ETHICAL DILEMMA AND SUFFERING AT THE WORKPLACE: RESISTING THROUGH NORMS.

TWO CASE-STUDIES

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Abstract

This article aims at revisiting the question of « resistance» in organizations through a long-term research path, concerning injustices at the workplace. These injustices issued from the professional sphere are made visible throughout the existence of conflicts of values.

We consider that social injustice arises from unsolved conflicts of values, provoking suffering at the workplace (Renault, 2016 ; Dejours, 2010). Nevertheless, we posit that the major challenge, existing in open and multicultural societies, has less to see with the existence itself of these conflicts that with the impossibility to overcome them through different “normative frameworks” (or “models of justice”), accessible to workers and susceptible to be put into practice (de Nanteuil, 2016, 2017).

In order to materialize this perspective, our paper mobilizes two case-studies, belonging to “non-profit sector”, where the work appears as a “vocation” – the adhesion to the cultural project is a condition to the commitment to work. However, this adhesion is threatened by the unsolved conflicts of values. Our paper proposes a normative framework that can be useful in order to tackle this situation: ethics of compromise. The difficulty experienced by workers is seen as the consequence of the impossibility to translate this ethics in daily work practices and life.

Resisting to injustice means to overcome the need of equality or diversity in the workplace. It means simultaneously to recognize these conflicts and to mobilize other normative frameworks. It is important to resist *through* norms and not only *against* norms.

Keywords : social justice, ethical dilemma, conflict of values, productive resistance

Introduction

Human beings spend more than a third of their lifetime at the workplace. Episodes of burnout or depression are more frequent than in the past (SPF Emploi, 2019). It is our duty, as researcher, to analyse the reasons leading workers to these uncomfortable situations. This is a major stake for science; different disciplines are interested in well-being at work, such as psychology and human resources (Maslach et al., 2001). Specifically, we aim at analysing how conflicts of values can reveal specific injustices at the workplace, through suffering. Moreover, this injustice should be overcame through existing “normative frameworks”, but this is not always possible. In this sense, we highlight the notion of resistance, as a new approach to surmount injustices.

The suffering at the workplace is the expression of unjust situations experienced by workers (Renault, 2004). Girard (2009) highlights that workers can suffer because of conflicts of values. As Girard (2009) suggests conflicts of values are an integrant part of the organisation daily life. For this reasons, organizations and workers need to learn to live with them. We consider that social norms are embedded and specific to any organization (March, 1986). In other words, we consider that any organization has its own social norms, implicit and explicit. Hence, a norm can exist and can be essential to an organization. In the same way, the same norm does not worth is another organization. It thus means that conflicts of values raise differently from one sector (or organization) to another (de Nanteuil & Cnop, 2007).

Considering that, our research aims at discovering, through the conflict of values experienced by workers, the injustice making them suffer. Once the source of injustice is defined, a normative framework will be proposed.

Practically, we will propose two case-studies, in two different sectors, sharing the same conception of work. We will describe the conflicts of values experienced by workers and the injustice revealed; in this way, we will propose a specific normative framework. Finally, we will underpin the concept of “productive resistance” (Courpasson et al., 2012) and its application in an organization. This notion allows us to highlight how workers, by recognizing these conflicts, can mobilize new “normative framework” and can resist thought this setting.

Injustice and suffering at the workplace: missing norms…

We are interested in analyzing the phenomenon producing suffering to workers, through particular lentils: the ones of the conflicts of values – also called “ethical dilemmas”. One author has drawn her attention on this articulation between suffering and conflict of values. Girard (2009) discloses the existing relationship between conflicts of values and suffering. Conflicts of values at work raise when a worker is split between different values referring to inconsistent acts. Girard (2009) presents different scenarios: conflicts can be *inside* a human being or they can exist *among* social groups. Indeed, a worker can be torn up between two values (« adherence to rules» and « loyalty »): his/her supervisor can impose one of this value to him/her.

