

**PERCEPTIONS OF PSYCHOSOCIAL RISK AT WORK:  
AN EXPERIENCE WITH NON-PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYEES AT UNLP**

*Julieta Cassini* \*

**Abstract**

“Psychosocial risks at work: analysis of their impact on the health of employees, organizations, health systems and social security” is a research project that is approved by the SECyT-UNLP. It takes place since 2014 at the Faculty of Economics of UNLP. The research team is an interdisciplinary group of professionals and university students from different field such as economics, psychology, sociology, medicine and social work. From this perspective, the aim is to reach an integrated and holistic view of the Psychosocial Risks at Work (PSRW). The study of PSRW is very important due to the impact of them in the development of the organizations, working conditions, life of workers and, its inherent financial cost of health system and social security. The main objective of this project is to explore, identify and describe perceptions of the PSRW which occur among non-professional employees at UNLP and the manifestations of health-illness process in workers and their psychological strategies to face them. Finally, it is expected to analyze the consequences of the PSRW in socioeconomic dimensions of the organizations as well.

**Key Words:** Psychosocial Risks at Work, Non Professional Employees of UNLP, Health-illness Process, Psychological Strategies

---

\* Motivational Scholarship to scientific Vocations, awarded by the Interuniversity National Council, 2014. Faculty of Psychology, La Plata National University.

In the present work, an experience with non-professional workers of UNLP (still on course) is developed. It is embedded in the research project: “*Psychosocial risks at work: analysis of their impact on the health of employees, organizations, health systems and social security*”. It was approved by the SECyT-UNLP, in 2014. This project has taken place at the Faculty of Economics of UNLP. The research team is an interdisciplinary group of professionals and university students from different fields such as economics, psychology, sociology, medicine and social work. From this perspective, the aim is to reach an integrated and holistic view of the Psychosocial Risks at Work (PSRW).

The main objective of this project is to explore, identify and describe perceptions of the PSRW which occur among non-professional employees at UNLP and the manifestations of health-illness process in workers and their psychological strategies to face them. Finally, it is expected to analyze the consequences of the PSRW in socioeconomic dimensions of the organizations as well.

### **Conceptual framework**

To build the conceptual framework, we appeal to the contributions of many disciplines: occupational psychology, psychopathology and psychodynamic of work, psychoanalysis, ergonomics, sociology of work, preventive psychology, and economy, as the intersection among occupational health, mental health and epidemiology.

Psychosocial risks at work (PSRW) are defined as those psychosocial factors, inherent to the organizations which turn into negative aspects of them and cause damage on employees' health. (Rodríguez, 2009). In a holistic point of view, PSRW are harmful to all dimensions of health: biological, psychological and social. They are determined by

certain type of work's conditions, organizational factors which usually interact with mental functioning (Gollac, 2011). According to Gollac, they could be classified into the following categories:

- Intensity of work: related with the charge of work, overexertion, exertion, working pace, little demands or requirements, few tasks to do and no challenges at work.
- Emotional demands: Being in contact with people who may be anxious, anguished, annoyed and to have control over their own feelings and other people's feelings.
- Autonomy: Lack or excess of autonomy to take decisions, do tasks, cooperate in projects, show their skills and develop a professional career.
- Relations and social links: In a vertical line (with authorities), horizontal (with partners) and with clients or users.
- Ethical conflicts: Working against norms or social, professional or personal's Values.
- Job uncertainty: Connected with the type of contract that employees had signed, precarious working situations and insecurity work. Risk of lose their jobs or decrease their wages. It's also associated with continuous modifications at workstations and do not have chances of getting a promotion.
- This assumes that is crucial to consider the PSRW from a new conception of work conditions and environment (WCE) (Neffa, 1989). This category includes PSRW and it is also delimited by them. In consequence, the PSRW not only does they take care of physical, chemical, biological, technological, etc. risks that may affect the health of the body (traditional approach of occupational health and safety) but also, from this standpoint became visible affective, relational, mental and cognitive

aspects of them at work as well. Because of this, the strong association between WCE and employees' health in diverse working areas is palpable.

