

## “Without work, I am nothing, I have no identity”: a qualitative study in a Brazilian public organization

“Sem trabalho eu não sou nada, não tenho identidade”: um estudo  
qualitativo em uma organização pública brasileira (PT: 145-167)

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**ABSTRACT**

Mental health in the workplace is a subject of great relevance and impact in the daily life of organizations. Leaders have to deal with increasingly constant demands in the work environment. The implementation of management actions to prevent psychological and behavioral disorders, as well as providing emotional support, has been increasingly required. Considering that work is essential for the formation of human identity, this article aims to analyze, based on the verbal report of fifteen leaders of a Brazilian public organization, experiences related to mental health issues in the workplace. More specifically, this article presents the importance attached by work to the professional life of these leaders. Through the analytical perspective of the psychodynamics of work, meanings attributed to work are described in this article, discussing its effects on the human psyche. Fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted with formal leaders of the Organization under study. These leaders are strategic to the Organization. Categorical content analysis was performed from the transcribed interviews. As a result, a strong affective link between the leaders and the Organization under study was identified. The management of quality of life at work was identified as essential in the organizational context. The act of working implies feeling useful and valued. The survey provides to the public administration professionals a comprehensive understanding of issues related to the human factor at work. This article proves that the Brazilian public administration needs to pay attention to the development of good practices in people management. Several relevant issues are presented and discussed, seeking for a conformity in people development practices.

**Keywords:** meaning of work, organizational behavior, mental health, quality of life at work, well-being at work, organizational culture

**RESUMO**

A saúde mental no trabalho é um tema de grande relevância e impacto no cotidiano das organizações. Lideranças têm, cada vez mais, que lidar com demandas cada vez mais constantes no ambiente laboral. A implementação de ações de prevenção de transtornos psicológicos e comportamentais, bem como de provimento de suporte emocional, vem sendo cada vez mais requerida. Considerando que o trabalho é essencial para a formação da identidade humana, este artigo tem como objetivo analisar, a partir do relato verbal de quinze lideranças de uma Organização pública brasileira, vivências relacionadas à saúde mental no trabalho. Mais especificamente, apresenta-se, aqui, a importância atribuída ao trabalho à vida profissional destas lideranças. Por meio da psicodinâmica do trabalho, descrevem-se sentidos atribuídos ao trabalho, discutindo seus impactos à psique humana. Quinze entrevistas em profundidade foram realizadas com lideranças formais da Organização em estudo. Estas lideranças são estratégicas à Organização. Realizou-se análise de conteúdo categorial considerando entrevistas transcritas. Como resultados, identificou-se forte vinculação afetiva das lideranças com a Organização em estudo. A gestão da qualidade de vida no trabalho foi apontada como essencial na Organização. O ato de trabalhar implica sentir-se útil e valorizado. A pesquisa fornece aos profissionais da administração pública uma compreensão abrangente de questões relacionadas ao fator humano no trabalho. Este artigo demonstra que a administração pública brasileira precisa estar atenta ao desenvolvimento de boas práticas de gestão de pessoas. Várias questões relevantes são apresentadas e discutidas na busca pela conformidade nas práticas de desenvolvimento de pessoas.

**Palavras-chave:** significado do trabalho, comportamento organizacional, saúde mental, qualidade de vida no trabalho, bem-estar no trabalho, cultura organizacional

## 1. Introduction

Work is an essential part in the formation of personal and social identities. Work is a part of an individual (Paiva, Bendassoli & Torres, 2015). The sense and importance awarded by individuals to the work is based on the perception of importance and utility.

The role played by emotions is essential. Understanding the work dynamics and its modes of subjectivation by individuals is one of the main aims of the research developed in the field of organizational behavior (Aryee, Walumbwa, Mondejar & Chu, 2017).

The work, according to Borges and Tamayo (2001), provides subsistence and favors individuation, creating emotional and existential meaning, as well as significantly contributing to the personality structuring. The intrinsic value awarded to work (Klein, Molloy & Brinsfield, 2012) is getting more space in the literature (Duarte & Dejours, 2019).

In the Dejours' (2004) perspective, work puts the worker's subjectivity to the test. The challenge of confronting working reality can represent both exaltation and mortification of its subjectivity. This is a transformative challenge, so that working is not only about producing, but it is about building oneself. Work, therefore, constitutes a test for subjectivity. Why and how do people behave in specific ways in their workplaces? In a healthy context, for example, it can be a set of well-being and satisfaction. In oppressive, unfair and harming environments, though, it can imply illness and death.

The boundary between the personal and professional spheres is diffused. Where does work end, and where does personal life start? Both spheres, are invariably confused, mixed and occasionally cross over.

