

Original article

Occupational health: Models, measures and actions

La santé au travail : modèles, mesures et actions

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This issue of the *European Review of Applied Psychology* is certainly not homogeneous and, paradoxically, Cyril Tarquinio (2008) should be acknowledged for wanting to make it so. The fields of health and work psychology are not unified and the theoretical models which coexist are indebted to both social and clinical psychology, the methods being questionnaires as well as observation in situ. And if the former is dominant in this issue, the instigator behind it knew how to include other perspectives. The interpretation that can be made of the above thus testifies to a concern that can only be shared: not to close the door too quickly on the questions raised by the very definition of the perimeter of research in health/work. This necessary openness concerns all of psychology at a time when this discipline particularly requires inventiveness and ingenuity in order to stand a chance of successfully dealing with the social issues that solicit it.

In order to answer Tarquinio's request to make here some commentaries on the work carried out for this issue, I have finally opted to pose some problems in order to lead to a proposition, that of a psychology of the development of occupational health. In order to do so, I refer to Canguilhem whose ideas can serve as a basis for this proposal. It has the advantage of being formulated in simple terms but poses profound epistemological problems to all that touches the psychology of occupational health: "I am in good health," he writes, "insofar as I feel myself capable of taking responsibility for my acts, to bring things into existence and to create links between things which would not have resulted without me" (2002, p. 68). According to him, we must draw the conclusion that occupational health is not safeguarded when an individual survives in a professional environment without a declared illness – officially or not – but only when he can continue to create a work environment to live in normally, in other words, where he can develop his capacity to act and to think.

A "normal" professional environment can then be defined as an environment in which the organization remains both the source and the resource of this development. As a result, health is certainly not synonymous with an absence of professional illnesses, and one can "ruin one's health" in a work situation well before one "becomes sick of it". Undoubtedly, frustrated professional development and thwarted activity in a work organization, overly inclined to reduce the subjects to the rank of simple means, do not affect the latter in a uniform way. Everybody does not transform the attacks on health that they undergo in finding themselves diminished by the task into a declared illness, and this, owing firstly to the fact that the workers are never only "operators". They are also – even at work – subjects involved simultaneously in several universes between which they can circulate. It is only when this circulation itself proves to be impassable and the compensations in which they could indulge in the workplace itself or outside of work are forbidden that their life becomes "impossible", most often after their professional activity has become "indefensible" from their point of view. These psychological movements which most often express a deleterious underdevelopment of the power to act on one's professional environment and, at the same time, on oneself, are confirmed by the results of several research studies presented in the papers by Laugaa et al. (2008) and by Dompierre et al. (2008). By using diversified methods, they confirm classical data in social psychology and in work psychology (Curie et al., 1990; Gadbois, 1979).

It will also be observed that by looking at things in this way, one is entitled to question, for example, the most consensual definitions of stress. Most often, stress is defined by the subject's evaluation of a situation which exceeds his resources (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). However, from the developmental perspective that we hold, the individual and collective professional resources of the subjects are often, on the contrary, sacrificed by work organizations which do not have the means to encourage the possible development of these resources. It is rather the workers concerned who then make up the "excess weight" of the

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work organization. Undoubtedly, it is possible to make the two approaches shown here compatible, but we acknowledge the fact that by considering that “stress” is designated by a reduction in the power to act or by a “diminished” activity (Yvon, 2003), we are led to the following conclusions: that which, against their will, is not realized by the subjects can become a veritable paradoxical source of “stress” although it is habitual to describe it as a superactivity.

Moreover, based on studies carried out concerning the prevention of MSD, we could postulate that the *hyposolicitation* of the – individual and collective – creative activity at work which is at the origin of the *hypersolicitation* of motor movements, degenerates into necrotizing automatisms and in synkinesis (Clot and Fernandez, 2005). What cannot be done “overloads” what is done, for reasons largely unknown in the literature: the non-realized activities do not disappear from the life of the subjects. They result in as much residue which does not fail to poison their existence at work and outside of work. Nevertheless, what cannot be done weighs heavily on what must be done. It is often the passiveness contained in the frustrating activity which is at the most insidious origin of the least repairable “fatigues”. But this is only the first consequence. The second is that the destiny of these “excesses” is not determined. They can, of course, transform a professional activity into a shut down activity, in all of the meanings of the term. But this destiny is not inevitably morbid. These residues, which are often repressed by the subjects concerned, at the price of costly effort, are also dormant capacities. However, the latter make up unexplored territory for the potential development of occupational health, most often without the subjects’ knowledge. Their thwarted activity can become a source of vitality.

From a certain point of view, the recognition of these unsuspected capacities by the workers themselves is the starting point of the development in question. It is their own recognition of *what they could do or become* and not only the recognition by others of what they do already or even of what they have become which is the principal basis of occupational health (Yvon and Clot, 2003; Roger, 2007). It is their own recognition of this paralyzing passiveness and its reconversion to a possible activity which is the potential source of a renewed professional energy. If this part of passiveness that the workers finish by imposing upon themselves in order to protect themselves from disappointments of reality and rendering themselves impervious is not recognized by them, the recognition by others, so often advanced as a guarantee of occupational health, is removed. This is because it sinks into a bottomless demand which is never merely the artificial compensation of a sluggish development. It is undoubtedly here that one of the main questions concerning psychological research in the field of health/work is asked, as demonstrated by the paper presented by Lanfranchi and Duvéau (2008).

