

Special Section “Work and Health in the Face of Contemporary Metamorphoses”

Incarcerated activity: The work of psychologists in prisons

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Abstract

In Brazil, the presence of psychology in prisons was established by the Criminal Sentence Execution Act, in 1984, and it was intensified in the past three decades. In the paper, the results of a study are discussed to understand the activity of psychologists in the prisons in Minas Gerais, based on clinical approaches to the work. We performed a qualitative research, with content analysis of documents, observations in five prisons, and interviews with 14 psychologists who work at these prisons. We verified that the role of psychology in prisons has been controversial, with different institutional intersections resulting from the security and punishment logic, which seems to frequently oppose professional ethical principles. The institutional demand for classifying prisoners overlaps with the monitoring of rehabilitation programs, set forth by law. This scenario, worsened by the lack of professionals, results in obstructions in the activity, the distress of the worker, trivialization of the violation of rights, and uncritical adhesion to the repressive mechanism of the institution.

Keywords: psychology, prison system, occupational health clinics, human rights, ethics

ATIVIDADE ENCARCERADA: O TRABALHO DE PSICÓLOGOS NAS PRISÕES

Resumo

No Brasil, a presença da psicologia nas prisões foi instituída pela Lei de Execução Penal, em 1984, e se intensificou nas últimas três décadas. No artigo, são discutidos os resultados de um estudo para compreender a atuação dos psicólogos nos presídios de Minas Gerais, a partir das abordagens clínicas do trabalho. Realizamos uma pesquisa qualitativa, com análise de conteúdo de documentos, observações em cinco presídios e entrevistas com 14 psicólogos que atuam nesses presídios. Verificamos que o papel da psicologia nas prisões tem sido controverso, com diferentes atravessamentos institucionais decorrentes da lógica da segurança e da punição, que parecem frequentemente contrariar os princípios éticos profissionais. A demanda institucional para a classificação dos presos se sobrepõe ao monitoramento dos programas de reabilitação, previstos em lei. Esse cenário, agravado pela escassez de profissionais, resulta em obstruções na atividade, angústia do trabalhador, naturalização da violação de direitos e adesão acrítica ao mecanismo repressivo da instituição.

Palavras-chave: psicologia, sistema prisional, clínicas do trabalho, direitos humanos, ética

ACTIVIDAD ENCARCELADA: EL TRABAJO DE LOS PSICÓLOGOS EN LAS PRISIONES

Resumen

En Brasil, la presencia de la psicología en las cárceles fue instituida oficialmente por la Ley de Ejecución Penal, en 1984, y se ha intensificado en las últimas tres décadas. En este artículo, discutimos un estudio que busca comprender la actividad de los psicólogos en las cárceles de Minas Gerais, desde los enfoques clínicos del trabajo. Realizamos una investigación cualitativa, con análisis de contenido documental, observaciones en cinco unidades penitenciarias y entrevistas con 14 psicólogos que trabajan en estas prisiones. Se constató que el lugar de la psicología ha sido controvertido, con diferentes cruces institucionales derivados de la lógica del castigo, en una dirección que parece frecuentemente oponerse a los principios éticos de la profesión. Además, se señaló que la demanda institucional de clasificación de los presos se superpone con el seguimiento periódico de los programas de recuperación, dispuestos por ley. Este escenario, agravado por el déficit de profesionales, se traduce en impedimentos a la actividad, desgaste del trabajador, naturalización de la violación de derechos y adhesión acrítica a los mecanismos represivos de la institución.

Palabras clave: psicología, sistema penitenciario, clínicas del trabajo, derechos humanos, ética

Work is fundamental to understand the processes of subjectivation and dynamics of health or disease promotion. It is one of the principles shared by the clinical approaches to work (Bendassolli & Soboll, 2011). The theoretical-methodological assumptions of clinical activity and clinical psychosociology were prioritized to discuss the partial results of the study, which aimed at understanding the psychologists' activity in the prisons in Minas Gerais, one of the most populous states in Brazil.

In the research, we described the work and its forms of organization, the sources of difficulty and challenges in the activity, and the experiences of these situations lived by the psychologists. The analyses focus on the activity and the intersections inherent to the research territory: the suffering and the ethics in the psychologist's work, the issue regarding human rights, and the authority over the prisoners, considering the prison as a social control device.

The benchmark of occupation health clinics is presented as robust for the analysis of the activity when considering the mobilization of the workers between what is prescribed and what is real regarding the work (Clot, 2010) and making evident the categories of their imaginary shared in the social group, institutionally building new meanings for work (Enriquez, 1994). The French psychosociology, based on Castoriadis (1982), discusses imaginary meanings and purposes of the action and emphasizes the imaginary as productive strength capable of influencing social and institutional dynamics. It also represents what the group is, what it wishes to be, and in what type of society we wish to intervene. Such system permeates the organizational/institutional life, whether "deceiving" the workers with narcissistic and omnipotence impressions, or instigating the worker's creativity, due to the excess of institutional rules. Pagés (1974) also highlights the influence of affections in the divisions of the groups, with stereotyped arguments, as group mechanisms.

