The psychic dynamics of workaholism in education: reverberations of servitude in managerial management

A dinâmica psíquica do workaholismo na educação: reverberação da servidão na gestão gerencial

Vanessa Catherina Neumann Figueiredo[1,2,3]* (ID), Isabela Faria Berno[4] (ID),
Jamylle Alves da Costa Rosa[5] (ID)

[1]Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS), Programa de Pós-graduação em Psicologia (PPGPsico), Campo Grande, MS, Brasil
[2]Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS), Programa de Pós-graduação em Educação (PPGE), Corumbá, MS, Brasil
[3]Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS), Programa de Pós-graduação em Estudos Fronteiriços (PPGEF), Corumbá, MS, Brasil
[4]Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), Programa de Pós-graduação em Psicologia, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil
[5]Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS), Laboratório de Saúde Mental do Trabalhador, Corumbá, MS, Brasil

Abstract

Workaholism is understood as excessive behavior and hyperactivity in response to excessive professional demands, a situation that impacts mental health. With the aim of identifying and understanding the psychological dynamics of workaholic teachers, 76 university professors were surveyed, who responded to a socioeconomic and occupational questionnaire and two scales, DUWAS and EACT. Seventeen teachers were classified as excessive workers, eight as compulsive workers, and seven as workaholics, psychological dynamics linked to a flawed work organization, supported by a professional and institutional culture that values sacrifice and meritocracy. Based on behaviors aligned with the ideology of servitude, teachers use excessive defenses and work compulsively to achieve the organizational ideal, reaching subjective annihilation expressed in work addiction, only tolerated by masochistic defense/functioning. The promotion of mental health is only possible with the formation of a political work organization that favors professional recognition.

Keywords: teachers; work addiction; defensive ideology; masochism.

Resumo

O workaholismo é compreendido pelo ato excessivo de agir hiperativamente frente a exigências profissionais desmedidas, situação que impacta a saúde mental. Com o objetivo de identificar e compreender a dinâmica psíquica de docentes adictos ao trabalho, foram pesquisados 76 professores universitários, que responderam a um questionário socioeconômico e ocupacional e a duas escalas, DUWAS e EACT. Foram classificados 17 docentes em trabalho excessivo, 8 em trabalho compulsivo e 7 workaholics, dinâmicas psíquicas atreladas a uma organização laboral falha, apoiada numa cultura profissional e institucional valorizadora do sacrifício e meritocracia. A partir de condutas alinhadas à ideologia da servidão, docentes utilizam demasiadas defesas e trabalham compulsivamente para atingir o ideal organizacional, chegando ao aniquilamento subjetivo, expresso na adição ao trabalho, somente tolerado pela defesa/funcionamento masoquista. A promoção da saúde mental só é possível com a conformação de uma organização, política do trabalho que favoreça o reconhecimento profissional.

Palavras-chave: docentes; adição ao trabalho; ideologia defensiva; masoquismo.

INTRODUCTION

The term workaholic means addiction to work and was first used in 1968 by psychologist Wayne Oates, who combined the words work and alcoholic when comparing himself to an

alcoholic because he considered himself addicted to work (Oates, 1971). Later, Oates defined the term as an uncontrollable need or compulsion to work (Pitacho; Palma; Correia, 2022). As an expression of servile behavior towards organizational interests, work addiction can be understood as the excessive act of doing more than is necessary, combined with a compulsion originating from an urge that forces the individual to toil (Del Líbano; Salanova; Schaufeli, 2010; Pitacho; Palma; Correia, 2022). This compulsion is mediated by unrestricted defensive strategies and mechanisms to cope with the tasks demanded, since the subject is unable to change the organization of work.

Following psychodynamic theory, the dependence on work presented in workaholism brings the idea of hyperactive behavior in the profession or occupation, given the impossibility of mitigating the overload and exacerbated tasks. Excessive personal involvement in work is related to the difficulty in questioning exaggeration and limiting requests, resulting in copious efforts to submit to corporate prohibitions, constraints, and pressures, while also ensuring the distinction of work results (Dejours, 2008).

In contemporary times, the capitalist and globalized economy values corporate characteristics such as productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness, which are institutionalized in the constitution of teaching culture and contribute to relentless commitment and the glorification of workaholism. Through the fascinating neoliberal discourse, which functions as a subtle mechanism of control and illusion of inclusion and belonging (Birman, 2017; Monteiro et al., 2019), the tyrannical and seductive power of privatist ideology sows moral obedience to competitiveness and excellence, producing subjectivities attuned to the management of the precariousness of higher education, a public body subject to the same discourse as private companies (Bresser-Pereira, 2015).

