CHALLENGES OF THE WORK OF FEMALE SOCIAL EDUCATORS IN SHELTERS

DESAFIOS DO TRABALHO DE EDUCADORAS SOCIAIS EM CASAS DE ACOLHIMENTO

DESAFÍOS DEL TRABAJO DE LOS EDUCADORES SOCIALES EN INSTITUCIONES DE ACOGIDA

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ABSTRACT: This paper analyzes the experiences of pleasure and suffering in the work of female social educators in shelters in the Mato Grosso do Sul Pantanal, Brazil. Based on the Psychodynamic of Work, the suffering derived from the shock between organizational norms and the real work situations experienced in the care of children and adolescents was analyzed. Nine professionals from two public institutions were interviewed, whose narratives were weighted through Meaning Analysis. The results point to the constant use of practical intelligence in the face of insufficient material conditions and training, disrespectful institutional relations, lack of emotional-affective support and self-acceleration due to the imposed work overload. The identification with the socio-educational tasks and the satisfaction with the development were the aspects mentioned as achievement drivers. It is concluded that it is necessary to recognize the profession and the importance of social education for the safe reintegration of those welcomed in the family of origin or adoptive.

KEYWORDS: Social educator. Suffering. Shelter. Psychodynamics.

RESUMO: Este estudo analisa as vivências de prazer e sofrimento no trabalho de educadoras sociais em Casas de Acolhimento no Pantanal Sul-Mato-Grossense. Baseado na teoria da Psicodinâmica do Trabalho, foi analisado o sofrimento derivado do choque entre as normatizações organizacionais e as situações laborais reais experienciadas no atendimento a crianças e adolescentes. Nove profissionais de duas instituições públicas foram entrevistadas, cujas narrativas foram ponderadas através da Análise de Sentido. Os resultados apontam para o uso constante de inteligência prática diante de condições materiais e capacitações insuficientes, relações institucionais desrespeitosas, falta de suporte emocional-afetivo e autoaceleração pela sobrecarga de trabalho imposta. A identificação com as tarefas socioeducativas e a satisfação com o desenvolvimento dos acolhidos foram os aspectos citados propulsores de realização. Conclui-se ser necessário o reconhecimento da profissão e da

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importância da educação social para a reintegração segura dos acolhidos na família de origem ou lar adotivo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Educador social. Sofrimento. Abrigo. Psicodinâmica.*

RESUMEN: *Este estudio analiza las experiencias de placer y sufrimiento en el trabajo de los educadores sociales en las Casas de Recepción en el Pantanal, Brasil. Basado en la teoría psicodinámica del trabajo, se analizó el sufrimiento derivado de la brecha entre las normas organizativas y situaciones reales experimentadas en el cuidado de niños y adolescentes. Nueve educadoras de dos instituciones públicas fueron entrevistadas. Los resultados apuntan al uso constante de la inteligencia práctica, condiciones materiales y la formación insuficiente, relaciones institucionales irrespetuosas, falta de apoyo emocional-afectivo y autoacelación debido a la sobrecarga impuesta. La identificación con las tareas socioeducativas y la satisfacción con el desarrollo de los acogidos fueron los aspectos gratificantes. Se concluye que es necesario reconocer la profesión y la importancia de la educación social para lograr la reintegración segura de los acogidos, en la familia de origen o adoptiva.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Educador social. Sufrimiento. Abrigo. Psicodinamica.*

Introduction

The work of social educators who work in *Casas de Acolhimento* (Shelters) is an extremely relevant activity for institutionalized children and adolescents and who, due to different situational variables, have experienced experiences of threats and/or violations, such as negligence, abuse, cruelties, and abuses (BRASIL, 1990; BRASIL, 2009). Thus, when parents and guardians are unable to provide for the welfare of their dependents, it is the responsibility of the State to implement temporary support programs and to apply special protection measures, such as Institutional Reception, in an attempt to avoid the (re)incidence of violence.