In recent years, the link and meaning assigned to work have become much stronger and more intense (Rohm & Lopes, 2015). Ribeiro and Léda (2004) investigated the effects of "not managing to disconnect from work". This led to serious affective problems and behaviors in workers, since work is now a source of personal, and not just professional realization (Kubo, Gouvêa & Mantovani, 2013).

One of the consequences is that quality of life deteriorates drastically, when one is very attached to work. Workaholic behaviors are harmful for workers, then they tend to led it to physical and emotional exhaustion. Mental health becomes fragile, then the individual simply does not manage to see beyond their work (Ribeiro & Léda, 2004).

Thus, it is essential, according to Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski (2010), to identify the way in which individuals reassign meaning to their presence at work, as well as their psychological *modus operandi*. This research intends to describe

beliefs and perceptions of Brazilian workers (leaders in public function) on work, having psychological dimensions as its reference.

The workers that participate in this study act in a public Brazilian Organization, that possesses national comprehensiveness. They are public servants, acting as leaders. Thus, in terms of practical and theoretical contributions, this work seeks to expand existing comprehensions about the meaning of work, discussing how emotional processes influence different aspects resulting from working activity. Here, the affection is considered as the central construct, that impacts, excessively, on how individuals provide the meaning to their work.

The guiding questions of this research are as follows: what are the meanings provided, by individuals, to work? How far do these feelings achieve the limit of an acceptable boundary type and when do they cross the boundary, making work as continual source of dependency and suffering? What is the limit in which the individual, unconsciously, is trapping their subjectivity and their psyche by the excessive need of producing more and better? How harmful are engagement and compromise with work?

This article starts with theoretical premise, according to Oliveira and Silveira (2012), where the behavioral repertoires are based on affectional and mental models constructed by the individual, considering the conditions provided by organizations. Both the affectional and mental models standardize behavior that directions execution manners.

Finally, still in terms of the theoretical contribution expected from this study, it is noteworthy to mention that this article is based on the concept of "psychological function of work" proposed by Bendassoli and Godim (2014). It is intended, here, to understand this concept's operationalization in a public working reality in Brazil. Human presence in a working environment is considered as a social phenomenon (once the individual provides a meaning to their identity from their recognition of belonging to a social group) and human (work as a means of access to achieve human desires, including monetary ones). This means that some complex psychological mechanisms are involved in the identification or production of meaning at work.

As for its relevance, we seek to understand the relationship between work and mental health, in the light of the concept of function of work in psychological terms. We consider that investigating aspects related to psychic life at work can positively impact on working activity itself. Programs to promote quality of life and mental health of workers can be planned, considering the results presented in this article. The scientific discussion on limits of scope of work, especially in its role in the formation of human identity, is also an important contribution that is expected from this article.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Different variables can be associated to the meaning provided by an individual to their work (Kubo, Gouvêa & Mantovani, 2013). According to Neves, Nascimento, Felix Jr., Silva and Andrade (2018), the hegemonic research models about organizational behavior point out the importance of studying variables associated to subjective interpretations made by an individual on their work. These models include variables that generally refer to beliefs, expectations and values that workers have regarding work in general terms (Meyer & Maltin, 2010).

More alternative models to the hegemonic models have been based on other concepts that also consider the social and political dimension of organizations (Tolfo & Piccinini, 2007). These models are based on the study of variables related to the perception of organizational justice (especially as referred to as recognition of effort, according to that discussed by Bennett, Bakker & Field, 2018), styles of leadership (Liden, Wayne, Liao & Meuser, 2014) and identification with the work (Bennett, Gabriel, Calderwood, Dahling & Trougakos, 2016). The “forgotten” dimensions awarded to positive organizational behavior, as personal strength, resilience, confrontational strategies, well-being, confidence and spirituality, have been also included in the current scientific debate on the meaning of work (Walumbwa, Muchiri, Misati & Meliani, 2018).

Work can have different meanings for people’s lives (Joo & Lee, 2017). Working is one of the main and most important human activities, whether due to financial motivation or the search of personal realization (Paiva, Bendassoli & Torres, 2015).

One of the pioneering studies on the sense and meaning of work was developed by the MOW team (The Meaning of Working International Research team). In the research (MOW, 1987) developed in the early 1980s, comprising more than 15 thousand workers from 8 countries, the team of researchers identified three central dimensions: the centrality of work (work importance level peoples’ lives), work-related social norms (how fair the exchange between worker and organizations are assessed by the principle of reciprocity) and work-related results (feeling of reward and usefulness, for example). These dimensions are classic and represent the meaning provided by an individual to their work experiences. Many recent studies were based on the results of this research conducted by MOW as its classical framework.

