

# The contribution of the psychodynamics of work to the practice of career counseling: understand and take action on problems of mental health at work

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This presentation has two specific aims regarding the career counselor practice:

- Document work situations potentially at risk to the mental health of education professionals in schools, including guidance counselors.
- Present a method of research-intervention to inspire the practices of career counselors who work in the field of mental health at work.

This presentation relies on a research-intervention conducted in two high schools (secondary level) in Quebec (Canada). This study (Maranda & Viviers, 2011) had the objective to identify work situations with risks for the mental health of the staff, by the analysis of the suffering at work and the individual and collective defensive strategies tied to the work organization. More specifically, the study aimed at accompanying the participants in the understanding of these work situations and in the development of an action plan to prevent problems of mental health at work.

If this study is, on the scientific plan, at the crossroads of the hermeneutic and critical paradigms, it is, on the methodological plan, a matter of an "action research" on the work and the subjectivity, called the "clinic of work" (Lhuillier, 2006). This type of research postulates that the subjects (the employees) participate in the production of knowledge on their work; they are the best in particular to describe the sources of their suffering and think of courses of action to remedy it. So, this study is founded on the subjective experience of work of the staff coming from four occupational categories working within two high schools of Quebec, i.e. 1) the teachers; 2) the professional support staff (education professionals); 3) the technical support staff; and 4) the management staff. The research method leans more specifically on the "psychodynamics of work" (Dejours, 2008), a clinical approach in which the role of the researchers is to accompany the groups of participants in an analysis of the dynamics between the organizational context, the suffering experienced in the work and the defense strategies. Following a "demand" coming from a collectivity (e.g., preoccupied by an increase of long-term sick leaves), a research team was constituted to accompany this collectivity and carry out the inquiry. In each of the two schools involved, the researchers launched,

at first, a public invitation to the staff to form four groups of voluntary participants (from the four aforesaid occupational categories). The number of participants varied from 6 to 14 persons per group, for a total of 80. The process of research was carried out in two stages: the first one characterized by the listening and the analysis of the subjective and inter-subjective experience of work of each group of participants; and the second one in the course of which the researchers' analysis of psychodynamics of work was discussed with the participants from a written report. Following the inquiry, the groups became joint holders of the final report depositing the knowledge produced within the framework of this study.

From analyses produced in each of eight groups of participants (four/school), the findings of this study allowed to identify and to document six work situations potentially at risk for the mental health of the school staff. Let's take a closer look at the way these situations are lived in the specific case of the education professionals, a staff category that includes guidance counselors, but also school psychologists, psycho educators, speech therapists, student life animators, etc.

1) the job burden;

In the last few years, education professionals have seen several mandates within the organization of school work added to their task load. With the increase of students in difficulty as much on the academic as on psychosocial plans, education professionals were invited to "do otherwise", but it is manifested in the facts by "do more with less": more tasks to do, certainly, but also meeting students with more intense needs. Also, the job burden makes the education professionals feel unable to do enough, or even not competent. Obsolete, they are taken to be witnesses of situations over which they would have liked to be able to intervene without the power to do so.

2) the pressures of time in an emergency mode;

Accompaniment implies a work that is done on the long-term. Currently, two types of logic are confronting this prerequisite. On one side, the reality of time in school environments is dictated by emergency and unpredictable situations inherent to working with human beings, and children in particular. On the other hand, the "accounting" logic appears to be taking increasingly more importance in the school environment, leading to increased demands of efficiency on the part of professionals. These logics are converging toward commands to "execute" questionable tasks regarding student needs by providing immediate solutions and being evaluated on the immediate results... The work necessary to exercise their profession according to their professional conscience is thus disregarded, or even hidden or denied.

3) the complexity of the tasks and the confusion in roles;

It seems that the work in the school environment is more complex. The different policies governing the school work support the decompartmentalization of professional practices, in a context of collaboration, among others. Several workers are thus called upon to intervene in the student records. However, the education professionals noticed a lack of knowledge about professional roles among the various actors of the school, including the school managers, who are supposed to organize the work. The confusion in roles leads to situations where the education professionals are faced with a kind of non-choice: either they accept to play a role that is not theirs to be able to do their work, either they leave the student with its problems... In short, the complexity of the work and the multiplication of the number of workers in the student records that is engendered, questions the "place" that the education professionals have in the school.

4) the bureaucracy and the disorganization;

The education professionals are faced with the disadvantages of the bureaucracy without the benefits they might expect... On one hand, they experience a disorganization of work: year after year, they notice the same organizational problems without any change; they do not have access to all information and procedures they need to

do their work correctly, while carrying the professional accountability of their actions; considering the managers' turnover in schools (5 years maximum in a specific school), the "organizational memories" of the schools rely on their shoulders. On the other hand, "red tape" bureaucratic measures (e.g. multiple forms) to obtain basic but essential work tools are substantially burdening their work. This situation generates strain and frustration.

5) the social tensions and the violence;

If the education professionals find, as in the other occupational categories, violence behaviors to be more and more frequent in the schools, it is a form of "organizational" violence toward the profession, which affects them more directly. In fact, they have the feeling of being "used as a tool" for organizational purposes, without any consideration and recognition of their expertise, their profession, to their ways of doing, and the requirements they underlie. This can lead to resentment toward school managers and contribute to interpersonal tensions.

