

ORGANIZATION OF THE WORK IN A RECYCLING COOPERATIVE: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE HEALTH OF FEMALE WASTE PICKERS*

Alexa Pupiar Flores Coelho¹, Carmem Lúcia Colomé Beck², Marcelo Nunes da Silva Fernandes³, Rosângela Marion da Silva², Daiane Aparecida Martins do Reis⁴

ABSTRACT: This study aimed to analyze the organization of the work of female waste pickers in a cooperative in the central region of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. It is a qualitative, exploratory-descriptive study undertaken between July – August 2013, with data arising from participant observation and focus group sessions. The data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. The results evidence that, in spite of the workers having affinity for specified tasks, it is the difficulties that determine the organization of tasks in the cooperative. The organization of the work is influenced by the division of the work, and the lack of human resources (entailing overload) and appropriate equipment. The study points to the need for occupational support and a care network for female waste pickers, in the light of the occupational difficulties.

DESCRIPTORS: Occupational health; Working conditions; Solid waste segregators; Nursing.

ORGANIZAÇÃO DO TRABALHO EM UMA COOPERATIVA DE RECICLAGEM: IMPLICAÇÕES PARA A SAÚDE DE CATADORAS

RESUMO: Objetivou-se analisar a organização do trabalho de mulheres catadoras de materiais recicláveis de uma cooperativa da região central do Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil. Trata-se de um estudo qualitativo, exploratório-descritivo realizado entre julho e agosto de 2013 e os dados oriundos de observação participante e de sessões de grupo focal. Os dados foram analisados segundo análise temática de conteúdo. Os resultados evidenciaram que, apesar das trabalhadoras possuírem afinidade por determinadas tarefas, as dificuldades determinam a organização das tarefas na cooperativa. A organização do trabalho é influenciada pela divisão do trabalho, carência de recursos humanos (o que implica em sobrecarga) e de equipamentos adequados. Aponta-se para a necessidade de amparo trabalhista e rede de cuidados para a catadora de materiais recicláveis, frente às dificuldades laborais.

DESCRIPTORES: Saúde do trabalhador; Condições de trabalho; Catadores; Enfermagem.

ORGANIZACIÓN DEL TRABAJO EN UNA COOPERATIVA DE RECICLAMIENTO: IMPLICACIONES PARA LA SALUD DE CATADORAS

RESUMEN: El objetivo del estudio fue analizar la organización del trabajo de mujeres catadoras de materiales reciclables de una cooperativa de la región central de Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil. Es un estudio cualitativo, exploratorio descriptivo realizado entre julio y agosto de 2013. Los datos fueron obtenidos por medio de observación participante y de sesiones de grupo focal y analizados de acuerdo al análisis temático de contenido. Los resultados evidenciaron que, a pesar de la afinidad de las trabajadoras por determinadas tareas, las dificultades determinan la organización de las tareas en la cooperativa. La organización del trabajo es influenciada por la división del trabajo, así como carencia de recursos humanos (lo que trae sobrecarga) y equipos adecuados. Se apunta la necesidad de soporte de trabajo y red de cuidados para la catadora de materiales reciclables delante de las dificultades laborales.

DESCRIPTORES: Salud laboral; Condiciones de trabajo; Segregadores de residuos sólidos; Enfermería.

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¹RN. Undertaking M.A on the Postgraduate Program in Nursing, Federal University of Santa Maria. Santa Maria, State of Rio Grande do Sul (RS), Brazil.

²RN. Ph.D in Nursing. Lecturer of the Department of Nursing, Federal University of Santa Maria. Santa Maria, RS, Brazil.

³RN. M.A in Nursing. Family Health Strategy Nurse, Municipal City Hall of Santa Maria. Santa Maria, RS, Brazil.

⁴Lecturer in Nursing, Federal University of Santa Maria. Santa Maria, RS, Brazil.

Corresponding author:

Alexa Pupiar Flores Coelho
Universidade Federal de Santa Maria
Av. Roraima, 1000 - 97105-900 - Santa Maria, RS, Brasil
E-mail: alexa.p.coelho@hotmail.com

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● INTRODUCTION

Occupational Health, as a concept, is a field which covers studies and interventions directed towards the articulation between work and health, aiming for the promotion and protection of workers' quality-of-life⁽¹⁾. Going far beyond the local and individualized actions, Occupational Health refers to a practice which covers the work collective and which considers all of the physical, social, cultural and psychic determinants of the work to be fundamental in the health-illness process.

