# Prospects for a public mental health policy in Brazil

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**Abstract.** The pursuit of high performance by workers have had devastating effects. Every revolution experienced by humanity, we have both positive and negative factors intrinsic to the respective changes. Mental health issues are not recent, but due to the conditions and demands experienced by workers over the years have intensified this situation, and what was once only theoretical has now been quantified by international organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), which annually reveal alarming data regarding the effects that this high productivity has on workers. In Brazil, the situation is no different, with data indicating a growing number of people with mental illnesses associated with the workplace, leading to absences, and, in extreme cases, even suicide. Mental illness is a public issue and should receive attention from the government as well as the private sector and other stakeholders because the trend is for the number of people affected by these mental disorders to increase. Through a bibliographical research sought to understand the relationship between mental illness and the work of organizational and work psychologists, and how these professionals can be strategic in promoting a public mental health policy. It is necessary a change structural in society, starting with the academic environment, which plays an essential role in the education of future professionals who will work in these settings. They possess the technical and specialized knowledge needed to deal with the current scenario of mental illness resulting from the work environment.

**Keywords.** Organizational and Work Psychology; Mental Health, Occupational health.

## 1. Introduction

Throughout human evolution, many adaptations were necessary for humans to coexist in society and develop, including relationships beyond the family nucleus, such as work relationships. Currently, there are various professional activities and services, but let's start with the working hours of an employee under Brazilian labor laws, as defined in the Consolidation of Labor Laws (1943) [1], which states in Article 58 that the normal working hours should not exceed eight hours per day. But, in practice, this is not always the case, and for some authors, a different reality is evident: "Work has, therefore, come to occupy all of people's time. It has invaded and intertwined with the time meant for the home, for relaxation, for the regeneration of vital strength and creativity. What used to be 8 hours of daily work has become a sort of existential full-time job, a never-ending stream of activities, which has exhausted, stressed, and wearied individuals through technologies that monitor and demand attention at all times, leading to a sense of meaninglessness and

boredom"[10].

The demands of employment lead to a worker's dedication, aiming for high or satisfactory performance, but these demands can also result in professional burnout. Thus, paradigms dictated by the capitalist globalization process have impacted human life in the 21st century, increasingly demanding that individuals exhibit satisfactory work performance. Due to these demands, pathological states marked by neural illnesses give way to comorbidities such as depression, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), bipolar disorders, and mental fatigue, consolidating systemic violence perpetuated by the labor sphere [19].

From this scenario, it becomes evident that we have a public problem, namely, the mental illness of workers, and there is an urgent need for the development of public policies focused on organizational spaces. Regarding the methodology adopted for this study, it is a qualitative research with a bibliographical research used as data collection, and data analysis was conducted through

content analysis. The article is structured into methodology, theoretical foundations of mental illness at work as a public issue, and the role of organizational psychologists. The results aim to demonstrate how the training of future psychologists impacts workplaces and, furthermore, how the strategic placement of these professionals within an organization contributes to the success of a public mental health policy for the workplace. The final section corresponds to the concluding remarks.

## 2. Methodology

The use of qualitative research for this work is based on the importance of investigating both the subjective meanings of experiences, daily practices, and narratives[6]. Data collection was conducted through research in books and scientific articles by researchers on the subject. The primary platform for finding these documents was "Google Scholar." In addition, quantitative data were extracted from publications by public entities that conduct quantitative research and provided processed data, such as the Ministry of Health (MS) and the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) at the national level, and the World Health Organization (WHO) at the international level. This study is characterized as an exploratory research, defined as bibliographical research based on existing material [8]. Information was analyzed to investigate how organizational and work psychologists could contribute to reducing mental illness in the workplace.

## 3. Mental illness at work as a public issue

Throughout the centuries, workers have fought hard to secure basic rights. However, the constant changes driven by capitalism, especially in terms of technological advancements, have revealed significant gaps in jurisprudence concerning workers, particularly those categorized as informal, self-employed, and "uberizationed". Even for professionals classified as "celetistas" [1], with employment relationships governed by established regulations, there exists a disparity between theory and practice regarding working hours. This suggests that there are gaps regardless of the employment regime individuals follow.

Despite the general trend indicating a reduction in working hours, the actual time spent working has increased in various regions worldwide, including highly industrialized countries. Among other reasons, this phenomenon stems from the pursuit of greater productivity, driven by increased inter-company and international competition. Therefore, the elongation and intensification of work are seen as part of a strategy to generate greater surpluses, which goes beyond previous periods of capitalist accumulation [20].

There exists a obscured relationship between technological development and labor precariousness [19]. When we think about labor relations, we need to consider several factors, including the number of hours dedicated to work, the fear of unemployment, changes in the work environment, and the revolutions that have occurred over the centuries, which have highlighted these factors. We are currently experiencing what some authors understand as the Fourth Industrial Revolution: The Fourth Industrial Revolution has revealed a dialectic, as it brought about facilitation in execution and a more cost-effective way of working for companies. However, for the working class, it has resulted in increased unemployment due to the reduction of job positions and the emergence of telecommuting, which has implications for the physical and mental health of workers [5].

