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Psychosocial risks, work organization, and harassment: a critical analysis of contemporary working conditions.

Riscos psicossociais, organização do trabalho e assédio: uma análise crítica das condições laborais contemporâneas

Riesgos psicosociales, organización del trabajo y acoso: un análisis crítico de las condiciones laborales contemporáneas

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Abstract:
This article analyzes psychosocial risks in the context of contemporary work, linking them to current forms of labor organization, the dynamics of violence and harassment, and the degradation of work collectives. From a critical theoretical perspective, the study examines how neoliberal rationality produces working conditions that naturalize violent and debilitating practices, transforming the management model itself into an instrument of exploitation. The concept of the work environment, the main classifications of psychosocial risks—according to the ILO, ISTAS, and INSS—as well as the phenomena of work intensification, exhaustion, harassment as a management practice, and the fragmentation of work collectives are discussed. It concludes that understanding psychosocial risks requires shifting the focus from the individual to the organizational and social structures that produce them, with the recognition and reconstruction of work collectives being central elements for protecting workers' health.

Keywords:
Psychosocial risks; work organization; workplace harassment; worker health; work collectives.

Resumo:
O presente artigo analisa os riscos psicossociais no contexto do trabalho contemporâneo, articulando-os às formas atuais de organização laboral, às dinâmicas de violência e assédio e à degradação dos coletivos de trabalho. A partir de uma perspectiva teórica crítica, o estudo examina como a racionalidade neoliberal produz condições laborais que naturalizam práticas violentas e adoecedoras, transformando o próprio modelo de gestão em instrumento de exploração. São discutidos o conceito de meio ambiente de trabalho, as principais classificações dos riscos psicossociais — segundo a OIT, o ISTAS e o INSS —, bem como os fenômenos da intensificação do trabalho, da exaustão, do assédio como prática de gestão e da fragmentação dos coletivos laborais. Conclui-se que a compreensão dos riscos psicossociais exige o deslocamento do olhar do indivíduo para as estruturas organizacionais e sociais que os produzem, sendo o reconhecimento e a reconstrução dos coletivos de trabalho elementos centrais para a proteção da saúde dos trabalhadores.

Palavras-chave:
riscos psicossociais; organização do trabalho; assédio moral; saúde do trabalhador; coletivos de trabalho.

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Resumen:
Este artículo analiza los riesgos psicosociales en el contexto del trabajo contemporáneo, articulándolos con las formas actuales de organización laboral, las dinámicas de violencia y acoso y la degradación de los colectivos de trabajo. Desde una perspectiva teórica crítica, el estudio examina cómo la racionalidad neoliberal produce condiciones laborales que naturalizan prácticas violentas y generadoras de enfermedad, transformando el propio modelo de gestión en un instrumento de explotación. Se analizan el concepto de entorno laboral, las principales clasificaciones de los riesgos psicosociales —según la OIT, el ISTAS y el INSS—, así como los fenómenos de intensificación del trabajo, agotamiento, acoso como práctica de gestión y fragmentación de los colectivos laborales. Se concluye que la comprensión de los riesgos psicosociales exige desplazar el enfoque analítico del individuo hacia las estructuras organizacionales y sociales que los producen, siendo el reconocimiento y la reconstrucción de los colectivos de trabajo elementos centrales para la protección de la salud de los trabajadores.

Palabras clave:
riesgos psicosociales; organización del trabajo; acoso moral; salud del trabajador; colectivos de trabajo.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding violence and harassment in the workplace, beyond an individualistic perspective, requires broadening the view to include the conditions that structure and sustain such phenomena. Contemporary work dynamics, permeated by neoliberal rationality, produce specific forms of organization, management, and subjectivation that favor the naturalization of violent practices. In this context, workplace harassment does not appear as an isolated or deviant event, but as an expression of a broader set of relationships and conditions that directly impact the lives and health of workers.

It is therefore necessary to understand the elements that shape the work environment as potentially harmful, shifting the analysis from individual behaviors to the organizational and social processes that produce them. In this sense, the concept of psychosocial risks emerges as a fundamental analytical tool, enabling the articulation between work organization, social context, and subjective experiences.

The content and context of work are quite heterogeneous. Constant changes in the form and content of work expose workers to new risks (Oliveira & Guimarães, 2022).

