

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# FEELINGS OF WORKERS OF THE CLEANING STAFF OF A TEACHING HOSPITAL

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To describe the feelings of pleasure and suffering of workers of the cleaning staff of a teaching hospital.

**Methodology:** Descriptive and exploratory study, with a qualitative approach, with 24 cleaning workers of a teaching hospital in the state of Paraná. Data collection was performed through semi-structured interviews from April to July 2016 and the statements were submitted to content analysis. The theoretical assumption was psychodynamics of work with the use of Dejourian methodology.

**Results:** The duality of pleasure and suffering was identified. The experiences of pleasure were related to teamwork and professional valuation and recognition. On the other hand, the experiences of suffering were related to lack of recognition and prejudice.

**Conclusion:** It is concluded that both the managers and cleaners should implement actions to mitigate the feelings of suffering and maximize the experiences of pleasure, promoting the health of these workers.

**DESCRIPTORS:** Occupational Health; Pleasure; Hospital Housekeeping Service; Teaching Hospitals.


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## SENTIMENTOS DE TRABALHADORES DE LIMPEZA DE UM HOSPITAL ESCOLA

### RESUMO

*Objetivo:* descrever os sentimentos de prazer e sofrimento de trabalhadores de limpeza em ambiente de trabalho de um hospital escola.

*Metodologia:* estudo descritivo-exploratório de abordagem qualitativa, realizado com 24 trabalhadores de limpeza de um hospital escola do Paraná. A coleta de dados foi realizada por meio de entrevista semiestruturada, no período de abril a julho de 2016 e os depoimentos foram submetidos à análise de conteúdo. Adotou-se como pressuposto teórico a psicodinâmica do trabalho Dejouriana.

*Resultados:* identificou-se a dualidade de sentimentos prazer e sofrimento. As vivências de prazer estiveram relacionadas ao trabalho em equipe e à valorização e reconhecimento profissional. Por outro lado, as vivências de sofrimento relacionaram-se à falta de reconhecimento e ao preconceito.

*Conclusão:* conclui-se que os gestores, em conjunto com esses trabalhadores, necessitam buscar ações para diminuir os sentimentos de sofrimento e maximizar as de prazer, promovendo a saúde deles.

**DESCRITORES:** Saúde do Trabalhador; Prazer; Serviço Hospitalar de Limpeza; Hospitais Universitários.

## SENTIMIENTOS DE TRABAJADORES DE LIMPIEZA DE UN HOSPITAL DE ENSEÑANZA

### RESUMEN

*Objetivo:* describir los sentimientos de placer y de sufrimiento de trabajadores de limpieza en ambiente laboral de un hospital de enseñanza.

*Metodología:* estudio descriptivo y exploratorio de abordaje cualitativo que se realizó con 24 trabajadores de limpieza de un hospital de enseñanza de Paraná. Se obtuvieron los datos por medio de entrevista semi estructurada, en el periodo de abril a julio de 2016 y se sometieron los testimonios al análisis de contenido. Se adoptó como presupuesto teórico la psicodinámica del trabajo de Dejours.

*Resultados:* se identificó la dualidad de sentimientos placer y sufrimiento. Las experiencias de placer se relacionaron al trabajo en equipo y a la valoración y al reconocimiento profesional. En cambio, las vivencias de sufrimiento se asociaron a la falta de reconocimiento y al prejuicio.

*Conclusión:* se concluye que los gestores, en asociación con esos trabajadores, necesitan buscar acciones para disminuir los sentimientos de sufrimiento y maximizar los de placer, promoviendo la salud de ellos.

**DESCRIPTORES:** Salud del Trabajador; Placer; Servicio Hospitalario de Limpieza; Hospitales Universitarios.

## INTRODUCTION

For most people, work is essential, because it is through work that they can establish social relationships, support themselves and achieve social status<sup>(1)</sup>. Therefore, work can be a source of professional fulfillment, attainment of wealth and material goods for workers, who feel pleased to provide services to others. However, work can also be a source of physical, mental and social suffering, as well as of health problems or even death<sup>(2)</sup>.

Emotions are inherent to human beings, that is, if people do not experience any feelings, whether of pleasure, suffering, joy, sadness, anger or satisfaction, no action will be possible. All organizations have spaces where workers must control their feelings so that they can perform their tasks in a more pleasurable and harmonious way. Emotions are part of the work routine, and the professionals must be able to identify and manage their own feelings, as well as those of their coworkers and others. However, managers should identify strategies to reduce the experiences of suffering<sup>(3)</sup>.

It is essential to understand and highlight the subjective work-related aspects, such as symbolic content, relations of pleasure and suffering, power relations, cooperation and recognition. Therefore, workers and managers should discuss this topic in order to stimulate the necessary mobilization for the transformation of experiences of suffering into experiences of pleasure<sup>(4)</sup>.

