Psychodynamics of Student Work in a Context of Job Scarcity and Economic Insecurity

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the results of a survey on the psychodynamics of student course work (Dejours, 1993) conducted over a three-year period with some one hundred university students in twelve programs[1]. In addition to the high dropout rates during the first years of university, certain signs of distress observed by guidance counsellors prompted us to attempt to understand the anxiety that students feel about their future.

Introduction

Young people from Quebec have been particularly affected by the numerous rounds of restructuring in the world of work. The unemployment rate for the 15-29 year old age group is 13,4% compared with 9,0% for the general population (Maranda and Leclerc, 2000). The comparative advantage enjoyed by university students over people with a lower education level does not stop them from feeling insecure because what awaits many of them is an immediate future of underemployment, student loan repayments, and temporary jobs.

This research led to discussions on the pleasures and sufferings related to studies and to the recognition of a number of defensive mechanisms inherent to the type of training chosen. As Dejours states (1993), work is an activity that is performed by people in order to achieve certain production goals. In the case of student work, this means the production of knowledge or skills, the production of social relations and the production of the self. Marks, credits and a diploma are the equivalent of compensation.

Ten programs have been examined to date. They are: architecture, biology, communication, computer sciences, literature, physical education, physiotherapy, occupation therapy, sociology and visual arts. By encouraging the formation of groups of students who are in the same program, we have created spaces for discussion in which students can reveal, discuss and question the constraints and rules of work associated with the pursuit of studies in a context of fierce competition and performance. Two situations related to common issues have been selected.

Silence and Repression of Anxiety

In programs where job scarcity is well known, such as sociology, visual arts, literature, communication, love for the discipline is an overriding condition of integration. Passion is both vital and indispensable. Like any person who works, students in those programs are concerned about how the usefulness of what they do is valued, that is, they hope for living conditions, a recognition of the beneficial effect of their work and its marked value. However, these hopes are dampened by the image that society conveys to them of the thinker, the intellectual and the useless artist (old clichés that resurface in the race for high-paying jobs). This is heightened by the doubts that families and friends have about their future and by the taboos which block communication. In many programs, passion becomes an implicit and explicit norm: "You have to be born with it". In this message conveyed by employers, teachers and the media, enthusiasm and passion are prescribed as an antidote to moroseness. This motivation discourse takes the form of a paradoxical command. Thus, this context leaves no room for students to express doubts about the purpose of their studies, and even less room for them to criticize the training and the institution.

Silence on this subject becomes a burden, a suffering that is borne alone and which can become increasingly oppressive over time. To avoid bringing up these questions, students choose not to discuss the worrying factors because, for many of them, anxiety is something to be hidden. Students decide to not bring up these topics that are considered to be personal because they fear being judged by their peers and future employers. It is better to "appear to be motivated" in order to believe in the future and not be identified, or even labelled, as not being passionate enough, even if it means that you do not truly feel this at all. Passion could become instrumental in a quest for effectiveness and productivity.

Performance and endurance

We now turn to the context in which employment is almost guaranteed but where competition and selection still prevail: computers and health sciences programs. Students are rigorously selected on the basis of academic results. For example, in occupational therapy, only 60 out of 500 applicants are chosen per year. Thus, those students are the symbols of excellence and have been the pride and joy of their families and friends since childhood. Although honours give the greatest of pleasure, the downside is that they include the requirements to perform. This requirement comes first from the education system whose practices are heavily focused on measuring results, and then from parents for whom marks are very important. Students have internalized these norms and are in the habit of setting extremely high targets for themselves and continuously keeping themselves above average, which gives them an immediate feeling of euphoria that must be constantly renewed. The pressure exerted in this way has led to brilliant results but also to bouts of intense stress and even exhaustion.

A new requirements is added to the results-related requirements, that is, to be a well-balanced person. In wishing to project an almost perfect image as students and future professionals in the helping relationship, there is a risk of doubling the academic results performance with performance related to psychological balance. It is no longer enough to succeed, one must project the image of a well-balanced person, show self-confidence in the face of uncertainty, manage one's stress, etc. These students are aware of the dangers inherent in a productivity-centred work organization, having read academic studies on stress and burn-out. In this sense, they believe that they are on a well-balanced path because they have the information that allows them to develop an objective knowledge of these issues. However, this is but a narrow line. Within this ideal, there is little room for fatigue, bad mood, disagreement or mistake and there is a real risk of slipping towards a defensive ideology which over-values the individual's responsibility to adjust at the expense of a critique of systemic constraints. This defensive strategy means keeping one's problems to oneself, subjecting oneself to a harsh discipline, working without complaining, gritting one's teeth and … often putting one's desire on the back burner. Students agree to subject themselves to this in the hope that, one day, they will no longer be forced to make so many sacrifices for their work. This second nature is laden with after-effects. Over time, they become experts in enduring and come to believe and say that they have no choice but to adjust to the situation.

Conclusion

This approach of psychodynamics of work can play a preventive role in counselling and guidance. In speaking out about work organization, concrete courses of action and intervention areas can be developed in the education community.

We conducted this study in partnership with the Counselling and Psychological Assistance Service and the Guidance and Counselling Clinic of the University. Their respective directors participated actively in the study as co-researchers. They were involved at all stages of the research, including the writing of the final report. Thus, the psychodynamics of work may well have a future in the academic environment (high school, college, university, etc.) because its theoretical and methodological approach can be used to support students as they construct their identity by helping them to recognize, at an early stage, the sources of pleasure and suffering linked to their occupational choice as well as the defence mechanisms being constructed at the same time. Through this approach, it is also possible to identify institutional shortcomings or problems linked to training programs. In this respect, this approach may prove to be a useful tool for student associations fighting for improvements in these areas. In short, the psychodynamics of work is an approach that allows for innovative actions in the relationship of students to their studies and to institutions.

Bibliography

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