Teaching work at public universities is based on the three pillars of teaching, research, and extension, in addition to administrative tasks and the innovative application of knowledge, products, or methods. Teaching includes lesson planning, studying and selecting bibliographies, developing teaching materials, defining the appropriate methodology, quantifying student progress in assessments, supervising and assisting students, as well as constantly updating knowledge. Research, in turn, involves seeking funding through calls for proposals from funding agencies, managing laboratories and research groups, selecting and supervising undergraduate and graduate students, selecting journals for publication, writing scientific articles, organizing academic events—such as seminars, conferences, and colloquiums—and participating in evaluation and selection committees. While extension covers projects with direct actions in the community and has as its main objective to bring the public university closer to society in general, which requires projects that interconnect professional practice actions with benefits for society, contacts to carry them out, in addition to the presentation, selection, and guidance of students who will participate. Furthermore, the administrative work carried out by professors is often solitary and without support from technical staff, currently requiring a focus on innovation, which implies the need to develop entrepreneurial work.

Under the tutelage of meritocracy, therefore, the ideal parameters for university appreciation involve intensifying work by performing various tasks, including teaching classes, advising undergraduate and graduate students, performing bureaucratic tasks, participating in committees, holding administrative positions, writing scientific articles, and coordinating teaching, research, and extension projects (Martins et al., 2017; Mesquita; Formosinho; Machado, 2014). The appropriation of overload, with the resulting wear and tear from the multiple tasks performed, makes it difficult to negotiate a fair division of tasks that allows for the use of creativity, a way in which the individual could derive impulses and follow a healthier path for their helplessness (Birman, 2017). The unchangeable condition of suffering then drives the adoption of defensive strategies, through which it is possible to assimilate goals and norms, even though the cost of curtailing the primacy of subjectivity and desire makes work alienating.

In search of acceptance and security, defense mechanisms are activated, whose elaboration and use by professional groups alleviate and make suffering bearable for some time. As these resources are intangible and do not imply an im change in the organization of work, over time

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they end up contributing to adjustment to adverse working conditions; when strategies become a defensive ideology, behaviors end up valuing collective silence in the toxic environment.

Among the collective strategies are protective behaviors which, based on the rationalization of ideas, opinions, and emotions, serve to help the group endure the afflictions generated at work; adaptive behaviors, whose denial of suffering leads to resignation; and exploratory behaviors, when the desire to comply with institutional production and excellence is hooked, striving to achieve the extravagant goals set by the institution (Moraes, 2013). If defenses such as acceleration, rationalization, and virile cynicism contribute to the continuity of service, since the psychic dynamic itself distances the understanding that the malaise is generated in relation to the work context, the conformity of the expropriation of work, when transformed into a defensive ideology of reluctant acceptance, of voluntary servitude, structures the adoption of a collective hyperactive posture consistent with institutionalized projects and ideals and can give rise to new work-related pathologies, such as workaholism.

Established out of the need for employment and comfort, voluntary servitude is permeated by judgments of quality and competence, leading workers to put their zeal at the service of the required productivity (Dejours, 2005). Driven by the fear of losing authority and the search for recognition, the careful commitment that occurs in living work is an expression of voluntary cooperation with what is demanded by the corporation, keeping distance from suffering and tormenting organizational aspects.

Through affective and subjective involvement with the task, servitude is intertwined with the discourse of self-entrepreneurship (Gaulejac, 2007), aligning itself with the neoliberal project of economic austerity and the emergence of new cultural values, such as immediacy, individualism, conformism, submission, narcissism, and consumerism, established in the pathology of work addiction.

Considering the new subjectivities—intensification, efficiency, productivity, effectiveness, competitiveness—and defenses—acceleration, rationalization, virile cynicism, acceptance—currently present in university teaching, this article seeks to identify and understand the psychic dynamics of workaholic university professors.

This study is limited to a qualitative-quantitative approach and uses the following theoretical bases: the psychodynamics of work (Dejours, 2005, 2008, 2022; Dejours; Gernet, 2012), sociology (Bourdieu, 1997; Gaulejac, 2007, 2011), and psychoanalysis (Freud, 2010a, 2010b, 2011), using the following instruments: a self-administered socioeconomic and occupational questionnaire created by the authors, the Dutch Work Addiction Scale, and the Work Context Assessment Scale.