The psychosocial nature of work is linked to affective processes triggered by human experiences in working conditions (May, Gilson & Harter, 2004). It is very important to understand the relational dynamics between individuals and their work (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Lancman, Barros, Uchida, & Sznclwar, 2019). It is important to discuss possible implications that the working organizations represent a source of psychic prison of individuals. What are the preventive actions and the

promotion of quality of life at work promoted by the managers of organizations? Are they effectively efficient? What kind of results do they achieve? How do leaders deal with workaholic employees?

When analyzing the empirical literature related to human presence at work, authors like Freitas and Facas (2013), Oliveira and Faiman (2019) and Silva and Marra (2019), while researching different organizational contexts in Brazil (teachers and military police officers at work), demonstrated that certain working conditions are prejudicial. The lack of support is the main source of labor distress. Thus, it is essential to adopt managerial practices that promote mental health of, for example, teachers and police officers. It is crucial to understand what Dejours (2004) perceived by "the psychodynamics of work".

Similar results were achieved by Rodrigues, Barrichelo and Morin (2016), while researching the working locus of Brazilian nursing practitioner in hospitals. Still, while identifying perceptions of people headings towards retirements, Macêdo, Bendassoli and Torres (2017) reported the intense difficulty of detachment from work and the feeling of fear resulting from the need to fill the time among those who would retire in 2 years. The fear of these workers was that they would not be able to work. This is happened because of their passion for work (Donahue, Forest, Vallerand, Lemyre, Crevier-Braud & Bergeron, 2012) was so intense that they felt helpless or had a very negative image of themselves (disablement or uselessness feeling), the factors that generated intense anxiety (Petrou & Bakker, 2016).

The role of leadership is essential in the promotion of an emotionally healthy and positive organizational environment (Tasnim, 2016). Other scientific researches, which problematize human presence at work from the point of view of workers' mental health, can be found in Christian, Garza and Slaughter (2011), Tadić, Bakker and Oerlemans (2015) and Campos, Alquatti, Garbin and Pereira (2016).-

In Brazil, recent cases of suicide at work have called the attention of the Brazilian authorities (Cortez, Veiga, Gomide & Souza, 2019; Dantas, Azevedo, Nunes, Amador, Marques & Barbosa, 2017). And public policies for the prevention of suicide are being implemented. The leaders are very concerned with the development of organizational policies regarding suicide intervention and prevention.

It is important that the organization of tasks becomes more rational and human (Tadić, Oerlemans, & Bakker, 2017). The expected goals and results must be clear, and within the favorable limits that would be possible for workers to achieve. Otherwise, the need of achievement the working goals can be felt painful manner. Work-plans should be constructed in a burdenless manner (Schulte & Vainio, 2010). According to Winter and Alf (2019), a healthy and balanced organizational

environment must be sought, and based on co-operation and in sharing personal and professional values that converge the formation of the workers' identity.

It is essential to seek the reconciliation of personal and organizational values to promote working well-being (Sonnentag, 2015). Dejours (2004) warns of the need for production and co-existence regulations at work, counting on the active workers' participation. According to this author, workers can offer honorable contributions for managerial decisions. These workers have the know-how, expertise and know how to act, based on subjective experiences in their working performance. Workers who feel heard by their bosses, tends to feel belonged and to feel positive regarding their working activity.

One can ask, in the light of the discussion carried out by Rohm and Lopes (2015): whether the intense rhythm of work, that generates tension and distress, contributes to increase of dissatisfaction and non-belonging felt by workers? Has the accelerated rhythm been a source of distress? What are the conditions that generate psychic representations of pleasure and distress? What is their impact in workers' mental health?

The answers to these questions are aligned with the discussions carried out by Kubo, Gouveia and Mantovani (2013). The relentless search for productivity at any price, and without adequate working conditions, can quickly lead to the psychic illness of these workers.

The promotion of workers' mental health is directly related to work organization (Lancman, Barros, Uchida & Sznelwar, 2019). Aspects related to job design and workers' performance (for example, autonomy in decision making, empowerment, pressure to achieve goals and adherence to organizational values) must be taken into leader's consideration. The performance of leaders is essential for promotion of well-being experiences of well-being in the workplace, mainly in the humanized management of their personnel and in the provision of support when necessary (Palassi & Silva, 2015).

According to Pereira and Tolfo (2016), other researches are needed in order to describe the meanings of work provided by Brazilian workers. The locus of Brazilian organizations, mainly of public ones, is not studied in traditional manner. Other researches are needed.

