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Research Article

Discussing the challenges of Operational Experience Feedback processes from the perspective of Psychodynamics of Work

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Abstract

Paper aims: Elucidating the barriers for an active participation of field workers in Operational Experience Feedback (OEF) processes and identifying potential ways forward.

Originality: Although the literature on OEF already addresses its challenges and strategies, we identified an opportunity for delving deeper into the (inter)subjective issues involved.

Research method: We conduct a review of the technical-scientific literature on OEF and elaborate a discussion in light of the theory of Psychodynamics of Work (PDW).

Main findings: Silence and disengagement in OEF can be the result of field workers and managers resorting to defensive strategies against the risks of questionings and critiques, which are nevertheless necessary for discussing and deliberating issues reported via OEF. The deliberation gap (i.e., the exclusion of field workers from deliberation of issues they report) can be an important element in the distrust and distance between field and management.

Implications for theory and practice: In order to strengthen OEF processes, we propose the development of collective resources that shall enable stakeholders dealing with questionings more constructively. For this purpose, we suggest strategies that consider the expectations on OEF results, performance evaluation criteria, and the conditions for field workers to participate in the deliberation of issues reported.

Keywords

Operational experience feedback. Psychodynamics of work. Industrial safety.

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1. Introduction

In the last decades, improvements in technical design and safety standards have contributed to a continual reduction of accidents in the industrial sector. In many organizations, however, making formal procedures more rigorous is no longer resulting in significantly lower fatal accident rates (Daniellou et al., 2011, p. 3, 92; European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2024; International Association of Oil & Gas Producers, 2024, p. 8). This approach is often associated with a focus on formal top-down structures and the behavior of operators, whereas: 1) the role of organizational and management issues in the constitution of accidents is often downplayed, and 2) poor attention is paid to the reality encountered by operators in the field (Daniellou et al., 2011, p. 3-4). With this in mind, some companies understand the importance of Operational Experience Feedback (OEF) processes, which are designed to promote the circulation of information derived from what is experienced at work, and are known in high-risk industries as essential for safety management (Gaillard, 2005). OEF is useful since the data available to managers are not always enough to understand production and safety issues. Problems can be underreported; moreover, the existing data may lack debate and interpretation with the help of stakeholders of multiple perspectives (Daniellou et al., 2011, p. 80, 101).

OEF can allow the explanation of latent tensions or conflicts that are often present in the genesis of incidents and accidents. However, the very discussion of conflicts, which is necessary to understand safety gaps, can undermine the relationship between the participants, and ultimately compromise the success of OEF. Another common difficulty is the fear of punishment, which leads stakeholders to feed organizational silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000) or to give superficial and defensive explanations for sensitive safety issues, such as those that can affect the reputation of individuals or trigger lawsuits (Mbaye, 2008). Thus, overcoming organizational silence, developing trust, and obtaining positive results in OEF processes are interrelated challenges (Daniellou et al., 2011, p. 80-81; Mbaye, 2008).

Although (inter)subjective aspects are already considered a relevant source of obstacles in OEF literature, there is opportunity to provide them a deeper comprehension. Hence, our research question is: how to understand the nature and genesis of the (inter)subjective issues in OEF processes? A possible approach for this question is discussing these issues in light of a certain theoretical framework. The theory of Psychodynamics of Work (PDW) is a suitable option, given its focus on intersubjective and psychic processes existing in work situations.

In this paper, we initially propose a literature review focused on the following questions: what difficulties may arise in OEF processes? What is the genesis of these difficulties? What strategies can be employed to overcome them? Next, we discuss the OEF literature in light of PDW. We present key concepts in PDW theory and explore how they can be related with (inter)subjective aspects of OEF processes specifically. Lastly, and still based on the theoretical framework of PDW, we propose further strategies to afford the engagement of workers in OEF processes.

Since much of the literature on OEF and PDW has been published in either French or Portuguese and lack translation to English, this paper also helps circumventing language barriers for researchers and practitioners interested in OEF. Additionally, we note that although this study focuses on industrial safety, given the tradition of OEF in high-risk industries, it is not restricted to this topic. In general, organizations have processes of feedback, lessons learned, continuous improvement, etc., in which OEF is essentially sought even when this term is not explicit. The success of these processes can be undermined by the same factors that hinder OEF (Mbaye, 2008, 2010). Furthermore, when safety issues are discussed considering real work, opportunities to advance in other issues such as health, quality, productivity, and environment can emerge (Institut pour une Culture de Sécurité Industrielle, 2019, p. 20). In activity ergonomics, *real work* or *activity* refer to how work is actually done, considering that the *prescribed work* or *task* cannot fully anticipate all situations and require adjustments (Daniellou, 2005; Guérin et al., 2001).