The State (prison system) has its authority and legitimacy questioned and its sovereign character undermined in the fraying of the symbolizing to guarantee security because it fails as an integral system to resocialize the inmates, as workers observe. The psychologist who integrates the resocialization institution is inserted in a power game, active in dealing with the complex social and institutional local reality and is not a mere victim. When dealing with the presented reality, they produce knowledge and practices which emerge in the gap between what is prescribed and what is real. Small transgressions establish ways of dealing with institutional restrictions as a form of creativity and living work of the psychologist, subject to a "suffering" institutional normality, named by Lévy (2001) as "state of latent crisis".

Clinical approaches to the work seek to retrieve human dynamics in the work process. Here, clinical activity and psychosociology are privileged, based on the French-speaking ergonomics (Bendassolli & Soboll, 2011). Clinical activity, by Clot (2010), enables us to better understand human activity and the collective character of the doings (professional genre), articulated with singular contributions from each worker (professional style). It also intensifies the theme, as it recaptures the Vygotskian discussion on the meaning, significance, and psychological function of work.

The meanings and significances of work can be conceptualized in different manners, according to the adopted theoretical-epistemological perspective. Despite the diversity of conceptions, even if each individual has their own concept of work, which creates a diversity of definitions and of meanings of work, all of them are intersected by culture, society, and the historical moment. The meanings of work are based on the representation – individual and/or collective – of the act of working built in the identification with what is performed and intersected by contradictions between discourse and practice in the organizations' daily life (Gonçalves et al., 2020).

The institutional context of investigation had significant changes over the centuries in prison service policies. According to Foucault (1975/2014), we developed from a system that sanctioned penalties, such as punishment, suffering, and assertion of sovereign power, in a disciplinary system based on principles of correction and resocialization of the imprisoned individual, to prevent future crimes, delinquency, and transgression of the rules in force. In our Western society, prison remains a punitive and mechanical device of predominant social control, to the detriment of other disciplinary measures.

Foucault's (1975/2014) prison genealogy is acknowledged, however, the reviews by Oliveira (2011) allow us to transfer such model of understanding to the Brazilian reality. Oliveira (2011) states that one of the fundamental theses of *Vigiar e punir* (Watching and punishing), the alleged criminal justice reform of genuine "presumed humanism", consisted of a product of the emergence of a new society, the "disciplinary society" (Foucault, 1975/2014). However, the influence of modern and scientific principles in the Brazilian legal culture is still irrelevant, in the context in which wide open violence has always been the method of police investigation and of punishment *par excellence* (Oliveira, 2011, p. 323). If the disciplinary society – permanent control, surveillance, and training of the bodies – did not fully materialize anywhere, in the country there has never existed a minimally disciplined social organization. The "typical Brazilian prison" inverts some of Bentham's panoptic principles, with the preponderance of violence to the detriment of the "disciplining of souls" and the gesture of "cramming the prisoners" – warehouses of individuals, instead of disseminated and subtle control outside of the walls (Oliveira, 2011).

According to Brasil (1984), criminal sentence execution aims to comply with the provisions of criminal sentence or decision and provide conditions for the harmonious social integration of the convict and the inmate. However, data from the National Prison Department (Departamento Penitenciário Nacional [Depen], 2019) show a percentage of pretrial detainees – with no conviction – in the country, in 2019, of 33%. In December 2019, there were 442 thousand vacancies and a shortage of 312 thousand, with overcrowding in many prisons (67% above the capacity) and a consequent impediment to guaranteeing basic rights, such as bodily integrity and privacy.

The legal provision, therefore, does not reflect the actual mass incarceration and the new prisons. The discarding of alternatives casts doubts upon the resocialization function of prisons. The national criminal system does not practice the least of what is legally set forth and it

represents serious structural deficiencies and inhumane conditions of custody (Secretaria de Estado de Defesa Social, 2016).

A relevant portion of the Brazilian imprisoned population is in Minas Gerais, the second state in terms of numbers, with approximately 75 thousand prisoners, spread over 190 prison units of the State Secretary of Justice and Public Security (Secretaria de Estado de Justiça e Segurança Pública [Sejusp]), and a shortage of over 30 thousand vacancies. In Minas Gerais, the incarceration rate is 346 prisoners for every 100 thousand inhabitants, close to the national average (Depen, 2019).

In this context, a little more than 150 psychologists work connected to the prison administration of Minas Gerais. Each one of them is responsible for classifying, monitoring, and contributing to the resocialization of over 400 prisoners, in an unequal prison system in Minas Gerais. It is about the work activity of some of these professionals that the analyses and considerations are made. The aim of this study is to carry out an analysis of the activity of psychologists in prisons.

Method

It is a qualitative research, case study, which uses clinical approaches in the analyses. In this investigation, we opted for non-probabilistic sampling, seeking specific characteristics according to the defined goals.

Participants

Among the prison units in the metropolitan region of Belo Horizonte, in Minas Gerais, the five with a greater number of psychologists were selected for the performance of interviews and observation of the work. In these units, the research project was presented, and the psychologists were invited to participate. Out of a total of 15 professionals available, 14 accepted the invitation. They were interviewed individually and were observed while working.