As a result, here one must also confront a paradox. Regarding recognition, recognition by others – peers or the hierarchy – is not everything. We have shown that if workers have the possibility to *recognize themselves in what they do*, in other words in *something to be developed*, it could even enable them to endure a long-term lack of recognition by others. This modality of recognition must be understood as a part of a history which does not

belong to any professional but for which each one of them is accountable. This insertion in *something* is most often realized by the feeling of living the same history; that of such a professional movement, a way of looking at things, of such a tool or of such a space; of such a way of feeling, thinking or acting together in such a way faced with the real. It is *something* which forms the transpersonal memory of a “job”. In this perspective, this professional memory is an instrument of action. It weaves the relationships with others by interposing the “memory of things” between the workers, in all of the meanings of the term. But it is also interposed between each subject and his own acts as the resource of the workgroup for the individual. When this generic memory saturated with insinuations is no longer maintained by the workgroup within an organization which abuses it, as shown by Litim and Kostulski (2008), the former then struggles to recognize itself in what it does. The realized work is no longer justifiable in the eyes of the professionals, and it is often in this type of situation that one “becomes sick of it” (Litim, 2006).

In other words, there are not only the direct *addresses* in the professional undertaking, be they the peer or the hierarchy. The mobilized or immobilized activity is addressed to a superaddressee, to something else and not only to someone else. Can this superaddressee, which often functions as a “helping addressee” (Bakhtine, 1984), be regarded as the transpersonal authority of the job? It is the collective respondent of the personal activity, the history which is continued or is stopped by each one, what one does or does not succeed in making one’s own by involving oneself. This *transpersonal* memory for action is designated by the concept of *professional genre* (Clot, 1999; Roger, 2007). This memory *of the work* which must be transformed each time into memory *of work* in order to affront the singularity of each situation makes up the expectations of the job, which make it possible to confront the unforeseen of the action in progress. It is not the source of this action but the resource of a job which is done alone and by several, in a personal and interpersonal activity, in order to answer to the impersonal requirements of the task.

Self-recognition in the possible future of this collectively held memory – and even in the conception of tasks and the official work organization – is surely the best prevention imaginable. Effectively, in this specific modality of recognition, developing the power to act on one’s environment is linked with the perception of self-efficacy, whose protective effect is known (Bandura, 1997). This is again shown in the paper by Laugaa et al. (2008). But one can also think that the possibility to recognize oneself in something which goes beyond personal and intersubjective activity to involve the subjects in much longer professional temporalities is one of the causes of this “control over the future” that the results shown by Hansez (2008) put into the foreground. The activity of transmitting the collective memory of a professional environment is a mechanism of recognition which is still little studied as such, and more often by default (Clot et al., 2007; Kostulski, 2005; Litim, 2006).

Nevertheless, this question is of great practical importance. Effectively, looking at recognition from the point of view of the control that subjects can exercise over the production of the

collective resources of individual action leads to other lines of actions than those proposed to the workers concerned with finding in themselves the new personal resources for “coping”. The development of the “job” managed by professionals could then constitute a program of prevention in occupational health which would at least be complementary with the individualized treatment of personal problems by experts. As it is again pointed out in one of the papers presented here, a group emotional discharge is not sufficient for the preservation of occupational health. Moreover, the group and workgroup do not intersect. A collective for the management of the job’s future is undoubtedly the best medium for transforming personal emotions into professional emotions, in other words, a means to act (Vygotski, 2003; Santiago-Delefosse, 2002; Roger, 2007).

This question would merit a discussion which could begin following the publication of this issue. In particular, on the point of knowing if the action in work psychology must or must not lead to programs which align the subjects to more “realistic” objectives in their relationship to the job in order to avoid the depersonalizations too often encountered. This psychosocial perspective, which has the virtues of aiming to bring into play compensation between areas of life in order to multiply the subjective investments, has another side: the risk of seeing powerlessness endured in an area such as work which then contaminates other compartments of life. Support for this idea has been established earlier with an appropriate expression from Gadbois, “work has a long arm” (Gadbois, 1979).

Basically, it should be emphasized the extent to which psychology is confronted with problems which can offer a new impetus to the field by studying the links between health and work. The action of transforming situations poses practical problems which question the theoretical models and even the traditional functions of measure. Cerclé et al.’s paper shows the importance of developing the “measure” itself in order to go beyond the homeostatic models of stress. The developmental perspective shown here is encouraging. But that is not all. Hansez (2008) insists on the fact that the measure must be used for the participation of the interested parties themselves and definitely not to replace it. In his famous defense of experimental psychology, Fraisse (1974) wrote that measurement in psychology can never reduce man to a formula. Otherwise, he emphasized, “this formula objectizes one’s life in one’s own eyes and, when the man is an object for himself, he becomes rigid”. From this point of view, the assessment made in Dompierre et al.’s paper is a classical example. Concerning our research activity, as long as the human subjects concerned in our social field do not have a *demand* which is likely to transform this research into a psychological instrument of development of their own activity, as long as they have not “evaluated” the research, there is little chance that they would use it.

We have here an excellent lesson in humility. But surely less reason to renounce than to insist: that of developing other modalities of research and not only other scientific models.

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