In view of what was presented in the introduction, this article is structured into sections: the first discusses the methodology adopted, the participating subjects, describes the instruments applied, and the procedures used for data analysis; the second section presents the results extracted; the third section discusses and examines the results achieved based on the theoretical references used; the last section leads to the conclusions, ending with the bibliographical references mentioned in this study.

METHOD

Based on the psychodynamics of work approach (Dejours, 2005, 2008, 2022; Dejours; Gernet, 2012, Mendes; Ferreira, 2007), in conjunction with concepts from sociology (Bourdieu, 1997; Gaulejac, 2007, 2011) and psychoanalysis (Freud, 2010a, 2010b, 2011), this article is an excerpt from the research entitled "Analysis of the occurrence of pathogenic suffering in the university context", already completed by the research group "Mental health and work on the border" (CNPQ). The data analyzed were collected from professors at a university in the Brazilian Midwest between October 2018 and March 2019. All tenured professors working full-time and assigned to the same campus were invited to participate in the research, and their responses to the instruments were given after prior agreement and signature of the "Free and Informed Consent Form" (FICF). The exclusion criteria included professors who were on leave for training or health treatment or who did not show up on the scheduled day with the researcher in charge.

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Participants

Seventy-six teachers participated in the study, most of whom were men (53.9%, n=41). Of the total sample, 60.5% (n=46) had children, 61.8% (n=47) were married, 44.7% (n=34) were between 29 and 40 years old, with an average age ranging from 29 to 83 years (M=44.5 years), and 56.6% (n=43) had a doctorate (Table 1).

Table 1. Sociodemographic data of professors at a university in the Brazilian Midwest in 2028 and 2019.

Sociodemographic variables	n (76)	%
Gender		
Female	35	46.1
Male	41	53.9
Children		
Yes	46	60.5
No	30	39.5
Marital status		
Single	27	35.5
Divorced	02	2.6
Married/Common-law marriage	47	61.8
Age Group		
29 to 40	34	44.7
41 to 50	21	27.6
51 to 60 years old	14	18.4
Over 60	07	9.2
Education		
Undergraduate	06	7.9
Specialization	09	11.8
Master's degree	09	11.8
Doctorate	43	56.6
Postdoctoral	06	7.9
Did not respond	03	3.9

Source: Authors.

Regarding professional trajectory, as shown in Table 2, 18.4% (n=14) held the position of undergraduate or graduate program coordinator, in addition to fulfilling their teaching duties, 35.5% (n=27) had been working for 11 to 20 years, and 56.6% (n=43) had been at the university for between 11 and 20 years.

Instruments

The following instruments were applied:

1. A self-administered socioeconomic and occupational questionnaire, previously developed by the researchers, containing questions about job position and area of activity, length of service at the institution, marital status, age, gender, presence of children, income, ethnicity, number of weekly classes, and activities performed.

2. Dutch Work Addiction Scale (DUWAS): a scale created by Schaufeli, Taris and Bakker (2006) and translated in Brazil by Carlotto and Miralles (2010), consisting of 17 items that assess

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Table 2. Occupational data of professors at a university in the Brazilian Midwest in 2028 and 2019.

Occupational variables	n (76)	%
Coordinates undergraduate or graduate programs		
Yes	14	18.4
No	62	81.6
Teaching experience		
Up to 10 years	23	30.3
11 to 20 years	27	35.5
21 to 30 years old	15	19.7
Over 30 years old	04	5.3
Did not respond	07	9.2
Length of service at current university		
Up to 10 years	13	17.1
11 to 20 years	43	56.6
21 to 30 years	08	10.5
Over 30 years old	03	4.0
Did not respond	09	11.8

Source: Authors.

and identify the occurrence of work addiction, according to the dimensions of excessive work (10 items) and compulsive work (7 items). Responses are marked on a Likert scale, with response options ranging from 1 (almost never) to 4 (almost always), making it easy to apply and understand.

3. Work Context Assessment Scale (EACT): this scale is part of the Inventory on Work and Health Risks (ITRA) (Mendes; Ferreira, 2007), and allows for the investigation of work-related health risks according to the organization, material conditions, and labor relations.

