

Grasset Yves (about to be published), "*Collectif de travail / Work Team*", in Agnès Vandeveld-Rougale & Pascal Fugier (eds.), *Dictionnaire de sociologie clinique / Dictionary of Clinical Sociology*.

Acts of violence at work

Acts of violence at work have an impact both on the wage-earners or agents who are confronted to them, on the firms or services they belong to, and also on the collective they depend on.

Numerous contributions in social sciences question the sometimes violent effects of the mutation of organisations on the persons working in them. In the field of clinical sociology, *L'emprise de l'organisation* (Max Pagès *et al.* 1979) produced quite early a key analysis allowing to situate the fragilisation resulting from an excessive commitment, a kind of dependence to work. That book centers on the expectations of a firm for an attraction, or an inveigling that can later prove destructive.

If such a line of inquiring on the organisation remains essential to think many a psychic ravage on wage-earners, it does not allow as such to embrace all the situations which nowadays affect the balance and good health of people at work. The grounds for the acts of violence there are varied, whether internal or external to the organisation. The prism of a univocal organisational responsibility cannot approach them, which does not mean either that the organisation is not concerned with such considerations. Thus, considering the acts of violence at work in their dynamics vindicates to wonder about the evolution of their status as well as about the discerning conditions of that source of problems or danger at work.

The possible forms of violence at work

External violence grows through the relation a firm, or more largely, an organisation, whether public or private, whether lucrative or not, develops with its environment : it may nowadays concern any kind of activity, but it is still strongly linked to service activities ; it involves one or more external aggressor of the firm, acting most often on the excuse of an established reprobation, on a disagreement or a conflict with the firm or what it symbolizes.

External violence at work can embody various forms. Thus in services managing benefits, a complication or a delay on a file often generates an aggressive attitude to an agent. Lately, some professional fields, particularly exposed to terrorist attack risks (workers in transport infrastructures, school and educational staff, police officers) have had to face destabilizing anxieties of the wage-earners or agents concerned. Similarly after the banking crash in 2008, the front row client service managers in banking institutions have witnessed many a hostile and occasionally threatening situation, in which they were directly summoned. Such frights ; tensions or fits of violence with different origins can potentially affect the personnel's health and jeopardize the proper running of the organisation.

The *internal violence in a firm* concerns the fits of violence within the work collective. Such facts now relate to moral harassment (i.e. a damaging of working conditions affecting the rights and dignity of the wage-earners, ruining one's mental health and jeopardizing one's professional future), now to sexual or alternative forms of aggression between colleagues, whatever their position in the hierarchy.

Yet, discriminating external or internal violence is often blurred, especially when the organisation fails to name and take early enough into account the reality and the impact of the fits of violence the workers are opened to. Violence then often shifts for instance from bearing an external origin to infecting the collective in turn. Workers may also turn against themselves such encountered violence they are subjected to in their professional investment. At times, the wrath developed through being exposed to violence appears tardively, postponed against alternative persons, that may perfectly be foreign to the creation of the violent process. Such postponed angry outbursts can for instance be pointed out in public transport as a - postponed - development to a set of provoking and intimidating attitudes suffered earlier by a bus driver.

The concern with health and security at work has recently shifted from the mere risk of physical injury to psychic.

Tensions about the subject

More than any subject of concern in the present field, acts of violence at work are often rejected by many a stakeholder. The firm may thus more or less easily admit the fits of violence defined as external (with an apparent exogenous origin) yet appear much more reluctant to the mention of an internal fit of violence within the firm or the collective. Yet such tension is much wider and also concerns its approach by work theoreticians and analysts.

Contrary to the perception by the members of the firm, the theoretical contributions which frontally tackle the reality and consequences of external violence are uncommon: they are usually only considered through the restrictive angle of organisational violence, thus supposing that the firm or service is, yet for a part, responsible through the pressures on work (managerial lacks, understaffing, varied pressures, position ergonomics...). Yet, taking external violence into account has proved a necessary step to start reflecting upon psychic damage within the frame of work. Taking psychosocial risks into account – the appropriate terms actually appeared in the early 2000s – particularly results from the risk of external violence with its psychosocial effects both on the individual and collective. This marked a decisive step in accounting for the evolution of the field of work.

The responsibility of the firm

A report from the Conseil Economique et Social (Economic and Social Council, Debout 1999) was a starting point in France to accept external violence as an “accident at work“ setting violence among the other professional risks, and opening access to compensations (allowances) or to embark upon specific responsibilities. Qualifying the sick note issued for suffering from external violence as an accident at work rather than a leave for illness generates the obligation of accounting for and preventing such hazards for the firm. Thus, not attaining the obligation of results in terms of physical and mental health (in the case of an accident at work or a Professional illness) can be sentenced as a non excusable fault from the employer.