With the advancement of production methods—through Taylorism, Fordism, and Toyotism—production methods have taken on different formats, and technologies for extracting wealth have been perfected (Duarte, 2019). Han (2015), in discussing the performance society, points out that the subject itself becomes a commodity and, therefore, also disposable. Thus, even with the changes in work models, violence persists in increasingly

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elaborate forms, refining itself in practices and discourses and affecting not only the body but also the mind of workers.

This article aims to critically analyze the concept of psychosocial risks, their main characteristics and classifications, as well as their implications for workers' health, seeking to understand how these risks are constituted in the contemporary work context and how they are articulated with the production and maintenance of dynamics of violence and harassment in organizations. To this end, it starts from a critical theoretical perspective, based on a literature review of key authors in the fields of occupational health, sociology of work, and critical organizational psychology.

The work environment

Workers and their work environment function in symbiosis. In contexts marked by the naturalization of certain working conditions, it is common to disregard the fact that the work environment is built by people and for people, and is not a space detached from social life. The work environment is understood as everything that surrounds an organism—whether in its physical, social, or psychological aspects—guaranteeing sufficient conditions not only for the organism to remain alive, but also for it to develop its capabilities (Padilha, 2011).

For a long time, the notion of the work environment remained centered on physical and environmental aspects, disregarding psychological and behavioral aspects and their dynamic relationships. This conception can be observed in the definition of Morais (2002), who conceptualizes the work environment as the place where the worker performs the service that is the object of the legal-labor relationship, restricting the concept to the set of physical space and conditions of the workplace.

The ILO (1988) recognizes the work environment as an integral part of the general environment. This perspective is evident when observing that a worker who is ill at work is also a worker who is ill at home, in the community, and in the family, and that the quality of life at work is reflected in the quality of life of the worker as a whole (Almeida, 2013). Thus, without the notion of interdependence, it is not possible to conceive of the work context as a space for the exercise of a fundamental right.

Almeida (2013) proposes conceptualizing the work environment based on two sets of factors: personal factors—which encompass psychological, behavioral, and biogenetic aspects—and environmental factors—which include geographical, sociocultural, and architectural-technological factors. The author also suggests incorporating organizational

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aspects, such as routines, procedures, collective norms, hierarchies, work schedules, evaluations, and organizational policy as a whole, since it is precisely these factors that express the manifestation of psychosocial risks, promoting harm to the worker's health.

RISK: A PSYCHOSOCIAL DIMENSION

From a psychosocial perspective, risk constitutes all social interaction between individuals, between an individual and a group, and between the individual and themselves (Baruki, 2015). Risk is defined as the concept that emerges from the understanding that the future can be controlled, and a "risk factor" is the characteristic or circumstance associated with an increased probability of an event occurring. Psychosocial risks relate to the possibility of harm arising from these interactions, requiring the recognition of the circumstances present in the environment that determine a psychosocial interaction as a risk (Rodrigues et al., 2020).

The concept of risk society, formulated by Beck (1992), is relevant here. The incorporation of the notion of risk is a result of various technological, social, and economic changes and their alterations in social organization. The emergence of probabilistic thinking favors the conception of risks as manageable (Luiz & Cohn, 2010). Thus, risk defines modern society (Beck, 1992), aligning itself with modernization and its uncertain and threatening force, which demonstrates the limits of the current social model.

Psychosocial risk arises when the nature of the interaction with the environment is negative, highlighting its relational aspect. It is necessary to separate the idea of risk from its effects: risk is established in imminence, that is, in the possibility of harm occurring, while the effects are configured when this harm has already occurred. For Areosa (2011), risk constitutes the antechamber for the occurrence of illnesses or accidents.

The concept of emerging risks refers to the idea of any occupational risk that is new and growing (AESST, 2007). The effects of the world of work—with its flexibilization, withdrawal of rights, and disregard for workers' well-being—constitute an old theme, but one whose perception changes over time, confirming that what is considered a risk can be redefined based on changes in public perception (Neto et al., 2014). Risks undergo a process of social construction, with their definition being transformed, expanded, or minimized according to the interests of social actors. In the words of Beck et al. (2000):

> The risk society is not an option that can be accepted or rejected in the course of political disputes. It arises in the continuity of autonomous modernization processes, which are blind and deaf to their own effects and threats. (p. 5)

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Psychosocial Risks: Conceptual Framework and Main Risk Factors

The definition of the concept of psychosocial risks is not consensual and encompasses different meanings, still configuring itself as an approach under construction. Some authors argue that psychosocial risks are related to the organization of contemporary work; others defend their inclusion in emerging risks; and there are still those who focus on the experience of workers, with an emphasis on the individual aspects of subjectivities in the worker-work context relationship (Areosa, 2023).