Data analysis procedures

Respecting the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, the data were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet and subsequently submitted to the R Core Team statistical software and analyzed. The variables were presented in terms of their absolute and relative values (percentages). To verify the association between the groups, the Kruskal-Wallis and Wilcoxon tests with Bonferroni correction were used to compare the categories of the categorical variable two by two. The level of significance adopted was $p < 0.05$.

To map socioeconomic and occupational characteristics, the frequency of the variables contractual regime, working hours, gender, age, position, marital status, education, number of classes and activities, time at the institution, and average hours worked were calculated. The frequency of teachers in excessive work, compulsive work, and workaholism was also calculated (Carlotto; Miralles, 2010).

The EACT analysis was based on the assessment protocol indicated by Mendes and Ferreira (2007), and a score of <= 2.29 was considered satisfactory, between 2.3 and 3.69 critical, and >= 3.7 severe. To calculate the overall frequency of the study population and the mean of the items, responses 3 (sometimes), 4 (often), and 5 (always) were grouped and considered positive, while the set of options 1 (never) and 2 (rarely) was considered negative.

RESULTS

Through the demographic questionnaire applied to 76 participants, an excessive workload and overlapping roles at the university were identified, revealing an intense work schedule, in

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line with the culture of productivity, which consists of scientific publications (Zuin; Bianchetti, 2015), merits and awards received, external relations to academia, and didactic/teaching production (Torrisi, 2013).

Contrary to the institution's own regulatory norm, which deals with the assignment of classes and provides for full-time faculty, coordinators, postgraduate staff, and project leaders to have the prerogative of reducing classroom hours, it was found that participants took on multiple tasks, achieved by extending their working hours, with an average of 13 hours of work per day (n=76), in an attempt to meet organizational demands.

For teachers, it was necessary to work at a fast pace to deal with the numerous tasks and responsibilities (89.8%, n=68): at the time of the study, 67.1% (n=51) participated in administrative committees, 56.6% (n=43) taught one to three undergraduate courses per semester, 38.2% (n=29) spent 12 to 14 hours per week in the classroom, 36.8% (n=28) coordinated extension projects, 59.2% (n=45) were involved in research projects, 40.8% (n=31) supervised undergraduate internships, and 68.4% (n=52) advised undergraduate students in research. When working in master's or specialization programs, they also guided students in research (32.9%, n=25), supervised students in teaching internships (10.5%, n=8), and taught at least one graduate course (22.4%, n=17).

Among the participants, 39.5% (n=30) accepted tasks beyond their working hours or requirements (12 women and 18 men), and among all women (n=35), 40% (n=14) perceived the excessive pace of work more clearly than all men (n=41) (9.8%, n=4) (p=0.012). Women also noticed, in greater proportion, the gap between what was demanded in terms of goals and the actual conditions, with a larger group of female teachers understanding the results outlined by the institution and the educational policy as fabulous and unattainable (20%, n=7), compared to male teachers (7.3%, n=3) (p=0.046).

Given the adaptation of education to the technical models of agility and competitiveness, the high speed and urgency of production was accepted by 89.5% (n=68), who had to make up for staff shortages (82.9%, n=63), meet tight deadlines (89.5%, n=68), and follow strict rules (81.6%, n=62). To this end, 36.5% (n=12) of women and 45% (n=18) of men were overworked, which was only possible by taking on multiple tasks and working at a fast pace.

The situation of overload and discomfort expresses the potential for illness in this work context, assessed as critical by 68.4% (n=52), indicating a situation that warrants attention, according to the EACT results shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Work context results assessed by the EACT scale.

Factors	Satisfactory	Critical	Serious	Did not respond
Work Organization	09 (11.8%)	46 (60.5%)	18 (23.7%)	3 (3.9%)
Working Conditions	29 (38.2%)	39 (51.3%)	08 (10.5%)	0 (0%)
Social and Professional Relationships	23 (30.3%)	40 (52.6%)	12 (15.8%)	1 (1.3%)
General EACT	11 (14.5%)	52 (68.4%)	09 (11.8%)	4 (5.3%)

Source: Authors.

As pointed out by the group surveyed, the organization of work at the university was understood by 18 (23.7%) teachers as a space of great distance and gaps between the norm and the reality imposed by excessive demands, perfectionism, and productivity, a particular scenario for compulsive practice. The fact that they deal with demands in a stubborn manner, regardless of the fatigue generated by occupational exaggeration, denotes the pathological characteristic of the addiction process composed of excessive and compulsive work.