Conflicts of values may create suffering: according to Renault (2016), suffering reveals injustice in the professional sphere. In this perspective, conflicts of values are symptoms of injustice revealed by suffering. However, in an open and multicultural society, it could be argued that such dilemmas are inevitable. Therefore, it seems that the problem resides less in the simple existence of dilemmas than in the impossibility, for workers, to invoke and/or to apply norms of justice to overcome these conflicts. In other words, conflicts of values can reveal an injustice, not because of their simple existence, but because of the lack of norms of justice in the effort to overcome them. We welcome Dubet (2006)’s conception of justice: we can disclose justice, if only we analyse injustice in-depth.

It is important to highlight our position regarding the adequacy of ethical norms and values to the context. Norms are socially constructed, in a specific context (Granovetter, 1985). Humans beings, social groups and organizational structures produce norms, that can be implicit and explicit (Gomez, 1994; Reynaud, 1997). For this reason, norms have to be apprehended not as abstract forms but as contextual realties, affected by diversity. This point is crucial to our research, because, considering injustice as a “missing criteria” in the modulation of ethical conflicts, it is clear that we can find similarities in situations experienced by workers in similar organizations. Specifically, we consider that the coherence existing in the setting of norms is the proof of the possible similarity of injustices experienced by workers, in organization belonging to the same sectors. It means that, organizations with some similar characteristics, particularly the impact of the environment on the structure of the organization, reproduce some similar mechanisms, which can create suffering to employee.

**Two case studies: firefighters and nurses in Wallonia**

Students of UCLouvain[[2]](#footnote-2) collected the data during three years. The core of the workgroup was the identification, analysis and exploration of conflicts of value in an organization. Through these works, thirty group assignments, each includes five in-depth interviews; we could identify different categories of conception of work. Each of them is the nest of a specific situation of injustice, expressed by a conflict of values.

This article intends to present a specific category of conception of work; what we define as “work as vocation”. This conception of work emerges in organizations, where workers decide to participate because of the ideal and the mission. These are essential for workers. In other words, workers have the calling to do this job, for instant nurses, firefighter or police officers. Specifically, these workers want to *help and sustain the others* and this is the motivation encouraging them. Normally, these values, leading workers to choose this specific profession, are the symbol of the trade and of the profession. This kind of values are opposite to the one that the organization promotes. Indeed, these days, these organizations are subjected to specific laws and rules imposed by the institutions. Particularly, these organisations entertain an important bond with the government, sometimes this one is a shareholder of the organization. As a shareholder, the government is imposing some restrictions as the cutting of budget or as new bureaucratic procedures.

To sum up, in this type of organizations, we have two sphere of values in contrast. On the one hand, the values that explain the commitment to the trade: the reason why workers decide to be partaking to the organization. On the other hand, some values embodied by the organization, because they have structurally changed the organization – i.e. the new administrative and institutional rules. The embeddedness of institutional values in the organizations is transmitted to workers. Workers are suffering, because they incorporate two spheres of values – professional values and institutional ones.

This conflict of values is lived *inside* a worker, which is torn between his/her ideals and the values that are imposed by the organizational constraints. Two cases will be presented, firstly the case of firefighters and secondly the case of nurses.

*Firefighters in Wallonia*

Working as firefighter is a choice made to help others: they are passionate of their job. Reading the interviews, it is noticeable that firefighters answered a calling. Workers are putting their life at risk, in order to save the population. In other words, firefighter are at our disposal.

To better understand the suffering and the conflict of values experienced by the firefighters, we need to introduce some elements of context. In 2015, in order to improve the public safety, the Belgian government decided to set up a new administration regarding the district distribution. Hence, before the reform, the municipality was in charge of the workers: all their duties and rights were bargained with the local institutions. Following the 2015 changes, jurisdiction on firefighters was not anymore in charge of municipalities, but a common status was imposed depending on the district, they belonged. Moreover, this reform imposed predefined region in which the firefighter of a predefined district must take action. Finally, paradoxical issue exists. On the one hand, the subventions allocated to any district are lower than before the reform – because of the change of jurisdiction. On the other hand, the bureaucratic rules and procedures are new and consuming.

Through this case, the conflict of values is inside the human beings as workers. The dilemma opposes the mission that the firefighters want to achieve, and the conditions that the organization and the administration allocate to them. The firefighters are completely engaged in their work and they are convinced that their job is necessary to the population. They feel to be essential to the society and to citizens’ well-being. Nonetheless, in this specific context, this category of workers face with the endless (bureaucratic) red tape and the lack of means.