When work experiences are positive, they favor identity formation and increase the potential of workers in all aspects<sup>(5)</sup>. In hospitals, various types of professionals perform their duties, but some are virtually invisible. This situation causes lack of recognition and, in turn, experiences of suffering in the workplace. That is what occurs with cleaning workers of hospitals<sup>(6)</sup>. However, these workers are important for the prevention and control of healthcare-related infections<sup>(7)</sup>.

In view of the aforementioned and the gap of knowledge on this subject identified, since there are scarce studies with workers of the cleaning staff of hospitals<sup>(6,8)</sup>, it is important to investigate the experiences of these professionals in the workplace, so that they can develop management strategies in conjunction with these workers, in order to contribute to the promotion of biopsychosocial health, as well as provide better quality of life at work.

Therefore, the present study aimed to describe the experiences of pleasure and suffering of cleaning workers of a teaching hospital.

## METHOD

It is a descriptive and exploratory study, with a qualitative approach. The descriptive methodology aims to observe, describe and document phenomena<sup>(9)</sup>. Thus, we sought to describe the feelings of cleaning workers of a hospital through the statements of the participants.

Cleaning workers who performed their duties in the inpatient units of a teaching hospital in the state of Paraná participated in the study. The hospital has 316 beds for patients under the Unified Health (SUS) and is a high-complexity referral center in the medical-surgical, adult, pediatric and obstetrics specialties in the municipal and state level in Paraná.

In the referred institution, the participants of the study are workers of the cleaning staff of a hospital who are subordinated to the Nursing Management, and, consequently, to the head nurses of the inpatient units to which they are assigned. In total, 90 workers integrate the hospital housekeeping services and are distributed in the inpatient units of the health institution. They work in the morning, afternoon and evening shifts.

The participants were 24 workers of the cleaning staff of the hospital units who met the inclusion criteria established, i.e., who have been working in the hospital admission unit for at least one year, and the exclusion criterion was being on vacation or paid leave.

As this is a qualitative study, the number of participants was not defined. Thus, the interviews were discontinued after data saturation<sup>(10)</sup>.

Data collection was performed through previously scheduled individual interviews conducted in a separate room in the workplace that lasted in average 30 minutes, from April to July 2016. The interviews were audiotape-recorded after the previous agreement of the respondents and were based on a semi-structured questionnaire submitted to a pilot test for adequacy. This questionnaire consisted of close-ended questions about social and occupational data and the following open-ended question on the object of the study: "Tell me about the feelings you experience in your job as a cleaning worker". Subsequently, the statements were fully transcribed.

Bardin's content analysis procedures<sup>(10)</sup> were used to analyze the statements. According to this approach, researchers are allowed to draw conclusions and interpret the information acquired (statements) beyond their manifest content, considering what is latent. The three stages of content analysis were then performed: 1) pre-analysis, during which floating and exhaustive reading of the statements was carried out; 2) exploration of material, which included the formulation of the recording units, according to their frequency and intensity and 3) treatment of the results, which involved inference and interpretation of data<sup>(10)</sup>.

In addition, to Psychodynamics of Work was adopted as theoretical reference to broaden data analysis. It comprises the influence of work organization on the generation of experiences of pleasure, suffering, wear, satisfaction and sickening of the individuals<sup>(11)</sup>.

The study met the ethical principles of research involving human subjects. The research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee, under protocol no 41236, of July 10, 2015. All participants signed a free and informed consent form, and to preserve participants' anonymity, their names were replaced by letter "I" followed by the interview order number.

## RESULTS

Twenty-four cleaning workers participated in this study. Of these, 19 (79%) were female and 17 (71%) were aged 30-59 years. Regarding education, 11 (46%) had completed high school, 10 (42%) had completed higher education and four (12%) were attending college.

Two categories emerged from thematic analysis and the respondents' statements, as follows: "Feelings of pleasure experienced by cleaning workers" and "Feelings of suffering experienced by cleaning workers".