The recurring repetition of compulsive work reported by eight teachers, five men and three women (Table 4), is understood as a resonance of narcissistic failure— rupture in the process of narcissism that leaves the subject prone to ego vulnerability, which can have consequences for their self-image and emotional relationships (Freud, 2010a). In the case under discussion,

Table 4. Factors contributing to work addiction in male and female teachers.

Duwas	Female (n=35)	Male (n=41)	Total (n=76)
Indicative of excessive work	7 (20%)	10 (24.4%)	17 (22.4%)
Indicative of compulsive work	3 (8.6%)	5 (6.6%)	8 (10.5%)
Did not respond	2 (5.7%)	2 (4.9%)	4 (5.3%)
No excessive/compulsive work	23 (65.7%)	24 (58.5%)	47 (61.8%)

Source: Authors.

this concept is fundamental to understanding the occurrence of distressing, painful, and unhappy cyclical experiences, such as compulsive behaviors, in the search for identity, care, and recognition. Work addiction is reported in Table 5, which identifies 7 workaholic teachers (5 men and 2 women) in the higher education institution surveyed:

Table 5. Prevalence of work addiction in male and female teachers.

Duwas	Female (n=35)	Male (n=41)	Total (n=76)
Workaholic	2 (5.7%)	5 (6.6%)	7 (9.2%)
Did not respond	2 (5.7%)	2 (4.9%)	4 (5.3%)
Excessive or compulsive work, without constituting workaholism	8 (22.9%)	10 (24.45%)	18 (23.7%)

Source: Authors.

DISCUSSION

As outlined by the liberal rationale of production and income above ethics and life, multifunctional, proactive, entrepreneurial behaviors are appropriated by the university community as a way to ensure recognition, demonstrate adaptation to established values, and maintain the authority already achieved in the academic and scientific milieu (Ribeiro; Leda, 2016). According to Bourdieu (1997), the scientific field consists of the autonomous relationship between various individuals who accept certain norms and rules in order to achieve scientific status, the admiration of renowned colleagues (a situation rarely achieved in institutions), or political prominence by occupying prestigious positions and tasks, such as being part of evaluation committees, coordinating laboratories, and heading departments.

The responsibility for various tasks impacts the construction of teaching identity and cannot be separated from the scrapping of public universities and the growing feeling of insecurity about the continuity of public service provision in the country. To guarantee a symbolic and objective place in the university, teachers' actions adhere to the economic logic of New Public Management, governed by quality and performance metrics to be achieved, through the acceptance of excessive demands.

Even though they are insufficient in number and dealing with many demands, it becomes the responsibility of each professor to take on the tasks of colleagues or technicians, which requires promoting the desire to be a versatile and effective individual, well-liked by the institution for having professional practices consistent with management expectations. To ensure the rapid fulfillment of various responsibilities and tasks, those who were overworked intensified their efforts through self-acceleration, a collective strategy that leverages the possibility of performing work even under inadequate conditions (Rego, 2013). However, when this unconscious defense triggered by psychic hyperactivity is exploited by management, it ends up serving as a productivity driver; thus, although useful for meeting demands and maintaining the respect of peers, this psychic functioning has harmful implications for the psyche, forming part of the managerial plot for the incessant compliance with tasks, to the detriment of the worker's own health (Dejours; Gernet, 2012).

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According to Birman (2017, p. 52), contemporary individuals, possessed by excess, end up unconsciously acting hyperactively so as not to submerge and be paralyzed by anguish. Thus, in order to escape and avoid the dread of helplessness, they "[...] offer their body and psyche so that the other can enjoy them as they wish, provided that, in return, they offer protection", in this case, the institution. However, these experiences of submission are incapable of becoming pleasurable, as the trauma does not allow for the discharge of drives and is entangled in the death drive (Freud, 2010b).

Beyond the acceleration strategy, the harmful hyperactive relationship with work is related to the very aspect of masochism, when the subject loses himself in small satisfactions and pleasures that may even be of imaginary origin (Freud, 2010b). According to Dejours (2008, p. 169), masochism allows the perpetuation of excesses and serves as a defense against suffering, making it bearable or converting it into a source of pleasure, safeguarding "[...] the subject from the risk of decompensation: somatic illness, depression, clastic crisis". However, like any defense, it acts in a morbid way, and over time it can make "collaborators" sick, so named as an example of the masochist's ability to romanticize and idealize their miseries to serve the sadist, in this case management.

