

## Looking at daily life: pathways for a social psychology of work<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The article outlines the research pathways that have led social psychology of work to study labor daily life. We present daily life as a seizure of the reality field, coming from an interdisciplinary discussion on the topic, emphasizing aspects of repetition and rupture and the relationship between micro and macro-social dimensions. We locate the efforts of composing daily life as the object of social psychology and point to the difficulties of theorizing such an object. Lastly, we discuss the recognition of daily life as a privileged field of research for the project of a social psychology of work, as it favors the recognition of singularities of the senses and meanings constructed by workers, of forms of social interaction, of organizational processes, of micropolitics, of the cunning practices built within the asymmetrical relationships of power.

**Keywords:** social psychology of work, daily life, social process, micropolitics.

When we elected daily life as our object of study, we did it not as a starting point. We arrived at this approach, in fact, based on our research and experience in the analysis of human labor from the point of view of the workers.

Our studies<sup>2</sup> have led us to try to understand work as traversed by psychosocial processes established by the intersection between macro social processes and local actions of the people who work. This form of understanding the so called “world of work” brought us closer to the daily life field or, as proposed by Peter Spink (2008), invited to research places and “microplaces” in which events of life at work occur. Thus researching, we assumed a methodological approach of participants of these events, while we investigated the actions of workers in daily life.<sup>3</sup>

In this essay, we initially intended to question the notion of daily life, using dialogue with scholars in the field to go beyond the recurring view of insignificance within this dimension of existence. Therefore, we placed the configuration of the daily life field of study based on the social philosophy and the different social sciences, especially the sociology of daily life. Then, we focused on how initiatives of the Social Psychology, particularly in Brazil, have treated the theme, taking into consideration that ordinary life is its privileged field of

research. Finally, we returned to the Work phenomenon, our theme of origin, to present some possible links with daily life approaches.

### Daily life configuration as a real field of apprehension

When we seek the meaning of the expression daily life in dictionaries, we have definitions that are predominantly linked with ideas of monotony, habit, banality or that which occurs daily, in a repetitive, ordinary and unimportant way. Mesquita (1995) also recorded a negative connotation, when one seeks to escape daily life, for it is not “the territory of desire, of dreams, of imagination, of aspiration” (p. 13).

With the predominance of this sense, it is possible to wonder if daily life is always about sameness and routine or if there could be room for the unexpected. Pais (2003), from the beginning, recognizes routine as a basic element of daily life and states that “considered from the point of view of its regularity, normativity and repetitiveness, daily life manifests itself as a field of rituals” (p. 28).

However, when diving into the etymological roots of the word, the author discovers that, in its Latin origin, routine (*rupta*) is associated with “the idea of route (path) [...] whence derive the expressions ‘rupture’ or ‘break’: the act or effect of breaking or interrupting, cut, break, fracture” (Pais, 2003, p. 29). Thus, there is an opening for daily life to be understood as a place not only of repetition, but also of innovation, of that which is unplanned and unforeseen, because it “is also part of the exceptional, the adventure, the unexpected, the dream” (p. 81).

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2 Coutinho, Borges, Graf & Silva (2013); Oliveira (2014); Sato, Bernardo & Oliveira (2008); and Sato & Oliveira (2008).

3 To better situate the point of view of research in daily life (opposed to researching the daily life), see M. J. P. Spink (2007) and P. K. Spink (2008).

On the one hand, thinking of daily life as a space for routine and repetition, led us to reflect on the colonization of everyday life by the capitalist rationality, thus constituting the daily life as a *locus* of alienation and consumerism (Lefebvre, 1968/1991). On the other, however, we should not forget that it may also be a space for “gaps” for a non-passive attitude toward consumption (Certeau, 1998). In this sense, by mapping the critical approaches of the “real field of apprehension known as daily life”, Tedesco (1999) emphasizes the importance of a targeted analysis focused “on the colonizing and crystallizers daily life processes that, at the same time, present situations, channels, needs and possibilities of transforming it” (p. 12). Daily life is, for the author, the space of dialectics, of contradictions, of rationality for the macroprocesses and of social conflicts that pervade life.