### Category 1 – Feelings of pleasure experienced by cleaning workers

According to the respondents, teamwork generates pleasurable experiences, as it encourages mutual help, unity, strengthening friendships and favors interactions, as seen in the following statements:

*We help each other frequently. There is solidarity, and this is a true source of joy for me... teamwork is wonderful. Teamwork even facilitates our communication. (I01)*

*We are very attached to each other, we always help each other in our tasks. When one cannot do the work, the other does, and vice versa, and we talk a lot. (I08)*

*Working as a team is very pleasurable and we build a good friendship! (I13)*

In this study, the respondents also reported experiencing feelings of pleasure when they are recognized for their work, as shown in the following statements:

*I am very happy when I realize that I am recognized for the work I do. It's a great encouragement for us! (I05)*

*Being recognized for what they do makes everyone happy, right?(I08)*

*Look at me. [...] What really makes me happy is to realize that we are valued for what we do. This encourages me to work even harder... (I07)*

The participants also reported that they consider themselves professionally fulfilled when they perform their work activities, which can be identified in the following statements:

*I feel very happy and fulfilled at work. (I03)*

*I like what I do and feel happy at my job (I16)*

*Working in the cleaning staff was a dream come true... I really like what I do (I23)*

*I like what I do a lot and I also passed a contest and have stability at work. So, I'm really happy now. (I24)*

## **Category 2 – Feelings of suffering experienced by cleaning workers**

The respondents also experienced situations of suffering saying that health professionals that work in the institution, as well as students in training programs, do not recognize their efforts and devalue their work. These experiences were reported in the following statements:

*It's very painful because nobody recognizes the value of my work. No one perceives our tasks as important. (I02)*

*I'm not recognized and I've heard doctors and students say something like this: don't worry about the dirt [...] these people are here to clean the dirt, they were hired just for that. (I07)*

*In my workplace, the others perceive me as inferior to them, as if I were invisible. (I09)*

When they first arrive at the hospital, the students ask for information, greet us, smile at us ... sometime later, when they realize we are cleaners, or when they assume more important positions, they no longer look at us or greet us. (I11)

*People look at us as if we were inferior to them and forget that we're people. This causes me a lot of suffering, but I tolerate it because I know that cleaning services are very important for the hospital and someday we'll be perceived as people. (I15)*

*People pass by me and do not even greet me. It is as if I were nothing more than an object. (I18)*

Finally, according to the respondents, having an academic background and working in the cleaning staff of the hospital is not well accepted, as shown in the following statements:

*People are surprised when you say you have completed higher education and work in the cleaning staff ... I think this is nothing more than prejudice. (I17)*

*When I started working at the hospital, a person at the reception desk for new cleaners at the hospital made the following comment: "So now you must have a college degree to clean the floor?" (I22)*



*No matter how hard I try, I am never accepted as a person in the group, despite having obtained a college degree. (I24)*

## DISCUSSION

The present study found that the workers of the cleaning staff of the hospital experience feelings of pleasure and suffering. Teamwork and appreciation and professional recognition generate feelings of pleasure. On the other hand, the experiences of suffering were related to lack of recognition and prejudice.

Teamwork is the result of a dynamic and complex process in which workers must be integrated. This requires a good relationship, which can be achieved through mutual help and solidarity, key factors for unity and teamwork<sup>(12)</sup>.

Teamwork develops continuous communication, strengthens speaking and listening, sets goals, and achieves common goals<sup>(13)</sup>. Teamwork facilitates conversation, which in turn helps to reduce the stress and stress of daily work. However, each team is unique and has its own particularities, obstacles and challenges to be faced, managed and overcome<sup>(14)</sup>.

In an effective team members communicate with each other and share their knowledge and decision-making responsibilities for patient care<sup>(7,15)</sup>. The member of a team must be also aware of the culture and the dynamics of the workplace to be able to play an effective role. From the health care perspective, teamwork plays a crucial role in patient safety and in patient care outcomes<sup>(7,15)</sup>.

Thus, cleaning workers must be aware of the importance of their activities, i.e. their role, as this is an essential support service. These workers are also part of the multidisciplinary team that assists the patients and their families<sup>(7)</sup>.

The type of leadership in the workplace may have a positive or negative impact on teamwork. Or else, a transformational leadership is positively associated with teamwork, as demonstrated in a study conducted at a teaching hospital, identified that nurses, as transformational and charismatic leaders motivate the other health care workers to do their best<sup>(16)</sup>. Thus, nurses as leaders of the cleaning staff of the hospital play a key role in the performance and satisfaction of this team.

A worker who receives recognition for his/her work may experience feelings of personal fulfillment and satisfaction for providing a good service for others, with a positive impact on mental health<sup>(17)</sup>.

From the perspective of the psychodynamics of work, recognition of the work performed, whether by peers, society, managers, among others, is an essential factor for the formation of the identity of workers and the experience of feelings of pleasure at work. This avoids health problems, especially mental disorders, and contributes to improving the quality of life of these workers<sup>(13)</sup>.

A study conducted in a public hospital in the state of Piauí with 182 health workers found an association between feelings of satisfaction and professional accomplishment with public work, type of leadership and the relationship between co-workers<sup>(18)</sup>.