The process of exploitation through overload in the corporate world, already denounced by Chaplin in "Modern Times", has been enhanced today by seductive and cynical language, whose latent content of promises of positions, titles, and immeasurable possibilities feeds and reinforces the subject's actions. The worker, entangled in the game "deceive me, I like it", reaches a state of work compulsion, to the detriment of any other personal activities. Thus, when addiction to work takes hold in the psyche, the employee presents themselves as affectionate, committed, serious, and apparently very satisfied with the organization, yet without their own personality, because, fascinated by the "siren song", their affections and feelings are captured and aligned with management (Mendes, 2018, p. 18).

Within the reasoning of an educational world influenced by the corporate market, the development of workaholism occurs progressively. Starting from the insertion of the subject into a work environment characterized by an excess of tasks and functions, the individual adheres to the compulsive mode of meeting the ideal of work and worker, whose social outline is reproduced in the institution and in the teaching collective, being introjected by the subject.

According to Gaulejac (2007), the dynamics of the desire for success and the fear of teachers of not being recognized calls for sacrifice in the eagerness to achieve perfection, mobilizes excessive activism, and leads to obedience to the organization of work, in the face of the anguish of losing institutional and identity relevance. The circuit of the drive towards work in the Resist-Give Up time is then governed by the superego[1] to satisfy itself at any cost (Mendes, 2018).

For Farias and Mello (2020), the psyche structured on affective fragility makes it almost impossible for workaholic teachers to stop and rest, with the transition from excessive to compulsive work linked to the adoption of defensive strategies of acceleration and devotion to professional activities. Considering the overload, pace, and time dedicated to university work, workaholic teachers are thrown into a frenetic and dense organizational space.

Outlined in childhood, activism resurfaces in the workplace of constant professional hyperactivity and is characterized by the cost of creating meaningful social bonds and affections, given the dependence on occupational activity. Unable to psychologically process the excess drive and sublimate it, the obstinate adult behavior of being continuously busy acts in defense of the psyche, protecting the subject from the invariable insecurity and anguish of everyday life, but expresses "[...] a mode of psychic functioning anchored in cleavage and unveils a mode of psychic survival based on discharge, anesthesia, and affective emptiness" (Farias; Mello, 2020, p. 73).

Aligned with the ideology of servitude, workaholic teachers use excessive defenses and work compulsively to achieve the organizational ideal, to the point of subjective annihilation expressed in work addiction, which can only be endured through masochistic functioning.

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[1] The superego is defined by Freud (2011) as a psychic instance that is responsible for the internalization of moral and social norms, encompassing rules, values, and prohibitions that are learned and apprehended throughout life.

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In this case, the masochistic pact of servitude reveals the sociopolitical malaise that plagues workaholic workers, whose defensive ideology of conformity and readiness in action alienates desire from projects established in narcissistic culture, disarticulates the collective, and silences professionals in the face of overwork.

If, for Gaulejac (2011, p. 91), "[...] to be a subject is to resist what has no meaning for oneself", in addition to work, meaningless and compulsive action to meet individual and institutional expectations is fed back by overwork, with the individual taking on organizational demands, even those that are meaningless to them. This situation undermines cooperation among peers, facilitates abuse, and increases individualism, leading to the trivialization of relationships and acceptance of inappropriate material conditions, such as lack of consumables (67.1%, n=51), shortage of instruments (64.5%, n=49), and precarious conditions (61.8%, n=47). As pointed out by Gaulejac (2007), the fear of losing gratification causes distress and leads to unlimited engagement characterized by obedience and permission to be used by the institution.