2. Research method

In order to undertake the literature review proposed, the following searches were performed:

- in the ISI Web of Science and Scopus databases: “operational feedback” OR “operational experience feedback” OR “return of experience”;
- in the *Capes Periódicos* database: “operational feedback” OR “operational experience feedback” OR “return of experience” OR “REX” (abbreviation for *rétour d’experience* in French, *retorno de experiencia* in Spanish, and *retorno de experiência* in Portuguese); and

- on the website of the *Institut pour une culture de sécurité industrielle* (ICSI), publications section: "REX". ICSI is an institution for the development of safety culture in high-risk industries (Institut pour une Culture de Sécurité Industrielle, 2023).

The searches were conducted on April 30, 2024. For each of them, the title and abstract of at most 50 results ordered by relevance were considered, without restrictions on publication date or field of knowledge. Considering the aim of this paper, we selected for a full reading only the results and respective bibliographic references that helped to clarify at least one of the following topics:

- types of OEF processes;
- obstacles to creation, preservation, and development of OEF processes;
- the genesis of these obstacles; and
- strategies to overcome them.

Next, the aforementioned topics were also used to guide a thematic organization and presentation of the findings of the literature review on OEF.

The last step of this paper consisted in discussing the literature review in light of the theory of PDW, which is primarily found in books. For this purpose, we explained some of its key concepts and discussed how they can be present in subjective and intersubjective aspects of OEF processes. The concepts were selected according to their potential in elucidating the referred aspects. Finally, on the basis of the discussion made, suggestions were proposed with the aim of improving OEF processes.

3. Literature review on OEF

Since the beginning of the literature review performed by the authors, a plurality of OEF processes was observed. For this reason, before presenting the obstacles to OEF, it seemed pertinent to contextualize the reader regarding the different types of OEF, as shown in subsection 3.1 'Defining OEF'. Next, in subsection 3.2 'Obstacles and strategies for OEF', the main challenges of OEF processes are presented, as well as potential solutions to them.

3.1. Defining OEF

In the industry, OEF can be understood as a process that allows the circulation of information useful to control high-risk systems (Gaillard, 2005, p. 4). It serves as a means of detecting safety failures, understanding the reasons for incidents and accidents, and promoting the continuous improvement of accident prevention devices (Gauthey, 2008, p. 5). Although a system can be divided into parts (e.g., teams, sectors, hierarchical levels, production units, contracted companies, etc.) with specific objectives, many problems go beyond the interfaces. Thus, no single stakeholder has the sufficient knowledge to ensure the safety of the system, which makes communication between stakeholders necessary (Institut pour une Culture de Sécurité Industrielle, 2017, p. 10).

OEF has a wide variety of objectives and means, which in turn reflect the variety of challenges and situations faced. The objectives of OEF can include, for instance:

- reporting, investigating, and treating adverse events (i.e., accidents, incidents, or anomalies) and gaps in materials, equipment, facilities, and processes (Daniellou et al., 2011, p. 108; Gaillard, 2005, p. 3; Gauthey, 2008, p. 11; Mbaye, 2010, p. 4-5);
- improving processes, rules, projects, equipment, and facilities (Gaillard, 2005, p. 3-4; Gauthey, 2008, p. 10; Mbaye, 2010, p. 3);
- disseminating or recognizing good practices and positive contributions to safety (Gaillard, 2005, p. 3; Gauthey, 2008, p. 12; Mbaye, 2010, p. 4); and
- analyzing production difficulties (Daniellou et al., 2011, p. 108).

The forms of OEF are equally diverse and may include (Gauthey, 2008, p. 14-32):

- documents, reports, or alerts on the current safety issues, past adverse events, or future events (e.g., storms, maintenance shutdowns);
- formal or informal meetings;

- participatory planning of operations and new facilities; and
- participatory (re)formulation of rules and procedures.

OEF processes can still vary in terms of stakeholders involved and recipients of the information, for instance when safety alerts are issued or accident investigation reports are disclosed (Gaillard, 2005; Gauthey, 2008).

The design of OEF processes tends to reflect the company's vision on how safety should be managed. OEF also depends on the circumstances faced, which may or not allow it to be implemented as originally conceived.

In the initial stages of safety management, companies typically do not have formally consolidated safety devices. Thus, the most evident need in relation to OEF processes tends to be the formalization of periodic meetings, communication channels, and reporting systems that allow registering incidents and accidents, as well as checking how these were or are being treated. This is an initial step toward converting adverse events into organizational improvements (Parker et al., 2006).

In the study by Mbaye (2010, p. 6-7) in chemical and nuclear industries, the author analyzed the existing OEF processes for safety management. Despite the variety of device nomenclatures, the author found that they involved more or less the following steps:

1. Detecting the adverse event.
2. Collecting data related to the event.
3. Selecting stakeholders to analyze the data.
4. Analyzing the material.
5. Identifying safety gaps, lessons learned, and possible corrective and/or preventive actions.
6. Writing and disseminating the results of the analysis.
7. Planning and implementing actions.
8. Monitoring the actions.

