

“Dirty work,” meaning, sense, and identity: proposition of integrated analysis and research perspectives

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Abstract

This study was developed to reflect on the possible relationships among meaning, meaningful, and identity of work, considering the ambiguities and paradoxes that permeate certain occupations in Brazilian society. It is a theoretical essay examining the perspectives on “dirty work,” meaningful, and meanings of work and identity(ies). The analytical approach allowed us to identify that the marginalization of certain occupations to the detriment of others has at its core aspects much more complex than the nature of work per se. Therefore, understanding this phenomenon requires more robust and in-depth efforts than those previously presented in the literature on identity, meaningful, and meanings of work and “dirty work”. The study proposes that there is more to low-prestige occupations considered ‘dirty work’ that negatively influences workers’ well-being than simply the stigma and stains printed on “dirty workers.”

Keywords: Meanings and Meaningful of Work. Identity(s). “Dirty work.”

“Trabalho sujo”, significado, sentido e identidade: proposição de análise integrada e perspectivas de pesquisas

Resumo

O presente estudo foi desenvolvido com o objetivo de refletir sobre as possíveis relações entre significado, sentido e identidade do trabalho, considerando as ambigüidades e paradoxos que permeiam certas ocupações na sociedade brasileira. Para tal, foi desenvolvido um ensaio teórico considerando perspectivas acerca do “trabalho sujo”, significados e sentidos do trabalho e identidade(s). A abordagem analítica adotada permitiu identificar que a marginalização de determinadas ocupações em vez de outras possui em seu cerne aspectos muito mais complexos do que a natureza do trabalho per se. Compreender, portanto, esse fenômeno requer esforços mais robustos e mais aprofundados relativamente aos até então apresentados na literatura de identidade, significados e sentidos do trabalho e “trabalho sujo”. A tese em foco é de que há algo mais sobre ocupações com baixo prestígio e altos níveis de sujidade, que afeta negativamente o bem-estar dos trabalhadores, do que simplesmente o estigma e as manchas impressas sobre os “trabalhadores sujos”.

Palavras-chave: Significados e sentidos do trabalho. Identidade(s). “Trabalho sujo”.

“Trabajo sucio”, significado, sentido e identidad: propuesta de análisis integrado y perspectivas de investigación

Resumen

El presente estudio se desarrolló con el objetivo de reflexionar sobre las posibles relaciones entre significado, significado e identidad del trabajo, considerando las ambigüedades y paradojas que impregnan ciertas ocupaciones en la sociedad brasileña. Para ello, se desarrolló un ensayo teórico considerando perspectivas sobre el “trabajo sucio”, significados y sentidos del trabajo e identidad(es). El enfoque analítico adoptado permitió identificar que la marginación de determinadas ocupaciones tiene en su núcleo aspectos mucho más complejos que la naturaleza del trabajo en sí. Por tanto, la comprensión de este fenómeno requiere esfuerzos más robustos y profundos que los presentados previamente en la literatura sobre identidad, significados y sentidos del trabajo y el “trabajo sucio”. Según la tesis en foco, hay algo más en las ocupaciones de bajo prestigio y los altos niveles de suciedad que influye negativamente en el bienestar de los trabajadores que simplemente el estigma y las manchas impressas en los “trabajadores sucios”.

Palabras clave: Significados y sentidos del trabajo. Identidad(es). “Trabajo sucio”.

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INTRODUCTION

Many approaches are used to analyze the theme of work, with theoretical and conceptual contributions on work conditions, its implication for the individual (Barros & Silva, 2004), its meaning, and its relationship with identity (Ardichvili & Kuchinke, 2009). When observed from an economic perspective, work may mean “making money” (Silveira & Medeiros, 2016), whereas, in organizational studies, its meaning stems from subjective interpretations of individuals, their experiences, and interactions with the environment (Rodrigues, Barrichello & Morin, 2016). As for social psychology and sociology, they focus on a non-pecuniary standpoint, emphasizing aspects related to the centrality of work in human life (Gill, 1999). Finally, in the psychosociological point of view, individuals can attribute different values and meanings to their work experiences, influenced by cultural and social systems (Mills, 1976). Thus, identity construction and the meaning of work establish a bilateral system of co-dependence (Ardichvili & Kuchinke, 2009) and the growing importance of work in the individuals’ processes of identity construction (Bosmans et al., 2016; Brown, 2015), and meaning and attribution of meaning (Baran, Rogelberg & Clausen, 2016) stand out.

