

# A discussion relating individual performance evaluation and mental health: Research conducted in public services in Brazil

Laerte Idal Sznclwar<sup>1</sup>, Ruri Giannini<sup>1</sup>, Daniele Pimentel Maciel<sup>1</sup> and Selma Lancman<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Production Engineering, Polytechnic School, University of São Paulo, Brazil; <sup>2</sup>Department of Ergo-therapy, Medical School, University of São Paulo, Brazil

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## THE WORK IN CONTEXT

The results presented here are related to the research ‘Construction of intersectoriality in the health and work field: Perspective of professionals inserted in the service network of the city of São Paulo’. The main objective of this research is to understand, through the approach of psychodynamics of work (PDW), the work processes of various actors that are in the frontline of the implementation of different policies (Brasil, 2011). One of the main issues that emerged throughout the research concerns the relationship between work and performance appraisal systems, more specifically in the Labour Court. From the evidence already obtained, we can consider that the performance evaluation systems disregard the real work – they are based on production goals defined from strategic objectives adopted without considering what judges actually face, as well as the servitors who work in support teams. There is still a great distortion regarding alignment with the values of the profession. Often, when seeking to achieve goals, other issues are relegated, such as treating cases with stronger degrees of complication, as if they were similar to others considered as routine. Another distortion is that there is not really an engagement in improving the quality of work – there are almost no organisational devices for discussion and feedback. The main purpose is to meet deadlines and goals regarding production volumes rather than to analyse and increase the usefulness of the performance of these public actors. As these evaluation processes, different reward modalities such as promotions and getting more resources, are also involved, there is an even greater distortion, even if this puts different actors in a difficult situation regarding ethical issues. The emergence of pathogenic suffering is one of the mental health consequences of judges and servitors.

## KEYWORDS

Psychodynamics of work, new public management, mental health.

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The results presented here are related to the research ‘Construction of intersectoriality in the health and work field: Perspective of professionals inserted in the service network of the city of São Paulo’. The main objective of this research is to understand, through the approach of psychodynamics of work (PDW), the work processes of various actors that are in the frontline of the implementation of different policies (Brazil, 2011) and involved in different public agencies responsible for their implementation. Reflection groups were held, based on the principles of PDW, with different actors from various sectors: health, work, social security and justice (Dejours, 2008). One of the main issues that emerged throughout the research concerns the relationship between work and performance appraisal systems, more specifically in the Labour Court. From the evidence already obtained, we can consider that the performance evaluation systems disregard the real work – they are based on production goals defined from strategic objectives adopted without considering

what judges actually face, as well as servitors who work in support teams. There is still a great distortion regarding alignment with the values of the profession. Often, when seeking to achieve goals, other issues are relegated, such as treating cases with stronger degrees of complication as if they were similar to other considered as routine. Another distortion is that there is not really an engagement in improving the quality of work – there are almost no organisational devices for discussion and feedback. The main purpose is to meet deadlines and goals regarding production volumes rather than to analyse and increase the usefulness of the performance of these public actors. As these evaluation processes, different reward modalities such as promotions and getting more resources, are also involved, there is an even greater distortion, even if this puts different actors in a difficult situation regarding ethical issues. The emergence of pathogenic suffering is one of the mental health consequences of judges and servitors.

Part of the problems encountered concern the introduction of public management systems inspired by private management. New Public Management (NPM) (Alford, 1993; Alonso, et al., 2015a, 2015b) has been presented as an alternative to the traditional public management model (Hood, 1995). The main objective is to transfer fundamentals and dynamics from the private sector to the public one (Ashraf and Uddin, 2016; Bessant, et al., 2015), believing that private companies have a higher productivity than public ones. Among the criticisms related to the implementation of NPM, it can be evidenced that it does not reach its objectives, as well as the distortions related to the meaning of work. For Bessant, et al. (2015), the NPM can be against the purpose and mission of the public service by embracing neoliberal ethics, sacrificing principles such as social justice, equity, environmental protection, and democratic and ethical decisions.

This does not mean that we should abandon evaluation practices, but rather radically transform them. Evaluation is intrinsic to life in society and the gregarious condition of the human being, it's desired by workers, moreover, the hope for recognition is one of the pillars of motivation at work (Sznclwar, et al., 2011; Dejourn, 2012). Workers have more intense reactions to uncertainty because they are not evaluated in terms of what they actually perform and they do not know how they are contributing to the institution or to society. Actually, they must face more frequently a negative return of an evaluation (Goler, et al., 2016). Finally, it is also possible that intensified individual evaluations destroy cooperation and mutual aid among workers to give rise to competition and distrust among them (Dejourn, 2012). It creates an environment conducive to pathogenic suffering and desolation.

Other social actors, besides judges and servitors, are involved in this system. This is the case with experts who work with judges to help them to obtain greater convictions, especially in cases where a causal relationship between work and the pathology presented by the worker must be defined. This positivist perspective still prevails in Labour Court and influences the strategic decisions of the sector. Even though they are not subject to the same system of evaluation, experts also act in this rationality based mainly on 'productivism'. The perspective of transformation, pursued by both work psychodynamics and ergonomics, is therefore undermined.

### **A brief outline of the work carried out**

Reflection groups were held, based on the principles of PDW, with different actors from various sectors: health, work, social security and justice (Dejourn, 2008). One of the main issues that emerged throughout the research concerns the relationship between work and performance appraisal systems, more specifically in the Labour Court.

### **Findings/solutions (the outcome)**

Performance evaluation systems disregard the real work – they are based on production goals defined from strategic objectives adopted without considering what judges actually face, as well as servitors who work in support teams. This does not mean that we should abandon evaluation practices, but rather radically transform them.

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