The act of working must be studied in all its facets (Sonnentag, 2015). Situations of cognitive dissonance for instance between the worker and the organization must be recognized. Motivational implications need to be taken into consideration, recognizing the harmful effects of potential stressors and, thus, generating a feeling of well-being at work.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This is a descriptive and exploratory research. A qualitative approach was used to carry out this research. This research is also based on the survey of primary data, obtained from the participants. Therefore, this is a cross-line research. As the general aim, this article is concerned on understanding of the manner in which workers subjectively interpret their reality and the authors opted for the use of an idiographic approach for researching reality.

#### **3.2 Characteristics of the Organization surveyed**

The research was performed in a Brazilian public Organization. The Organization belongs to the indirect Brazilian administration and operates in the field of agricultural research. It also has a recognized performance throughout national and international territories.

Due to accessibility, the research was carried out mainly in a decentralized organizational unit, located in the south-east region of Brazil. For confidentiality reasons, it was decided to Organization's company name to remain undisclosed.

#### **3.3 Data collection procedure**

Fifteen (15) semi-structured interviews were performed, in depth, with workers, acting as leaders at the time of the study. These leaders were selected intentionally, based on the adoption of the following criteria of co-existence: these people had to be sector/department leaders, who were recently hired (up to 1 year of service) or performing their professional activity for more than 15 years within the organization). These criteria represented what was understood here as "key-leadership" for the Organization.

Two people from Human Resources department, directly assisted the research team in the identification of possible participants that would be invited to be a part of this research. Of the 40 suggested names, the research team has randomly selected 30 names. These 30 people were invited to participate in the interviews that would be performed. The invitation was made by e-mail or telephone and 21 people confirmed their interest. These received a letter stating the purpose of the research, and, then 15 people have effectively participated in the research.

Upon signing the informed consent term, each interviewee also agreed to record the interview. This recording would allow the research team to focus on the arguments presented by the interviewees. The recording allowed subsequent literal transcription, ensuring greater abundance and a more efficient level of details gathered during the analysis of the interviewees' statements. No reactions of hes-



itation or retaliation by the interviewees during the 15 interviews were registered. The interviews were carried out as planned.

### **3.4 Participant Profile**

Regarding the participant profile, the prevalence of men was identified (n=11, 73,3%), with a more experienced profile (86,7% with at least 41 years of age) and with more working experience (80% of participants had at least 11-year working experience within the organization).

### **3.5 Data analysis procedure**

A semi-structured script was used, including questions that dealt with psychological representation about work within the organization. The stimulus questions were as follows: *"How do you feel working within this Organization?"*, *"What kind of feelings do you have while working here?"*, *"Tell us about what motivates you to work here"*, *"Now, tell us about what makes you angry or what does discourage you from coming to work"* and *"Can you see yourself working here for the next few years?"*. The questions dealt with affective and emotional aspects provided by the working process.

It was sought to identify the type of feelings or affection awoken, considering all the experiences they have live in the working place. A dialectical and interactive approach was used during each interview. The interviews lasted, on average, thirty to forty minutes. It is important to stress out that, even with the dialectical and interactionist approach, few interviewees had a great difficulty in verbalizing their arguments. This difficulty was mainly due to the fact of not being able to verbalize ideas or feelings, or the lack of appropriate words to do so. It is noteworthy to mention however, that the research team managed to remedy this situation, by leaving all the interviewees comfortable and willing to speak in the way that they thought the best.

Having 15 interviews transcribed in whole, a thematic and categorial analysis was performed for the interpretation purposes of contents. The interpretation of the reports was freely made, and followed recommendations of Bardin (2011) in direct interpretation of the meanings of the words told.

Based on the literature, categories of analysis were previously defined with regard to the main goal of this study (psychological and social representations of the work) and which would be empirically matched through an internal unit between the arguments presented by the interviewees as follows: *"psychic, affectional/emotional and social representations on working conditions"* and *"personal and professional identity"*. It is important to stress out that these categories correspond

to the main theoretical dimensions identified in the literature on the sense and meaning of work, as well as were those that were most cited by the set of interviewees. These are macro-level categories that will gather the literal arguments that were verbalized in this empirical research. It is noteworthy to mention that this internal unit was sought by analyzing the convergence of opinions regarding the topics approached. Some saturation examples have also been identified.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

In general terms, convergence was identified in the great majority of opinions expressed by the interviewees. It was decided to present in this article the most representative arguments based on the greater prevalence of convergent opinions. The question of singularity of opinions, in terms of the meanings attributed to work, was taken into account by the research team. We stress out, again, that the research results are based on interviewees' perception, and therefore, the opinion manifested by the 15 leaders needs to be contextualized and relativized.