The OEF processes with a higher degree of formalization and verticalization tend to present higher temporal and cognitive costs. Moreover, Mbaye (2010) found that the observed OEF processes did not allow for dialogue between managers and field workers, which could be explained by the following factors: the non-participation of lower ranks in both analysis of events and definition of corrective or preventive measures; the information systems for recording and managing events were difficult to use; the official communication about events, which seemed abstract and difficult to understand; and the downsizing process, which led to conflicts and deterioration of relations. There are still other challenges that OEF may face (Fondation pour une Culture de Sécurité Industrielle, 2014, p. 10):

- Among the reported safety issues, few are properly addressed.
- Safety issues are reported in such a way that it is not possible to make a diagnosis, thus compromising the possibility of corrective actions.
- Workers avoid reporting safety issues. They fear punishments and corrective actions that may be ineffective and/or make procedures more bureaucratic.

The aforementioned obstacles point to the need of dialogue and coordination between different stakeholders, whether to deepen the diagnosis of safety issues, identify those to be prioritized, or elaborate effective solutions (Daniellou et al., 2011, p. 101; Institut pour une Culture de Sécurité Industrielle, 2017, p. 19). In this context, some authors go beyond reporting systems and propose *work debate spaces*, which should:

- promote visibility to real work, which is not limited to strict compliance with prescriptions and involves regulations in the course of activities, even when critical information is missing or uncertain (De La Garza & Fadier, 2007; Detchessahar, 2011; Journé, 2005);
- enable debate between participants, allow exposing and discussing the points of view at stake, and generate joint learning (Falzon & Mollo, 2009; Rocha et al., 2014, 2015); and
- be formalized, well-defined, and planned spaces (Detchessahar, 2011).

Debates can make it possible to integrate important information that was being ignored, therefore improving the appreciation of certain situations and respective risks. Still, there is a chance that the members of a group

eventually reinforce themselves in mistaken appreciations, generating the 'tunnel vision' (Daniellou et al., 2011, p. 38, p. 59). Besides, even if participants of a work debate space may introduce new and important information, they do not necessarily reach a consensus. This situation is illustrated in the action research by Rocha et al. (2014, 2015) conducted in an electricity distribution company. The authors show the creation of a work debate space involving technicians and supervisors which allowed: a collective reflection on how individuals in the group actually assessed operational risks in different manners; a closer relationship between supervision and field; mutual learning; and a positive influence on well-being, considering that being able to express oneself and being supported by colleagues are health protective factors (Detchessahar, 2011).

In summary, variations in OEF processes described in the literature can manifest themselves in three major dimensions: objectives, means and conceptions, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Variations in OEF.

Dimension	Examples of variations in OEF processes
Objectives	• Reporting, investigating, and treating safety issues (Daniellou et al., 2011; Gaillard, 2005; Gauthey, 2008)
	• Improving processes, rules, projects, equipment, and facilities (Gaillard, 2005; Gauthey, 2008)
	• Disseminating good practices and positive contributions to safety (Mbaye, 2010)
	• Analyzing production difficulties (Daniellou et al., 2011)
Means	• Documents, reports, or alerts
	• Formal or informal meetings
	• Participatory planning of operations and new facilities
	• Participatory (re)formulation of rules and procedures (Gauthey, 2008)
Conceptions	• Reporting systems (Mbaye, 2010)
	• Work debate spaces (De La Garza & Fadier, 2007; Detchessahar, 2011; Falzon & Mollo, 2009; Journé, 2005; Rocha et al., 2015)

3.2. Obstacles and strategies for OEF

Despite the variety of types of OEF processes, the literature review enabled the identification of some recurring obstacles as well as possible strategies to overcome them, as presented below.

3.2.1. Fear of sanctions and punishments

As investigations of adverse events advance, they can evidence the co-responsibility or responsibility of other individuals, such as supervisors, engineers, maintainers, managers, directors, etc., who may have strongly influenced organizational or strategic choices that contributed to the event. Individuals may fear being held responsible or having their skills and decisions questioned, which can leave harmful marks on their teams and professional identities (Gaillard, 2005, p. 7-8; Gilbert, 2001). Such aspects illustrate the psychic aspects and costs involved in OEF processes.

Faced with these threats, individuals tend to defend themselves and give naive, fatalistic, superficial, or even untrue explanations about their involvement in the event, thus hiding any signs of mistakes, omissions, or personal limitations. Hence, the quality of the information collected in the investigation is compromised, and the chances of an adequate diagnosis and treatment of the event reduce (Mbaye, 2008). The depth of investigations also depends on the degree of questioning and recognition of internal inconsistencies that the organization is capable of supporting (Gilbert, 2001). Rigid production policies on excellence and zero defects are another factor that may encourage employees to hide problems, errors, and difficulties present in the real work, since revealing them might trigger sanctions (Gauthey, 2008, p. 35).