That gradual consideration since the early 2000s locates what is lived by the wage-earner within the professional frame « what I suffer is bound to my professional activity, not to myself). Some years later, influenced by the success of Marie France Hirigoyen’s volume : *Le harcèlement moral, la violence perverse au quotidien (Moral Harassment, Everyday Perverse Violence, 1998)* a new report from the Conseil Economique et Social (Debout 2001), was the starting point for the official acknowledgement (January 2002) of the question of moral harassment as one insidious form of internal violence.

The consequent legislative evolution in France, and more largely in Europe, formerly opens the field of concern with the psychic consequences of being exposed to such violence at work. If beyond 50 full time equivalent work positions, the size of the organisation allows it, the Comité d'Hygiène, de Sécurité et des Conditions de Travail (Hygiene, Security and Working Conditions Committee) is in charge to follow those risks and collegially elaborate the curative or preventive responses within the firm. With smaller firms, the Staff Representatives take on that function relying upon the other resource actors, particularly the Prevention Doctor. In TPEs (très petites entreprises/very Small firms) the manager usually embraces the care for health and security.

For all that, evoking those problems and taking them into account or mastering them constitute a very hard stake for the sole firm. Resorting to external contributors, backed by the domestic resources, is most often essential to take action on violence, to break a taboo and make the path to go over the situation without degrading the interpersonal relations.

The evolution of concerns at work : the sense of History

The intense development of service professions, the drop of collectives, the varied tensions and lack of understanding situations born at work multiply the advent of situations that are lived as violence. A feeling of vulnerability, linked to precariousness (rising unemployment, loss of confidence in a full job society, chronic uncertainty of the evolution of work) strengthen the sense of insecurity.

Thus, SUMER (surveillance médicale des expositions aux risques professionnels/Medical Watch of the exposition to Professional risks) surveys have witnessed since 1994, while a heavy shift in employment has been operating, the dominance of aggressions and intimidating attitudes the wage-owners and agents facing public are confronted to.

Up to now, five SUMER surveys have been led by Dares (Direction of Research Facilitation, Studies and Statistics) and the General direction of Work and Medical Work inspection (France) in 1987, 1994, 2002-2003, 2009-2010 and 2015-2016. They allow to measure the evolution of the professional exposition of wage-earners. Yet, the research procedure may vary, making any immediate confrontation of the results difficult :

- 1- In 1994, 18,5% of wage earners facing public thought they were exposed to an aggression risk. 23,2% were in 2003
- 2- In 2003, some 16% of wage earners in private firms had fallen victims to an aggression from the public in the last 12 months. 13% were in 2010.
- 3- Meanwhile, 16% of wage earners in private firms thought in 2003 they were facing at least one hostile attitude. 21% were in 2010.
- 4- The wage earners or agents in the FPH (fonction publique hospitalière/Hospital Public Service) or in the FPT (fonction publique territoriale/Territorial Public Service) and in the tertiary sector remain most concerned : in 2010, some 30% of FPH agents had fallen victims to one verbal aggression in the last 12 months at least.

However, despite the importance and intensity of that problem, little interest in the matter is observed in the appropriate literature measuring the effects of external violence at work on one's confidence into the institution or the public or customer base perception by the wage earners receiving or mixing with them.

Exposition to violence is yet far from insignificant and often favours rejection or conflation, even racism within the very organisation : it strongly bears on the working atmosphere in deteriorated circumstances and tends to make inaudible any logical or rational perspective towards an issue to

the crisis. Understanding the ground for such a lack of interest in external violence, even a denial too, of work-analysts belonging to various subject-fields leads us to account for the society issues around stances on violence at work and its supposed origins.

Embracing the whole of the situations of violence at work summons renouncing to a simplifying reading : all violence affecting the wage earners or agents at work is not due to the organisations. Accepting that observation implies a field of reflexion should be opened, and questions the connexion the organisation has with its surrounding, for instance. Accepting that observation leads to account for data and logics external to the firm or service.

More than other theoretical currents, clinical sociology has been developing a care centered on the analysis of the links between psychism and the social since it began. It allows to catch the sociopsychic processes in their full complexity at the closest with what is felt. In front of violence at work, it thus opens original dynamic intervention perspectives, with mediation logics that allow to take suffering individuals in the context of their work into consideration and to sketch out, with them, the possible extrication through a co-construction process. However, the fact that workers are confronted to violence generates duties for the employer and executive staff. The temptation to act through mediation only, can be lived by victims as a further violence, a kind of denial of the problem to be solved. The clinical sociologist must be specifically watchful to it.

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Correlative themes :

Work clinic, Work collectives, Conflit, Intervention, Social link and social relations, Recognition, Psychosocial risks, Health and Work, Mental health and Society, Clinical sociology of activity, Clinical sociology of Work, Violence, Violence and organisation.