To Martins (1998), interest for daily life is the result of humanity’s contemporary disbelief in classical ideals such as justice, freedom and equality. This interest is part of the “skepticism arising from the disillusionments that have accompanied the remarkable auto-regeneration capacity of capitalist society” (p. 1). It is not possible to deny the recurring ability to overcome crises that capitalist societies have shown in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; however, these crises have been presented in cycles at intervals becoming shorter and with ever increasing intensity and amplitude.

The economic and social transformations that affect all spheres of human life have been accompanied by changes in ideas and representations of reality, making room for the questioning of classical social theories and arousing interest in the daily life theme. In this sense, Levigard and Barbosa (2010) state:

In the wake of cultural, behavioral and political transformations, important questions in the social sciences arise. It became necessary to rethink and build new theoretical tools for the apprehension and interpretation of complex social reality. Thus, in the 1970s, theoretical contributions emerged focused on the understanding of how the hegemonic conservative forces reproduce the social fabric, and the dynamics of accommodation/individual and collective resistance against these forces. The daily life theme gained relevance in these studies. (p. 86)

Representative of these studies, daily life sociology emphasized the links between the micro and macrosocial dimensions, shifting its focus from the macro-structural social relationships to the situations of interaction, since “a purely macroscopic view of the social is unable to account for all small social games that constitute the social fabric” (Pais, 2003, p. 75).

The proposal of a link between macro and micro-social dimensions breaks with the classic dichotomy of social theories: the exclusive focus on the actions of individuals or social structures.

In this sense, Tedesco (1999) advocates a daily life sociology that should contemplate “the *individual* as a private-individual being, its close, regular, intensive, adhesive, fixed and mutable relationships. However, it does not mean that the great *social devices*, the macro-theories (systems, classes, organizations...) may not be displayed” (p. 26, emphasis added). Following this line, Pais (2003) considers daily life as “a privileged place of sociological analysis that is revealing, par excellence, of certain processes of operation and transformation of society and the conflicts that cross it” (p. 72).

These two authors emphasize the importance of a critical analysis of daily life, which requires undoubtedly a historical perspective. For this reason, Pais (2003) criticizes current sociological theories that analyze daily life through an anti-historical way, with the focus on “little nothings of life” and points to the challenge “of establishing a link between the major social devices and the micro-social devices that regulate or inform social life” (p. 82).

Gardiner (2000), in turn, points to the risk of being reduced to daily life and the meanings built from it into “a relatively homogeneous and undifferentiated set of attitudes, practices and cognitive structures” (p. 5). Echoing Lefebvre and other authors, Gardiner defends that daily life has a history and, in our case, this history has a close relationship with modernity. Following this, he proposes the development of a critical knowledge of daily life. This includes recognizing the ideological dimension of common sense and the effects of power asymmetries in the ways reality is perceived. At the same time, Gardiner (2000) states:

So, while modernity is marked by a logic of control and domination, the Orwellian nightmare of a deeply bureaucratized social existence is always delayed, partly because the perfectly controllable systems simply are not possible (like chaos theorists like to remember), but also because we subvert the full commodification and homogenization of experience through a myriad (sometimes fleeting) of passion expressions of non-logic and imagination. These emancipatory moments are endemic in daily life and remain opposed to the utilitarian gray of official society, hidden as it is by the logic of the commodity-form and the *ethos* of productivism. (p. 15)

And, based on Certeau, he added:

To some extent, daily life has this resistant quality simply because its presence is not always recorded by the panoptic gaze of bureaucratic power; it remains an incipient and heterodox mix of practices and fluid thoughts, multiple and symbolically dense. (Gardiner, 2000, p. 15)

In the panoramas of approaches on daily life, presented by Pais (2003), Tedesco (1999) and Gardiner (2000), show different theoretical perspectives from which this dimension can be seized<sup>4</sup>. The dialogue with different social theories can also be found in Psychology texts, like Levigard and Barbosa (2010) and Emiliani (2009). Next, we present some views of Psychology, especially Social Psychology in Brazil, which has dealt with the issue of daily life.