As explained above, two main categories of analysis were identified and the empirical literature on the subject was considered a priori. This classification was preserved posteriori, once the empirical arguments were presented and verified by the interviewees. These categories ("psychic, affectional/emotional and social representations about working conditions" and "personal and professional identity") will serve as a central axis for the discussion.

In general, very positive emotions related to work were identified. The work, accordingly to the MOW study (1987), is the source of centrality and impacts directly in the worker's self-image. The verbal reports, as a general rule, dealt with an intense feeling of pride in working within the organization. There were reports of distress when talking about the retirement issue, about the negative image of the public servant and about excessive bureaucracy in duty performance. These categories are presented and exemplified as follows.

The responses provided by participants generally indicate that they are quite engaged with what they do. They are proud of the place they work, and claim to be emotionally involved.

The interviewees reported feeling like they were part of a family. They claimed to enjoy their tasks and to be committed to their jobs. These results are aligned with what Donahue, Forest, Vallerand, Lemyre, Cravier-Braud and Bergeron (2012) discuss regarding the importance of very positive meanings and experiences shared amongst the individuals as important facts of engagement and motivation.

Work was understood as a source of well-being and of positive emotional experiences (Tadić, Bakker, & Oerlemans, 2015). The fact of feeling themselves useful, providing a relevant service to Brazilian society, was homogenous amongst the

interviewees base on the centrality attributed to work. From the perspective of 15 participants, work is understood as a source of pride and motivation. It is noted that the Organization's reputation was a positive point reported by all 15 participants.

The image of the organization, according to May, Gilson and Harter (2004), seems to generate positive attitude for work. And for this organization, what was portrayed by the interviewees was an image of seriousness in the services provided and credibility to Brazilian society. This image is an important source of pride, well-being and motivation for work.

The participants reported feeling as a part of something greater, of something extremely strategic for Brazil. As the Organization develops research initiatives and technological innovations for the society, there is a positive feeling of belonging:

"Only when we work here, we feel pride, you know, as people respect each other, they respect the Organization, as it is a respect that has existed for many years, in research, in what we do. We feel integrate." (Interviewee 2).

"Certainly, there is company's tradition in Brazilian and global society, right? We feel the will to participate in this research, we feel happy when we see the name of the organization in the media, you know, we are very proud" (Interviewee 5).

"I feel I am being a part of something big, it feels good to be here, I like to say to everyone that I work here and what I do" (Interviewee 9).

"It is very good to work here, people value you, the name of the Organization is respected, people respect as well you very much" (Interviewee 12).

"I really would like to pass to on to a public competition and work here. The research is very important for Brazilian society. When I say that I work here, people seem to be proud of me, they look at me differently, you know..." (Interviewee 13).

These results meet the findings of Walumbwa, Muchiri, Misati, Wu and Meiliani (2018) and May, Gilson and Harter (2004), arguing about a greater meaning of work once an individual understands that their personal and professional expectations are met. The commitment becomes greater, as well as the engagement, and ends up promoting a favorable working environment to the promotion of the workers' mental health (Kubo, Gouvêia & Mantovani, 2013). One shall pay attention to workers' mental and emotional health, stressing out the promotion of quality of life in their workplace.

It seems that the interviewees seem to have a certain status by working where they work. The perceived credibility is supported in its history and in the explicit conquest of its organizational missions and goals:

"I belong to the (name of company) family, I belong to this family, I feel important working here, people seem to open their eyes when I say that I work in (name of organization)" (Interviewee 1).

"I feel like I am a part of a family. A very united family. Here, it seems that people like what they do. The name of (name of Organization) is very strong, people really respect the company, they are really proud of it" (Interviewee 4).

"One of the most striking aspects here, is the responsibility of employees in fulfilling the aims and goals of (name of organization), which generates a very intense commitment with the organization" (Interviewee 11).

"We do not want to stop working here, you know. When there is an important result, when some research is successfully carried out, we feel happy, it seems that we really participate in everything" (Interviewee 14).

Considering the set of opinions expressed by 15 interviewees, a very strong link with the organization has been identified. The feeling of attachment to what these people do was pointed out by Rosso, Dekas and Wrzeniewski (2010) and Saks and Gruman (2014) as essential for the formation of affective links with people's jobs.

However, on the other hand, this symbolic representation of work, once exaggerated, can represent, according to Pereira and Tolfo (2016), a warning signal for the organizational leaders. The boundary between pleasure and distress needs to be constantly taken into account. Once more, it is noteworthy to mention the importance of taking action promoting workers' mental health and quality of life. It is important to always keep in mind the effects of job design and of the working context on employee's health, adopting effective managerial strategies promoting them on a daily basis.