Instruments

Aiming to understand in-depth the studied phenomenon, we proceeded to the triangulation of data (analysis of documents, participant observation, field diaries, and semi-structured individual interviews). Public documents (state and federal acts, resolutions, technical benchmarks, administrative rules, and decrees) and restricted institutional documents (service guidelines, *memoranda*, and regulations) were analyzed.

The observation in the prison units aimed to produce information on the activity and subsidize the knowledge of the environment and the subjects' experience. The observation was open and participatory, which, along with the field diary, is an essential modality for the analysis and recording of data. Finally, individual interviews were performed, both in person and online, with the psychologists that work in the visited units and the ones indicated of other units.

Ethical procedures of data collection and analysis

Ethical aspects were observed for research involving human beings set forth by the National Commission of Ethics in Research (*Comissão Nacional de Ética em Pesquisa* [Conep]), such as the signing of the Informed Consent Form (*Termo de Consentimento Livre e Esclarecido* [TCLE]) by the interviewed workers; Letter of Consent (*Carta de Anuência*) signed by the Sejusp authorizing the execution and acceptance of the Ethics Committee in Research (*Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa* [CEP]), under registration No. 3.909.792.

Between October and November 2020, 14 individual interviews, 12 visits to five prison units in the metropolitan region of Belo Horizonte, and the observation of 37 service appointments with prisoners with 68 hours of work observation were carried out.

The content analysis contemplated a pre-analysis; exploration of the material; treatment of the results, inference, and interpretation. Afterward, we proceeded with classification and interpretations, in compliance with the matrix theory and objectives.

Results and discussion

To analyze the results produced, we first discussed the institutional prescriptions for the work of psychologists in prisons and, then, compared what is set forth with what is verified in the discourse and practice.

Based on document analysis, we verified that the presence of psychology in the legal field in Brazil, particularly in prisons, dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. It preceded the enactment of the Criminal Sentence Execution Act (Brasil, 1984) and the regularization of the psychologist profession coming into force (Brasil, 1962), becoming more intense from the second half of the last century on.

According to Depen and the Federal Council of Psychology (Brasil, 2007), in the document *Guidelines for the work and training of psychologists in the Brazilian prison system*, psychology sought to consolidate itself and justify itself as a positivist science at the end of the 19th century. It became an ally of law, medicine, and criminology in the treatment given to the emerging issue regarding alienation, forensic psychiatric hospitals, and insane offenders. The first psychologists entered the prisons in 1960, close to the regularization of the profession, with an expansion over the following decades, mainly with the use of tests. In December 2019, there were 1,244 psychologists working in the Brazilian prison system (Depen, 2019).

The Criminal Sentence Execution Act (Brasil, 1984) and public policies deriving from the 1988 Constitution (Brasil, 1988) have been determinants in the regularization of the psychologist's role in the national prisons. In the practice and the research, psychology based on diagnosis and prognosis is gradually questioned, the existence of prisons is criticized (Conselho Federal de Psicologia [CFP], 2016), and the priority on rights and human dignity is highlighted.

In its provisions, the Criminal Sentence Execution Act (Brasil, 1984) sets forth in art. 5: the convicts shall be classified according to their criminal records and personality, in order to guide the individualization of the criminal sentence execution. The classification, art. 6, shall be

performed by the Technical Commission of Classification (*Comissão Técnica de Classificação* [CTC]), which will prepare the individualizing program of the penalty of deprivation of liberty suitable for the convict or the pretrial detainee. The composition of this Commission, in art. 7, sets forth that it will be chaired by the director and consisting of, at least, two heads of service, one psychiatrist, one psychologist, and one social worker. It is exclusively in this Commission that the psychologist explicitly appears in the Criminal Sentence Execution Act. Moreover, the terms psychology or psychologist are mentioned among the higher education categories required for holding the position of prison director, referring to the segregation of the prisoner with threatened psychological integrity.

In Minas Gerais (1994), the act containing the criminal sentence execution rules sets forth in: art. 8 – the re-education treatment consists of the adoption of a set of medical-psychological and social individualized measures, seeking the re-education of convicts and their reintegration into society. In addition to reiterating the presence of a psychologist in the CTC, the act sets forth in art. 14 that the medical-psychosocial observation encompasses biological, psychological, and complementary exams, and a social study of the convict and that this observation, which will guide the treatment program, will be performed from the beginning to the end of the sentence execution. In line with this, the most recent amendment to the Regulation of Rules and Procedures of the Minas Gerais Prison System (*Regulamento de Normas e Procedimentos do Sistema Prisional* [ReNP]) (Secretaria de Estado de Defesa Social, 2016) available, produced by Sejusp, sets forth the presence of a psychologist, together with a number of other workers, in the composition of the commission.