## Social psychology and everyday life

It is not common to find in Psychology studies that systematize contributions that theorize daily life. In a review of the Daily Life Psychology, Emiliani (2009) offers a possible explanation for this gap: “Psychology has always been marginally dedicated to daily life for having been concentrated... as a priority on the individual and his mental, behavioral and affective processes” (p. 82). In addition, according to the author, for Psychology, daily life would be an idea so little defined that, in a way, it could be included in it. After consulting the Psychology literature<sup>5</sup>, whose titles remit to daily life, Emiliani found many themes, though no conceptual coherence, which could be linked “to both daily activities (such as work and free time), as well as the places and institutions in which they are found (e.g., family and school)” (p. 83).

In his understanding of daily life, Emiliani (2009) dialogues with different social theories<sup>6</sup> and defines the structure of daily life as a “scaffold of stability” that would allow the gradual integration in social life, providing facilitative routines and regularities of social adaptation<sup>7</sup>. This structure would represent “a kind of ‘hard core’ of what is experienced that is unproblematic and taken for granted” (p. 217). As a result, the fragmented experiences of daily life of each person would contain durability in time and sharing with others, contributing “to sustain personal identity” (p. 260)<sup>8</sup>.

When we searched the Brazilian psychology publications in search of the word “daily life”, we found theoretical texts focused on specific themes analyzed in their daily relationships, but that, therefore, do not properly explore

daily life<sup>9</sup>. The selection edited by M.J. Spink (1993) shows, through reading social representations, several studies on daily life knowledge.

It is also possible to find texts with methodological proposals on how to research daily life. M. J. P. Spink (2007), for example, retrieves the memory of three classic studies of Social Psychology<sup>10</sup> conducted in the first half of the last century. By rescuing this tradition of research *around* daily life, the author alerts us to the fact that looking at daily life is not something new in Social Psychology.

Although methodological texts such as the aforementioned articles by M. J. P. Spink (2007) and P. K. Spink (2008) present theoretical references – such as Heller and Certeau (in the first) and Lewin (in the second) –, they focus on research practices without actually theorizing about daily life.

By analyzing what is regarded as “a vast bibliographic production about daily life” in the fields of history, sociology and anthropology, Petersen (1995a) also identified what it is considered “a weak point: the little theorizing concern, the lack of a more consistent definition of the object” (p. 30) and denounced the “strongly empirical studies of daily life” (p. 31). Although the author did not analyze studies of Psychology, we believe that her criticism could be applied to studies of this discipline.

It seems important, then, to highlight how the study of a daily life psychology has advanced in Brazilian research, though still resents the lack of a bigger effort in theorizing daily life. The studies often cannot exceed what Petersen (1995b) calls a “phenomenon view of daily life” (p. 52). Thus, we agree with the author’s statement:

The “Gordian knot” that needs to be untied regarding research of daily life is like coming out of an empirical fragmentary vision and moving forward into a theoretical reflection that reveals what is supposed and the necessary connections of it that we call daily life. The question being asked, about what is with daily life, has to be replaced by another, about what is daily life. Thus, we need to change the tone and the direction of our questions towards a more comprehensive reflection of daily life. (p. 59)

## Work and daily life

The analysis of daily life work situations is not the prerogative of our own field of research, the social psychology. As we know, daily life work is also the subject of other

4 Although not discussed in this article, the spatial dimension is very important for apprehending daily life, particularly in the works of Henri Lefebvre. Sato (2012) and Castro (2010) are examples of how this dimension is treated in daily life work studies from the perspective of Social Psychology.

5 Among the Works analyzed by Emiliani (2009), we have M. Argyle (*The social psychology of everyday life*) and J. V. Rillaer (*Psicologia della vita quotidiana: una riflessione scientifica non freudiana*).