Studies related to the meaning of work and identity in administration tend to prioritize positions of great organizational representation (such as top management), often leaving out individuals and essential functions both from a social and organizational point of view (Monteiro, Pereira, Oliveira, Lima & Carrieri, 2017). In this aspect, the academic system seems to legitimize a current social idea of work, in which some activities are preponderant while others take the backstage of the productive organization and society, often shaming the individuals who carry them out. These workers may be stigmatized, hidden, dirty, invisible, subjugated, degraded, silenced, considered first-class refuse (Borges & Mourão, 2013).

In the social sphere of work, some occupations are prestigious and socially valued due to the prevalence of an economic notion about work (Silva & Freitas, 2016). In Brazil, the notion of noble and “clean” work (free from demeaning stigmas) is translated through the word “profession,” i.e., work that requires, among other aspects, specialization in a certain area (expertise), formal higher education, and social and/or intellectual prestige (Coelho, 1999). On the other hand, it is important to highlight those individuals who “live off the remains” in the labor society. They are subjected to various marginalizing and downgrading stigmas, relegated to “dirty work,” using the term coined by Hughes (1958, p. 81), to refer to a task “[...] physically disgusting. It [is a task that] may be a symbol of degradation, something that wounds one’s dignity,” i.e., stigmatized occupations and professional activities, with little (or no) prestige or social visibility.

The social division of labor in a society like Brazil is generally polarized, with prestigious and socially valued “clean” occupations on the one side and stigmatized, impure, dirty occupations on the other. However, many people in society perform jobs considered “dirty,” where some aspect of the work (or all work) is affected by the physical, social or moral “taint” in a prestigious and socially valued occupation (Baran et al., 2016). In the same sense, Lhuillier (2009) argues that some activities involve more dirty work compared to others and may, therefore, occupy places of low (or no) social value and professional recognition for the individuals included in them. Furthermore, regardless of the individual, occupations may carry a level of prestige (Treiman, 1977) and “dirt” (Baran et al., 2016). These aspects are important to be considered within the theoretical structure of work and its processes of meaning, attribution of meaning, and identity construction – because even dirty work can be different, in some cases, regarding relative occupational prestige, a fact that is ambiguous and in some ways paradoxical. Thus, the question that guides this theoretical essay is: **how are the meaning, meaningful, and identity of work related considering such ambiguities and paradoxes?**

This essay reflects on the possible relationships among meaning, meaningful, and identity of work, considering the ambiguities and paradoxes that permeate certain occupations in Brazilian society.

DIRTY WORK

For Hughes (1958), dirty work refers to the type of work perceived as disgusting or degrading, where individuals are stigmatized as dirty when performing the task. Dirty work is used to describe work that can be dirty in various ways, physically disgusting, degrading, or contrary to the most heroic of moral conceptions (Adams, 2012). This notion leads to a psychological and moral division of labor beyond the technical and social division. Notably, this job niche is a social need essential for the proper functioning of society. Thus, the individuals conducting the undesirable but required tasks are called “dirty workers” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). In other words, groups conducting such work act on behalf of society as its agents but receive stigmatization, invisibility, and marginalization in return (Lhuillier, 2012). The society “that creates the demand and need for dirty work deprives those who carry it out of a social status as observed in other occupations or spheres of social life” (Bendassolli & Falcão, 2013, p. 1156, our translation). The activity performed can “dirty” and “taint” the individual physically (harmful work or directly linked to garbage, effluent, and death), socially (work that involves contact with stigmatized groups or where the worker seems to serve someone), and morally (occupation considered sinful or activity of questionable virtue).

The complexity around these work relations can be better understood when first considering that work is often masked by employment. The individual’s personal and collective life prioritizes employment (Lhuillier, 2012) and the associated benefits identified at different levels (self-esteem, income, and socialization). Therefore, work conditions and other aspects such as the meaning and meaningful work and the individual’s identity and identification processes are left behind.

