

Moral harassment and the subjectivity of the contemporary worker: Analysis of the Ambev case

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamics of contemporary work and its impact on workers' mental health, focusing in particular on organizational culture and bullying. Corporate culture, when it promotes cooperation and respect, benefits employee well-being; on the other hand, competitive and precarious environments can increase the risk of mental disorders. The Ambev case illustrates how collective bullying practices can affect workers' identity and well-being, highlighting the need for healthy organizational policies. The study uses a qualitative approach and the case study method to investigate this complex relationship, guided by the theory of Work-Related Mental Health (WRMH).

Keywords: Bullying, Organizational culture, Work psychology, Work-related mental health, Case study.

INTRODUCTION

The multifaceted dynamics of the contemporary world of work are marked by profound structural and economic transformations driven by capitalism, which significantly influence labor relations and the subjectivity of workers. In this current scenario, the intensification of the demands for adaptation and innovation imposed on workers is evident, which can compromise the construction of a professional identity, resulting in feelings of alienation, insecurity and fragmentation of identity (Sennett, 2009).

Organizational culture plays a crucial role in the mental health of workers. Work environments that promote values of cooperation, respect, and recognition contribute positively to employee well-being (Fleury, 1996). On the other hand, organizational cultures that emphasize exacerbated competition, unattainable goals, and meritocracy (irrational and individualistic) can generate a hostile work environment, increasing the risk of mental disorders such as stress, anxiety, and depression (Mattos, 2012). Characteristics of this model, the flexibilization and precariousness of labor relations have intensified practices of moral harassment in the workplace. Lack of job security and constant pressure to perform create a breeding ground for abusive behavior by superiors and co-workers.

Barreto's (2005) research was pioneering in revealing that 42% of the workers interviewed reported situations of humiliation, highlighting inclusion through exclusion as a common phenomenon in Brazilian companies. Seligmann-Silva (2022) emphasizes the need for organizational policies that promote a healthy and harassment-free work environment, while Hirigoyen (2002) and Soboll (2008)

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discuss the devastating consequences of bullying for workers' mental health. In the workplace, abusive practices such as name-calling, task overload, social exclusion, and the imposition of humiliating tasks are common.

Collective moral harassment, a practice in which humiliation and exposure correspond to generalized conduct to a department, sector or group of employees, was evident in the cases involving Ambev. Such practices have severe consequences and directly affect the identity of workers. The conviction of Ambev by the TST (Superior Labor Court), in addition to imposing fines and indemnities, highlights the need to punish the naturalization of discrimination and abusive practices under the excuse of "humor" or "masculinized jokes" (Valor Econômico, 2023) (Superior Labor Court, 2023).

The objective of this work is to understand the relationship between organizational culture and moral harassment, using the case of Ambev as a reference. We highlight the need for public policies and organizational practices that promote fairer, healthier and more humanized work environments (Antunes, 1999). In addition, in our case, it highlights the importance of multidisciplinary approaches to address the complex relationships between work and mental health, contributing to the development of effective intervention and prevention strategies in the field of Work-Related Mental Health (SMRT) (Seligmann-Silva, 2022).

This scenario is highlighted by Mourão and Borges (2013), when they underline the importance of Psychology in understanding work dynamics. The interaction between organizational culture and individual and collective attitudes creates a fertile field for the manifestation of dysfunctions such as moral harassment. Therefore, when the organizational culture promotes openness, innovation, and dialogue, as highlighted earlier, a climate conducive to collaboration and well-being is created. However, when it is permeated by norms and values that reinforce harassing practices, the consequences can be devastating for workers' well-being and mental health.

METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the objectives proposed in this study, a qualitative approach is proposed, aligned with research practices in the humanities and social sciences. As argued by Demo (1995), qualitative research allows for a deep and detailed understanding of social and organizational dynamics, and is particularly suitable for exploring complex topics such as, in our case, organizational culture and bullying. Lakatos and Marconi (2010) complement this argument by showing that qualitative research enables an interpretative analysis that goes beyond the mere description of phenomena, allowing a richer exploration of the context and perceptions of the individuals involved. Severino (2017) complements by highlighting the ability of this approach to capture subjective perceptions and experiences, which are fundamental, in our case, to understand the internal dynamics of an organization like Ambev.



In addition to this method, we used the case study in our work. The choice of Ambev's case study is central to this research due to its relevance and representativeness in the Brazilian business context. According to Yin (2015), the case study is a powerful methodological tool for investigating contemporary phenomena in depth and in their real context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident. In the case of Ambev, moral harassment and organizational culture are intertwined in a complex way, making it a paradigmatic example for studying these interactions.