6 Among them: Garfinkel, Schutz, Lefebvre, Moscovici, Bruner.

7 Emiliani (2009) analyzes the stages of life in which reality control strategies would be the greatest necessity, such as infancy and old age, by use of routine and ritualized practices capable of providing order and regulations.

8 In a movement similar to Emiliani (2009), Levigard and Barbosa (2010) also bring to the field of psychology the theoretical debate on daily life and, therefore, dialogue with the work of three important points of reference for this field: Heller, Lefebvre and Certeau.

9 As an example, we can cite the text by Critelli (2008) on daily life consumption, and the text by Nardi (2008) on sexual diversity policies in the educational daily context.

10 M. J. P. Spink (2007) brings back in this text, the following classical studies in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: 1) the study of Marienthal, performed in a community of unemployed by Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeisel; 2) the research “When prophecies fail”, effected by Festinger and his colleagues; and 3) a precursor study of Environmental Psychology, conducted with children by Barker and Wright.

sciences and the effort for its analysis has made interdisciplinary fields in which the contributions of social psychology added to those from other disciplines (Oliveira, 2014).

Day-to-day work has been the subject of anthropology and sociology, restricting this to a couple of examples of research identified with specific fields and with which we have dialogued. Many are the studies performed by these two fields, but only for exemplification purposes, we shall cite some of them. In the case of anthropology, this production is illustrated by Durão (2003), Granjo (2004) and Marques (2009): studying different professional categories (typographers, oil refinery workers and glassware), demonstrate the use of the ethnographic method to study specific work situations. Sociology, on the other hand, include the now classic study by Martins (1994), regarding the experience of workers with the advent of new technologies in a factory in the ABC Paulista region, in Brazil, and Mello e Silva, Nozaki, and Puzone (2005) in a suggestively titled study “Work seen from below”, in which the ethnographic approach to work in cells is approached and they analyze the peculiarities and contradictions of Toyotism in Brazilian companies, claiming the need for local empirical studies for the improvement of sociological theorizing about work.

As for the interdisciplinary fields of work study, we highlight the ergonomics, especially the so-called activity ergonomics (Guérin, Laville, Daniellou, Duraffourg, and Kerguelen, 2001), and the so-called “work clinic” (Bendassolli and Soboll, 2011; Lhuillier, 2006, 2011), such as the ergology and activity clinic.

Exchanges between social psychology and these interdisciplinary fields are varied, but we can point out, without going too far back in history, the French tradition of work psychology, represented by Faverge (1952/2009), the socio-technical tradition (Trist, 1978) and the work of Ivar Oddone (Oddone, Re, and Briante, 1981).

Jean-Marie Faverge inaugurates what De Keyser (1982) calls a “looking policy” that is characterized “by recognizing the dynamic relationships that workers keep in their environment; by appreciating the knowledge anchored in concrete experience; and by refusing the deterministic approach” (Cunha, 2011, p. 63). The sociotechnical tradition emphasized the inseparability of social and technical dimensions (P. K. Spink, 2003). Ivar Oddone, whose work was of great importance in the development of the occupational health field in Brazil, in turn, draws attention to what actually workers do and promotes the recovery of the workers’ knowledge and the “rediscovery” of their experiences (Oddone, Re, and Briante, 1981).

In Brazil, there were several contributions added to form a social psychology dedicated to labor studies in the country, including those mentioned above. One important contribution falls to Peter Spink: in his article “Organization as a psychosocial phenomenon: notes for a redefinition of work psychology” (1996), for example, the author delineates the field of social psychology of work and

points to the importance of studying daily life, which we will see below<sup>11</sup>.

A number of other empirical studies with a qualitative approach has been performed in Brazil in the above defined field where the identification of theoretical studies about daily life in which they are anchored<sup>12</sup>, done in greater depth by some and less in depth by others. Among the authors cited in these texts to offer theoretical support, we have: Michel de Certeau, Agnes Heller and Henri Lefebvre, particularly the first two, and also Brazilian authors such as José de Souza Martins.