Bendassolli and Falcão (2013) discuss dirty work from a conceptual triad involving the relationship between dirty work and health, psychological development, and work quality (job well done). Regarding the relationship between dirty work and the worker’s health, the authors stress that, in some schools of thought, dirty work is a factor of illness, physical and psychological suffering, and social exclusion (Bendassolli & Falcão, 2013). The second aspect in the triad refers to dirty work as promoting the worker’s development. This perspective reveals a value judgment that implicitly and exclusively attributes to the so-called “first-line” occupations the capacity to enable the individual’s development. However, the argument put forward in this perspective is that social status and psychological functions related to the dirty work an individual performs – even if, initially, the individual has no other work option – must be considered separately. Finally, the third component is directly related to the idea of work quality. This is a crucial discussion regarding health at work and its capacity to fulfill its role in psychological development (Clot, 2008). Failure to discuss quality may bring the individual a feeling of insignificance, breaking the connection between the individuals’ desires and aspirations and the activities they are obliged to carry out (Bendassolli & Falcão, 2013). Thus, people are prevented from recognizing themselves in the activity they perform. They become strangers to themselves, generating what Clot (2008) calls activism without work, i.e., an empty activity.

MEANING AND MEANINGFUL WORK

One of the seminal studies on the meanings and functions of work was conducted by Morse and Weiss (1955). The authors analyzed the impact of changes arising from society’s intense industrialization on the meanings attributed to work, especially its instrumentalization. However, the theme is still little explored in the Brazilian context (Rodrigues et al., 2016; Tolfo & Piccinini, 2007).

Several authors in labor studies tend to discuss the meaning and meaningful work as similar variables (Bispo, Dourado & Amorim, 2013; Lemos, Cavazotte & Souza, 2015) and, sometimes, as synonyms (Tolfo & Piccinini, 2007). In general, the literature on the subject points out that meanings are constructed “collectively in a specific historical, economic, and social context” (Tolfo & Piccinini, 2007, p. 44, our translation). Furthermore, the meanings individuals attribute to their activities

depend on their social relations, having, therefore, a multifaceted and dynamic nature. From this perspective, the meanings of work for individuals are related to the process of institutionalizing work in the social sphere, so these meanings influence the individual's personal, organizational, and social structures (Silveira & Medeiros, 2016). On the other hand, the meaningful work refers to the importance the individual gives to particular tasks performed, also considering the individual's representations about these tasks and the importance they have in his/her life (Morin, 2004). Together, the many meaningful work “are characterized as a personal production related to the individual apprehension of collective meanings, in everyday experiences” (Tolfo & Piccinini, 2007, p. 44, our translation).

Some studies demonstrate the meaning of work as a fluid element, either positive or negative according to a given occupation. For example, Bosmans et al. (2016) emphasize that domestic workers tend to develop a positive or negative meaning of work based on coping strategies used to minimize the stigma associated with their occupation, considered as dirty work. For the authors, there are four main categories of coping strategies. First, domestic workers tend to confront and/or contradict actions that, in their perception, would contribute to an increase in the taint, refusing, for example, to do “dirty tasks.” Another category involves reframing tactics, through which “domestic workers infused the stigma with positive values or neutralised, ignored or countered its negative values” (Bosmans et al., 2016, p. 65). In some cases, the acceptability of dirty work is noted. It is a process of temporary acceptance, in which the individual agrees to perform the job until they find a “cleaner” work activity. A temporary process of acceptance can be detrimental to the individual's subjective instances since, over time, such a strategy needs to be applied for an increasingly longer period. It becomes a maladaptive coping strategy, implying a negative process of the meaning of work (Bosmans et al., 2016).

Baran et al. (2016) point out that some categories of workers may intentionally distance the self further from their occupation as a coping strategy to tackle threatening aspects of the identity and meaning of their work. Thus, some occupations tend to create a psychological barrier between work and life outside of work as a strategy to avoid incorporating the evaluation of their work into the representation of themselves (Baran et al., 2016).