In order to circumvent or mitigate the fear of being sanctioned or questioned, and encourage active participation in OEF processes, companies have developed some strategies, for instance:

- Partially or completely decoupling OEF processes from the sanctions system. As an example of partial decoupling, it can be stipulated that only malicious transgressions will be punished (Gaillard, 2005, p. 7-9).
- Emphasizing that the goal of OEF is identifying and understanding safety gaps and learning from them, rather than applying sanctions (Gaillard, 2005, p. 7-9).
- Ensure confidentiality and anonymity of participants (Gilbert, 2001).
- Focus the discussion on technical issues instead of individuals involved and their respective decisions (Gilbert, 2001).

However, even when strategies as the aforementioned are used, there always remains the issue of whether the company can be trusted or not to the point of disclosing sensitive information (Gaillard, 2005, p. 8).

3.2.2. Diversity of stakeholders

OEF tends to become more difficult when participants of different professions, educational levels, sectors, hierarchical levels, or companies are involved. The heterogeneity of stakeholders can lead to cultural differences and conflicts that hinder mutual understanding. The language and knowledge of managers and safety specialists often predominate to the detriment of lower rank workers, who are nevertheless closer to operational reality (Gaillard, 2005, p. 10).

A common obstacle to the development of compromise solutions is that stakeholders involved underestimate the restrictions and difficulties faced by each other (Guérin et al., 2001, p. 62). For OEF participants to be able to explain the reality of their own work to others, a possible strategy is to avoid jargons and technical details, and instead, seek didactic communication, possibly with the support of schemes, drawings, or photos (Mbaye et al., 2014, p. 6).

3.2.3. Costs and benefits of OEF

Performing in-depth adverse event analyses and developing solutions with the participation of several stakeholders are time and effort consuming, which can conflict with everyday pressures and therefore threaten the success of OEF (Mbaye, 2010, p. 10). In this sense, a possible strategy for the participants of OEF is to set specific goals, consider time constraints, and be selective regarding the information and issues to be discussed (Glauser, 1984, p. 631).

The lower degree of verticalization of certain OEF processes, as well as the knowledge of each other's real work by its participants, can facilitate trusting relationships and reduce the costs involved. In the study by Mbaye (2010, p. 29-30), for example, the author observed that field workers were disengaged toward verticalized OEF processes, which were controlled by managers and perceived as disconnected from the experiences of the field. On the other hand, they felt more comfortable with OEF processes limited to their respective sectors, which afforded a higher degree of confidentiality and protection against external judgements. Thus, it is noted that the costs of an OEF process tend to be compared with its benefits, and the perceived result of this comparison can weigh against or in favor the engagement of the participants (Mbaye, 2010).

3.2.4. Focus on gaps and events of higher harm potential

Formalized OEF processes enable the registration of a large number of safety gaps and adverse events to be analyzed. Since the available resources to analyze all of them are limited, it is advisable to focus on issues with higher harm potential. Issues to prioritize may include incidents that could have resulted in grave accidents if circumstances were slightly different, as well as gaps in equipment and facilities that, in unfavorable scenarios, may result in grave or catastrophic accidents. On the other hand, events or even minor accidents that could not have triggered grave accidents (e.g., injuries in office environments) would not be prioritized (Institut pour une Culture de Sécurité Industrielle, 2019, p. 7).

Nevertheless, it is known that the selection, investigation, and treatment of gaps and events is not exclusively guided by technical reasons. In-depth analyses of issues with high harm potential may be hampered by conflicts of interest, since they tend to reveal questionable choices and attitudes at the management level (Llory & Montmayeul, 2014, p. xxii).

3.3. Final remarks on OEF literature

The literature shows how the active participation of workers in OEF processes can be hindered by obstacles of various types. In regard to obstacles of (inter)subjective nature, the following can be mentioned: fear of sanctions (subsection 3.2.1), linguistic and cultural barriers (subsection 3.2.2), lack of trust (subsection 3.2.3), and conflicts of interest (subsection 3.2.4), as summarized in Table 2.

Although these obstacles have been empirically described and some explanation has been provided to them, a deeper comprehension on their causes could be achieved by making use of concepts of an appropriate theoretical framework. In the next section, we propose resorting to the theory of Psychodynamics of Work (PDW), considering its focus on work situations and its capacity to provide insights for new ways to deal with (inter)subjective obstacles that may be present in OEF processes.

Table 2. Obstacles of (inter)subjective nature in OEF processes.