The Commission is responsible for: initiating the classification of the prisoner, based on their admission in the Prison Unit, through observation, classification interviews, and technical services in the health, psychology, social service, security, education and labor areas; and preparing, performing and monitoring the Individual Resocialization Program (*Programa Individual de Ressocialização* [PIR]) during the serving of the sentence of deprivation of liberty, according to the law. The regulation says that the Commission must prepare the PIR within up to 30 days, extendable to equal number of days from the admission of the prisoner and it shall expire in 12 months, and, then, it must be re-evaluated for possible adaptations. In the provision, it is set forth that the maximum time elapsed between the first appointment and the next shall be of six months, ensuring an annual provision of service of, at least, two appointments for the prisoner by the technical areas. The ReNP establishes the CTC as a responsible multidisciplinary board for preparing, monitoring, and enforcing the PIR goals.

The other responsibilities of the psychologist in the prisons are set forth in the ReNP (Secretaria de Estado de Defesa Social, 2016) and in the *Guidelines for psychology activities (Manual de atividades da psicologia)* (Secretaria de Estado de Defesa Social, 2019). It highlights the planning and performance of actions of basic health care, the performance of psychological tests and preparation of reports, appointments with relatives and workers of the prison system in emergencies, as well as bureaucratic procedures of each task.

The *Guidelines* indicate that, in the appointment for classification, the professional must assess the psychological functioning of the individual and identify their demands, aiming to promote the establishment of proposals and suggestions for the elaboration of their PIR (Secretaria de Estado de Defesa Social, 2019). The document must include: a) description of the profile and behavior of the prisoner (psychic functions, personality, health and mental illness records, transgressive behaviors, affectional bonds, perspectives, and other elements of the psychological condition); b) an annual monitoring plan of the prisoner, with the systematicity and scheduling of the next appointment; indication, justified, for work, educational and resocialization activities of the prisoner; and identification of behaviors that limit the previous item (Secretaria de Estado de Defesa Social, 2019).

Since 2019, the form “Initial psychology interview” has been used by psychologists as a script for performing the mentioned classification. There are 45 open-ended and close-ended questions, and they are accessible for filling out in the Integrated System of Prison Management (Sistema Integrado de Gestão Prisional [SIGPRI]), in a specific health module in the digital record. The interview takes into consideration data, personal bonds, and relationships as positive or negative significant events in life; physical, psychological, and sexual violence background; use of drugs in the family and monitoring of relatives in the social work services; individual and family mental health background; transgressive background, since the first offense, behaviors and individual and family behaviors and feelings addressing the crime. It considers the experiences in the prison unit regarding interests in activities and relationships with prisoners and employees; perspective on life outside the prison; and examination of psychic functions (attitudes with the interviewer, level of consciousness, orientation, attention, memory, sense perception, language, thinking, intelligence, critical judgment, mood, affection, volition, psychomotricity, and past background of impulsiveness and aggressiveness). It verifies the demand for psychological monitoring, health conditions, use of medication, and history of use/abuse of legal and illegal substances. The script ends with the periodicity of the service, a summary produced by the system, and three complementary fields. Having ended the classification, it is the psychologist’s responsibility to present the result of their assessment to the CTC, which shall discuss and prepare the PIR. It is based on it that the psychologist will perform the monitoring.

The Criminal Sentence Execution Act (Brasil, 1984) was the precursor to the legal establishment of rights for the prison population and it sets forth medical, pharmaceutical, and dental services in health care, but not psychological services. However, there are two legal initiatives that moved forward in this sense. The National Health Plan in the Prison System (*Plano Nacional de Saúde no Sistema Penitenciário* [PNSSP]), of 2003, was, for the first time, a specific action addressed to the confined population in prison units (Lermen et al., 2015). The plan foresaw an exclusive minimal team, including psychologists, in prison units to assist over 100 and up to 500 prisoners.

The second milestone is the National Policy of Comprehensive Health Care of Persons Deprived of Liberty in the Prison System (*Política Nacional de Atenção Integral à Saúde das Pessoas*

Privadas de Liberdade no Sistema Prisional [PNAISP]), of 2014, an expressive progress in health care for prison population, as well as it expands the notion of guarantee of social rights (Lermen et al., 2015, p. 916). The so-called Health Teams in the Prison System (*Equipe de Saúde no Sistema Prisional [ESP]*), or Teams of Basic Prison Care (EAP), foresee the presence of a psychologist according to the number of those in custody, and the adhesion is provided to states and municipalities. In the documental analysis, we verified that the presence of the psychologist in prisons is legally and prescriptively justified, due to its classification attribution, which assists the individualization of the sentence, even if the health care attention actions are also foreseen.

This highlight given to the “position” of the psychologist in the law on criminal sentence execution and in the subsequent health policies stands to reason in this predominantly classification function, which is subject matter of many criticisms by the professionals themselves. The conflict between the legal and institutional provisions and the psychologist’s ethical commitment also frequently emerge in the discourse and the observation of the professionals’ activity, as we will discuss as follows.