In the 1970s, the French psychoanalyst Christophe Dejours studied the subjective mobilization caused by work, thus creating the Psychodynamics of Work, which is dedicated to understanding the balance between the experiences of pleasure and suffering in work, upon which depends the maintenance of the worker's psychic health⁽²⁾. Hence, the studies in Psychodynamics of Work consider the work's implications in the individuals' psychic integrity, bearing in mind that psychodynamic analysis aims for the study of the psycho-affective movements triggered by the inter- and intra-subjective movements involved in the experiences of working⁽³⁾.

The central element of the worker's health and illness dynamic is, according to psychodynamic theory, the organization of the work, which includes a broad set of elements of a bureaucratic, hierarchical and structural nature represented by the division of tasks and by how the individuals organize themselves and relate in the occupational activities⁽⁴⁾. The organization of the work prescribes to the worker norms and rules, which conflict with her desires and her uniqueness; the degree of autonomy of the subject who works over the organization and freedom to imprint upon the work her "way of doing" determines experiences of pleasure or of suffering, and influences the health and illness dynamic⁽²⁾.

In the light of this process, it is necessary to direct one's gaze to work undertaken by women. It is known that women's work is inserted in a context in which the woman is frequently subjected to precarious conditions, due to the lack of support and to the unfavorable social, cultural and legal conditions. This relates to the fact that informal occupations, with long working days and low resulting income, inflexible hours and with poor social recognition – such as domestic work, street trading and the selection of recyclable materials, among others – often fall to women⁽⁵⁾.

Among these women, this study will address the female waste picker, a worker who – often – does not benefit from the occupational health actions stipulated in the legislation⁽⁶⁾. These factors justify the need to discuss her health, given her exposure to experiences of suffering in the work, which constitutes a fundamental issue to be considered in the nursing field. It is considered relevant for Nursing to take ownership of studies and actions in the field of occupational health, female work, and the selecting of recyclable materials, given Nursing's role in health promotion, the prevention of diseases and accidents, and in education for safe work, above all among the more vulnerable groups. Knowing how these groups relate to work and its organization, therefore, represents a starting point for the construction of these actions.

The present study, therefore, aimed to analyze the organization of the work of women who select recyclable materials in a cooperative in the central region of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

● METHOD

The present study is a qualitative investigation, of the exploratory-descriptive type. The study scenario was a recycling cooperative located in a municipality in the central region of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

The participants were women of this cooperative who select recyclable materials, chosen through the following inclusion criteria: to be a woman who works in activities of the selection of recyclable materials linked to the cooperative, and to have worked there for at least six months in the activity in question. The exclusion criteria was: female workers who were off work in the period of data production for any reason.

It is emphasized that this article raises results referent to one of the interfaces of the End-of-Course Paper entitled “Work-related illness in women who select recyclable materials”; the results result from the articulation of two data production instruments: participant observation and the focus group technique (FG).

Participant observation calls for coexistence, contact, communication and the exchanging of experiences between researcher, participants, and the dynamic context of the relationships constituted between them⁽⁷⁾. This stage was undertaken in July 2013. The research scenario was the recycling cooperative, with the focus of the observations being the women’s work dynamics, using an observation script and field diary for this purpose.

The FG, on the other hand, is a data production technique which makes it possible to insert the participants, collectively, into a process of discussion and reflection, in the sense of rethinking social attitudes, concepts, practices and policies⁽⁸⁾. Three sessions were held, with five participants in the first, five in the second, and six in the third. The meetings were held in the cooperative’s kitchen and each lasted approximately one hour. The FG sessions involved the presence of a moderator – responsible for leading the debates – and three research assistants, involved in recording the nonverbal communication and elaborating a summary of the discussions which, at the end, was read to the participants. The workers were identified, in the transcriptions, by fictitious names chosen by each one of them.

With a view to facilitating the analysis, the FG sessions were recorded, following the consent of all the participants, using digital recorders. The data were subjected to thematic content analysis, which took place in three stages: pre-analysis; exploration of the material; and treatment of the data and interpretation⁽⁹⁾.

The study complied with Resolution N. 466/12 of the Brazilian National Health Council⁽¹⁰⁾, and all participants signed the Terms of Free and Informed Consent. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Santa Maria (CEP/UFSM), under Certificate of Presentation for Ethical Appreciation (CAAE) 16195113.9.0000.5346.

● RESULTS

The participants were aged between 30 and 53 years old. Among the six participants, five lived with a partner and had children. The length of time they had worked in recycling varied from 3.5 to 19 years. All were literate; the worker with the lowest educational level had finished the fourth year of primary education, and the worker with the highest educational level had studied at, but not completed, university.

The women who selected recyclable materials had a workload of approximately 45 hours per week. Their workday was from 8 AM to 5:30 PM, with one hour’s break for lunch.