Type of obstacle	Brief description
Fear of sanctions	Stakeholders fear being questioned or held responsible for the events reported (Gaillard, 2005; Gilbert, 2001). Thus, they tend to defend themselves with superficial explanations for the event (Mbaye, 2008).
Linguistic and cultural barriers	The heterogeneity of stakeholders can lead to cultural differences and conflicts that hinder mutual understanding (Gaillard, 2005).
Lack of trust	Field workers can be disengaged toward verticalized OEF processes, which are controlled by managers and perceived as disconnected from the experiences of the field (Mbaye, 2010).
Conflicts of interest	In-depth analyses of events can be hampered by conflicts of interest, since questionable choices at the management level tend to be revealed (Llory & Montmayeul, 2014).

4. Contributions from PDW

PDW is a discipline stemmed from Work Psychopathology and created by Christophe Dejours in the 1990s. While the questions of Work Psychopathology address the processes of mental illnesses, the questions of PDW address normality, i.e., how individuals avoid mental illnesses at work. The discovery of psychic defensive strategies against suffering in work situations was an early milestone in the development of PDW, which has continued to evolve in dialogue with other disciplines and transformations in the world of work.

PDW can be defined as the psychodynamic analysis of the psychic and intersubjective processes mobilized in work situations. The term 'dynamics' refers to the psychic conflicts that emerge from the encounter of the subject—who has stories, expectations, and desires—with work situations capable of imposing conditions and demands despite the subject's will (Molinier, 2013, p. 68-69). This is denominated the encounter with the *real of work* (a different concept from *real work*), i.e., everything that resists skills and procedures and therefore pushes the subject to elaborate solutions. The real of work is experienced affectively as an unpleasant surprise or even a blow. It can generate frustration, irritation, suffering, and a sense of incompetence or impotence (Dejours, 2012b, p. 25; Molinier, 2013, p. 91-94). Some examples of real of work are failures, breakdowns, incidents, accidents, and organizational inconsistencies capable of generating interpersonal conflicts. The real of work also produces intra-psychic conflicts related to self-criticism and self-blame (Dejours, 2008, p. 38-39). At the same time, by confronting the real of work, one mobilizes and develops creativity, subjectivity, skills, and competences, which in turn may become a source of peer recognition (Dejours, 2012a, p. 40-41, 50-51, 2012b, p. 26-27). This confrontation can also lead to the subversion of prescribed procedures (Dejours, 2012a, p. 42).

Next, we present concepts used in the field of PDW (but not necessarily originated in it) to reflect on the difficulties of attributing higher visibility to real work, as is intended by OEF processes that involve work debate spaces. Some of these difficulties were mentioned by Dejours (2008) when discussing the effects and limitations of performance evaluation systems.

4.1. Subjectivizing activity

With the concept of subjectivizing activity, Böhle & Milkau (1988) emphasize that individuals in work situations are not restricted to cognitive processes nor the objective elements of the environment. Rather, an intense mobilization of subjectivity is prerequisite for work, hence activity becomes subjective. Expressions of subjectivity (e.g., perceptions, feelings, intuitions) can affect or distort sensory perceptions, but are not necessarily undesirable. They are also a resource for understanding the environment and are capable of supporting the subject in his actions.

The concept of subjectivizing activity helps understanding subjectivity as an indispensable resource for the quality of work, which is not always clear in managerial approaches. From the point of view of PDW, it can be added that the resources of subjectivity develop slowly and gradually, as the subject withstands and circumvents the real of work with tenacity (Dejours, 2012b, p. 25-26).

4.2. Tacit knowledge

The subjectivity and experience developed at work provide intimate knowledge of activities, their intricacies and difficulties, which consists in a know-how or *tacit knowledge*, as denominated by Polanyi (2009). Unlike explicit knowledge, tacit knowledge is a 'silent' one and cannot be easily formalized, translated into words, nor transmitted. Thus, we know more than we can say (Polanyi, 2009, p. 4-8). We note that this can pose challenges for work debate spaces, given that one of their aims is to make real work more visible and to discuss it.

For Polanyi (2009, p. 16-18), the internalization or indwelling of knowledge occurs as it is experienced, lived, and put into practice. This process provides consistency and meaning to the subject's knowledge, making it an indispensable resource for the quality of his actions and development of novel solutions. Thus, tacit knowledge is inseparable from an embodied, practical, and inventive intelligence that is needed to perform real work and meet organization's demands (Dejours, 2008, p. 47-49, 2012b, p. 26-29, 2012a, p. 40-44).

Ergonomists, anthropologists, and other researchers who try to investigate work closely often come across the following situations:

- A semiotic deficit is observed among workers, i.e., a difficulty in symbolizing work, expressing activities in words, and explaining actions and decisions. (Dejours, 2008, p. 45-48; Guérin et al., 2001, p. 165). Given that tacit knowledge is always present in real work, we can deduce that semiotic deficit always exists to some degree. In addition, workers may find it difficult to bring to consciousness aspects of their work that are not limited to prescriptions or tangible results.
- Practical and embodied intelligences are trivialized by workers themselves. They refer to many of their activities as trivial ones, without conscience of the implied skills that have been developed at the cost of confronting the real of work. In general, practical intelligence is mobilized without being noticed by the subject himself (Dejours, 2008, p. 49, 2012b, p. 177).