Generally, the data from the interviews and field observations show that the role of the psychologist in prisons is still controversial and misunderstood by the professionals and the institution. There is a unanimous discredit in the current prison structure for rehabilitation, and a distance between the meaning of work, positive and connected to the “caring”, and the negative meaning for the society, related to the notion of “privilege of the prisoner”. There is no specific qualification for the work, learned in the daily life, separately or with the aid of psychologists who were already in the prisons. The institutional intersections in the security and punishment logic frequently oppose ethical principles of the profession, and the classification of persons deprived of liberty precedes the monitoring, which, with a shortage of psychologists, is limited to a few prisoners. There is also a probable trivialization of routines of violation of rights of the prisoners by the professionals, and all these elements result in activity impediments, worker’s distress, and uncritical adhesion to the repressive mechanisms of the institution.

Subsequently, the main categories of analysis that emerged in the verbalization will be presented. In this article, we discuss four categories of analysis that were created from reading the transcript of the 14 interviews, as well as the observation records and field diary.

Due to the relatively reduced number of psychologists in the Minas Gerais prisons, particularly in the metropolitan region of Belo Horizonte, the target audience will not be characterized to avoid identification and breaching secrecy. Some excerpts from the interviews will be used to illustrate the arguments, identifying the interviewees from S1 to S14, as well as passages of the field diary. We highlight, as follows, the dimensions of the psychologist’s work in prisons and the analyses.

“We are not seen with kind eyes” or “I think that people don’t quite understand what we are doing here”

The phrases above illustrate what was verified that colleagues, the “institution”, and the rest of the society report about the psychologist’s work in prisons. But the misunderstanding is also of the professionals, who play contradictory roles, at times –are they psychotherapists? Classifiers? Guardians of rights? Health or security professionals or both? Fire extinguishers? Forensic experts? The position of all these roles was verified simultaneously and distinctly and there were uncertainties when reporting their objectives and their function. The work of these psychologists is characterized by a weak professional identity.

It is unanimous the discredit of prison as an instrument of rehabilitation, in the current structure, as S2 reveals on the accomplishment of its resocializing function: “You know, I will be very sincere, I’m not going to be a hypocrite, [...] resocializing, no”. Criticisms regarding the prison model as an anti-crime device, the issue regarding public security, the lack of investments, resources, and minimum conditions for complying with the Criminal Sentence Execution Act, as well as the overcrowding and lack of basic rights, are cited as the main ones.

When questioned on how society sees the work of psychologists in prisons (the meaning of work), the frequent reports are on the unfamiliarity and devaluation of psychology in these places, in addition to a type of curiosity and interest in the unknown. The professionals say that society sees their service to the prisoner as a privilege or something unnecessary, mentioning phrases such as “psychologist for outlaws and tramps”. S4 reports: “We are very marginalized by the society, our work [...]. Society believes that a prisoner, that ‘a good criminal is a dead criminal’, you see?” S1 endorses:

There is a great deal of prejudice regarding our work in here [...]. After all, who do we work with? It is exactly with those who they wish not to have outside, right? Those who are really in the margin, and what is left here for them. So, it is not an important work, nobody sees it as [...] important (S1).

Even colleagues use derogative expressions regarding the work of psychologists, as if they were there to victimize the person or slap on the wrist.

There is a certain disrespect [...]. The great majority of those who provide security, the correctional officers, do not value our work. There is even a nickname, right? Prisoner’s mom’ [...], they don’t understand that we work with rights [...]. It is complicated, we are not seen with kind eyes by some of them (S1).

For psychologists, this reveals prejudice against the work and unfamiliarity with their role in prisons, by the society and the institution co-workers. According to S3: “I have already heard absurd, a person after committing a crime having so many service appointments in the prison system, and sometimes a common citizen doesn’t have these professionals”. For another psychologist, “I don’t often say that I work in a prison environment, I don’t” (S2).

For Gonçalves et al. (2020), recognition coming from peers, the organization, and society is one of the main pathways of pleasure and a source of positive meaning of the work. When absent, the meanings assigned to their work can be more instrumental (remuneration and survival) or even negative (suffering, dissatisfaction, and punishment).

Regarding the meaning of the worker towards their activity, we verified that an empathic and qualified listening to the incarcerated individuals and, perhaps, “humanizing them”, even if briefly, in addition to the anomic registration in the system, are the reiterated justification for working there. For S1, “I enjoy working in the prison system. However, I also get frustrated with so many obstacles and with poor results [...]. Because in theory, it is very, very good, very important, but, in practice, it does not work”.

Although the meaning of the work associated with pleasure being especially noticed when individuals identify themselves with their activity and feel proud of their profession, the possibility of aiding people and positively influencing their life conditions are also highlighted (Gonçalves et al., 2020). This can be verified when most of the professionals replied in the affirmative when questioned whether they would choose again to work in the prison system: “I would do it, I enjoy the system [...]. I enjoy what I do, I like being here. We face challenges, difficulties, but I like it” (S2).

“By doing, ‘by force’” and “falling into it”

The expressions above are experiences of the interviewed psychologists. There is no formal qualification for the job, and they frequently refer to “falling into the job” in the prison, learning “what they must do” (what is prescribed) and “how to do it” (what is real) by doing, alone, or with colleagues. One of the professionals replied that they learned “by doing, ‘by force’, making mistakes” and that “It was not so easy [...]. We don’t have qualification training [...] here we have never had them since I entered I have never had a qualification training to talk about prison system” (S1).