The relationship between stigmatized occupations, meanings, and meaningful work are also addressed in Brazilian studies. In this sense, Pereira, Paiva, Santos, and Sousa (2018) emphasize the Brazilian socio-cultural context, marked by adversity, prejudice, discrimination, and various other forms of violence against some classes of workers. In the same line, we emphasize that the meanings and meaningful work in Brazilian society are in the midst of a reconfiguration process. Such process occurs due to the strong tendency of precariousness and fragmentation of labor relations (Irigaray, Oliveira, Barbosa & Morin, 2019), and due to a social reality of instabilities and deep economic inequalities, where the logic from the capital overcomes the human labor force, challenging and inducing the worker to survive in unstable and fragmented conditions (Silveira & Medeiros, 2006).

IDENTITIES AND WORK

Identity as a theme of studies is considered a complex concept, relevant to several areas such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and social sciences (Dubar, 2005). More than a decade ago, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p. 1163) described identity as “one of the most popular topics in contemporary organization studies” and, according to Brown (2015), it is still popular nowadays. An important fact is that identity is not only “crucial” but also “problematic.” It requires a constant process of analysis to understand its dynamics and relationship with the current socio-cultural context (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

Although the literature on the topic is still incipient and fragmented, it presents a rich diversity of findings, approaches, and theories (Brown, 2015). The field of organizational studies presents a breadth of definitions and uses of identity. It is seen as a basis for the construction of transdisciplinarity between the theory of organizations and other areas of knowledge (Marra, Fonseca & Marques, 2014). Despite the different interpretive perspectives, the literature converges to a notion of identity as

representations of subjects about themselves, which emerge from a continuous process of socialization (Marra et al., 2014), as they seek to answer questions such as those asked by Brown (2015, p. 21): “‘how shall I relate to others?’; ‘what shall I strive to become?’; and ‘how will I make the basic decisions required to guide my life?’”

One strand of sociological thought suggests that the growing interest in identity is symptomatic of the intense social changes that have dissolved traditional structures of society, thus intensifying the so-called existential anxieties, imposing increasing pressures on individuals to build themselves aligned with a “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2005). Identity is naturally intangible and ambivalent. Bauman’s (2001) idea of liquid modernity stands out in this sense as a current reality in which everything is illusory and fluid, where “life in society” is a generating source of insecurity, pain, and anguish. Therefore, the interpretation of reality requires caution. In this complex scenario, pre-established analytical models are inadequate, and it is crucial to consider identity. “In a society that has made social, cultural, and sexual identities uncertain and transitory, any attempt to ‘solidify’ what has become liquid through an identity policy would inevitably lead critical thinking to a dead end” (Vecchi, 2005, p. 12, our translation).

The dominant flows of theorization on identity reside in social cognition (Haslam, 2004), in the psychoanalytic work of Freud (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012) and Lacan (Driver, 2009), in streams of power and post-structuralism (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), and symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). In the same sense, Brown (2015) points out that although these flows are characterized by distinct epistemological and ontological assumptions as well as, at times, different methodological approaches, they are not hermetically closed. On the contrary, there are shared interests and cross-border exchanges of ideas. It is important to emphasize that the work of identity seems to be more necessary and intense in situations where a climate of tension and adversity prevails. These situations immediately induce feelings such as contradiction, confusion, and insecurity, which in turn tend to lead the individual to self-examination (Brown, 2015), i.e., to a review that threatens their identity (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012).

From these assumptions, one could say that workers depend on the views of others to constitute their identity, especially the occupational identity. Thus, the stigmas associated with work tend to negatively affect individuals’ sense of self (Pereira et al., 2018), as observed in the categories of dirty work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). In contrast, according to Bosmans et al. (2016, p. 55), “the stigma of dirty work can be countered through coping strategies, acting as defensive mechanisms, used by members of ‘tainted occupations’ in order to create a more positive sense of self.” In this regard, one of the identity frameworks usually associated with dirty work is social identity, which explores the concept of self from the subject’s affiliation to a particular group (Valtorta, Baldissarri, Andrighetto & Volpato, 2019). Thus, identity construction in the case of subjects whose work is outside the socially prestigious and “clean” occupations deserves attention because, as stated by Goffman (1963), the stigma around such occupations can be understood as a deteriorated identity.