Although it is impossible to make the tacit knowledge involved in an activity completely explicit, it is possible to symbolize and make it explicit to some degree, and this may be enough to trigger reflections in work debate spaces. Furthermore, some work sciences have methodologies that help providing higher visibility and discussion in relation to activities, such as the ergonomic analysis of work, in activity ergonomics (Guérin et al., 2001); self-confrontation, in the clinic of activity (Clot & Faïta, 2000); and the clinic of work, in PDW (Lancman & Sznelwar, 2008).

We can mention the study by Lancman et al. (2019) to exemplify an action in PDW. The authors developed an intervention based on reflection groups composed by professionals of a university hospital pharmacy division, who requested the action, and researchers who conducted it. The division operated discreetly and in the basement of the hospital. Its work was recognized by management and clients only when errors were found (e.g., incorrect dosages, lack of medications), in an 'upside down' recognition. The action helped to make different or conflicting opinions explicit within the pharmacy division, and to reflect on new ways of organizing work, although no consensus was reached. The aim of actions in PDW, more than enabling the exchange of information, is affording the appropriation of individual and collective aspects of work, as well as providing visibility to the efforts and intelligences mobilized. Although actions in PDW may induce organizational transformations, these are not primary goals.

Concerning the design of PDW actions, in principle the presence of different ranks in the same reflection group should be avoided, especially when it is noted that hierarchical relationships hinder the expression of thoughts and opinions (Lancman & Sznelwar, 2008).

4.3. Discretion and secrecy

Discretion is usually intrinsic to a work well done. Problems that are solved before becoming noticeable also remain largely invisible to the organization. Work debate spaces could promote the recognition of these positive, but generally ignored contributions.

Discretion is also present in the sphere of violations or voluntary rule transgressions. Analyses of real work often show the impossibility of complying with all the rules faithfully and all the time. This can be explained by factors such as contradictory rules, rules that do not make sense in certain situations, and rules that become unfeasible given the resources available. Violations are therefore common and are not necessarily the result of incompetence or irresponsibility, but the consequence of having to perform activities under adverse conditions which, in turn, may reflect organizational inconsistencies (Daniellou et al., 2011, p. 55-62; Reason, 1990). Thus, in order to meet organizational goals, sometimes it is necessary to hide how work is done and keep it in clandestinity (Dejours, 2008, p. 43).

Secrecy and clandestinity can also reflect the need to hide mistakes and imperfections when workers fear being blamed or stigmatized. In order to deepen discussions about the company's gaps, it may be necessary to debate the failures and violations that remain under- or unreported not only in OEF processes but in the day-to-day of the organization. However, unless trust is developed between field workers and hierarchy, the most sensitive issues of the real work are unlikely to be disclosed.

4.4. Defensive strategies against critiques and questionings

Working involves being constantly observed and evaluated by others. Managers are exposed to the judgment of various internal and external stakeholders. Critiques and questionings sooner or later appear as feedback and can be destabilizing, even when they have a constructive intention.

Questionings, either from others or oneself, can have ambivalent and relevant effects. On the one hand, questionings can afford reflection and development of skills and processes. On the other hand, they can jeopardize mastery, generate a sense of incompetence, and undermine one's identity and reputation. When questions are perceived as threats against one's skills or authority, defensive reactions can arise, such as denying or distorting the information received, attacking the credibility of the sources (Ilgen et al., 1979, p. 367), denying (co-)responsibility for the issues in discussion, or projecting responsibility onto third parties, in the sense of blaming them. From a PDW perspective, these reactions can be interpreted as psychic defensive strategies, which are unconscious and have the effect of denying, distorting, or re-signifying the risks of the real of work, thus mitigating anguish and suffering (Dejours, 2007, p. 103, 2012b, p. 60; Molinier, 2013, p. 272-273). The aforementioned defensive strategies, for instance, are based on denial or distortion of reality and one's own vulnerabilities.