*Nurses in Wallonia*

The nursing profession is essential in hospital. It is noteworthy that historically this profession has been subjected to institutional decisions, which degraded the conditions of working. In other words, the number of patients keeps on growing, but the subventions allocated to nursing are dropping. The nurses interviewed shared the reason of their engagement in this profession: they feel useful, they feel making a difference day-by-day. For this purpose, it is important to underline their commitment even if the conditions are arduous, not only psychologically, but also physically.

The nurses interviewed explained that they frame their job around the respect: respect of the patient’s himself and his/her need and the respect of the rules. That is to say, the patient is a human being, with feelings and emotions, but – in order to respect the hierarchy – the nurse is obliged to follow doctors’ dispositions, even if the patient does not share them. This example clearly shows one of the conflicts experienced by workers: some personal values are irreconcilable with the professional ones.

Moreover, the subventions are not always appropriated to the hospital needs: the budget is cut and the resources diminish. In this way, the nurses are facing with an overloading. This issue can create two different conflicts of values. On the one hand, although the patient is not completely treated, the hospital decides to release the sick. In this case, the nurses are living again a conflict: it is not compatible with their personal value of respect. On the other hand, it is difficult to handle the patients, devoting time and attention to them, if nurses are overloading. This is an example of the dehumanization of the sick. In order to finish the shift, respecting the schedule, the nursing are not allowed to bond ties with patients.

In this particular context, in which workers’ must leave their values behind and act following a less important values, in their opinion, can create injustices. In fact, in this case, nurses feel guilty or frustrated.

*Work as vocation: which type of injustice?*

This conception of work is demanding and the worker as human being is involved in it. Worker’s actions help and sustain the population, they are essential to save life or, at least, conserve and prevent the well-being. However, the institutional constraints are changing the organizational design, the structure and the standards. The workers are struggling: they understand the institutional impositions, workers embodied them, but they have different values leading their action. The conflict of value provoking the suffering is the imposition of some values – *institutional* ones – to the one they consider predominant – the *professional* ones. However, it is important to highlight that if the conflict exists, it means that workers are also driven by institutional values. In other words, workers are attached to institutional values. Workers embodied the institutional values and workers are acting and respecting organizational discourse. The experienced injustice is expressed by the impossibility of accomplish their mission as workers, taking care of the meaning, because of external impositions. Nevertheless, workers understand and acts following the external imposition, because they are part of this institution. Workers should be able to conciliate these two spheres of values, in order to accomplish their mission.

**Normative frameworks to overcome conflicts of value**

In his book, de Nanteuil (2016) has extracted four normative frameworks, also called “models of justice”, from contemporary philosophical controversies. The author wishes to help readers identify and overcome ethical dilemmas, in specific context. As presented earlier, our posture is the following: through case-studies, we wish to propose in-depth analysis of injustice at the workplace; in that perspective, we consider that such injustice is less the result of ethical dilemmas as such than the impossibility, for workers, to overcome them through norms of justice. As a reminder, we consider the injustice, revealed by a conflict of values, as a lack of one or more criteria of justice.

*Ethics of compromise: main characteristics*

De Nanteuil (2016) enlists two main authors to develop this model: Laurent Thévenot and Luc Boltanski. Both are partaking to “l’école de conventions”. This paradigm conceives the general interest and the common good as the product of a dynamic articulation of values and shared beliefs. Particularly, through a shared setting of norms the human beings composing a collective can act in order to accomplish their common good. Pierre-Yves Gomez (1991) assumes the application of conventions and its theory in the organizations. It is important to highlight the moral attitude of conventions: in fact, starting from a structural problem of organizations, we can underline the moral issues to tackle. In other words, this model of justice wants to show that economic agents are also moral human beings needing coordination in order to realize the common good of the organization.

For this purpose, it is necessary to underline the importance of plural conceptions of shared values in an organization. In any organization, workers live different roles, works, rules and situations. Anyone of them has to point out his/her needs as workers and as moral human beings, it is important for them to state their positon (justification), and finally to find a compromise with the other members of the organization to reach their common interest.