The leaders must intervene immediately when the limits of this boundary are not clearly defined. Once they identify that the individuals are dedicating themselves too much to their work, this can affect their mental health. The individual cannot manage to detach themselves from work. Sometimes irreversible damages can be caused to the human psyche.

The need to harmonize work with other spheres of life is stressed out in the literature (Cheung, Lun & Cheung, 2018). Mindfulness techniques focus on personal aims and goals have already been applied throughout Brazilian organizations, incentivizing individuals to detach from work during their personal time:

"There are people here that come to work on weekends, they cannot stay at home. And there are quite a lot who do, you see. In fact, the (name of organization) is their second home, sometimes it is considered as a second mother" (Interviewee 3).

"It is about feeling as a part of the family (name of Organization) here, to dress in the uniform, everyone here is very proud, everyone plays the piano, you have few people that actually play the piano, but everyone tries" (Interviewee 12).

"We go home and still think about what we have to do, you know, we have some difficulty in detaching, it seems that we want for tomorrow to come" (Interviewee 14).

"You cannot disconnect, you know, I cannot and I think I would ever do. I am at home and I am thinking about going to work, it is a connection, as they say, gripping it with force. I love coming here, I would come every day if it were up to me, and they would not even have to pay me" (Interviewee 15).

The main negative emotions expressed by the participants were more related to the image of public administration as a whole (specially, regarding the lack of valuation of the public servant and to the lack of professional practices on recognition and feedback) and not as aspects related to the working environment itself. A survey of research carried out in Canada shows a close relationship between psychological distress and a lack of recognition due to de-valuation of the results of work. It is estimated that the lack of recognition can multiply the risk of negative experiences of stress (Brun& Dugas, 2008).

As a general rule, society has, according to the reports of the interviewee, a distorted image of the public servant as a paralyzed person, who feel not identified with what they do, having no commitment and motivation.

The interviewees point out the negative image of the public servant as a source of distress in the workplace. This stereotype of the figure of the public servant, was identified as one of the main negative points, according to the participants.

For Dejours (2004) and Joo and Lee (2017), the recognition is a key element to prevent violence and promote well-being at work. This social recognition helps preserve co-operation, breakage and isolation, generating the feeling of belonging and providing pleasure when working.

(On working environment as a whole): "The lack of motivation as a whole, as public servant is even disapproved. You have to perform many unpleasant activities, in addition to not being recognized as should" (Interviewee 1).

"Wow, there are days when we feel bad, you know, we fall, the people judge you all the time, we feel like we have our hands tied up, but

we are public servants as a whole, you know that it is not for us" (Interviewee 7).

"What we want here is to be valued, you know, to see that what we do is important, it is important here, we want things to have continuity, instead of being isolated actions, so the thing end up not working, it is our fault, you know, and it is bad" (Interviewee 8).

"There are people here who come, who do thing, and that's it, the one goes home, the one only does the basic, the one doesn't want to participate in anything else, you see that one could give more, do more, and right" (Interviewee 14).

Another daily life aspect, also understood as a source of dissatisfaction and distress, according to participants, is excessive bureaucracy. Dysfunctions existing in bureaucracy are claimed to be nerve-racking.

It has to do with flaws existing in working arrangements. It is not planned as it should be and some contingency variables (as the quantitative loss of public servants in some departments of the Organization, for example) are not taken into consideration during the task distribution. The participants shared the feeling of burden. There is little perceived autonomy to perform tasks, and, according to some reports, the creativity is not stimulated at all. The standardization of excessive tasks and routines prevent full use of individual's potential:

"In fact, there is excessive bureaucracy in the communication process, slowness in decision making process, and sometimes it hinders the process of proposing and implementing practices and policies that express performance at work" (Interviewee 4).

"The lack of a more integrated view on processes, is what, sometimes, turns the work difficult" (Interviewee 5).

"Performance here is made severely difficult by the excess of formalities in many procedures, sometimes it has to do with the bureaucracy that does not make much sense, besides the poor conditions of equipment and of a building itself" (Interviewee 11).

"The systems here cause many problems, there are moments in which everything just crashes, and there are moments in which two things have nothing to do with each other, the conveyor belt is dirty, and there is excess or lack of air-conditioning, I think the parking needs to be enlarged, there are many things that need to be better organized" (Interviewee 14).

"We have many IT-related problems, here, the sensation is that nothing works when you need, you know, it seems that everything is there and does nothing at all, so we get impatient, we want to re-

solve it quickly and they seem to be in high demand, but I also need to be able do my job, right?" (Interviewee 15).