The challenges of managers in preserving authority, as discussed in PDW, can also be present in OEF processes since these involve dealing with sensitive issues that may expose managers' downsides. The exercise of authority ultimately depends on subordinates' recognition, which in turn is influenced by managers' ability to listen and provide support. Listening to critiques and questions, whether in upward or downward direction, is fundamental for vertical cooperation. At the same time, exercising authority involves risks, such as having one's reputation affected by unsatisfactory results, serious incidents, or blunt criticism, and ultimately falling into disrepute (Dejours, 2012b, p. 131-149). These risks should be contextualized in the dissemination of individual performance evaluation mechanisms, which often contribute to generating fear and silence, as well as distrust and disloyalty among colleagues (Dejours, 2012b, p. 85-87). In addition to the defensive strategies mentioned in the previous paragraph, we can mention others that can be mobilized by managers and affect OEF processes:

- Virile cynicism, through which those who support or apply punishments or dismissals seek to recognize and value themselves for their courage. These measures would be taken in the name of the organization's best interests, i.e., eliminating the unproductive, cutting costs, and improving competitiveness. Through virile cynicism, those who support or apply drastic measures avoid falling into guilt, regret, loneliness, doubt, or ethical suffering (Dejours, 2007, p. 87-90).
- Cultural alienation, i.e., the loss of contact with reality that occurs as a group seeks to shield itself from external criticism and convince itself of doing a great job (Dejours, 2008, p. 77-78; Sigaut, 2004). For instance, as observed in safety science research, the following practices can be present among managers: highlighting positive achievements and ignoring negative ones; exchanging praises; suppressing or ignoring a minority point of view that raises questions about the actual performance achieved; and emphasizing the long absence of catastrophic accidents as proof of good management, while downplaying or silencing serious shortcomings in facilities, equipment, and staff (Dekker, 2019, p. 249, 379).
- Managerial language, i.e., limiting communication and arguments to elements that can be audited or measured, or that have been mentioned in official documents. This ultimately makes it impossible to discuss and deliberate issues of the real work, and to reflect upon the suffering inherent to the encounter with the real of work (Duarte & Dejours, 2020). We add, firstly, that managerial language helps managers to anticipate and protect themselves against questionings on decisions they make. Secondly, field workers too may find themselves compelled to use managerial language. In accident investigations, for example, one way of defending oneself against questionings and trying to prove one's innocence is to argue that the actions undertaken, despite their negative outcome, were based on official guidelines and procedures.

This way, defensive strategies against critiques can eventually produce side effects such as barriers to dialogue that, in turn, contribute to organizational silence. The participants of work debate spaces may trust each other, but worry about what could happen if the disclosed information reached upper ranks; therefore, the potential of OEF processes can be impeded by limitations of the organization as a whole.

4.5. Collective resources for mutual understanding and cooperation

In order to reduce the need for defensive strategies based on denial and distortion of reality, which make it difficult to reflect upon critiques and questions, we propose that a possible way forward to strengthen OEF

processes is developing collective resources associated to *deontic activity* and *living together* (*vivre ensemble*, in the original French).

Deontic activity is the collective work of making agreements in either formal or informal *deliberation spaces*. These agreements or work rules are the foundation for cooperation and collective operating modes (Dejours, 2012b, p. 82-83) and can be of different types, for example (Molinier, 2013, p. 131-140):

- technical rules;
- social rules, relating to conviviality and politeness;
- language rules, which involve jargon and words with specific connotations within the group; and
- ethical rules, which establish what is right or wrong to do.

When workers discuss rules and ways of working in deliberation spaces, they not only consider technical aspects but also social and ethical ones. Conviviality among workers, for instance during activities, breaks, and commemorations, allow for apprehending both technical and non-technical aspects that need to be considered for proper deliberations on work rules and agreements. In the point of view of PDW, working is not only producing, but living together as well. This does not mean that workers necessarily have to be fond of each other; rather, it means being capable of cooperating despite personal divergences and whenever needed so as to meet production goals. Thus, there is an intimate relationship between living together, deontic activity, and cooperation (Dejours, 2012b, p. 82-85, 95-98). For instance, workgroups can be more or less efficient in deliberating the role of each member in order to perform a certain operation timely and safely, or how best to allocate a scarce resource within the group. The experience and values of a collective of workers, combined with its capacity for listening and dialog, afford the development of deliberative intelligence (Molinier, 2013, p. 141).

A vital ingredient for consolidating bonds of trust withing a collective of workers is the capacity of its members in respecting their own agreements. However, agreement via consensus is not always possible. In these cases, an arbitration is expected to be conducted by someone with recognized authority, for instance the boss. A key factor for arbitration is being capable of understanding and considering the different points of view and the real work of those involved. Despite dissensus and possible discontents, legitimized arbitrations can help preserve the bonds of trust that afford collective cohesion. Conversely, when arbitration is not legitimized, both collective cohesion and authority's legitimacy can be undermined (Dejours, 2012b, p. 79-86, 131-149).

The members of a collective of workers can share and develop a common basis of knowledge and experiences which can be a source of pleasure, fulfillment, and sense of belonging (Dejours, 2012b, p. 159-161). This set of resources also favors mutual understanding and vertical and horizontal cooperations, which are key in OEF processes. Nevertheless, many organizations have opted for eliminating spaces and moments of conviviality, that are often perceived as waste of resources. Downsizing and performance evaluation mechanisms that foster rivalry among peers are other factors that have contributed to degrade living together, deontic activity, and genuine participation of workers in OEF in a large number of organizations (Dejours, 2012b, p. 85, 2014).