Thus, in summary, Figure 1 shows how the onset of teacher workaholism is related to a combination of personal and organizational factors. The results indicate that excessive commitment reflects not only individual characteristics, but also an institutional context that encourages competition and values personal sacrifice as a measure of success. The diagram shows that the organization of work in the university context (a), with its endless goals and activities typical of managerialism, leads the teaching staff to make unrestricted use of defensive strategies to maintain performance (b), given the impossibility of transforming the work. Considering that teaching subjectivity is forged, in capitalism, by values linked to production and merit, the anguish generated by reliving the original helplessness in an adverse work environment, which does not recognize the beauty or usefulness of the work performed, forces the subject to manage their affect. The denial of intrapsychic conflicts in the psychic dynamics of workaholics occurs through subjection to what is dictated by the organization of work, via the ideology of servitude (c). Alienation from work overload leads the subject to compulsively strive, in a hyperactive manner (d), to increase their performance and achieve heroic goals (Dejours, 2008). In line with neoliberal logic, the social pathology of workaholism (e) is characterized by the annulment of individual desire, and helplessness can be exploited by management to make teachers submit to exaggeration. However, as experiences of servility cannot become pleasurable, the defense provided by masochistic dynamics (f) allows the workaholic subject to deal with the continuous suffering related to overload, making it plausible and acceptable to comply with management, even if over time it reduces well-being and favors psychosomatic illnesses.
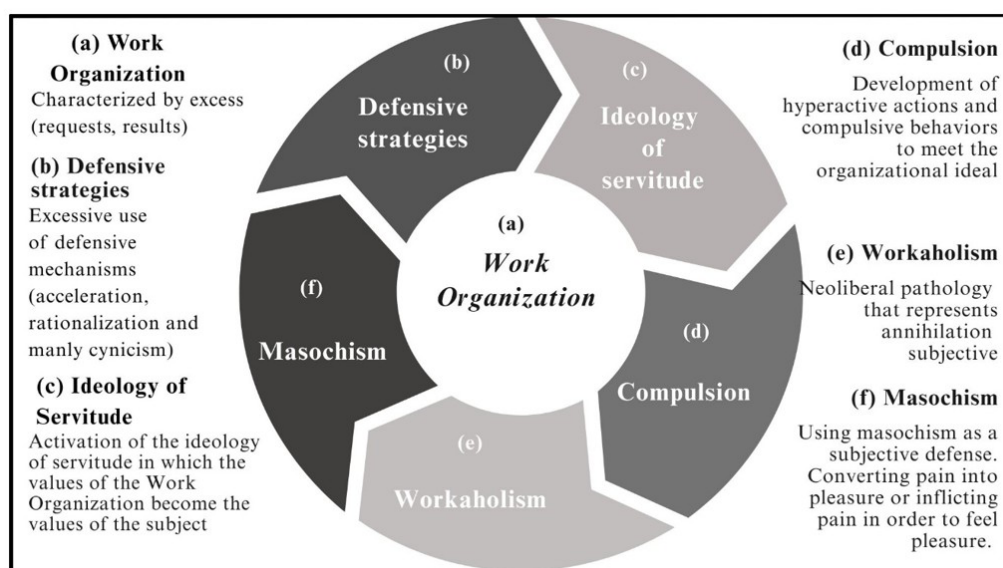
Figure 1. Diagram representing the neoliberal pathology of workaholism.
Source: Authors.

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CONCLUSION

The study shows that teacher workaholism results from an intertwining of individual and institutional factors, in which the intersubjective relationship with a flawed work organization, permeated by meritocratic ideas, drives the subject to engage in excessive and compulsive work, which can lead to workaholism. Thus, addiction to work, as a pathology of ideological servitude, reinforces defensive strategies and masochistic practices, damaging mental health and quality of life.

Although the research was conducted with a small sample, limited to a single institution, a fact that restricts generalizations to the national context, the identification of workaholic teachers denotes the silencing of the collective in the face of the spread of administrative techniques and evaluations typical of New Public Management, which, within the university context, conceives a new culture and a new type of management that reveres performance, competence, utility, and effectiveness. According to Azevedo (2023), the benchmarking method adopted in public universities compares performance and distinction through productivity indicators, guiding the goals to be achieved by teachers and thus regulating the academic field by inhibiting any expression contrary to heteronomy.

If neoliberal academic culture reinforces moral obedience to excellence and productivity, encouraging practices of self-exploitation in the face of highly demanding and multifaceted teaching work, the internalization of managerial values and practices increases vulnerability to mental and emotional illness. Through psychological devices useful for regulating production, public universities trigger fear of ruin and the desire for teaching success in order to achieve the collective's narcissistic identification with the administration and gain workers' acceptance of incongruous and flawed elements of the organizational design.