As standardized by the High Complexity Service of the Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS), the shelters must offer shelter in an environment similar to that of a residence, with a living, dining and meeting room, study environment, outdoor area and space for the sheltered to keep their belongings. Personalized assistance with respect to each person's identity and life history is gaining importance, assistance to groups of up to 20 users and the composition of a team made up of at least one coordinator, two professionals with higher education (preferably a psychologist and a social worker), a social worker for up to 10 users/shift and an assistant educator (both with completed high school) (BRASIL, 2006; 2009).

Within this institutional context, social educators become responsible for the applicability of non-formal education and take the temporary place of affective reference in

place of legal guardians, in order to accompany children and adolescents inside and outside the institution. Its care and education tasks include providing food, hygiene and protection; arrange the environment and the offer of activities in accordance with the age group; accompany users in health treatments and at school; assist in tasks; guide in the classification of records and memories that preserve their life history; support cognitive and emotional difficulties; promote the development of self-confidence and identity; and preparing those welcomed to leave the institution (BRASIL, 2009).

In addition to the attributions described above, it is also a social educator's commitment to enable the construction/reconstruction of more just world concepts, with the aim of empowering those welcomed and taking them to new ways of thinking and acting, making them more active and participatory in socio-cultural and political decision-making processes, through the teaching of their rights (PEREIRA, 2016). It is through their daily activities that professionals legitimize respect for human rights and contribute to overcoming the marks left by social threats/risks, to favor the (re)construction of a more hopeful future (FERREIRA; SANTOS, 2019).

Although studies by Lima (2011) and Cavalcante and Corrêa (2012) have found a taste for the tasks of tidying up the house, feeding and sanitizing the sheltered, there are several challenges in this complex occupation, such as having to resolve conflicts and deal with organizational problems without receiving due recognition, situations that generate the feeling of worthlessness and failure. The difficulty of dealing with hostile children and defiant adolescents (LEMOS; MORAES; ALVES; HALPERN; LEITE, 2014), the demand of care, support and to affirm stable bonds that promote protection and development with each user (GOLIN; BENETTI, 2013 ; TINOCO; FRANCO, 2011), the large number of people welcomed in view of the number of available professionals, are aspects of work that translate into overload and emotional exhaustion (HALPERN; LEITE; MORAES; 2015; LIMA, 2011).

At the same time that affections are valued when users are received, Medeiros and Martins (2018) and Teixeira and Villachan-Lyra (2015) indicate that the moment of dissatisfaction has not gained enough attention, requiring emotional support to be provided to the team, due to the feeling of abandonment that emerges and that may become a hindrance in the development of attachment. In addition, in order to be viable for the goal of social reintegration, Costa, Santos, Santos and Lima (2018) point out the necessary action with the families, in order to understand the situation of socioeconomic vulnerability and guide access to assistance and employment policies, thus providing the opportunity to promote protective domestic spaces.

Although the provision of supervision, support and training is indispensable, the regulation fails in the profession (MANICA, 2017) and the lack of recognition of the importance of socio-educational actions for the transformation of the scenario of exclusion and life of the welcomed (PEREIRA, 2016) collaborates for the invisibility of the specific demands of social educators. Taking into account the wide gap between norms and prescriptions to be put into practice and the reality characterized by unsatisfactory work situations to assist people in situations of violation of rights, this article analyzes the experiences of pleasure and suffering of female social educators in the work of child and youth care in shelters in the Mato Grosso do Sul Pantanal.

Guiding research concepts

To analyze the experiences of pleasure and psychological distress of social educators, the Psychodynamics of Work was adopted as a theoretical framework. Aimed at understanding the relationships between work and subjectivation processes, the analysis of the subject's connection with the organization of work allows us to understand the processes of psychic regulation that channel the experience of pleasure and suffering in the work context.