4.6. Proposing a path forward for OEF processes

Affording workers the conditions to deliberate work rules and other aspects of work organization they are submitted to is a way to develop subjectivity, sense of belonging, and organizational processes as well (Dejours, 2012b). However, this is not the rationale of top-down managerial approaches, for instance, when field workers are expected to be 'data inputters' but are not enabled to discuss and deliberate the same issues they have input into OEF processes. This deliberation gap may contribute to fear punishments as the result of an unfair treatment of the issues reported; moreover, it reflects a gap in the living together between managers and field workers, who typically have few opportunities to understand the real work of each other. We propose that by investing time and effort in covering these gaps, the roles of both managers and field workers are prone to be reformulated toward a more constructive relationship between them, i.e. one that could do without defensive strategies based on denial or distortion of reality.

In short, from a PDW perspective, we are induced to develop strategies not by focusing on the individual behaviors of silence and disengagement of participants of OEF, but rather on the role of management in producing these behaviors, and how management can be improved in order to afford field workers the conditions to express themselves as active and collective subjects in organizational processes. The development of work debate spaces is an important step in this direction, but actually integrating field workers in deliberations that involve managers and other stakeholders is still a challenge.

Finally, considering the issues addressed by PDW, and with a view to strengthening OEF processes, we suggest the following strategies:

- Avoiding expecting from OEF only tangible and quick results, and instead also valuing intangible gains, such as a clearer understanding of the involved stakeholders' work and practical intelligences, or the (re)formulation of agreements between them—for instance, a new way of acting collectively in face of a given situation, or a collective deliberation on possible sanctions after an accident. A more accurate appreciation of the real work, especially of those on the field, may provide OEF stakeholders (e.g., in-house or outsourced field workers, managers, and safety professionals) better conditions for fair arbitrations, compromise solutions, and tangible results in the long term.
- Affording field workers time and support to participate in the discussion and deliberation of issues inputted in OEF processes.
- Monitoring how the participation of each person in an OEF process is affecting his/her performance in individual evaluation mechanisms, which should be used to motivate participation in OEF and not to penalize discussion on sensitive issues.
- Analyzing the individual performance evaluation criteria applied to each participant of OEF. Where appropriate, criteria can be adjusted in order to mitigate conflicts of interest between OEF participants, thus favoring the creation of compromise solutions.
- Whenever the possibilities of cooperation and deontic activity within a workgroup are scarce, it may be interesting to prioritize its strengthening as a collective of workers with the aid of smaller and homogeneous OEF processes. This way, they may become more capable of defending their point of view and negotiating compromise solutions with other stakeholders in larger and heterogenous OEF processes.
- Valuing spaces and opportunities for conviviality considering their importance for deontic activity and cooperation, which are needed in OEF.

5. Conclusion

A combination of (inter)subjective aspects such as fear of sanctions, linguistic and cultural barriers, lack of trust, and conflicts of interest, often helps producing organizational silence and ineffective OEF processes. In this paper, we provided these aspects a deeper understanding by resorting to concepts of PDW theory. The following points can be highlighted:

- In certain situations, the need to achieve the prescribed goals while avoiding punishments leads workers to hide how work is done and keep it in clandestinity. The debate on unreported failures and violations would require the development of trust between field and management.
- Critiques and questionings can undermine one's professional identity and trigger defensive strategies based on denial or distortion of reality. Such defensive strategies, in its turn, can hinder dialogue and contribute to organizational silence instead of organizational learning in OEF processes.
- Collectives of workers share a common basis of knowledge and experiences that favors deliberation, living together, and vertical and horizontal cooperations. However, downsizing and performance evaluation mechanisms may foster rivalry among peers and degrade the collective resources needed in OEF processes.

From a PDW perspective, we are induced to reflect on how management can be improved in order to enable field workers expressing themselves as active and collective subjects in organizational processes, including OEF. In this sense, an opportunity is developing the conditions that would allow field workers to participate in the discussion and deliberation of issues they report, therefore fostering a closer relationship between field and management.

For the stakeholders engaged in creating or maintaining OEF processes, considering the issues discussed in this paper shall provide a clearer comprehension of obstacles that may be present. Analyzing them may be a hard task, given that sometimes organizational silence prevails and hinders frank discussions on what is impeding the active participation of workers in OEF. As for the limitations of this study, we note that our contributions are essentially theoretical ones, therefore they shall be discussed and validated in light of future empirical studies. Moreover, in order to precise the most relevant barriers to OEF in a specific organization, an in-depth empirical investigation

would be necessary. Another possibility for future studies on the (inter)subjective aspects involved in OEF processes is the recourse to disciplines other than PDW, e.g., psychology, anthropology, and organizational studies.

Data availability

No research data was used.

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