An interviewee was trained by other prison professionals: “But I even felt a little privileged, because later I started noticing that people who arrived afterward didn’t have any kind of preparation, right?” (S3). S2 reported having received training when they were given the position, however, it is not provided “for everyone who is going to be inserted in the prison environment, with various professionals, not only specifically regarding psychology”. We verify a dichotomy in the looseness with attributions and professional qualifications and rigidity and excesses in the control of the prisoners.

The majority did not know what job they would perform nor where they would work when they took the civil service exam. The choice of working in the prison system, for S1, was because

I used to take all civil service examinations that came up, and when this one came up, it was not even that choice that you say ‘I have always wanted to work in the prison system’, it was not that. The civil service exam had a large number of vacancies [...], and it just happened that I passed and took it (S1).

Another professional states: “I had no idea that I would be working with prisoners, I thought that I was going to work in HR because all the exam was addressed to HR” (S4).

A large portion of the interviewees had no experience or previous knowledge of prison system, whether in previous jobs, internships, visits, or courses in the undergraduate program, revealing unpreparedness in academic education for this work, an aspect that is observed in other research on the work of psychologists in this context (CFP, 2021).

“Thank God, there are only two to go”: Institutional intersections in space and time

To illustrate the forms of service appointments which, apparently, are structured as rules in the work of psychologists in prisons, we will start with the recordings of the field diary. In a certain morning of observation, seven appointments were foreseen by the psychologist starting at 09:00 am and occurring throughout the day. However, as recorded in our notes

In this appointment, the second one in the morning (there were five more to be performed), I noticed that, despite the prisoner’s demand for speech, the professional kept on looking out of the room when the appointment exceeded 30 minutes, with some restlessness. After the end, I questioned her about the restlessness, and the psychologist reported that the time was limited and that she gets anxious when the appointment exceeds 30 minutes because there is an external pressure (veiled or not) to hasten.

Due to the shortage of correctional officers, moving of prisoners should be avoided and there is an expectation “to solve it all in the morning”. As recorded, “Outside, there are prisoners waiting for the appointment and officers state: ‘There is just him, it is really quick’. Good thing, ‘cause in the afternoon we’re free”. We verified in the other remarks and interviews, that the limits of time – verbalized or not – are shared among the psychologists in the prisons. Regarding obstacles and work limits, S1 states

My work depends on the other person's work, do you understand? I depend on the officer to get the IDL [individual deprived of liberty], my job is not independent, it is not free, making it very difficult. And the State gives less and less importance to this, right? (S1).

Regarding the different priorities for the work and the scheduling of appointments for the monitoring, S2 points out:

You schedule it but depending on the procedure it is not possible to bring [...] because they prioritize the incarceration procedures. Let's suppose they have found a cell phone in a cell, then they will have to make their procedures [...]. Sometimes, there is no correctional officer to bring the inmate to the psychology appointment.

The institutional time limits follow the intersections in space, from the lack of exclusive rooms, available and adequate, with no guarantee of secrecy and privacy. According to the field diary,

The appointment occurred with the officer at the door, quite close, also talking to others passing by. The appointment has a protocol atmosphere, and the prisoner seems to know that it is hasty. The psychologist fills in the script and makes succinct questions chosen automatically. The prisoner wears handcuffs behind the uncomfortable plastic chair, without having been questioned.

In another appointment: “The officer stays at the door, looking inwards, and monitors the appointment, without the professional questioning it”.

In addition to these intersections, there is also acceptance and trivialization of these conditions and organization of the work by the psychologists, as well as the possibilities of resistance in this environment. It is inevitable that we question the extension of the initial interview script and its relevance in the individualization of the sentence, a result of individual appointments in series, most of them lasting between of 15 and 20 minutes, occurring in inadequate conditions of secrecy and privacy.

If there is the psychologist's professional commitment to the performed activity, the flexibility to changes and nuances of the institution they work for, and meeting the profession's ethical guidelines, there is an institutionalization in this system that prioritizes the scan of the bodies (of the prisoners and, consequently, of the psychologist workers). Such context requires adaptation from the psychologist, and responsibilities for established limits and instituted faults are incumbent upon them.

In an institution in which the strongest subsist and are acknowledged, if they maintain their excellence and acknowledgment, the less efficient ones will join the mass of those who are rejected by the system, the psychologist must meet a specific requirement of the institution for individual evaluations, appointments, and reports for the progression in the sentence. By trying to manage the requirements in this institution (opinions, technical reports, and criminal reports in the alleged classification), the psychologist tries to quickly meet the system that certifies their productivity.

Competition and cruelty among peers in the daily work were also perceived and recorded. A speech brings as most significant “danger” the problems resulting from intersubjectivity and group dynamics of the work team, involving subjective bond with the work, peers, and, indirectly, the prisoner. Aspects of imaginary dimension and meanings of the work are mentioned, affecting the psychologist's health.