According to Duarte (2019), psychosocial risks are working conditions—mainly within the organizational context—that can affect workers' health. For the ILO (1986), they are the factors that influence health, performance, and job satisfaction, interacting with the work environment, the content, nature, and working conditions, and their relationship with the worker's capabilities, needs, culture, and living conditions outside of work. According to Guimarães and Oliveira (2022), Psychosocial Factors at Work (PFW) are the set of perceptions and experiences of the worker resulting from the interaction between the individual, living conditions, and working conditions—which bring risk or protection to health—and which impact the worker's performance, satisfaction, and health.

ILO Classification

In 1984, Swedish epidemiologist Lennart Levi grouped psychosocial risks into six factors: (i) quantitative overload, referring to the high volume of work and the pressure to do more in less time; (ii) insufficient qualitative load, characterized by limited and monotonous work content; (iii) lack of control over work, with a lack of voice on the part of workers and rigid hierarchies; (iv) lack of social support, characterized by the deficiency of solidarity networks and the breakdown of collectives; (v) role and function conflict, expressed in the difficulty of reconciling the multiple roles of life — such as motherhood, which often forces the working woman to choose between being a mother and being a professional; and (vi) physical stressors, including factors that affect the worker physically and chemically.

ISTAS Classification

The Trade Union Institute for Labor, Environment and Health (ISTAS) identified four major dimensions of psychosocial risk factors: (i) excessive psychological demands at work, with work being carried out at a faster pace and the worker's subjectivity being rendered invisible; (ii) lack of influence and autonomy, expressed in the absence of autonomy to perform the work, to make decisions and even to take breaks; (iii) lack of social support and low quality of leadership, characterized by the absence of support to define and perform tasks; and (iv) low compensation for work, reflected in contractual insecurity, unfair treatment and lack of recognition for the work performed.

Psychosocial Risks according to the INSS (Brazilian National Social Security Institute)

Normative Instruction No. 28, of December 5, 2023 (Brazil, 2023), addresses repetitive strain injuries (RSI) and work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WRMD), linking the increase in the number of illnesses to market demands, the pace of production, and the overloads already described in previous classifications. The high prevalence of RSI/WRMD is associated with transformations in the world of work, where companies tend to prioritize adapting workers to market changes instead of adapting work organization to a less unhealthy work environment.

According to the INSS (Brazil, 2003), psychosocial risks are the subjective perceptions that workers have of work organization factors—a concept that does not corroborate the perspective adopted in this study, which understands psychosocial risks as phenomena of a relational and structural nature, not restricted to individual perception, but produced and sustained by broader organizational and social conditions.

From work intensification to exhaustion.

Work intensification refers to the high-productivity regime in which workers are immersed, with increased working hours and impacts on their lives. Since the 19th century, with technological advancements, a reduction in working hours was expected. On the contrary, there has been an increase in excessive work—defined here as the extension of the workday beyond the 8 hours per day and 48 hours per week recommended by the ILO—as well as an increase in work intensity, productivity, and flexibility (Costa et al., 2014).

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According to Antunes (2014), the individual comes to occupy an appendage-like position, without control over their own time as the subject of their life, subjected to grueling workdays and immersed in the discourse of productivity. The Fordist conception of the workday—in which 8 hours are divided for work, 8 hours for rest, and 8 hours for leisure—gives way to a flexibility in which work time and free time become at the service of capital consumption (Antunes, 2009).

Exhaustion is established as a consequence of overwork, understood in the articulation between intensity and extensiveness. Dejours (1992) states that emotional imbalances, fear, anxiety, and depression are related to increased cognitive and emotional demands and their impact on health. Marinho and Vieira (2019) affirm that the exhausting workday operates as a mechanism that, combined with the loss of value of work and the direct appropriation of labor power, integrates a more structural logic of capitalism: the super-exploitation of labor.

Lee et al. (2009) identify three types of excessive working hours: those exceeding the law, those exceeding workers' desires, and those with detrimental effects on health and safety. Dal Rosso (2008) points out that, since work has been socially organized, its intensity has been governed by organizational standards, geared towards profit and the extraction of maximum limits from workers. High demand is naturalized and incorporated as an individual reality—and not as an expression of capital in its renewed pursuit of profitability.