When analyzing research that could be considered as belonging to a social psychology dedicated to labor studies, we can observe different emphases used for daily life specific dimensions. There is some research that, for example, emphasize the meanings constructed by collective bargaining (e.g. Coutinho, 2009; Diogo and Maheirie, 2007), focusing on ways daily life represent and understand the professional category to which they belong, illness at work, unemployment, gender differences etc.

On the other hand, there is a compilation of research that focus on the action at work or activity itself. On one side, they seek to understand the processes of subjectivation, including the psychological distress and illness (e.g. Carrijo and Navarro, 2009); on the other, they analyze the collective dimension of workers’ actions, for example, investigating the power relationships or the collective ways of substantiation of work (Bernardo, 2009; Osório, 2006; Sato, 2002, 2012).

It is not a simple matter, to define the *status* of daily life work in the studies produced from a psychosocial perspective, which has proven to be plural. However, it is possible to highlight some points that we consider essential when tracing this path between work and daily life.

The first is the recognition of a distance existing between prescribed work and real work, including all the consequences that followed the formulation of these concepts by Ombredane and Faverge (1955): if the prescribed task is not able to anticipate the unpredictability inherent in work systems (which makes the Taylorism ideal laughable), it falls to the workers to enter action and the challenge the articulation of plan and reality.

The inescapable mediation with the real brings daily life into focus:

It has become increasingly clear that the day-to-day, mundane daily life, is not an emptiness filled with debris scattered randomly across the floor, on the contrary, it is where we are recognized as people in the communicative sense. We recognize also that the ability to organize activities and actions, to create new and different ways of acting is an

11 See also his first studies, still on the Tavistock Institute (P. K. Spink, 1982).

12 As some examples of studies, we can mention the following: Andrada (2006); Coutinho et al. (2013); Oliveira & Leimer (2009); Sato, Bernardo and Oliveira (2008); Sato and Oliveira (2008); and Schmidt and Neves (2010).

essentially human characteristic and that this is the basis that puts the steps of humanity in the recognizable skyline of the day-to-day, even if the steps are contradictory and confused in their meanings. (P. K. Spink, 1996, p. 186)

Secondly, workers make use of knowledge collectively constructed to perform their work's objectives, falling back on the "collective boxes of mundane organizational tools developed throughout social history" (P. K. Spink, 1996, p. 188).

Yet, as stated previously (Oliveira, 2014; Sato, Bernardo and Oliveira, 2008; Sato and Oliveira, 2008), a study of daily life work opens the possibility of meeting with the micropolitics, to the extent that the labor activity is the stage for conflicts and contradictions of different interests. We find in Certeau (1998), the appropriate conceptual tools to clarify the dynamics of this micropolitics; in the contexts of power asymmetries, the workers' actions takes place in areas controlled by others, so that the tactical characteristics of the "art of the weak" are present as ways of resistance.

Finally, as stated by Sato and Oliveira (2008):

What was revealed by the daily life work analysis is that the management is, in itself, an iterative process and not only the application of provisions on others. In fact, if we consider the results of research centered on daily life work by social psychology, managing work is not simply prescription and obedience, but the production of a negotiated existence. (p. 195)

## Pathways, departures and arrivals

In our pathways, the circumscription of the survey on daily life was induced by the way we conducted research in social psychology of work. We sought in this essay to present the paths that led to the study of daily life work and the

horizons that opened up during this pathway. Daily life was not the starting point of the research, but one of the arrival points we were led to when following the thread which tied the situations and contexts together, appearing as problems to the workers. As said earlier, it is in the daily that life happens. Proceeding to examine daily life nowadays was, thus, the methodological requirement for the presentation of the working and living conditions in the context of labor relationships in capitalism in our countries. What led us to recognize the uniqueness of the senses and meanings constructed by the workers, their forms of social interaction, the organizational processes, the micropolitics, the cunning practices etc.