In the observation of the work and the professionals' report, we verified that the institutional demand for classification of persons deprived of liberty overlaps with the periodic monitoring of rehabilitation individual programs, according to the law. The classification becomes bureaucratic and institutionalized since monitoring may be “impossible”. Accounts reporting

that “We will see that prisoner only once” are very common, and, as S4 highlights on the monitoring period set forth in the PIR: “Really, that periodicity is just to be complied with because hardly do we manage to do it. Before, we used to do it, when there was a larger number of officers [...], nowadays not anymore, right?”. This is materialized in the professionals’ giving up on scheduling appointments, because “They are not going to bring them, not worth asking” (S2).

When questioned on the possibility of monitoring the appointment cases, professionals ratify that the progressive shortage of correctional officers in the past years has made this routine impossible. This impacts their activities when dealing with urgencies, demands of the CTC (first interview), and severe psychiatric cases. Regarding the appointments, S1 states that “Our schedule has been reduced [...]. I remember there was a time when we spent months with a minimum schedule. Sometimes there were days when there was no one to see because there was no officer to come here” (S1). They also highlight that in the security logic, the psychologist’s work is submissive, because “If they are to choose, they prefer to work with other things regarding security rather than the appointments in fact” (S1).

In this regard, some of the interviewees consider it natural to serve “only those who have a demand” (S2), “the demand of psychology is very high, I’m not saying that it isn’t. But the priority of monitoring in fact, due to security bringing them or not, occurs often with the psychiatric ones really”. Thus, the classification of prisoners is presented as the beginning of a process with no continuity, unbinding the alleged “criminal treatment” due to the lack of monitoring, and “health care”, reduced to the most serious cases.

When talking about the psychologist’s work in socio-educational units, Massa (2019) points out how a selective justice system and the paradoxical proposal of building autonomy and responsibility with an incarcerated subject cross the activity. For Massa (2019), in a scenario marked by everyday violence, it is possible to locate a minimization of institutional violence and even a progressive naturalization of both the inhospitable environment and its practices. According to the author, being alienated from one’s job appears as a strategy to avoid getting sick, which also appears as a possibility in our discussion.

This seems to be something very trivialized in the environment, according to the excerpt from the field diary, during an appointment: “When asked if they wish to undergo psychological treatment, the prisoner in question hesitates and asks: ‘it takes long, doesn’t it?’”, and the professional answers “Yes, it does, it takes long”. They already know about the impossibility of a follow-up.

Trivialization of a violation of rights routine

We heard from some psychologists that the institutional demands, in the security and punishment logic, oppose the ethical principles of the profession and lead them to question “what should we follow”: their Psychology Professional Ethical Code (CFP, 2005) or the employing institution. Psychology always bases – or should base – its work on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It should consider the power relationships and critically and historically analyze

the political, economic, social, and cultural reality. The Code guides the psychologist to work in order to eliminate forms of negligence, discrimination, exploitation, violence, cruelty, and oppression and reject situations that demean psychology.

What to follow? The answer is complex because we must analyze the phenomena that the institution itself produces, from the institutionalization of its workers in its *modus operandi* to the imprisonment of its way of experiencing the work, leading to the trivialization of violations of the prisoners' rights or their own as professionals. For Rauter (2007), psychologists who work in prisons may be threatened in case they do not intend to reproduce the prison institution mechanism through their actions. The author observes that, in the performance of psychologists in prisons, they are also a prisoner of assignments that often go in the opposite direction of the professional ethics and their education and even "against the law" in the simplest sense of the term. It presents the apparent dilemma between the psychologist's ethical commitment (what is prescribed) and the real work (the performed activity).

During a visit, the professional reported psychologists' attempts to guarantee prisoners' basic rights, such as asking for a mattress so as not to sleep on the floor, or a new uniform, because it was old or due to cold weather. It is said that the security management sees a privilege or "naivety" of the psychologist, they say "You are the prisoner's mom, that tramp really deserves this [...]. He's lying, that tramp, go there and see that he is full of clothes there, he gets it to sell it" (S1).

The experience of being disbelieved or discredited is intensified for psychologists through threats, direct or not, institutional retaliation, particularly in cases of denouncements made by professionals in view of episodes observed or reported by prisoners. We recorded in the field diary:

When I asked if there were other psychologists in the prison, one of the psychologists told me that there was one that was removed for being more critical or for going against what was prescribed, or against what she saw, like unnecessary aggressions by officers against prisoners. She made it clear that direct confrontation leads to retaliations and getting ill. "How am I going to denounce a co-worker?". She, then, commits small transgressions, such as advising a prisoner to talk to their family saying that they had suffered violence and to subtly denounce it to the State's General Ombudsman, in order to avoid confrontation with the rest of the team, especially with security staff.

However, the trivialization of violence is present in the routine and the professional practice. We recorded in the field diary on the question in the interview which asks if the prisoner has suffered physical or psychological violence.

In one of the cases, the prisoner reported having already suffered physical and psychological violence in another unit. The professional listens and moves on to the next question, without going deeper. For what reason? I asked her this question after the appointment. She stated that she decided not to explore it be-

cause it is recurrent, she hears it frequently and has little room for action regarding this. Among the possible behaviors (such as exploring the episode, seeing how it affected them, denouncing or advising them to denounce), she chooses to stick to the crime and to the accountability.