The cooperative’s work is divided between work in the recycling warehouse and work on the trucks. In the warehouse, the women separate the recyclable material by types on the conveyor belt or table so that it may later be compacted and transformed into bales. Later, the bales are piled up to await sale or to be sent on to another, smaller cooperative, registered with the municipal recycling collection service. In addition to this, there is the treatment of papers termed “confidential” (as the documents must be treated such that any information contained in them cannot be identified). Paper is separated into two types (white and colored/dark), is shredded and, finally, compacted and transformed into bales. Regarding work on the trucks, this is undertaken by men, women from the warehouse being included when there is a lack of male labor.

During the participant observation, it was observed that within the warehouse, the women generally undertake the same tasks and occupy the same workstations. It was noted that the division of the work came about through affinity, which was confirmed during the FG:

Each one has her job, the girls know how to do the work at the table, I know how to do the paper, it’s the job that you know. (Patricia)

[...] "Nina" is good at the work on the table, there's no point putting her to do something else because she will be less productive [...] There is no point putting me at the table, because I won't be productive. Because my focus is the scrap metal, I know how to do the scrap metal. They don't need to tell me, I know that I can't be productive, because it is not work that I'm accustomed to in my day-to-day. (Monica)

However, the work in the cooperative presented a set of operational issues which influenced how its work was shaped. The tasks' high demands and, principally, the lack of personnel often cause the female workers to be obliged to interrupt their tasks and abandon their workstations – those with which they identified, and for which they had affinity – to occupy another workstation or help a colleague who was having difficulties. This situation configures a "to-and-fro" of the female workers in various tasks over the course of the day, on the majority of occasions, to resolve urgent problems.

In relation to the reduced number of staff, the women attribute this to two factors: to the frequent absences of certain colleagues, and to the high turnover of staff, as they state that many attend the cooperative looking for work, but leave it after little time.

[...] People come here, we give them a job, people think it's easy here. When the time comes to take something heavy, to carry a bale to the third or fourth storey, they leave. As you can see, the fighters here are us, the old ones, it is us who are here, hands on. (Patricia)

We notice a difficulty, which is that the older workers are rarely absent. There are times they don't turn up, but not as much as the people who came recently. And that is how they "break us", as this is like a set of cogs, if one tooth on a cog is missing, the cogs stop working. (Monica)

As a result of difficulties related to the division of the work, the women find themselves obliged to make sure that various types of activities get done. According to the female workers, the lack of staff for the organization of the tasks results in overload, as the following excerpts illustrate:

[...] Because people don't come to work, you have to work for yourself and for the person who is absent. That complicates things. Yesterday, for example, three people did not come in to work. [...] People don't come to work, and it begins to accumulate. One or two women cannot take care of the material which arrives; two or three trucks per day. (Patricia)

Still in relation to the difficulties related to the organization of the work, the women raised the issue of the division of the tasks between men and women in the cooperative. According to the women, there is a difficulty in the provision of assistance by the men for the work in the warehouse. While the women felt themselves to be overloaded with the activities in the warehouse and in the trucks, the men limited themselves to the trucks, and, at the end of the day, went home; while the women remained in the warehouse after the work shift had ended in order to take care of the activities which had accumulated.

[...] You might be there absolutely exhausted lifting up a bale, and they [the men] turn up and say "my part is done, I'm out of here" [...] They used to turn up and help us, bringing in what had been on the street, helping to lift bales, weighing things. We began to do some things before they arrived, that's why they don't feel as responsible as they should. It is a difficulty, you have to ask, and say "please". (Monica)

The men arrive here, grab their things and go home, and we have to lift the bales, we have to bring the material from outside, we have to go out to the truck when they are not here. They don't come, so we have to go. And they cannot do our job. We can do theirs. (Patricia)

These elements, referent to the division of the work, also relate to the women's conceptions regarding what they conceptualize as "typical woman's work" and "typical man's work". The female workers mentioned incompatibility between men and "women's work", motivated by the group's experiences with men in the warehouse:

They don't separate the small items that we do, because they don't have the patience [...] Not that I am discriminating against men, that they shouldn't be working here, it's not that! But the people you see at the table, separating stuff, they're women. (Manuela)

In relation to the structural problems which permeate the organization of the work in the cooperative, on the other hand, issues arose related to the physical environment as a space, and to

lack of appropriate equipment, as exemplified in the reports below:

Our main problem is space. We should have a bigger space, so that we could have a trolley, one of those forklift trucks to be able to lift things. The trouble is that we use muscle power, we have to go to the upper storeys, it's all done here, manually. It is hard for us. (Patricia)