If, on the one hand, the action of working fulfills a constructive function and promotes the development of intelligence, skills, enables the expression of subjectivity in the external world and enables the achievement of satisfaction and pleasure through the re-signification of suffering via sublimation, the impediment to transform the work can make suffering culminate in illness or pathologies, depending on the intersubjective relationship established with the organization of work, material conditions and between people (DEJOURS, 2013). By rigidly imposing rules, values and goals to be followed without the possibility of negotiation, the prescribed organizational logic ends up preventing exactly the expression of subjectivity, initiating a confrontation between the internal and singular world of individuals (constituted by their interests, beliefs and desires) and the external and palpable world of work, composed of determinations and activities that do not always coincide with people's wants, projects and needs (LANCMAN; SZNELWAR, 2011).

Relevant factors are the understanding of the prescribed work organization (goals, laws, regulations, rules, norms and procedures that describe how the tasks should be performed) and the real, live work, which places the subject in a situation of evident failure to follow faithfully what is foreseen, in view of the reality formed and structured by a series of unpredictable situations in everyday life, which go beyond the technical and scientific domain. Because it

involves much more than just the fulfillment of pre-established rules, real work requires the use of cunning and demands intense mental functioning, however simple, mechanical or manual the occupation is, because regardless of the job, unforeseen situations happen and need to be resolved.

Exactly constituting unexpected situations that materialize the failure of the prescription, living work manifests itself affectionately, leading initially to a frustrating experience characterized by impotence, only after mobilizing the personality and intelligence to engage the body and provide the development of reflection, interpretation and reaction to the unpredictable, a process that at the end is capable of causing transformations and bringing relief.

It is through the transgression of the prescriptions that the struggle for mental health at work takes place, an expression of the desire to re-elaborate that action. Suffering, by encouraging the creation of tricks and the use of affections towards the subversion of organizational impasses, makes the subject more skilled and competent, allowing the redefinition of suffering by overcoming events that generate anxiety, imprecision and apprehension (LHUILIER, 2014). Thus, the search and overcoming of impasses based on real work allow suffering to be understood not only as a regrettable consequence expressed in pathologies, and to be configured, simultaneously, in a state of struggle for health and against forces who may be pushing you towards mental illness (DEJOURS, 2013).

To give a creative destiny when suffering through sublimation, an environment of trust based on authentic communication is needed, in which the contribution of inventions and tricks to the progress of the work is recognized. The validation and adoption by the collective of the procedures considered ethically appropriate promotes the development of identity and professional achievement. However, when the effort to find solutions is repeatedly frustrated and not recognized, the suffering can take the pathogenic form, even compromising the very construction of professional identity. This condition undermines the use of practical intelligence, making it impossible to redefine suffering and giving rise to the use of defensive strategies, which, although apparently adapting workers to anxiogenic situations by leaving them unconscious, may, over time, trigger the installation of social pathologies and getting sick (LANCMAN; SZNELWAR, 2011).

Method

Characterization of institutions

Based on the Psychodynamics of Work, this study was developed in 2015, in two government host institutions located in the Mato Grosso do Sul Pantanal. At the time of the research, *Casa de Acolhimento* I, focused on serving users from 0 to 17 years and 11 months, housed 20 children between 0 and 11 years old and 10 adolescents between 12 and 17 years old, extrapolating the norm of accommodating up to 20 shelters (BRASIL, 2009). For the daily execution of care, his team was composed of eight social educators and six assistants, with two auxiliaries hired. *Casa de Acolhimento* II serves users from 0 to 17 years and 11 months, and in April 2015 it hosted five children between 6 and 11 years old and three teenagers between 12 and 17 years old.

The team responsible for day-to-day and immediate care was composed of six social educators and three assistants, of which only three educators were offered a competitive exam. In addition to operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week, each Shelter had a monthly financial transfer to bear the expenses of R$ 6,500.00 from the Federal Government and R$ 3,250.00 from the State Government, expenses higher than these amounts supplied by the municipality.

Participants

All social educators who had been in contests and who had worked for at least one year in government institutions were invited to participate, excluding workers on leave and those not found on the days previously defined for the interview. Nine social educators participated in the research, all women, seven of them aged 28 to 37 years, seven with children, five had completed higher education, two had incomplete higher education and two had completed high school. The length of service at the institution of six respondents ranged from seven to nine years, seven educators had no previous experience of working with children and adolescents, seven received between 1000 and 1500 reais/month in salary (two received less than 1000 reais/month), and six worked 12/36 hours, day and night.