The different forms of harassment as management practices.

Harassment is not merely an organizational deviation: it is a process that accompanies current forms of work management, based on the values of excellence, individualism, demands, and control. From this perspective, Gaulejac (2007) situates workplace harassment as a degradation of working conditions that affects the dignity of workers and causes harm to their health, with these practices being legalized as management strategies.

Harassment, even when directed at a single person, acts as a ripple effect: it uses its power to control the collective, transmitting the message of management through fear. Fear disrupts collective processes, promotes the silence necessary for harassing behaviors to be

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possible, and establishes individualism as a form of defense—reinforcing it as an indispensable instrument for organizational policies to be effective (Horst & Soboll, 2013).

Harassment as a management practice and policy manifests itself through stress, injury, and fear. Productivity rankings, target policies with their public exposure, and the manufactured insecurity for the psychological manipulation of workers turn work itself into a violent instrument, insofar as it incorporates market needs and aligns them with organizational needs, treating the effects on workers' lives as mere collateral damage.

The pursuit of excellence fuels endless competition. For Gaulejac (2007), this dynamic culminates in the standardization of subjectivities and the increase in overload pathologies—such as repetitive strain injuries (RSI) and burnout syndrome—loneliness, and violence, in an instrumental use of oneself and others (Soboll & Horst, 2012). In this context, harassment emerges as a social pathology related to work, increasingly used as a management strategy—a practice aligned with and legitimized by the political and social strategies of relationships not only in work but also in life.

DEGRADATION OF WORK COLLECTIVES

From the 1980s onwards, neoliberal ideology established new forms of work and production organization, reaffirming the valuation and recognition of the individual and the business rhetoric aligned with the neoliberal discourse of individual accountability (Harvey, 2014). Neoliberalism and its ideals of freedom and dignity are anchored in the free market, reaffirming the devaluation of collectives with the strengthening of meritocracy and individual freedom over social rights.

The deepening degradation of work has promoted an intense degradation of collective life (Dejours & Bègue, 2010). Despite being carried out in teams, the work involves individual evaluations and encourages competition—workers compete and collaborate with each other with the goal of greater production, while human resource management is used as a tool for subjective mobilization. The worker feels alone in a hostile and competitive environment, marked by the management of fear: fear of unemployment, of poor performance, and of their own colleague, who represents a threat.

It is essential to distinguish between a collective and a group of workers: a collective is a joint construction, it is the possibility of exchange, of shared vision and of combining knowledge for the construction of knowledge. Collectives are formed when there is a work

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environment conducive to cohesion, with shared rules, space for collaboration and promotion of a shared vision — conditions that produce and promote greater mental health (Areosa, 2023).

Recognition is a central element in building workers who are more protected and have greater resilience to the dynamics of illness present in the workplace. Here, recognition is understood as the compensation that the worker receives in the work context—it is essential that this compensation goes beyond material remuneration, including returns that favor the construction of work as a dimension of identity, health, and well-being.

Indifference, insecurity, instability, fear, and fragmentation are not merely side effects of contemporary work: they are instruments of harassment as management, aimed at weakening collectives and isolating workers—because, separated, they are more easily controlled and influenced. For Sennett (2006), capitalist sociability is based on being in the world through provisionality, which makes the development of lasting bonds of solidarity in the work context extremely difficult.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article sought to demonstrate that psychosocial risks in contemporary work are not isolated or merely individual phenomena, but rather express structural conditions produced by the capitalist organization of labor under the neoliberal aegis. The analysis undertaken allows us to affirm that moral harassment, work intensification, exhaustion, and the degradation of labor collectives are facets of the same exploitative process, which becomes more sophisticated as capital refines its management and control mechanisms.

Understanding psychosocial risks therefore requires shifting the focus from the individual to the organizational and social structures that produce and sustain them. In this sense, any effective intervention on work-related illness must necessarily consider collective dimensions, conditions of recognition, and the reorganization of work processes, overcoming approaches that exclusively blame the worker for harm to their health.

It is concluded that the recognition and reconstruction of work collectives, coupled with the expansion of worker health protection policies and the strengthening of the regulatory framework on psychosocial risks, constitute indispensable paths to building healthier, fairer, and more democratic work environments. Future research in this field should advance the operationalization of these analytical categories, investigating how psychosocial risks manifest themselves concretely in different sectors and organizational contexts.

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