The high performance demanded by companies often disregards the mental health and well-being of workers [5] because the focus is on delivery, the product, the service provided, and the end result, regardless of what it takes to achieve it. However, all this exposure has negative effects, as indicated by research: When an individual is exposed to an environment that irritates or frightens them, or when it creates a sense of disappointment compared to the expectations they had, it can result in widespread frustration with serious psychological consequences. These consequences may include extreme fatigue, difficulty in relationships, anxiety, demotivation, among others. This is what happens when a worker's rights to health, safety, and occupational medicine are violated, with the presence of stressors in the workplace such as excessive demands from superiors, high productivity expectations, long hours of work without proper rest, personal searches upon entry and exit from the workplace, and more. These are workplace risk factors that can lead to worker illness and burnout [5].

There is a global agenda focused on Sustainable Development with goals until 2030, of which Brazil is a part [13]. Among these goals, we can highlight number three, which corresponds to Health and Well-being. It is evident that promoting mental health is essential for achieving this goal because, according to data from the World Health Organization (WHO): Mental disorders are the leading cause of disability, resulting in one in every six years lived with a disability. People with severe mental health conditions die on average 10 to 20 years earlier than the general population, mainly due to preventable physical illnesses [14].

Another alarming international statistic provided by the WHO is the prediction that annually one trillion dollars is lost due to 264 million people suffering from depression and anxiety at work [4]. Mental health and work require attention and state actions because they are characterized as a public problem. In Brazil, a survey conducted by IBGE revealed an increase in the diagnosis of depression by mental health professionals. In 2013, the number of people aged 18 and older diagnosed with depression was

7.6%. However, in 2019, it was estimated to be 10.2%, representing 16.3 million people [9].

## 4. The Role of Organizational and Work Psychologist

Conducted an in-depth study on worker health related to social, organizational, and work psychology. It became evident through interviews conducted in the research with other psychologists how important the role of this professional is, not only in diagnosing but also in deeply mapping the causes of worker illness: "Thus, even though concrete workplace issues that could contribute to worker illness appear in their statements, there persists a belief that individuals carry pre-existing structural aspects that are indeed at the root of their illness. These aspects are expressed through difficulties in adapting to the current productive environment or even personal problems that weaken them and place them in a vulnerable position to illness"[16].

The role of Organizational and Work Psychology (OWP) is strategic in changing the scenario of worker absenteeism due to mental health-related issues, as through this field of study, the professional will: "Analyze and understand how the various dimensions that constitute the dynamics and life of individuals, groups, and work organizations interact, with the aim of developing strategies that promote health, prevent illness, and improve the quality of life for workers"[2].

The organizational and work psychologist plays a role in diagnosis, mediation, and the creation of projects and programs that promote mental health in the organizational environment [15]. However, the psychologist's role in the organizational environment extends to other areas, for example: "While work psychology is more focused on market issues, employment, work organization, ergonomics, and occupational health, the activities of psychologists related to management and behavior are more directed towards administrative activities. Psychologists contribute knowledge, methods, and techniques on how to manage people and organizational processes" [18]. Indeed, the role of organizational psychologists aligns closely with administrative activities. When conducting interviews with psychologists about their respective roles, found that worker health was not spontaneously mentioned or considered the primary focus. There is an explanation for this phenomenon [16]. Some authors emphasize factors related to the education and training of these professionals, as there is inadequacy in the teaching and learning process, which consequently leads to limited engagement in the organizational environment [17]. This highlights the need for a broader and more comprehensive approach to education in organizational psychology to ensure that it adequately addresses the complexities of worker well-being and mental health in various organizational contexts. There is a low or nonexistent specialization and training for professionals in the field of organizational and work psychology, and subsequently, their roles within organizations tend to deviate from the objectives of preserving the physical and mental health of workers.

Mental illness among workers is a reality in both the public and private sectors, and it has become a public problem with an urgent character, given its effects, which can result in extreme cases such as suicide. The state plays a significant role in formulating public policies to address this situation, starting with education, which is directly linked to the training of future professionals who will work in work environments and will have the necessary tools to diagnose, treat, monitor, and change this scenario. The future organizational and work psychologist is a strategic professional as part of this public policy.

## 5. Conclusions

From this investigation, concerning statistics on workers whose mental health is compromised, alarming data have been observed. This reflects in their absenteeism from work activities and a decrease in their quality of life and well-being. It has become a public issue that is being addressed at an international level, as it ranks among the diseases that most affect the active population. Despite being a public problem, it requires responsibility and action from the private sector to reverse this situation.

Throughout the research, it became clear that measures need to be taken, and an attempt was made to relate the role of organizational and work psychologists in this context. Although research has already shown a connection between the work of these professionals and the reduction of mental illness, there is a lack of commitment from academia to actually train professionals to specifically work with this issue. Furthermore, there must be a structural change within companies regarding the functions of these professionals, which essentially resemble management rather than focusing on the physical and mental well-being of other workers.

In conclusion, it is evident that education plays a key role in improving the mental health of workers. This is because it is essential for the organizational environment to be composed of qualified professionals who can address the issue of mental illness, which is likely to increase due to all the factors mentioned earlier, such as the pursuit of high performance and dedication to work activities, often at the expense of health and well-being.

From the works studied, it is clear that the beginning of a public policy to combat worker illness starts with education. In essence, education is the foundation for addressing the challenges of mental health in the workplace and fostering a more holistic approach to well-being, not only for future organizational and work psychologists but also for professionals across various psychology disciplines and, ultimately, for

the workforce as a whole.

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