Instruments and data collection

A socioeconomic questionnaire was used, containing questions of a demographic nature, related to academic formation and the work of social educators, and a semi-structured individual interview, composed of questions about the activities developed with the host, how

they dealt with adversity and the perception of how work affected them. Both instruments were applied individually and in a private room, with sound insulation and free from interruption by third parties, with a view to safeguarding the information provided by the employees. The interviews were recorded on audio and the socioeconomic questionnaire was self-administered, with the researcher remaining available in the same environment to answer possible questions of interpretation and understanding that might exist.

Data analysis

The socioeconomic data of the questionnaire were analyzed in a descriptive way, always in the sample as a whole, and the interviews were transcribed in full and submitted to the Core Meaning Analysis (CMA), which considers the quality and the meaning of the speeches from the highlight of manifest and common latent content presented in the verbalizations frequently and with similarity regarding the meaning (MENDES, 2007). After reading each interview and marking the speeches with representative psychological and semantic themes, these were grouped to be classified into categories.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul, with CAAE: 42325915.9.0000.0021. All participants signed the Free and Informed Consent Form, and the information collected was analyzed together, without distinction by capacity, to ensure confidentiality of identity.

Results and discussion

The suffering of the unpredictable

NOB-RH/SUAS establishes that social educators must meet the psychological and social demands for attention, education, support, protection and care of the children and adolescents served, considering their individual needs and favoring development. However, the large number of young children, less than one year old, demanded the priority attendance to satisfy the basic needs of the most dependent, including feeding, hygiene and baby care.

> *Very difficult, because they [welcomed] are many, and we work with two monitors basically to deal with twenty, twenty-three children, mainly babies;*

> *baby in arms wants this here [referring to the comfort of a child who she held in her lap to fall asleep], with five what can you do?* (PARTICIPANT 2, individual interview, 18 April 2015, our translation).

Despite affection being the first condition for integral development and should base the professional-welcomed relationship (COSTA et al., 2018), the work overload prevented them from being able to supply the emotional difficulties of older children: "*You have to be taking care of the baby and the little ones, sometimes we end up neglecting the care for teenagers, you know*" (PARTICIPANT 3, individual interview, 23 April 2015, our translation).

To contemplate the large number of tasks to be carried out with children and babies, they used and shared the strategy of defending acceleration, enabling adaptation to work without the possibility of organizational re-signification. The speed in doing the service raised the perception of a better performance and reduced the torpor of frustration and powerlessness of not being able to change aspects of the assistance policy and the organization of work that trigger suffering.

Although professional hyperactivity kept the psychic apparatus occupied, allowing a certain emotional distance, apparently facilitating choices and the way of forwarding their practices (LANCMAN; SZNELWAR, 2011), the educators continued to be affected by the sadness of babies, children and adolescents. The welcomed' suffering moved them to supply the institutions with toys, material for entertainment and development, allowing their desire for a fulfilling work to be brought closer to the insufficient organizational context. However, if, on the one hand, the violation of the prescriptions called for an active conduct to face suffering and to protect mental health, the constant use of ingenuity kept the physical, cognitive and affective demands of the service invisible to the municipal management.

Devaluation and lack of recognition of utility

Influenced by essentialist ideology, parents and family members of users supported the natural emergence of maternal skills and characteristics in the performance of care and attention, ignoring the social construction of sexual identity (KERGOAT, 2009) and the skills of devotion, renounce and compassion, activated in the real work, through contact with the suffering of others.

Even with restricted custody power, mothers and guardians did not understand or deemed the installation of the protective measure inappropriate, belittling and discrediting the work of the educators, as they considered their care as good or better than those provided by

the institution. As they serve as a point of confluence of tensions between family members of users and the institution, the educators suffered from unpleasant, vexing situations, were attacked and offended: "*There have been cases of angry parents coming here at the door and being aggressive, kicking the gate, wanting to attack us outside, because they thought that it is our fault for the children being sheltered*" (PARTICIPANT 8, individual interview, 15 May 2015, our translation).