For Gaulejac (2011, p. 85), faced with the consternation of losing the beloved object, be it status, employment, or happiness, workers activate individual defenses (such as projection, introjection, idealization, and sublimation), an affective bond that allows command, productivist logic, and competence to be assimilated and admired. As a result, defensive strategies used excessively in the face of organizational shortcomings lead to subjective control and domination, providing an opportunity for the establishment of the ideology of voluntary servitude (Dejours, 2005, 2022); in the understanding that it is impossible to transform reality, suffering becomes something common to be experienced at work.

As in the labor market, the educational system propagates the idea of superperformance, achieved through hyperconnection, assimilation of countless pieces of information, and unrestricted use of technological resources that enable effective and rapid communication (Valdés-Henao, 2022). These skills are developed by teachers who, together with actions to seek resources, scholarships/research grants from funding agencies and the private sector, form a list of entrepreneurial measures that are well regarded and favorable to the institution. In particular, since 2017, with the change in position from a social institution and social entity to a social service provider (Chauí, 2003, p. 24), Brazilian public universities have been guided by privatist ideas, marked by values of efficiency and results, through the promotion and glorification of an innovative and diligent teaching profile. Success is now assimilated as a bold achievement guided by one's own desires, but only achieved through vigor and hyperactivity.

This article, therefore, contributes to the understanding of how "voluntary servitude"—passive acceptance of oppressive working conditions—can occur and be perpetuated, as well as providing reflection on the relationship between work addiction and teaching culture, which honors those who do not succumb to uncertainties and hardships, resolving them individually, even if it means denying their own limits, in the copious summoning of the body (Penteado; Souza Neto, 2019). If, in masochistic functioning, sacrifice to the point of exhaustion generates pleasure and engenders the denial of psychopathological arrangement and exploitation, the ideology of servitude ends up stripping "[...] the worker of his subjectivity, excluding the subject and making man a victim of his work" (Vieira, 2014, p. 122). This dynamic directly impacts health, as well as socio-professional and affective relationships (Carrasqueira; Barbarini, 2010), with the primacy of bonds woven for the sake of utility.

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The growing contingent of teacher discontent is a sign of this neoliberal rationality replicated in the criterion of value, which forges an identity subject to enduring productivity and the suffering of being continually subjugated. The subjective annihilation of the act of working, when only abundance and professional readiness fill the underlying emotional void, prevents the subject from identifying with and giving meaning to their occupational activity (Dal Forno et al., 2014). Therefore, the importance of new research that includes teachers who are suffering, already ill, on leave for health treatment, or retired due to disability is evident. Studying the relationship between workaholic dynamics and managerial profile, institutional culture, and organizational climate, aspects crossed by unequal gender relations at work, can reveal different ways of coping with suffering in men and women in various higher education institutions.

Like the diseases of late modernity, such as burnout and depression (Han, 2016), situating teacher workaholism as a pathology of contemporary society, in line with neoliberal logic, allows us to understand the abandonment of affections and creation for the sake of increased production through the exploitation of suffering. The expression of the ideology of voluntary servitude seen in the dynamics of workaholism reveals the importance of recognizing work as a path to building autonomous identity.

In contrast to the omission of symbolic retribution in the work context, the main cause of voluntary servitude, capable of leading to subjugation and the concealment of ethical values as a way of avoiding psychological fragility and the fear of loneliness, Dejours (2022) points to a political organization of work that guarantees the chance for recognition and subjective life in the institution, the first condition for building identity and protecting the psyche. Since when the dynamics of recognition are stagnant, it is not possible to transform suffering or the meaning of work, in order to achieve mental health for workaholic university professors, it is necessary to promote new forms of professional relationships that are more democratic, cooperative, and collective, prioritizing subjective mobilization.

In this sense, it is understood that in order to mitigate workaholism and compulsive hyperactivity, it is essential to promote institutional policies that recognize faculty dedication, reorganize the distribution of tasks, and encourage healthy work environments, ensuring autonomy and appreciation of the individual in the face of academic demands. The promotion of mental health in the university context requires the reformulation of work policies, with an emphasis on recognition, balanced redistribution of tasks, and encouragement of professional autonomy.

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Authors contribution
VCNF: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data management, Statistical analysis, Data analysis, Fundraising, Project administration, Resources, Visual preparation of data, Writing and revision. IFB: Data analysis, Visual data preparation, Writing and revision. JACR: Conceptualization, Data collection, Data analysis, Writing.

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