutionalization and professionalization of science yield significant socio-economic ramifications. A critical need for financial resources to support research initiatives is evident; in their absence, many challenges arise that impede the professional efficacy of academic researchers. Consequently, this situation engenders a cohort

of disheartened and demoralized educators, as illustrated by an excerpt from an interview with a faculty member: “Often all of this [inadequate working conditions, lack of resources for research, etc.] results in exhaustion, frustration, and indignation...”. A thorough examination of the testimonies provided by the interviewees reveals that ergonomic factors are not the sole contributors to the onset of illness among professors. Particularly, the lack of essential resources for fulfilling their professional responsibilities has dire implications, affecting both their physical well-being and mental health. Numerous respondents articulated experiences of significant exhaustion, encompassing both physical and psychological dimensions, as a direct consequence of enduring the deteriorating conditions of their work environment.

In summary, based on the experience of the professors at the university studied in this research, it was possible to confirm that the precarious work environment at the institution severely impacts the exercise of the profession, since they do not have the minimum necessary to carry out their activities. In addition to them, as indicated in the testimonies, the students suffer from a decline in the quality of the classes to which they would be entitled.

Interpersonal relationships and the social environment of the university

In this category, it was possible to perceive that personal and relational issues between professors are an extremely sensitive topic, being present in all interviews, regardless of the course and campus to which the professor belongs.

An important point that this work brought as a contribution refers to how academic vanity is present among professors, as evidenced in the following statement: Within the university we have a show of vanity”. Or in the excerpt from an interview transcribed below:

“I have observed, at times, professors thinking they are better than others because they have a funded research project, or even because they have more postgraduate degrees than the others. I also see a competition for a greater number of articles, or for being better known at IFES and in the academic world”.

There is also segregation by groups. The interviewees indicated the existence of 3 distinct groups of professors within the university. The first group is made up of professionals who consider themselves to have a good relationship, and who ex-

change experiences and recognition among themselves. The second group is made up of professors who are indifferent, often referred to as “neither smell nor stink” or “professor-less”, that is, those who only give their classes and leave, rarely participating in assemblies. Finally, the third group is made up of the “friends of the king”. This division into groups causes professors to become stressed more frequently, since often their own course colleagues do not have even minimal interaction and are unable to work as a collective, thinking only of themselves. This causes certain professors to experience rejection, lack of recognition, frustration, as can be seen in the following excerpts from the narratives:

“Because of the competition, I always wonder if it’s worth doing everything I do here. [...] Sometimes I think it’s not worth it and that I haven’t done enough. [...] I get zero recognition...”.

“Unfortunately, the work environment is not as healthy and friendly as many people imagine”.

“To me, this is very strange [...]. Oh, what a bad bunch of people! We almost throw stones at each other, it’s crazy!”

These statements confirm the excessive individualism of the profession, which causes professors to feel uncertain and insecure. This corroborates the findings of the studies by Baptista et al. (2019), Mahnic and Oliveira (2022) and Pena and Romo-aldo (2019). In addition, the reports show the lack of recognition among peers, or that this recognition comes only from those who are considered “part of the group”, which causes great discomfort among professors. This lack of recognition among coworkers has already been pointed out by several authors as something that results in psychic suffering at work for the individual (GERNET; DEJOURS, 2009; SELLIGMAN-SILVA, 2011; AREOSA, 2021). This is because the role of recognition is extremely important, since it can transform suffering into pleasure (DEJOURS, 2010).

The findings of this study can be linked to the arguments made by Oliveira, Pereira, and Lima (2017). The authors emphasize that the concerns of professors in public institutions about the pressure for academic production promote an individualistic mindset, particularly regarding the quantity and quality of publications. Additionally, the research by Baptista et al. (2019) confirms that the quality of relationships with supervisors, colleagues, and students is one of the factors that can lead to psychic suffering among professors.