According to Madeiros and Ferreira (2011) and Silva and Marra (2019), studies carried out in Brazilian federal and state government organization warn against the cognitive cost as a dimension of high demand by the "Human Cost of Labor". These studies certify that the demands related to intense mental concentration, problem solving and management to deal with unforeseen circumstances that occur in working situations, lead to a very high level of demand from the workers (Carneiro & Ferreira, 2007; Ferreira & Mendes, 2003).

Through the verbal reports of 15 interviewees, the role a leader was highlighted. The leaders are essential for the task execution and support provision during the performance of working routines. The leaders need to be trained. In fact, the lack of preparation of some leaders seems to be one of the main sources of distress at work.

As leadership position in the Organization is being resulted from political influence (commissioned occupation), those considered most qualified applicants were not always selected to act as a leader. Since the 15 interviewees acted as leaders at the time of the interviews, some of them questioned the demeanor of their colleagues on some occasions. There were reports of very unprepared leadership. And this generated negative feelings on work.

Some of the participants of this research were very unsatisfied with the lack of managerial preparation among their colleagues acting as leaders:

"A lack of development of leadership's motivational capacity. Insensitivity of the Council regarding the problems reported servants. A lack of a clearer horizon is their own career" (Interviewee 2).

"He clearly does not have patience to talk, in fact, I think and it seems that he does not know how to deal with people at all" (Interviewee 9).

"So you can see, the most important thing here is the leader, and there is a person that seems not to know what he is doing, and this is complicated" (Interviewee 10).

"You clearly understand that the leader (Leader's name) has no competence for the job, he gets mad, you know, we do all the work" (Interviewee 11).

(Speaking about the difficulties experienced at work) "Surely, the leader needs to be prepared, he needs to promote the work, the better relationship among colleagues and the superiors, the task division must be fair, as well as working time, and especially the way that it is done" (Interviewee 12).

Some interviewees claim that leader's personal preferences are implemented. These preferences generate perceived differences while dealing with the subordinates, especially during performance evaluation periods. There seems to be a sense of injustice in some cases. It can also be noted that these empirical findings are in accordance with Liden, Wayne, Liao and Meuser (2014), Saks and Gruman (2014) and Tasnim (2016), empathizing that managerial preparation and styles are decisive in promoting the minor or major engagement with work amongst the subordinates.

"Subjectivity here must be abolished, you know, I think that it is the result that must always be seen. The quality of work and decisions is what needs to prevail. All leaders here need to take this into account, instead of privileging each other. One more thing, the performance evaluation must not provide punitive effects, people end up not taking seriously and continue to do whatever they want" (Interviewee 7).

"Lack of professional recognition between a leader and colleagues, sometimes it seems that you are by yourself, you know, you don't know if you are doing well, if you are doing bad, as well as the excess of intimacy between colleagues causes discouragement" (Interviewee 8).

"What really draws attention here are motivational issues, such as the lack of recognition regarding the work that some people do here and do not receive any kind of feedback, unless during the performance assessments, and there everyone is doing well, nobody gets a bad assessment, which is complicated" (Interviewee 12).

The management development programs must be implemented in the Organization under study. The training of support skills must be prioritized, psychosocial skills especially (Winter & Alf, 2019). It must be shown to the leaders that complements are also very important during the feedback provision, not just the expression of negative points.

In addition to this, the leadership must be prepared in terms of knowledge of the workflow and management techniques for planning/organizing work. It is important to stress out that the explicit support from leaders, as understood by individuals, is an important source of pleasure, satisfaction and motivation (Tolfo & Piccinini, 2007; Klein, Molly and Brinsfield, 2012).

In short, we identified that there is intense routine in the manner in which the work execution is performed, focusing on departmentalized division and elevated level of task specialization. There is a clearly defined hierarchy of command and explicitly determined decision making responsibilities. Encouraging creativity, as well as promoting a more positive organizational environment, must be consid-



ered as core elements in managing performance (Sonnentag, 2015). Leaders need know how to act better in personnel-related issues, especially when it comes to conflicts resolution.

The valuation of servants needs to be provided on a daily basis. Work-related feedbacks must be provided. Development strategies of the working team also must be defined. Managing unpreparedness in dealing with other people and a lack of recognition provided to their subordinates, according to the reports, seem to be elements that need to a major improvement.

The participants of this research seem to conceive their work as an integral part of their identity. Besides being a source of personal support, work is understood as an essential complement to their continuous process of subjectification and consolidation of their identity.

The reports suggest that there are very positive experiences regarding the meaning provided to the work concept. There was a common registry of feelings of deep identification with the company among reports, so that some of the interviewees see the company as a second mother or a second family in metaphorical terms. Obviously, as previously discussed, any type of excess can cause work-related mental illness, and this must be continuously monitored by the organizational leaders. Some reports on workaholic individuals suggest that preventive and remedial actions to mental health need to be implemented.