The data analysis will be based on the SMRT theory. Araujo (2007) highlights the complexity and challenges faced in monitoring SMRT in Brazil, emphasizing the importance of a close look at working conditions and health surveillance policies, addressing the transformations in the world of work and emphasizing precariousness and labor flexibilization, which can lead to deteriorated working conditions, increasing the risk of mental disorders among workers.

As this is a research, still under construction, we do not yet have the final results, but the guidelines to guide us in this search were: the adoption of a more restricted time criterion, such as 10 years, is justified due to the dynamic nature of scientific research, based on previously established descriptors. In addition, we foresee the realization of a bibliographic research, still in preparation, based on previously established descriptors.

In addition, the research is already based on some reference studies to guide its construction, which are organized into two major axes: organizational culture and moral harassment. The reference texts used for organizational culture are: *Culture and Power in Organizations* (1996) by Maria Tereza Leme Fleury; *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (2009) by Edgar Schein; *Psychology, Organizations and Work in Brazil* (2014) by José Carlos Zanelli, Jairo Eduardo Borges-Andrade, Antonio Virgílio Bittencourt Bastos; *Work and Organizations: Actions from Psychology* (2013) by Livia de Oliveira Borges and Luciana Mourão; and *Chiavenato* (2008): *People management*. The reference texts used for moral harassment are: *Malaise at work: redefining moral harassment* (2002) by Marie-France Hirigoyen; *Moral/organizational harassment: an analysis of the organization of work* (2008) by Lis Andréa Pereira Soboll; *Moral Harassment: Heloani's Violated Dignity* (2005); and *Moral harassment: subtle violence: epidemiological and psychosocial analysis at work in Brazil*, by Margarida Maria Silveira Barreto (2005).

RESULTS

So far, we can point out that there is a clear relationship between moral harassment and the neoliberal capitalist context, highlighting the precariousness of labor relations and its consequences for workers' mental health. Among our references, the following stand out: Sennett (2009), who discusses the transition to more flexible practices and the impact on workers' professional identity; Enriquez (2014), who explores the psychosocial dimension of work dynamics and their effect on mental health; Dejours



(1992), who analyzes how the dynamics of the work environment influence the mental health of workers; Joazeiro (2011), who studies the relationship between work, subjectivity and mental health, highlighting the impacts of precarious working conditions; Antunes (1999, 2000), who discusses the new morphology of work, precariousness and its effects on workers' identity; Bauman (2001), who reflects on fluidity and disposability in the contemporary world and its implications for professional identity; Fleury and Fischer (1996), who explored the intersection between organizational culture and power dynamics within companies; and Schein (2009), who analyzes organizational culture as a set of values, beliefs, and norms that influence behavior in the workplace.

From the analysis of the material collected, it is possible to show that the reality of transformations in the world of work, especially under the influence of neoliberalism and globalization, finds an example in the episodes of collective and structural moral harassment at Ambev, the largest beer manufacturer in the world.

The SMRT will be the basis for the analysis of all these data and, as raised so far, it is possible to understand that the SMRT seeks to study and mitigate the psychosocial risk factors in the work environment that lead to mental illness in workers.

The results obtained so far corroborate the thesis that the transformations in the contemporary world of work, driven by the logics of neoliberal manipulative capitalism, have significant implications for the subjectivity of workers. The demand for continuous adaptation and the volatility of work relationships can compromise the construction of professional identities, generating additional challenges for the mental health of individuals.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Initially, we discuss the reconfiguration of labor relations in the neoliberal context, characterized by flexibility, temporary contracts and precariousness. These changes, which challenge the construction of workers' professional identity and economic stability, create a breeding ground for abusive management practices. The case of AMBEV is a tangible example of these theoretical dynamics. The company's corporate culture, marked by practices of moral harassment and psychological abuse, reflects the extreme adaptability and flexibility required in the neoliberal scenario.

These reformulations aim to integrate the analysis of the Brazilian management style with the problem of moral harassment, highlighting the case of Ambev to provide a comprehensive and relevant study on the organizational culture in the Brazilian context. The problem situation that motivates this research is the observation that the way work is organized today, based on these flexible and neoliberal models, tends to feed a context or cultures that deal with moral harassment practices.



The situation at Ambev serves as a wake-up call for the need for policies and practices that promote healthy, fair and respectful work environments. Consequences, which have proven to be disastrous to the point that recently the company itself recognized its faults and began to adopt a more acceptable culture in relation to such acts.

Psychologists play a fundamental role in addressing moral harassment in the workplace, acting with social and ethical commitment to promote the health and well-being of workers in their biopsychosocial aspects. The work of psychologists involves identifying and intervening in situations of moral harassment, providing psychological support to victims and collaborating in the creation of organizational policies that prevent such abusive practices.



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