Political, economic and social context

The research that underpinned this article also considered the national context surrounding the work of professors. As Seligmann-Silva (2011) points out, the conjunctural and structural nature of the environment, the social, economic and political dynamics influence and can determine processes of human exhaustion among workers, directly or indirectly.

This thematic category emerged as a particular recurrent across the interviews. The participating professors consistently emphasized its relevance, especially in relation to the broader political context of the country. They frequently referred to funding cuts affecting scholarships, research support, and the progressive dismantling of public universities—issues also addressed in another thematic category. When discussing these contextual factors, the interviewees reported experiencing heightened psychic suffering, manifested in symptoms such as anxiety, depression, fear, and panic. These experiences are evidenced in the selected excerpts presented below:

“I felt panicked about losing my job. It was incredible, even though I knew I was a civil servant and had a permanent job...”

“With the 2016 coup and Bolsonaro, I stayed at the university as if I was surviving on life support. It was so sad...”

Here we clearly see the uncertainties and insecurity that the profession provided during the period mentioned by the interviewees, causing suffering to these professionals even though they were in a public institution that supposedly gave them stability. This reinforces the findings of the study by Baptista et al. (2019).

One interviewee even reported that he had to ask for a four-month leave of absence, with paid leave, to be able to deal a little better with everything that was happening in the country. He emphasized that he felt very hopeless and that he never imagined that a government (citing the expresident Bolsonaro government) could leave him like this, “in a general depression”, because he had no prospect of a secure future, a horizon that could alleviate at least a little of the feeling of despair. He became emotional when he recognized that he had reached the point of feeling both physical and psychological discomfort. It was also possible to note that the professors’ suffering came not only from the political context that directly affected

them. They felt equally impacted by what this context caused to the students, as is evident in the excerpt from the narrative highlighted below:

“Another fact was the pandemic, which also affected social, economic, health, and many other aspects, right? These were very difficult times! So this whole climate ended up affecting everyone’s mood, not only the professors, but the students as well. [...] I think that since we came back from the pandemic, the students have been more apathetic, there is this whole social context, right? There is also Fake News, the biggest challenges in the job market, so the country’s sociopolitical and economic context certainly influences our work a lot”.

As seen in the literature review, it is possible to see in the reports that the socioeconomic factors surrounding the organization of work affect workers, as stated by Costa, Júnior, Torres (2017). It is also clear how the sociocultural environment permeates the organization of work, determining the dignity and mental health of the worker. Thus, the socio-historical reality should not be ignored when trying to understand and act on stressors at work, as highlighted by Selligman-Silva (2011) and Baptista, et al. (2019).

However, it was also possible to find in the data, regarding the sociopolitical context, a perspective of hope that the professors interviewed said they nurtured the political changes that could result from the results of the 2023 election. According to many of them, even with all the terror they experienced in previous years, they still had the expectation of better times with a fuel that motivated them to continue working.

Academic Productivism and its Effects

According to the findings of the research that underpins this article, there are three forms of productivism in Brazilian federal public universities, related to teaching, research and extension. Regarding teaching, the professors addressed issues such as the accumulation of subjects and the workload, which exceeds 40 hours per week. One of the interviewees reported the following:

“People have the idea that public servants are crooks, they don’t work, they sit around doing nothing, because they don’t clock in. But those who are responsible, who ethically assume their responsibilities... this time off that people think is not like that! There are people who assume a workday, I won’t say it’s cruel, but it’s tough. Yesterday I was at the university from 2pm to 10pm!”.

In this statement, we can perceive the dissonance experienced by the interviewee, who does not recognize herself in the social identity created by the narrative that public entities are privileged, as shown by Fleury and Macêdo (2013). The professor experiences the exercise of her profession in a completely different way. She believes that she receives insufficient remuneration, is subject to a severe workload, and faces other conditions that characterize a very precarious work organization.

Regarding productivity in research, the professors reported that they do not feel direct pressure from the university, but rather that this pressure is greater on the part of each one. The interviewees indicated that they feel greater pressure regarding research when they are close to the period of functional progression. The suffering in this case comes from the difficulty of the professor reconciling the activity of research and publication, with the overload of tasks related to teaching and administrative functions.