It is important to highlight that our research project focuses on the perceptions of PSRW, which means that we consider essential the particular point of view of any situation and subject, taking into account the informative and cognitive characteristics but also the evaluative and attitudinal ones. (Bonzo, 2001)

One of the possible expressions of these risks on the workers could be due to diverse processes of health-illness. From perspectives such as psychodynamic at work, with contributions of psychoanalysis and ergonomics, the possibility of suffering is correlated with the gap between prescribed task and real work (Dejours, 1992). The presentations of health-illness processes can consider the biological, mental, cognitive, emotional and social dimensions of life. It is central to note that even if the suffering presentations localized on the subjective order, this etiology exceeds the individual point of view.

It is essential the contributions of the occupational psychology that has arrived to the conclusions that workers in their jobs are no passive and besides, they suffer risks during the working day in organizations. Commensurate with Dejours (1992), so as to employees adapt and resilient to PSRW, have to reinterpret and reconstruct the instructions given by the superiors, partners, clients and users. In this way, they improve "defensive ideology of work practice" which let them forget about it for a period of time and not to think about the negative aspects of the work and this allows them to do their jobs.

In social sciences, there are other conceptual and explicative prototypes which are indispensable to go deeper into the subject. One of this is a model theorized and proved by Karasek in 70's. It is called "JCQ" (Job content questionnaire) and it measures the

psychosocial requirements at work and the possibility of autonomy. In addition, this model could be complemented by another dimension: "Social support", a variable proposed by Johnson.

Furthermore, another contribution is very useful to the issue: Effort-reward Imbalance (ERI) model originally formulated by Siegrist (2006). According to this, work-related benefits depend upon a reciprocal relationship between efforts and rewards at work. The ERI model claims that work characterized by both high efforts and low rewards represents a reciprocity deficit between high costs and low gains, which could cause negative emotions and strain stress. A significant reward (money, a complement about the job done) creates welfare and contributes to health.

The strategies of the employees are varied and they can work in very different ways for each one. For example: coping strategies, resilience, sublimation, adaptation, over-adaptation, etc.

Finally, it is expected to highlight the economic and epidemiology point of view. Nowadays the PSRW have become a transversal issue in very different organization's agendas. The social and health system also take them into consideration as well as professional illnesses, absence from work, working environment and long term medical treatments. In the same way the social and human costs, due to PSRW, are significant.

In this way, it could be thought as a starting point of departure in which the organizations may formulate diverse labor policies to reduce the prevalence and incidence of the mentioned variables.

## **Methodology**

For the investigation it was used an exploratory cross sectional descriptive design. (Hernández Sampieri, Fernández Collado, & Baptista, 1998). An important and constructive tool was the multiple triangulations of theory, strategies and sorts of data. The target population was non-professional employees of UNLP. Access has been established and consent obtained through meetings and previous experiences with non-professional workers union of UNLP called ATULP (Asociación de Trabajadores de la Universidad Nacional de La Plata). In this way, a diagnosis of their needs was done and it allowed starting awareness and consensus among the population about these topics. (Salas, Aguadiak y Gravellone, 2012).

Over a total population of 2178 workers, a random test sample was built up raising the number of 346 employees. Some dimensions were considered for the sample: number of agencies in general, distribution of non-professional employees in the entities of UNLP and in which group they worked (administration personnel, maintenance staff, general services staff, technical assistance, specialized assistance and professional assistance).

The research team has realized a widespread bibliographical exploration by reading up-to-date materials in many formats. This process has been accompanied by team's meetings. Likewise, the team has attended to seminars, conferences and courses inside and outside of the project.

In order to collect data, some instruments were chosen:

- Semi-structured interviews and In-depth interviews: With the objective to interview workers and few key informants and focusing on their perceptions of PSRW, its relation with health and their strategies.
- Spontaneous observation: with the purpose of watching the conditions and environment of work of non-professional employees of UNLP, the dynamic of their works, the tasks they develop and the social interrelations.

- Visualizing workshop: “How do I feel my body at work?” It involves a group technique with the intention of raising awareness among staff of PSRW, their bodies and the way they cope up with them. The main objective was break up with the strict rationality of daily life. (Giraudó, 2001).
- Survey on Psychosocial Risks at Work adapted to our country and especially to the target population (filed in “Dirección Nacional del Derecho de Autor” by J.C. Neffa and team, dic. 2013): currently the survey team is applying it. It has been surveyed almost 85% of the sample.
- Systematization and analysis of data: Thanks to the incorporation of informatics programs to classify and make the database. It emphasizes that the team has used free software of Faculty of Economic of UNLP to load data to the system.
- At last, we projected to prepare a final report as well as the transfer of procedures and partial and total results.