MAIN CATEGORIES OF ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MEANINGS, MEANINGFUL, AND IDENTITIES AT WORK

Centrality of work

This essay is epistemologically oriented based on the thesis of the centrality of work. Different schools of thought consider work a central element in human life due to its ability to provide livelihood, actualization, and the creation and maintenance of personal and social identity (Rodrigues et al., 2016). However, in philosophy and sociology, currents of thought claim the opposite, i.e., the loss of the centrality of work – or its complete suppression – in contemporaneity (Lima, 2003). According to these currents of thought (Méda, 1995; Offe, 1989), the various changes introduced in the work contexts in recent decades associated with the structural crisis of the capitalist system can be seen as signs of the loss of the centrality of labor activity. Therefore, the work is no longer perceived as a base of collective identities, losing its subjective dimension as a category that constitutes ways of thinking, feeling, and acting (Lima, 2003). However, there are mistakes in the theses of theorists who defend the loss of the centrality of work (Méda, 1995; Offe, 1989). For example, the theoretical confusion between work

(inherent in human existence) and employment (historical construction) and the discussions supported basically by arguments and persuasion, with little empirical evidence (Cardoso, 2008).

Despite all the discussion about work, it has been a solid category to analyze social aspects throughout social thinking (Cardoso, 2008). The meaning of work in modern society refers to an element that enables the construction of the future, replacing chaos with order, as it becomes an important mechanism of social control and organization (Bauman, 2001). It is worth noting that, from the perspective of Clot (1999), work is a threefold oriented activity: toward the subject (personal goals), toward the reality of the activity, and toward the others (sociability). For Silveira and Medeiros (2016, p. 1, our translation), “the meaning attributed to work – transcending individual models of reference – influences how the subject interacts socially, which gives work its due importance as an object of study.”

Considering the context of contemporary work relations, the thesis of the centrality of work offers important contributions to understanding the connections proposed in this essay, especially regarding occupations permeated by adversity, degradation, and stigma. From this perspective, one possibility is that, in some contexts, the work presents cracks that cause psychic and, in extreme cases, physical suffering. Discussions encompassing such perspective are relevant because, according to Dejours (2001), work is and will continue to be a central category in society due to processes of worker’s identity construction, personal fulfillment, meaning and attribution of significance, and health. Evidence of such assumptions can be seen in studies with analysis of occupations that constitute categories of dirty work both nationally (Borges & Mourão, 2013; Matos, Lima, Paiva & Ferraz 2018; Oliveira & Barros, 2019; Paiva, Pereira, Guimarães, Barbosa & Sousa 2020, Pereira et al., 2020) and internationally (Löfstrand, Loftus & Loader, 2016; Valtorta et al., 2019).

Dialectical relationship

This essay proposes a more integrated and relational analysis of the processes of meaning and construction of significance and identity. The literature on these three topics strongly suggests that they constitute a dialectical process with society. Regarding identity, a considerable portion of the literature does not present it as static (Brown, 2015) but as dynamic, changing over time (Dubar, 2005). For the author, identity is not given to the individual in its entirety at birth. It is constructed in childhood and reconstructed at various times throughout life, in an individual process influenced by society. In this system, the individual depends on the judgment of third parties and personal definitions and orientations. Thus, identity can be understood as a product of a successive process of socialization (Dubar, 2005). Among the multiple dimensions of identity, the professional dimension has a prominent position. “Because it has become a rare commodity, employment conditions the construction of social identities; for going through impressive changes, the work requires delicate transformations in identity” (Dubar, 2005, p. 3, our translation).

It is important to observe that work is understood as an activity (Clot, 2010). In aggregate terms, the idea of work arises from the subject’s confrontation with reality, which is how individuals are inserted in a social environment while they undergo the personalization process. Lhuillier (2009) stresses the fact that any impediment to the activity, or the feeling of valuation it provides to the subject, induces a process of subjective immobilization of the individual. Consequently, the subject becomes “empty” and tends to lose the experience of meaning and meaningful. Thus, it is important to analyze the subject from a dialectical perspective between the “I” and its entire socialization environment, as this environment significantly influences more subjective processes.