We want to precise that the *justification* is a crucial point of the critical position the actors can state. For justification, Boltaski and Thévenot intend the referring to known and shared criteria of justice. In their workplace, the justification can take place when an event, in our case, an injustice, is produced. Thanks to that, the workers can position themselves and they can critique the unjust experience lived. To answer to the justification, they can appeal to the orders of worth (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991). In this way, workers can choose from among what exist to state their position. In the orders of worth, different *Cités* are presented. Each *Cité* is defined thought a specific context (existing rules, roles, norms and characteristics of an organization) and an ideal (expectation of different regulations to reach the general interest).

This model of justice can be addressed to workers experiencing injustices at work, if three criteria are articulated. Firstly, different *Cités* might exist in the organization. Specifically, it is important that different values can coexist. In other words, in any organization, the existence of different roles and hierarchical positons should allow workers to have different and plural values. Secondly, it is essential that the compromise expected between the different category or different workers can be thought in a long-term dimension. In other words, the compromise is not conceived as a punctual answer to specific problems. It means that the compromise must be found in order to reach the common good. Thirdly, all the stakeholders should define together what they mean with the term “common good”.

To conclude, this model needs to make the workers, in their economics agents’ and moral beings’ features, able to justify themselves and to accept others’ justifications, for the common good.

*Ethics of compromise and work as vocation: possible relationships*

This model of justice can give voice to all the values existing in an organization; it can conciliate different spheres and different activities leaded by different values. Any organization expressing this conception of work as a clear vision of what “common good” is. It is necessary to find a compromise between the different sphere of values, to understand the reasons why some choices are made and to rethink an organizational structure that can support all the stakeholders.

**Normative frameworks and “productive resistance” at the workplace: new perspectives**

After the presentation and analyse of situation of injustices revealed through this specific conflict of values, *inside* the worker, our aim is to show how workers can resist through norms. In other words, it is essential to stress on the possibility, thanks to a particular normative framework, to show workers’ need of justice. In our case-studies, workers are torn up between two spheres of values, both embodied and leading workers’ actions. The concept of productive resistance may help workers to resist to this injustice, because of its definition and nature.

“Productive resistance requires that resisters create temporary realignments of normal power relations in which the commanded achieve control of an agenda that is presumed to govern them” (Courpasson et al., 2012, p. 804). It means that the organization should let resisters, in our case-studies, workers, experience a conflict of values. In the same way, workers need to be listened, to define what is common good and finally to create, with the organization, a way to coexist. This specific situation is dormant in workers’ experience of injustice. As aforementioned, the attachment to institutional values and professional one create the injustice, and it is a way to overcome the conflict. In other words, the acceptance of the two spheres of values creates the conflict for workers and, simultaneously, it can be the answer.

Through their empirical studies, Courpasson et al. (2012) consider that the enclaves – as working spaces and as shared values and practices – and that reports – as written text and as agreement – are the tangible and social objects of this resistance. Through these object the organization (and the management) let workers have power and express them about their needs and values.

For this purpose, a question raises: “How compromise can be an act of productive resistance?” We should refer to the three criteria proposed (de Nanteuil, 2016) and show how they can express this productive resistance. Firstly, the ethics of compromise proposes the existence of different *Cités* in the organizations, expressed, in our case-studies, by institutional and professional values. This is the basis of creative resistance. Indeed, this notion establishes the importance for workers to express themselves. Therefore, productive resistance asks to the organization – management – to let workers free in expressing their needs. This proposition is crucial thus for our model of justice: the plurality and tolerance (Policar, 2006) of different spheres values need to coexist in organizations, where work is considered as a vocation.

Secondly, the ethics of compromise stresses the importance of finding a long-term compromise putting the common good as nexus of the new model of justice. The productive resistance should be not seen as a static moment, which will never be reproduced again. On the contrary, this kind of resistance is a coproduction of norms and objectives. Productive resistance is not as the opposition of two irreconcilable spheres or categories of values. Finally, it is important to define “common good”, in order to resist through norms. This is the perspectives that further research should assume.

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2. Work assignment for “Sociologie du travail” course. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)