To be able to examine the objects above, the necessary theoretical and methodological resources have been searched in various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, since many tensions – between the micro and the macro, between the individual, the group and society, between objective and subjective, between reproduction and construction of the new, between conformism and resistance (Chauí, 1986) – are presented as challenges to define daily life. Above all, in this quest we have committed to gathering the basis necessary to illuminate the expression of the unique, of the new and the unexpected and not only what totalizing theories have affirmed and reaffirmed. Beside this, we have conducted empirical studies that allowed us to get to know the different work situations and the views of workers. Therefore, investigation procedures are required to allow the capture of what the researcher is not able to foresee as a manifestation. Strategies for listening, for observation and for coexistence between researchers and workers in the surveyed situations tend to be more open, with no closed investigative protocols, and require prolonged interaction in the field of research. During these surveys, we take all insertions of the researcher in the field as interventions, we advocate no separation between the moments of gathering and the analysis of information and we defend an ethical commitment for all involved in the investigative process.

## Olhar o cotidiano: percursos para uma psicologia social do trabalho

**Resumo:** O artigo esboça os percursos de pesquisas que têm levado a psicologia social do trabalho ao estudo do cotidiano laboral. Apresenta o cotidiano como campo de apreensão do real, partindo de uma discussão interdisciplinar sobre o tema, salientando seus aspectos de repetição e de ruptura e as relações entre dimensões micro e macrosociais. Localiza os esforços de constituir o cotidiano como objeto da psicologia social e aponta para as dificuldades de teorização desse objeto. Finalmente, discute as razões do reconhecimento do cotidiano como campo privilegiado de investigação para o projeto de uma psicologia social do trabalho, na medida em que favorece o reconhecimento das singularidades dos sentidos e dos significados construídos pelos trabalhadores, das formas de interação social, dos processos organizativos, da micropolítica, das práticas astuciosas construídas no interior de relações assimétricas de poder.

**Palavras-chave:** psicologia social do trabalho, cotidiano, processos sociais, micropolítica.

## Regarder le quotidien: parcours pour une psychologie sociale du travail

**Résumé:** L'article ébauche les parcours de recherches qui ont amené la psychologie sociale du travail à l'étude du quotidien du travail. On présente le quotidien en tant que champ d'appréhension du réel à partir d'une discussion interdisciplinaire sur le

thème, soulignant les aspects répétitifs et de rupture et les rapports entre les dimensions micro et macrosociales. On situe les efforts de construction du quotidien en tant qu'objet de la psychologie sociale et indique les difficultés en vue de sa théorisation. Finalement, on discute les raisons de la reconnaissance du quotidien en tant que champ privilégié de recherche pour le projet d'une psychologie sociale du travail, dans la mesure où il favorise la reconnaissance des singularités des sens et des signifiés construits par les travailleurs, des formes d'interaction sociale, des processus organisateurs, de la micropolitique, des pratiques astucieuses construites à l'intérieur de rapports asymétriques de pouvoir.

**Mots-clés:** Psychologie sociale du travail, quotidien, processus sociaux, micropolitique.

### **Pensar lo cotidiano: trayectorias para una psicología social del trabajo**

**Resumen:** Este artículo esboza las trayectorias de investigaciones que han llevado la psicología social del trabajo al estudio de lo cotidiano en el contexto laboral. Se presenta el cotidiano como el campo de aprehensión de lo real, con base en una discusión interdisciplinaria sobre el tema, enfatizando sus aspectos de repetición y ruptura, así como las relaciones entre las dimensiones micro y macrosociales. Muestra los esfuerzos de constituir lo cotidiano como objeto de la psicología social, y esboza las dificultades en la teorización de ese objeto. Por último, discute las razones del reconocimiento de lo cotidiano como campo privilegiado de investigación para el proyecto de una psicología social del trabajo en la medida en que favorece el reconocimiento de las singularidades de los sentidos y significados construidos por los trabajadores, de las formas de interacción social, de los procesos organizativos, de la micropolítica y de las prácticas astutas construidas al interior de las relaciones asimétricas de poder.

**Palabras clave:** psicología social del trabajo, cotidiano, procesos sociales, micropolítica.

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