According to some of them, this is not always evident to the professor himself. Or maybe they don't see any other way to meet the demands that are piling up. One of the interviewees stated the following: "If I don't do it, no one will do it for me. So, I have to make it happen and do everything to the deadlines". Thus, it is clear how powerless they feel when faced with the pressure to produce products they face at work.

As for extension, the professors stated that they enjoy it more. According to them, through extension they interact with the community and with students, in addition to giving back their knowledge to society. One interviewee said: "The time spent teaching, and extension is rewarding because we have contact with the student, we have contact with society". "My priority has always been the classroom and extension", acknowledged another. We can infer that this interviewee sees the extension activity as compensation for psychic suffering at work, showing that this suffering is what is called creative, that is, it is the type of suffering that is psychologically transformed into pleasure (FLEURY; MACÊDO, 2013).

What causes psychic suffering at work and how to deal with it

The results of the research show that professors experience psychic suffering at work, mainly due to the precariousness of the workplace and the lack of

financial, material and human resources for the professional and technical development of their activities. Distress can also result from interpersonal relationships marked by ego disputes and belonging or not to groups favored by proximity to the university's upper hierarchy. The findings also indicated that the socioeconomic and political context, which translates into the lack of recognition of teaching work and public policies that value higher education, are causes of psychic suffering. This is the answer to the first research question proposed for the study, namely: What situations trigger psychic suffering at work among professors at Brazilian federal public universities?

The second research question concerns how these professors experience these situations and what actions they take to deal with them. The following considerations are made to answer it.

The consequences that experiences of psychic suffering at work cause in professors can be considered mild, moderate and severe. Those considered mild are neglected by professors and present themselves as stress, anxiety, physical pain (back pain, eye discomfort, etc.). They seek ways to decompress through activities that give them pleasure, such as doing physical activities, spending time with friends and family, organizing trips or outings to places far from the university, watching movies, or even participating in union mobilizations.

Those considered moderate relate to health problems such as irritable bowel syndrome, anxiety and physical and mental exhaustion. They go beyond the work environment, affecting their lives. Professors respond to these problems by trying to reduce the pressure on themselves regarding goals and performance in activities, or by seeking treatment from health professionals such as doctors and psychologists to deal with issues of anxiety, depression, etc.

Severe consequences refer to situations in which professors find it more difficult to deal with work-related mental health disorders. In these cases, they request leave for a certain period to undergo treatment. However, it is worth mentioning the case of an interviewee who was diagnosed with Burnout Syndrome. The only way this teacher found to resolve the psychic suffering at work that affected him was to request dismissal from his public position.

Final considerations

Further investigations are also recommended to explore the differences in psychic suffering experienced by professors in technological fields compared to those in the humanities and social sciences. Preliminary findings suggest that professors in technical disciplines are more adversely affected by inadequate laboratory infrastructure, whereas those in the humanities and social sciences more acutely feel the impact of societal and political narratives that devalue public service sector employees, particularly federal university professors.

Moreover, additional research is encouraged to examine the interplay between psychic suffering and variables such as age, years of service, and pedagogical experience within the institution. Comparative studies incorporating gender perspectives would further enrich this field of inquiry. Finally, quantitative research that utilizes the empirical categories identified in this study could prove invaluable in measuring the relative impacts of various factors on the psychic suffering of professors at public universities. Such studies might also facilitate comparisons between experiences of faculty at public universities and those at private higher education institutions, or among faculty engaged in undergraduate versus postgraduate education.

Despite its limitations, this article makes a significant contribution to a relatively underexplored research area within the field of Administration in Brazil. It provides empirical evidence and analytical insights that can inform academic discourse and guide the implementation of enhancements, whether through improved university management practices, collective action among faculty at public universities, or public policy initiatives aimed at alleviating or even eliminating psychic suffering in academic settings.

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