The recording in another situation of monitoring of appointment was:

The first prisoner had their hands cuffed behind their back and they would hardly be able to put the mask they were wearing back on their face in view of the pandemic in the place. The psychologist did not seem to notice or care about it. She only noticed the difficulty of the position of the handcuffs when the prisoner had to sign the appointment control.

In the ReNP (Secretaria de Estado de Defesa Social, 2016), handcuffing the prisoner during internal traffic aims at the security of people and the prison unit. However, according to the psychologists, they can ask to remove the handcuffs during the appointments.

The account leads us to think that the prescribed bureaucratic rules overlap with the expected purposes of assistance and resocialization. The anomie in the treatment given to the prisoner seems to repeat itself among the professionals who should work in compliance with human rights. In the appointments observed, there were reports of prisoners from suffering aggressions by the correctional officers, internal and external at the time of the arrest, as well as negligence regarding basic survival conditions, such as receiving spoiled food.

In addition, when asked if the experience of working in prisons affected them or still affects them, the professionals often point out relevant impacts on society and human beings. However, we observe that contrary to common sense assumptions, which could reveal experiences of fear or apprehension when working at an environment of certain danger and risks to bodily integrity, psychologists' main complaints are related to the institutional dynamics and interpersonal relationships at work, as previously mentioned. Regarding fears, one of the professionals says:

I have never, never, never been afraid of coming to work in the prison system, no matter how much my family would talk [...]. My parents were more afraid [...]. I have never been fearful and to this day I am not. And the point is: it is an issue regarding relationships, you see, among workmates, which is most affected (S1).

The same psychologist states:

These relationships are very heavy. Vanity is a big issue. There are a lot of conflicts, much cruelty sometimes. For the mere pleasure of doing something to harm the other person [...]. The relationships here are very complicated, and I think that they are the ones that make us ill (S1).

Finally, when asked about the obstacles to performing the work and the obtained outcomes, the professionals often reported a feeling of frustration and disinterest. S1 reported that “I used to have a higher expectation, nowadays I have a much lower expectation of my work in here, the meaning of my work [...]. I think it is very superficial” (S1). This reiterates that it is an activity, in a way, submissive to the logic of security, worsened by the trivialization of inadequate conditions and the impossibility to denounce or fight against the constant veiled threats of retaliation.

Final considerations

All the results enable us to affirm that the institutional intersections, as well as the lack of workers' training and understanding regarding their contradictory role in the prisons, result in and contribute to the impediments of the activity, distress, and the possible uncritical adherence to the repressive mechanisms of the institution, whether this adhesion is an effect of the institution itself or a strategy used to preserve one's health in this context.

Our work has not exhausted the theme – on the contrary. We seek to bring just a few elements of a reality that is often unknown, to produce displacements. We believe that our research opens new fronts of investigation and intervention, such as studies that focus on the interaction between the work of psychologists in prisons and other professionals responsible for the care of prisoners/security teams, seeking to explore, in a more in-depth way, the collective dimension of the activity; research that brings the view of the population in custody about the work of psychologists, in these establishments, and that can analyze, in detail, the relationships established between prisoners and psychologists, in daily life; the planning and execution, together with the prison administration, of workshops and/or projects aimed at the health and quality of life of these workers, aiming at their recognition and support. There are many possibilities.

Psychosociology and other clinical approaches to work recognize the subjectivity of psychologists engendered by cultural and symbolic references produced in the social life, absorbing dominant values about the prison and the prisoners, in addition to the stigma and social imaginary regarding the institution. A more humanized look towards the prisoners enables us to escape, even if momentarily, from the coercive and disciplinary effect that the social and institutional set exerts on psychologists in the prison. The prison, an institution that represents the omnipresence of the State in the social control set, through the institutional and individual imaginary, outlines the professional role and delimits the psychologists' work.

Clinical approaches to the work also enable us to understand the accounts and the ambivalent practices mapped in field research experience, in which the hazard, which produces fear and vulnerability, lives with the awakening of affections and their protective function in the workgroups. The absence of procedures that regulate with precision the psychologist's role in prisons and working conditions so that the existing prescription takes effect generates suffering and demotivation for the professionals, revealing flaws in the legal system, public policies, and the academic education itself for the reality.

The prison's institutional impossibility to minimally resocialize the prisoners and the place assigned to the psychologist in this context can hinder the psychic investment of these workers in the activity, undermining the possibilities of creative, transgressive, and living work. Likewise, the inadequacy of working conditions in the prison, in its work organization aspects, the activity itself, or in relation to peers, places the psychologist in confrontation with the most diverse necessities, with a disqualification and discredit scenario, making the experience in the work and self-actualization more difficult.

This process does not have only negative aspects, as the positive value of the psychologist's work is acknowledged in their professional commitment to informal, tacit, and instituting ethics, which partly corroborates the institution's mission. It is in this complex scenario, in which the objective and conscious aspects join the imaginary, desire, and affection of individuals and of the workgroups in prisons, that the psychologist's work must be understood and given new meaning, amidst the debate on human rights and dignity at work.

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