In this sense, Souza and Carrieri (2012) argue that individuals who fit a certain social role build their identity in direct or indirect relationships. Thus, the process of identity construction is coordinated in terms of discursive aspects of everyday practices. Under this perspective, “discourses and systems of representation construct places from which individuals can position themselves and from which they can speak” (Woodward, 2000, p. 17). Therefore, studying identity outside daily life may lead to mistakes since identity is constituted from day-to-day practice and experiences (Souza & Carrieri, 2012). From this perspective, studies related to the intersection between the meanings and meaningful work and the construction of identity must permeate the discursive analysis of people’s daily practices, given that the understanding of who the individual is follows the interpretation of the meanings of their action (Souza & Carrieri, 2012).

Stigma vs. prestige

Stigma is an aspect that sumptuously permeates contemporary labor relations. However, it is more strongly perceived in some occupations than in others, and social judgment occurs unequally, i.e., judgments are not carried out using the same bases. So, intense ambiguities, paradoxes, and ambivalences permeate labor relations, especially marginal work, when considered as such. In one of the seminal texts on the subject, Goffman (1963) points out that stigma, in some cases, can be considered a deteriorated identity.

When dealing with marginalized occupational categories, such as sex workers, urban cleaning workers, housekeepers, among other professionals “tainted” by dirty work, the literature offers three types of marks (physical, social, and moral) that lead to stigmatization within different levels of occupational prestige (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark & Fugate, 2017; Kreiner, Ashforth & Sluss, 2006). This suggests that such workers experience considerable internal conflict due to ambivalent identification (Baran et al., 2016), which can trigger a series of psychosocial imbalances and can, in some cases, be externalized in physical problems and mutilations (Pereira et al., 2020). The easily noticeable stigma in the dirty work, for example, is admittedly harmful to individual subjective processes, challenges the identity of workers, their sense of both “who I am at work” and “who I am” fundamentally (Baran et al., 2016).

However, different occupations have different types of ‘dirt’ (Kreiner et al., 2006). Some are marginalized, while others are widely respected by society. In some cases, occupations judged to be dirtier assume a character of perversity, in which the stigma refers to evilness or something that can bring shame to the people around, as is the case of sex workers in Brazil, where this stigma is largely grounded on a Christian moral logic (Paiva et al., 2020; Pereira et al., 2020). For these individuals, the result is an ambivalence effect, which is the state of “being” deteriorated between identification and disidentification simultaneously with occupation (Baran et al., 2016), which pragmatically impacts the subject’s well-being (Kreiner et al., 2006).

On the other side, the prestige of the occupation is an essential aspect of contemporary labor relations. At the theoretical level, it is vital to understand the subjective aspects of the individual due to their potential role of shielding the effects of the flaw attributed according to the work’s dirtiness level (Ashforth et al., 2017). A practical example of this relationship is the work of doctors compared to that of an urban cleaning worker. In this situation, both professional classes are marked by high levels of physical dirt (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). However, physicians enjoy high social prestige, while urban cleaning workers are marked with stigma. It is also interesting that both occupations are involved in highly physically contaminating tasks (urban waste, hospital waste, contaminated objects, diseases, boils, among others). However, the prestigious dirty work is shielded and, therefore, the deleterious effects of dirty work are reduced. In this same sense, Baran et al. (2016) argue that the public may even know that those in high-prestige occupations carry out dirty work but retain some of the stigma associated with such work due to the level of prestige. Therefore, it is completely different to work with a high level of dirt in high prestige and low prestige occupations.