Because they are susceptible to various forms of physical and verbal aggression, light accusations of mistreatment to those being welcomed or to be blamed for family breakdown (COSTA et al., 2018), they established a distant relationship with parents and guardians, with no link in this pointing to evidence of symbolic retribution or recognition for the work done. This relational difficulty hindered the bond between institution, educator and parents, essential for the construction of a protective environment conducive to the return of the sheltered to the home of origin or adoptive.

The lack of recognition of usefulness on the part of the coordinators was also a common occurrence, being visible the unequal treatment given to social educators, in comparison with the rest of the civil servants who made up the technical teams of the two institutions. The devaluation of the profession, whose foundation was in the very lack of regulation of the profession, was experienced daily through the assignment of multiple functions, sometimes not at all consistent with their real duties, and by the constant withdrawal of authority and autonomy, causing embarrassment in front of the public attended.

> *I spoke to the child [...] like "take off this shirt that you are not supposed to go... with that shirt at school"... she took the child... she went up with the child... the child sent her [...] and the child came down with the shirt... then I was like "who am I to say something then, right?"* (PARTICIPANT 7, individual interview, 29 April 2015, our translation).

Reinforcing the split between those who planned and those who performed the service, the neglect of opinions and measures taken in relation to undesirable behaviors presented by the welcomed persons hindered the operationalization and fulfillment of tasks. The frequent embarrassments between coordination and educators occurred anywhere in the institution, and the situations in which these situations were witnessed by users and culminated in disrespect and humiliating episodes were not uncommon, contributing to the disintegration of the relationships between the professionals and the welcomed (LIMA , 2011). The feeling of demoralization for not being heard or recognized for its technical usefulness increased doubts about how they should act professionally.

Affection in welcoming-unwelcoming

The welcoming moment, marked by several breaks and mourning (TINOCO; FRANCO, 2011), was characterized by the appearance of concern and empathy with those who needed shelter, care and protection. "*Most people arrive like this, dirty, mistreated, disgusted, cornered, quiet, silent, afraid... So, I become sad, right*" (PARTICIPANT 7, individual interview, 29 April 2015, our translation).

The prescriptive conflict of "attaching oneself affectionately to the children/adolescents attended and contributing to the construction of a family environment, avoiding, however, 'taking possession' of the child or adolescent" (BRASIL, 2009, p. 47, our translation) brought up contradictory feelings that passed between the feeling of abandonment and the feeling of accomplishment: "*I am happy because they are going back to the family, because I think that every child has to be with the family, but at the same time we end up attaching, then there is a hint of sadness*" (PARTICIPANT 5, individual interview, 28 April 2015, our translation).

The loss of affectionate position, due to the adoption or return of the sheltered to his family of origin, did not receive attention, supervision or support from the technical team, evidencing the institutional difficulty in preparing the educators to deal with the moment of dismissal, which would be of great value to overcome grief and adjust their work practices to professional identity.

The workers were not consulted in the termination or adoption process, although they could contribute to this moment, notably marked by memories of abandonment, resentment and new perspectives on parental relationships (COSTA *et al*., 2018). Sadness and impotence were also reported in the recurring situations of disrespect and aggression on the part of adolescents who rebelled when they had to follow new habits, times and rules (CAVALCANTE; CORRÊA, 2012; LEMOS *et al*., 2014): "*It is very difficult to deal with the bad words they say, they offend with a lot of curses, when we say no to something, they don't like it and they go banging doors, throwing a chair*" (PARTICIPANT 3, individual interview, 23 April 2015, our translation) .

It cannot be disregarded that the professional devaluation witnessed in the institution, combined with the scarce attention given to adolescents, influenced the construction of a weakened relationship between the educators and the host, increasing the chance of being offended when they set limits and try to impose their authority.