## 5. Conclusion

This article is aimed to describe the understandings and beliefs of workers of a public Brazilian organization on personal and professional representation attributed to their work. Through interpretative analysis of the content, we identified the opinions and expectations of individuals on values and meanings attributed their work.

After conducting 15, using a semi-structured script, meanings attributed by the leaders to their work were described. Professional experiences that encourage engagement and commitment with work were discussed, as well as ideological representation of the work in their lives.

Consequently, it is concluded that the meaning attributed to work is essential for the formation of personal and social identities of an individual. What gives to the work a particular sense is the purpose for which it is accomplished? Understanding an integral part of their working reality, and identifying themselves with the current organizational values, individuals will tend to get more positive work-related experiences.

The results show that individuals want to be recognized and valued. The leaders need to be more capable of supplying psychosocial support to individuals, es-

pecially in complimentary and recognizable manner. In addition to the corrective feedback, it is necessary to encourage workers' professional development.

Some of these recommendations suggested in this article in the light of the currently reported results, imply effective burdens for organizations, both from resourceful and durative points of view. It takes commitment and engagement to implement effective actions in the field of people management. The potential that each individual is capable of manifesting in the exercise of their attributes must be recognized, respecting the limits of their mental and psychological health.

The reason why one works is connected to the psychic representation that we are social beings and that we act accordingly to our self-understandings in the world. Reflections about what is being done, and whether this is bringing any positive experience, that generate well-being, promote some effect or impact in the world.

The promotion of workers' mental health necessarily involves the understanding of their position before the conditions they are provided with. Actions aimed at the promotion of well-being and quality of life at work need to be constantly planned and executed. Actions to prepare leaders, as well as monitoring of managing performance and organizational support, are essential.

The leaders need to be available and be capable of listening to the workers. Leader's commitment with the development of their personnel is therefore required. From this active hearing, taking care of personnel's interests and working conditions as a whole. One must act to prevent situations of violence and work-related physical and mental illness.

Yet, it is expected that the leaders act as mediators par excellence, not only in conflicts within their personnel, but also, by contributing to the harmonization among organizational goals and workers' needs. The leadership must have technical and behavioral competence defining their performance. The leader will have to have technical ability and stimulation techniques to provide motivation and support to their working personnel, as long as it should be required.

Identification with work needs to be monitored. Situations in which the intervention is needed due to an individual's feeling of not managing to stop working any more (addicted to work). Psychic illness related to the act of working is directly related to the sequestration of human subjectivity.

Also, it is important to consider that this study identified the organizational leaders that need to act more directly during their diagnosis of the causes of psychological distress at work. Each leadership needs to be active in the mapping of these causes, and act quickly in its resolution. Managing actions, designed to provide support and recognition, need to be explicitly understood by workers.

Positive values associated to work must be underlined. Psychological disturbances associated to the act of working need to be diagnosed and the practices of managing intervention need to be implemented at once, developing so-called leadership “ethics of care” among its subordinates.

As limitation of this research, we stress out that the data collection performed with 15 people cannot represent the organizational context in whole, although criteria for the selection and choice of people to be interviewed have been adopted, seeking representativeness of opinions (leaders with less than a year of working experience or with at least 15 years of service provided). Servants stationed in departments that possess other organizational subcultures could also have further enriched the variety of information collected.

Yet as a limitation, we identified that some of the arguments presented by some participants could not have been more detailed, due to their inability to develop their narrative in a better manner. Some participants provided short, or even evasive answers on some of issues, and this made the subsequent categorization and analysis difficult. New interviews, or even focal groups, to study these responses in depth are recommended.

Another possible limitation refers to the manner in which individuals positioned themselves, or biases resulting from the self-reporting. It is possible many opinions have been expressed on the influence of leniency or severity, for example, indicating the presence of social desirability. This fact needs to be considered in subsequent research, or a new data collection strategy (secondary data analysis, for example, as research of organizational climate adopted in the Organization itself), or by adopting data collection strategy based on group observation, and not just by asking individual opinion about certain subjects.

For future studies, we recommend to deepen the qualitative diagnostic on variables related to one’s involvement and commitment with their work. Other variables related to the theoretical dimensions of organizational substructures, such as organizational citizenship, perceived justice and team-work power, can supply the empirical data necessary for the consolidation of the results presented in this study.

More humanized management in the working environment involves understanding ambitions and desires of individuals. There is work to be done, but there are individuals that want to collaborate more than just to be a mere spectator of their own reality. The challenge is already thrown down.

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