Job satisfaction depends on environmental factors and individual mental processes. Thus, the characteristics of the work environment vary and affect the individual's perception. However, feelings of happiness and unhappiness are also triggered by the mental process of each individual<sup>(19)</sup>.

It should be noted that work and personal demands can impact the workers' well-being. A study conducted in Africa found that labor demands are related to the type of management, cognitive factors, job dissatisfaction, job expectations, job insecurity, pay,

work overload and work-life balance. In turn, personal demands are related to family, financial and health issues. Thus, work can be a source of professional exhaustion, contributing to the development of mental illnesses such as the burnout syndrome<sup>(20)</sup>.

Pleasure at work is based on the individual's perception of professional achievement and freedom of expression. Workplace freedom of expression is related to the capacity of employees to show their feelings and express their opinions to coworkers and supervisors. On the other hand, professional fulfillment is related to the experience of well-being, pleasure, motivation, recognition of work, as well as pride in the work the individuals carry out<sup>(21)</sup>.

The worker must achieve the required goals, with involvement and motivation, so that the work provides satisfaction<sup>(22)</sup>. Therefore, work must generate positive feelings, i.e. pleasure, joy and stimulation, thus favoring professional achievement, as well as personal growth and consequently health promotion.

Corroborating these findings, another study with cleaning workers in an emergency hospital found that lack of recognition at work favored feelings of suffering in the workplace. The participants reported that they felt devalued and ignored by other professionals in the institution and by society, and reported prejudiced attitudes towards their occupation<sup>(2)</sup>.

Feelings of recognition make it possible to construct one's identity by giving meaning to the effort made to accomplish the task and which can be translated into experiences of pleasure and individual fulfillment<sup>(11)</sup>.

According to the psychodynamics of work, workers want to see that their work is meaningful, worth doing. They want to see the impact of their work on the others, and not be perceived only as manual laborers that passively follow the orders of their superiors. All these workers are human beings with desires and expectations that are often not fulfilled, and thus, they experience feelings of suffering in the workplace, which may lead to health problems and psychopathological symptoms, if no measures are taken<sup>(21)</sup>.

A study with cleaning workers showed that these professionals, who were devalued and ignored by other workers of the institution, were looking for opportunities to work with other teams in an attempt to find their identity as individuals and workers. Thus, it is necessary to give visibility to these workers and recognize the importance of hospital housekeeping services, in order to mitigate the feelings of suffering of this population<sup>(24)</sup>.

Although some types of invisibility in healthcare work have already been characterized, especially those that cannot be easily measured<sup>(25)</sup>, in the present study, the participants reported that not only was their work invisible, but they themselves were invisible to other co-workers.

One author used a metaphor to explain the situation by comparing the work performed to an iceberg: the visible part above the water corresponds to a small portion of that work (prescribed work), while the part that remains under water is the largest (and invisible) portion of the work, (real work)<sup>(26)</sup>. Thus, the work performed by these cleaning workers is in the "invisible zone" of the health work process, and this must be changed in view of the importance of these workers for health services.

Corroborating the statements of the participants of this study, some authors emphasize that cleaning workers experience situations of devaluation and prejudiced attitudes even by their coworkers in the cleaning services, who mock those who read newspapers or who are taking college courses, by saying they are ignorant or illiterate all the same. Some professionals also reported that they feel ashamed of their work, lying to family and friends about their jobs and even hiding when a friend or relative arrives in the hospital<sup>(24)</sup>.

Therefore, the results of this study are corroborated by numerous and frequent experiences of pleasure and suffering observed among health professionals, including those "invisible" in the work process. The present study allows reflections about the work

process of cleaning workers as an integral part of the hospital health team and indirect patient care.

Although the objectives of this study were achieved, one of its limitations was the fact that suffering and pleasure in the workplace involve abstract aspects, subjectivity and are influenced by time and space, as well as by the individual characteristics of cleaning workers. Thus, it should be noted that the results obtained depict the reality of these particular workers of the cleaning staff of a teaching hospital.

## CONCLUSION

The workers of the cleaning staff of the hospital experienced a duality of pleasure and suffering, as follows: teamwork and valuation and professional recognition generated feelings of pleasure. In turn, the experiences of suffering were related to lack of recognition at work and prejudiced attitudes towards workers who performed cleaning services, despite having a college degree.

The present study provides further knowledge on the topic by addressing the experiences of pleasure and suffering experienced by cleaning workers in the workplace, which can be useful to managers regarding the implementation of actions aimed to reduce situations of suffering that may predispose these workers to illness and disseminate experiences of pleasure that promote health in the workplace.

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Final approval of the version to be published - KLL, BGAR, JTM, CVCO, MJQG, MLCCR

Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved - KLL, BGAR

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