Why are psychosocial risks on the rise? Human history and neo-Taylorism

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1. Introduction

Ergonomists are engaged to understand and prevent psychosocial risks in companies and public services, owing to a rising concern in European countries where these risks are considered as emergent by EU-OSHA (2012). This interest is not only due to legal demands for evaluation of these risks, we can also observe through our interventions the deterioration of the quality of work for human development, linked to the contemporary organization of work in a globalized economy. Current tendencies of work organization seems to make it more and more difficult to achieve health as WHO defines it since 1948: “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO 1948). Ergonomics is concerned at the first place with health at work and should consider seriously this outcome of modern work organization.

2. Methods

The paper presents theoretical considerations based on anthropological studies and our experience of interventions on psychosocial risks in varied work activities

3. Results

The hand and the social brain

Sennet (2008) defines craftsmanship as “an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake”. This enduring impulse is rooted in the history of use and development of tools during hominization, indeed, the control of the free hand and opposable thumb is a major factor in the development of a bigger brain in earlier humans (Leroy-Gourand - 1964). This long co-evolution of brain, hand and tools shaped our physical and cognitive functioning; engraving archaic physical, social and behavioral patterns that are deeply rooted and are still operant under the new skin of modern humans, just like primitive fears are still present in our behavior. Our hypothesis is that the loss of manual work and, more important, the loss of any control the worker has on the final concrete products or outputs of work contradicts our anthropological history and is a deep factor of the emerging psychosocial risks. Humans need to use their hands together with their brain, and contemporary modes of production and organization obviously refrain and silence this anthropological impulse, at the expense of workers health. Cazamian (1971) was already concerned with this detrimental trend at the onset of automated industry.

Current research on cognition also shows that human brain has evolved to be biologically adapted for participating in collaborative activities involving shared goals and socially coordinated action plans (Dunbar 2003). The social brain is pre-wired for social skills and needs, this abilities are actualized for each individual during ontogenesis where steps of increasing complexity appear: from the perception of others' intentional actions, through the pursuit of goals and the choice of plans to reach them, to the shared intentionality leading to cultural creation (Tomasellos 2005).

Paleo-cognition studies suggest that fire mastering was a fundamental achievement impacting our social being. The fireplace is the place where daily feedback on techniques and regulations happened, where language was evolving, hunting techniques could be discussed and the collective organization of “work” was debated. The ancient fireplace was operand in the development of social life and cognition (Twomey 2013, Wrangham 2009), fire itself would reduce stress (Lynn 2014) favoring appeased social relations and encouraging cooperative planning. The place for debating on coordinated and cooperative work is thus part of our human origins.
Psychosocial risks

As we observed during interventions in different work activities, a major factor of dissatisfaction at work, resulting in the so-called psychosocial risk, is that the contemporary worker is physically cut off from the results of his action. The concreteness of work products is also fading away with the expansion of the digital world.

We describe a sense of anomie, fundamental despair and the lack of implication at work in a number of audited firms, where workers are assigned to specialized repetitive production under strong procedural control. On the opposite, self-employed artisans following their concrete production from start to delivery, show a different pattern of psychosocial risks, generally not related to the sense of their being and action, typically burn-out and stress to be linked to over-investment in work.

Concurrently, the social brain is also affected, as workers are often deprived of regulating and debating on their own concrete production: quality control is delegated to a third party, and no place is allowed for professional debate on the rules and processes of collective production (Clot, 2014). Standardized products and services also deny the worker’s fundamental need to re-formulate through experience what he is asked to do.

During psychosocial risk assessment, we often observe signs of the dis-engagement at work, when workers describe their contribution as “being there” and performing the requested tasks, without any collective planning, “without thinking” or asking. Phrases displaying disengagement and explicit abandon of any critical point of view are regularly heard: “they want me to do this”, “I do not care if it is wrong, I follow the procedure”, “I even do not know what I am doing this for”, “leave your brain at the entrance”... Such disengagement implies suppressing fundamental cognitive operations of the social brain: shared intentionality and cooperative planning, described above.

We suggest that this suppression commands a deep frustration, a cognitive deprivation analogous to sensorial deprivation affecting the social brain: to “stop thinking” is costly and has physical and mental impacts.

Ergonomics has pointed the importance of the margins of maneuver, the professional debate on the quality of work output, and the harmfulness of restricted movements. Relating also to the basic human impulse “to do a job well for its own sake” described by Sennet, the contemporary work is all the opposite. Taylor has divided work in simple and easy discrete actions, and granted the conception of work to engineers. Those who conceive work do not experience the tasks they conceive, and those who experience work are denied the opportunity to conceive it. This is contradictory to the anthropological need for cumulative experience, building individual as a man and man as a successful species.

4. Discussion

( Neo)Taylorian organization has deprived the workers of fundamental needs that are rooted in human history, creating a gap between our deep impulses and the way work is performed in contemporary industries and services. This fracture is a factor of the psychosocial risks the workers are exposed to.

In the current mainstream organization of work, achievement of the work is replaced by the completion of tasks, evaluated through criteria external to the worker, this task participating in a broader global production system that is often un-understandable or un-accessible or even not agreed by the individual worker, leaving the worker dispossessed of its craft. As a result, and with the attraction for the new virtual social life, alternative to the engagement in craft, we observe the Y generation, described as de-implicated, looking for jobs rather than profession and work, following quality criteria without personal implication. That is the dream of Taylor come true.

However, we know as ergonomists that the companies implicitly want more of the worker, they need a total implication to face the real world they cannot pre-view through quality criteria; this is why a WHO-healthy worker is also an efficient worker. Companies need real humans, complete with brain and body, concerned and not only involved. The failure to do so leads to the expansion of psychosocial risks in the neo-Taylorist organization. Current trends of organization in the software industry, allowing free use of space and time, giving free food and entertainment, is trying to catch the best of autonomy and self-organization. Alleviating Taylorian constraints, these forms of organization let the worker express its need for craftsmanship and free cooperation, nevertheless collecting the productive output of this semi-autonomous human activity at a higher organizational level. The interest of ergonomists for enabling work environments
and empowerment (SELF 2014), leaving room for personal development and self-organization is also an answer to the rule of Taylor.

References

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