The issues posed by the environment had already been observed during the participant observation. The recycling warehouse was a relatively spacious environment, but the inflow of materials was too great for the number of women responsible for separating, compacting into bales, weighing and storing the bales. This resulted in an accumulation of materials which often formed genuine walls of cardboard and plastic. This restricted the space for people to pass, which slowed down the rhythm of the work. The female workers recognize the importance of favorable conditions for working in a healthy and more comfortable way:

[...] When we started here, we didn't have any of the equipment which we have today, so our way of working was very precarious. And nowadays it is not – we observed that we didn't need to suffer so much. If you have the machinery, you can work better. [...] Because if you have the right equipment, you don't suffer so much from the physical part. You can produce without much effort for the production. (Monica)

The female workers, therefore, recognized that they had advanced considerably in terms of working conditions in the cooperative. They admit, however, that further changes and investments are necessary, for the work of the waste picker of recyclable materials to be optimized and advanced, taking the maintenance of their health and consideration.

● DISCUSSION

In relation to the dynamic and organization of the work, similarities can be perceived with other Brazilian cooperatives described in the Brazilian literature⁽¹¹⁻¹²⁾. Emphasis is placed on the division of the work based on each worker's affinity, aptitude and uniqueness, and the importance of this for their well-being. According to the Psychodynamics of Work⁽⁴⁾, in order to maintain her psychic health, the worker needs the organization to allow her sufficient liberty for her to negotiate between the organizational impositions and her own wishes. The flexibility of the organization of the work, therefore, is fundamental for the worker to be able to exercise her autonomy, her creativity and her subjectivity – therefore turning the act of working into a means of receiving pleasure.

However, under this model of the division of the work, there was a conflict between the reality of the day-to-day of the female waste pickers in this study and the difficulties in relation to the human resources and the work dynamic, which caused the female workers to be removed from their workstations as a result of the job's requirements. This is what real work corresponds to, defined by the Psychodynamics of Work⁽¹³⁾ as all that the worker actually does in her occupational routine, resulting from the interaction between a set of elements which includes, principally, unforeseen and unexpected situations, the incidents, difficulties and interferences, which oblige the worker to adapt in order to respond to the demands. The real work, therefore, given the need for the individual to take care of an urgent demand, which is additional to what was prescribed for her, can cause physical and mental suffering and strain.

Authors⁽¹⁴⁾ in another study with people who work selecting materials in a recycling association infer that these experience a margin of autonomy and freedom regarding their work process, as – in the day-to-day – there were practically no prescriptions of tasks, but rather “ways of doing” which are transmitted through the praxis and continuously reconstructed by the collective. This study partially corroborates these authors' work, as, if on the one hand the work undertaken in the cooperative manner allows a certain control over the organization, on the other hand, this organization is influenced by factors such as the lack of labor and poor working conditions, which often determines the worker's confrontation with the reality of the work.

The conflict between the real organization of the work and the psychic characteristics of the worker can cause illness⁽¹³⁾. If the women who work selecting recyclable materials find themselves involved in an occupational dynamic which impedes the negotiation with the reality, and which oppresses their

subjectivity and freedom to work in the way that they enjoy and desire, the psychic suffering arising from this context can be transformed into illness⁽¹²⁾.

It is considered that well-being and pleasure are reflected in each individual's freedom in relation to the organization of his or her own life, and, as a consequence, of his or her own labor. This need for liberty extends to the content of the work, to the division of the tasks, and to the relationship existing between oneself and others⁽¹⁵⁾. The interlocution between the worker's satisfaction with the organization of her occupational activity and her well-being, her experiences of pleasure at work and, consequently, her health are, therefore, clear.

In relation to the shortage of human resources which caused the overload for the female workers, one can observe that the same met obstacles to recruiting staff who could adapt to the work, which may be the result of the difficulties related to contact with recyclable materials. Regarding this, it is supposed that not everybody can manage to fit in and identify with the rhythm and demands posed by the day-to-day activities in the cooperative, which results in absenteeism on the part of new staff.

Regarding this, research⁽¹⁶⁾ on the social representations of people who work in recycling materials, regarding their work, showed that these people feel themselves to be marked by the image of a person who undertakes dirty work, smelling bad, mixed up with the garbage with which they work, an image which culminates in feelings of social exclusion and social repulsion. This factor, associated with the high physical demands posed by the tasks, may be involved in the difficulty found in taking on workers who identify with the recycling activities.