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Historicity

An important aspect to better understand the phenomena discussed here and their intersections is historicity. Initially, this topic gained space because of the dialectical relationship between meanings, meaningful, identities, work relationships, and the subject’s socio-historical context. For Brown (2015), identities can be “invented” in the sense of being “created.” They may receive aesthetic qualities, but they are not often seen as (entirely) works of fiction. Memories can be distorted, “facts” reinterpreted or forgotten, gaps in meaning can be filled by fantasy, leading the individual to delude themselves and misunderstand their own motives (Pereira et al., 2018). It is noteworthy that the established dialectical relationship (discussed above) indicates that the meanings and meaningful work come from historicity, i.e., with the historical moment, with culture, with the way of existing (or resisting) in the world (Bitencourt, Gallon, Batista & Piccinini, 2011). From this perspective, some studies demonstrate that identity issues are usually based on the correlation between historical “fact”

and personal biography (Bitencourt et al., 2011; Brown, 2015; Pereira et al., 2020). Thus, some questions are pertinent, such as what types of work are socially acceptable or commendable and what constitutes a technical violation of sociability, or is it totally reprehensible?

Context

As well as historicity, thinking about the context of work is crucial to understanding the meaning and meaningful work and identity construction processes. The context of work is a key aspect of labor relations, especially when it comes to occupations marked by stigma and social prestige (Paiva et al., 2020). In this sense, Irigaray et al. (2019) found evidence that the meaning of work has been reconfigured due to people’s new employment relations and contexts of work. Furthermore, some studies show that subjects inserted in contexts of ‘dirty’ and low social prestige tend to experience less meaning from work than other workers. This phenomenon influences the attribution of meaning to work and life itself (Baran et al., 2016) and also influences identity processes (Pereira et al., 2020). Some signs are still perceived by the fact that these workers tend to resort to different coping strategies, such as the creation of “allegorical” identities (Pereira et al., 2018), high use of alcohol and drugs (Baran et al., al., 2016), and, in some cases, refusing to perform tasks related to their work in their personal life (Teixeira, Saraiva & Carrieri, 2015). Thus, the loss of meaning of work and identity fragmentations can be largely seen as a reflection of the work’s nature (Baran et al., 2016).

Structure of “dirty work”

Notably, “dirty work” as a research theme gives rise to new discussions that go beyond the basic structure of “dirty work” (physical, social, moral taint) (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Such observation is because, in some cases, the malaise in “dirty work” relationships has a source beyond the propositions in the literature (Baran et al., 2016). Therefore, it seems that current theory and future research must consider not only the dirtiness and prestige aspects suggested by the dirty work scenario but also the additional psychological demand that these workers may experience. Also, studies that found that in some “dirty work,” the relationship between the activity carried out daily and the individual’s subjectivity leads them to experience less meaningful of their work (Baran et al., 2016) deserve to be better explored. In this same sense, studies that deepen the subtle and conflicting relationship between “dirty work” and the individual performing the so-called dirty tasks – dirty worker – are necessary, since, in most cases of low prestige dirty work, the stigma of the occupation is perpetrated on the subject, attributing to them, in essence, impurity, perversion, and degradation. From this perspective, daily work practices enter the individual’s personal life, dissociating their work identity from their personal identity (being and existing), as some studies on labor relations in the context of prostitution in Brazil highlighted (Paiva et al., 2020).

Symbolic interactionism

A potential area for further theoretical development lies in considering occupations that carry out dirty work within the perspective of symbolic interactionism and related sociological theories. In this line of thought, “identity is formed from the interaction between the ‘I’ and society. The subject still has an inner core or essence, which is the real ‘I,’ but this is formed in a continuous dialogue with the outer cultural worlds” (Hall, 2006, p. 11, our translation). In addition, Ennes (2013) emphasizes that symbolic interactionism allows thinking of identity processes as power relations of hierarchization and social classification, based on a perspective where the subject and the social group guide their actions in different ways according to specific interactions. Therefore, reflecting on the social reality based on social relations, interactionists focus their analysis either on the “situation” or on the “context” to refer to the materialization of interactions in time and space (Ennes, 2013). Such considerations give rise to human relations within the work context as a lens to understand how personality, identities, meanings, meaningful, and related constructs develop through interaction. However, when considering that such interactions occur in a context of great adversity, violence, and stigmatization, a different dynamic probably emerges, which is a valuable point for future studies.