6) the precariousness of work contracts;

Finally, the education professionals tell us that the beginning of a career in education is particularly challenging given that they must often work in several different schools within the same work contract. They must therefore work with several school managers, with each having their expectations and their style, as well as with the staff of these different schools. This situation exacerbates the intensity of the other situations described, while increasing the tolerance to these difficult situations, all the while increasing a feeling of isolation.

These six situations are marked by a work organization threatening the mental health of the school staff. So, considering the suffering which they engender, why do these situations persist? According to the theory of the psychodynamics of work, the workers set up, in their work, individual and collective defense strategies to contain the suffering, strategies that contribute insidiously to the persistence of the problems of the work organization which are at the source of the suffering.

Two types of defensive strategies came out as most prominent. In the first place, we noticed an adaptation to the mission of the school as a "mending facility" by individually compensating for social, educational and institutional problems by performing little extra tasks "on the sly", or without recognition. This can be translated through, for example, replacing a school manager to punish some students, or by giving in to overworking when the performance requirements encourage giving oneself totally for the school, seven days a week, in a form of "heroic self" taking everything onto their shoulders.

The other type of defensive strategy is in reaction to the invasion of work, which leads to reproducing one of these actions:

- a) An impossible "limits speech", a reminder given frequently by education professionals for whom this is a rule, yet still impossible to apply to the actual workload when means and resources are lacking;
- b) Practicing a rhetoric inspired by the new public management, in other words the positive discourse to mobilization which in fact creates silences or trivializes distress (or even denies it);
- c) Out of breath, physically or psychologically withdrawing from the work, especially through days off or leaves. Falling back or stepping out of the line of fire to avoid the invasion of work into one's private life are good examples.

To summarize, the helping professions require a gift of oneself, an extraordinary feat offset by the pleasure of the work. When the defense strategies characterized by "adaptation" have failed and one is forced to withdraw, the latter may be transformed surreptitiously in severance from the suffering reality, in a manner more or less radical. This severance from reality also disconnects from the pleasure provided by work. In short, these defensive strategies are individual stopgap measures that may be adequate for a time, but they do not alter the conditions at the source of the pathogenic suffering. They contribute to the individualization of the relationship to work initiated by the organization

of work. Moreover, according to our analysis, these defensive strategies contribute to the "risk" of the work situations for the mental health of the school staff because they play a role of "preservation" of the pathic constraint which can, eventually, lead to more important mental health problems, as well as the consequences of these strategies on the work done day-to-day (e.g., consequence on the students).

In addition to this broad psychodynamic of work inquiry, the action-research that we have conducted provided for a "post-investigation" device to accompany the schools in the design of an action plan to intervene specifically on risky situations identified by the investigation. The work groups which participated in this study are currently in the process of implementing measures that would correct or modify in a practical way the work situation by actions at the school level, such as giving more visibility and recognition of the work, a successful integration in the school environment (and not just insertion measures for some), better professional relationships when solving intervention problems, a more respectful management of life quality at work, a more dynamic understanding of mental health at work, as well as their treatment through occupational health and safety committees with the intent to help the relationship school staff have towards their work evolve.

Two findings emerge from this research about the practice of guidance counselors. On the one hand, certain work situations in the school environment are likely to generate a dynamic potentially pathogenic for mental health. Another ongoing research conducted specifically with guidance counselors in school suggested that, despite their knowledge and skills about the relationship between the individual, his job and training, the guidance counselors find they are also faced with such a dynamic, perhaps even amplified by the infiltration of the "individual adaptation" in the values promoted in the profession.

This brings us to the second finding about the practice of guidance counselors, which concerns, in this case, the organizational field of practice. In fact, researchers and practitioners in the vocational guidance field are closely interested in the problem of mental health at work. Approaches in research and intervention are mostly based on an "individualizing" conceptualization of the problems which is translated in professional practices aiming at: the selection of the best candidates, skill development programs (e.g., stress and time management, cognitive restructuring, resilience growth), managers' training to intervene effectively with "difficult persons", etc. These approaches do not however take into account environmental and organizational "health" in which mental health problems occur. The findings of our inquiry show the existence of difficult work situations which support the hypothesis of a "sick" work organization, the persistence of which can be explained by the deployment of individual and collective defense strategies. The guidance counselors should therefore develop practices that can deal with the problems of mental health at work at the "collective" level, in a perspective of action for a systemic, organizational or social resolution of these problems and thus avoid shifting the responsibility of problems on the shoulders of individuals.

The "clinic of work" that we propose joins in a paradigmatic frame which aims at the same time a production of knowledge - on professional experience - and an "action" in the meaning of *praxis* (Arendt, 1961/1994), i.e. a politico-moral action directed toward others, as autonomous beings and agents of the development of their own autonomy (Mosconi, 2001). This type of "act together" methods "allows to make a commitment in forms of cooperation and exchange, to bring back a distribution (division) of places and tasks, to distance oneself of our own history to ensure activities which connect with others and which relate to the common world" (Lhuillier, 2010, p. 221, free translation). It seems to us that the "clinic of work" can constitute a promising "action research" approach for guidance counseling practitioners allowing them to better understand and to take action on problems of mental health at work in the contemporary world, and contributing to social justice and sustainable employment.

Keywords: Psychodynamics of work; mental health problems at work; risky work situation

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