Another element present in the accounts is the sexual division of the work, which relates to the delimitation of tasks among the workers based on the criteria of gender. Ethnographic research⁽¹²⁾ undertaken in a recycling warehouse evidenced profound gender characteristics to the division of tasks between the men and women. According to the study, work which is considered of greater "thoroughness, care and sensitivity" is reserved for the women, which relates to the preestablished conception of the woman's domestic nature. Work which is considered to require greater strength, reasoning and intelligence, on the other hand, is reserved for the men.

This statement corroborates the conceptions that women presented over the course of the research in relation to the work undertaken by themselves and by the men. The sexual division of the work, and the disadvantages suffered by the women, entail serious implications for the female workers' life and health⁽¹⁷⁾. It is considered that the construction of the masculine and feminine results from socially established relationships, which result in inferiority and inequalities⁽¹⁸⁾. The continuance of the sexual division of the tasks, therefore, contributes to the restriction of their space in the occupational world and to the process of worsening their work conditions, which may have implications in their psychic suffering and illness.

The Psychodynamics of Work highlights that the human relationships in the occupational environments are influenced by the different ways of organizing the work. This points to the fact that there is a close articulation between the organizational models and the workers' subjectivity⁽¹⁵⁾. One can understand, therefore, that the way that the waste pickers' work is configured is partly the result of personal conflicts, of the dynamic of the work collective, of the movements of unity and disunity, and of the values understood by each individual and by the group.

Finally, in relation to the structural problems and problems involving machinery present in the cooperative, one can point to their potential implications for the female workers' occupational health. Research⁽¹⁹⁾ has evidenced that the waste pickers working in a cooperative find themselves in a cyclic process of maintenance in a situation of exclusion and worsening of working conditions, influenced by elements such as the weaknesses of the organization of the work, barriers in buying and selling and derisory payments for the material which has been separated; and, consequently, the impossibility of investing in infrastructure. This process, according to the authors, is reflected in the health of the waste pickers – above all, in their psychic integrity.

This study agrees with authors⁽²⁰⁾ when these assert that, although waste pickers of recyclable materials are fundamental for the construction of an effective recycling chain, they suffer through a lack of material goods, and social, financial and psychological support; as well as genuine recognition

of their needs and importance. The recognition of this worker, and the construction of care networks, may be important for the promotion of improvements in their environments and, consequently, in the organization of their work.

The person who separates and selects recyclable materials, given her exposure, requires especial attention, particularly on the part of health professionals⁽²¹⁾. The nurse has a fundamental role in this process, given her position as an educator, manager of health services, and actor in the different levels of care. The professional exercising of Nursing extends to actions of health promotion and safety at work, as well as education for reducing the physical and psychic risks resulting from occupational activities. Investigating the organization of the work through the words of the workers themselves, therefore, represents a path to understanding their feelings and needs.

Emphasis is placed on the work, in the psychodynamic perspective, as a fundamental element in the construction of the human being, acting as a mediator between the unconscious and the social field, the singular and the collective. This allows one to think that it is not the work in itself that represents a permanent agent of suffering and strain, but rather how it is organized by the individuals⁽¹⁵⁾. It follows that new understandings of organization must be sought, so as to recover the pleasure, the health, and the worker herself in the exercising of her autonomy and freedom.

● FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study showed that the organization of the work in the recycling cooperative is influenced by the shortage of human resources, which causes overload and strain for the female workers; dissatisfaction in the division of the work; and structural problems in the physical area and the area of equipment. These factors can make performing the tasks more difficult, and place at risk the health and well-being of the women who select and separate the recyclable materials.

It is considered that this study contributes through making an interface - referent to the vulnerability experienced by women who select and separate recyclable materials – which is more visible to society and to research in Nursing. It is fundamental for these women to receive support, care, and greater attention on the part of the health field; articulation of the care network, which converges on their needs, is essential.

Nursing faces the challenge of undertaking studies and intervention actions which contribute to the access of highly different groups of individuals to the prevention of accidents and other threats to health. Regarding waste pickers of recyclable materials, this challenge requires the understanding of the organization of the work and of the other elements which are related to the experiences of pleasure and suffering, health and illness. Understanding the dynamic which exists between health and work, therefore, is fundamental if the nurse is to be able to promote improvements and construct care plans for vulnerable workers.

As a limitation of the study, it should be mentioned that many of the women working in separating recyclable materials did not feel at ease for the collective discussion. In addition to this, one should indicate the impossibility of generalizing from the results, as this is a specific context, that is, a recycling cooperative in a municipality in the central region of the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. However: it is considered that the results found raise the visibility of an issue which, so far, has been explored little, and may define the undertaking of interventional studies which make use of information revealed for the construction of care plans and action plans which converge on the health of waste pickers.

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