Temporality

Williams (2012) emphasizes the importance of a temporal dimension in the construction of identity. However, any explicit theorizing about the relationship between time and identity is still rare. Regarding temporal perceptions, Alvesson (2010) emphasizes the notion that identities provide a sense of temporal coherence to subjects, and even so, it remains an issue little explored. Corroborating these findings, Paiva et al. (2020) emphasize that temporal issues sometimes widen while deepening the ambiguities that permeate the work of subjects who carry stigmas, in which the consequences extend beyond the time dedicated to working, showing other facets related to suffering at work, which has been disregarded in organizational studies. Under a capital logic where time is money, some dirty workers (such as sex workers) are given a frenetic pace of work (Lainez, 2019) that induces them to deny their personal life in the present and save it for a less “tainted” future, which may imply harmful psychic displacements for individuals (Blithe & Wolfe, 2017) due to issues of different temporal perceptions (Carvalho, 2018; Güell & Yopo, 2016).

Spatiality

In addition to the research on temporality, it is important to highlight that contemporary labor relations require workers to be increasingly temporally flexible and spatially mobile (Sennett, 1998). In this aspect, a “dialectical relationship between the categories space and identity must be considered, based on the principle that space operates as a means of production of identification of individuals with their social world” (Pimentel & Carrieri, 2011, p. 3, our translation). Also, spatiality permeates all social relations and thus provides a basis for understanding the process of (re)construction and (re)signification of subjectively shared meanings about oneself, about the other, and about one’s own dimension of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 2002). Furthermore, future studies that address the relationship between spatiality, identity, meanings, meaningful, and work context are necessary for the theoretical evolution of the phenomenon analyzed in this essay.

Methodological perspectives of the research

Considering the themes discussed and their respective theories, we suggest future research adopts qualitative approaches since the intention is not to identify regularities or trends in the data but to listen to the subjects and their respective life experiences. According to Merriam (1998), this research approach encompasses techniques and assumptions that make it possible to explain and understand social phenomena with a high level of depth and the least possible rupture with the individuals’ context. Corroborating this position, Mattos (2011) emphasizes that this type of research must be analyzed, understood, and used considering its social dimension.

Studying dirty work necessarily implies understanding the moral, psychosocial, and economic dimensions around the subject. Such effort also implies comprehending the discussion on the subject’s constitution processes, considering the social dynamics (Bendassolli & Falcão, 2013). Qualitative approaches are adequate as they consider, in greater proportion, the subjectivity of the individual in all their processes of (re)construction and (re)signification of the self. Keeping in mind the risks of mistakes when studying identity, meanings, and meaningful work out of the daily life (Souza & Carrieri, 2012), data collection methods suggested here consider the individuals’ life history. This measure is crucial because the notions of memory and time are directly related to the identity and work’s meaning and meaningful for dirty workers and their respective stigmas. Thus, employing methods that enable capturing the individuals’ subjectivity through feelings, facts, and memories expressing experiences may favor understanding meanings (Joaquim & Carrieri, 2018). The relevant future research will adopt rigorous ethnographic methods, including participant and non-participant observations and in-depth interviews on life histories and trajectories.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As one of its main theoretical contributions, this essay’s analytical approach reveals the need to go beyond traditional research on identity, meaning, and meaningful work, exploring issues such as stigma and the level of dirt and prestige of a given occupation. The integrated and in-depth review showed that the marginalization of certain occupations is based on aspects much more complex than the nature of the work per se. On the one hand, workers who are in an occupational context of low prestige and high level of ‘dirt’ (for example, sex-workers, housekeepers, urban cleaning workers) daily face the stigma around their work, often suffering and subjected to physical, social, and symbolic mutilation. On the other hand, individuals in highly prestigious occupations and with a high level of ‘dirt’ (for example, some doctors and lawyers) experience more significant work, with less suffering due to stigma. Notably, this second category of workers experience discomfort in the work context, but not directly with the stigma of the occupation, unlike the first category. Therefore, understanding this phenomenon requires more robust and in-depth research beyond what has been presented in the literature on identity, meanings, and meaningful work and dirty work. Future research exploring the issue beyond the traditional boundaries is crucial to shed light on categories of work often invisible both in society and academia, especially in the administration field. This study focalizes the thesis that there is something more negatively influencing the well-being of workers of low-prestige occupations with high levels of dirt than simply the stigma and taints attributed to ‘dirty workers’.

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