The professional identity that drives achievement

Sharing with the group the solutions found in the face of organizational impediments caused a certain sense of support and greater security in unexpected situations, since only two employees reported previous professional experience with children and adolescents, and two others had acquired notions about development after entering university courses. The appropriation and transformation of inventiveness into daily know-how validated the individual effort and the investment of the personality in action in overcoming social and material constraints, creating an environment of cooperation and trust conducive to subjective mobilization and the resumption of the sense of work.

Even though they were denied recognition of their usefulness, social educators showed identification with socio-educational work, feeling proud of their success in the tasks of teaching, caring and educating the sheltered. "*We see that they are learning to have respect, to have good manners; I see that it is the result of our work, because they didn't have it at home, you know*" (PARTICIPANT 1, individual interview, 16 April 2015).

Teaching respect and good manners, monitoring the school situation, providing care, building bonds through dialogue and desirable daily living were activities mentioned as generating positive feelings and satisfaction. When their interventions collaborated to improve the quality of life of users, they felt proud and fulfilled.

Final considerations

Social educators did not receive training to deal with the difficulties faced in contact with those welcomed, and understanding the consequences of the experiences of violations and ruptures, producing feelings of helplessness, uncertainty, discontent and guilt would allow the establishment of a condescending service in the face of legitimate needs of users. Even though the standardization for the service indicated the indispensability of preparation for action in strengthening family bonds between children and families of origin, the personnel policy did not provide guidance, support or supervision in the actions to solidify the fragile relationships between shelters and the family of origin, nor did it provide knowledge about guaranteeing protection and rights for children and adolescents, child and youth development, functioning of social assistance services or procedures for adoption (BRASIL, 2009).

Therefore, to carry out their duties, the workers accessed particular socio-affective experiences, which, because they are considered naturally female, justified the non-obligation of management in offering specialization and formation. Subjective mobilization in the face of

the scourge of children and adolescents led to the commitment and commitment to overcome organizational failures and satisfactorily implement the psychological and physical repair actions of the welcomed.

The impossibility of changing the work organization, characterized by the overload of shelters and the performance of various activities, led to self-acceleration. If the use of the defensive strategy allowed a fragile adaptation to the imposed requirements, the insensitivity derived from the imposed speed had an impact on the quality of the deferred care and on the perception of the intervention needs, being able to harm the reconstruction of affective bonds and the integral development of users (CRUZ; DIAS; PEDROSO, 2014).

The use of defenses to put the service into practice showed that the organization of work experienced, not only hindered the performance of the occupation, but also aggravated the suffering of that work. As the educators did not have an articulating space of ideas and experiences, the emotional exhaustion remained, making it difficult to carry out politicized modifications interwoven in the resignification of work to achieve pleasure and fulfillment.

In addition to the legal regulation of the occupation, Guará (2006) points out the necessary assimilation of the socio-educational identity on the part of the institution, the team and the welcomed, so that the reception is guided by education, protection, care and support, with a view to full social insertion and new future projects for those welcomed (FERREIRA; SANTOS, 2019). Although such construction is based on the reflection of the practices, relationships and everyday episodes experienced by social educators, there was no possibility to build in the Shelters an environment of reflection and deliberation. The communion of the difficulties found in real work and the tactics of transcending them, in a space that prioritizes the recognition of the beauty and usefulness of caring and educating, can favor the composition of the collective, based on the affirmation of an ethical and technical component of professional identity.

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ERRATUM: CHALLENGES OF THE WORK OF FEMALE SOCIAL EDUCATORS IN SHELTERS

Due to technical problems during the editorial production the article "Challenges of the work of female social educators in shelters" (DOI https://doi.org/10.21723/riaee.v15iesp3.14448), published in Revista Ibero-Americana de Estudos em Educação (RIAEE) (ISSN online 1982-5587), v. 15, n. esp3, 2020, was published with an error that caused the name of an author being presented in the wrong spelling.

On page 2396, where the text reads:

Vanessa **Cartherina** Neumann Figueiredo

It should read:

Vanessa **Catherina** Neumann Figueiredo

The journal apologizes for the errors.