### **Preliminary results**

The results we dispose are relative and qualitative ones. They come from interviews done in the context of the research project, the visualizing workshop, spontaneous observations of the survey team and the first data processes. As yet, we do not have the total of the data because the survey is still being applied to the employees. At the end, we expect count on qualitative and quantitative data to approach to a comprehensive approach to this subject of study. It is important to remark that in 2014 some members of the research team, simultaneously, carried out an extension project called: “*Let’s talk about work: Know the conditions of work so we can transform them*”. By mean of this project we could approximate to the workers of UNLP in a different way.

Thereby, we can localize areas to further discuss:

- The name “non-professional employees of UNLP” has been a relevant issue until now in the project. They have repeatedly expressed that and this name is not representative for them, their jobs, and they do not feel because of it part of the team. In fact, this designation called them as the opposite what professional employees (teachers) are.
- It would seem that exist a big diversity among demands of work. In some workplaces there is a permanent overexertion (Ex. specialized health assistance staff). On the other hand, in others workplaces there are little exigency and few tasks to do all the time or in some parts of the year (Ex. Contest departments). The little exigency is felt like distress and/or boring because their jobs lose sense.
- The attention to the public is related with emotional demands. For example they usually have to keep calm people who are angry, anguished, anxious, etc. and they have to quickly or relative quickly respond, many time by their means, to students, teachers and public.
- A considerable number of workers have indicated that “they do not have expectations of promotion” due to they have already risen to the top category or they do not trust in the transparency of contests or they have had discussions with authorities and think it is a very influent factor to get a promotion.
- It has also been detected mobbing situations and labor conflicts among partners and/or authorities, teaches, management, public.
- The maintenance staff may have developed “defensive ideology of work practice” related with unappropriated use of tools or special clothes to work or uniforms to protect themselves from the risks they are exposed.

- A lot of workers pronounced they fell “proud of the job they do because they can do something useful for others”

The consequences that their jobs may have in their health, the participants of the investigation pointed the existence of: muscle spasms, high blood pressure, muscle tension and headaches. To confront the symptoms they have developed some strategies such as: doing activities outside, doing recreational activities which make them relax, take care and balance positive and negative aspects that have already existed in their workplaces (Ex. The importance of count with their autonomy despite of high demands of work, or maybe rewards from their partner, the management, and public in general as well).

### **Final comments**

This work gives an account of the development within the research project. In this way a general overview has been made through the conceptual framework in which it is supported as well as the particularities considered while researching a high complex and multidetermined subject of inquiry as the PSRW are.

The approach chosen by the research team to carry out this project has considered:

- The relevance that the team is an interdisciplinary one that encourages the exchange, debate and reflection among the disciplinary fields involved to conceive and approach PSRW.
- The fact of that the research focuses on the view and perception of RPST (employees’ own perspectives, visions, opinions, feelings and experiences). In this way the emotional, relational and cognitive skills have been prioritized. All of them take into consideration the psychical and mental aspects.

- The methodological relevance is related with the investigation design chosen and the multiple triangulations that allows combining within the same investigation different strategies, theoretical perspectives and data sources having diverse instruments to approach to the sample of 346 non- professional employees at the UNLP.
- Bear in mind that PSRW is a topic which is going to make visible and raise awareness, to think them in each working situation arouses different sensations and feelings. By means of an investigation design like this it is difficult to contain and accompany the situation. That is why it has been thought in the appropriateness of an extension project that let the whole workers have a space of support, reflection and exchange of their working situation with other workers from other working environments.
- To consider this issue is in varied sectors of the activity, which is important to keep in mind and replicate in next research considering that the PSRW develop in organizations that process raw materials with the help of machines and tools (direct work) as well as administrative tasks and service sector (indirect work).
- The research project is still working about the issue but partial results have been made. They have been the result of qualitative data analysis techniques. It can be mentioned as found issues: discomfort about their nomination as “non-professional”, different situations related to the intensity of the work, emotional demands, bad social relationship and violence at work considering their work as one of the main issue related to the PSRW. Referred to the consequences of their work for their health, the workers have pointed contractures, general discomfort, muscular tension, headaches and the increase of blood pressure.