WORK INSTABILITY PERCEPTION IN A SAMPLE OF PSYCHOLOGISTS (1)

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Abstract

Considering work instability as a contextual stressor we designed a specific instrument to assess how it is perceived by a group of psychologists: The Perceived Uneasiness in Work Instability – Psychologists Inventory (in Spanish, IMPIL-PS).

The data were collected from a 44-subject sample, both male and female, residents of the City of Buenos Aires and Greater Buenos Aires.

We present data referring to sample characteristics and the areas with the greatest impact of the stressor are indicated.

Recent research on work instability as a contextual stressor point out its influence on subjects´ performance and behaviour.

Key words: psychological assessment; stressor; work instability; psychologists.

Introduction

Stress at workplace

Generally when a worker faces a great tension, just like any other professional, he looks for ways that release him from it. These ways are not always beneficial for his health. Tobacco, alcohol, bulimia, asthenia, hyperactivity, are escape valves that often lead to headaches, flu, coronary and psychiatric problems.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1993 made a report named *Work in the world* where *stress* is defined as the general mechanism with which the organism adapts itself to all the changes, influences, demands and tensions it may be exposed to.

The motivation to perform a task will always be accompanied by a dose of –in a certain way-positive stress. It implies a process human beings possess to adequate to their environment, and it is not negative itself. This stress becomes more or less harmful depending on the chances to adapt to new circumstances or the ability to face conflict and work it out. When the demands exceed the capacities an individual has, then the degree of stress increases. Continued stressing and extreme pressure might be very dangerous. At the highest levels of tension we find the so named burn-out syndrome

(Maslach, Jackson, Litter, 1996) in which the degree of pressure and blocking become intolerable.

The ILO points out that harmful stress does not constitute an isolated phenomenon but it has become a meaningful occupational risk for professionals. Different studies from different countries seem to confirm this notion. In the UEA, 27% of the professors have suffered from chronic health problems as a consequence of their profession and nearly 40% take medicines to deal with the symptoms of the diseases caused by their jobs.

In Sweden recent studies come to the conclusion that 25% of educators are exposed to excessive psychological tension to a degree that may be considered of high risk. In the United Kingdom 20% of teachers suffer from anxiety, depression or stress problems. And in Hungary it has been proved that certain pathologies, such as laryngitis, pharyngitis, diseases of the circulatory system, neurosis, etc., are more frequent among educators than among general population.

The ILO has launched a series of measures to eliminate or compensate the stress suffered from the teachers. Among them we can find: promoting job stability, avoiding forced moves, reducing the number of students per classroom, building middle-sized facilities, and distributing spaces rationally.

The studies about labour health currently add the phenomenon of mobbing. This shows that the absence of norms, functions, and procedures at the workplace are another source of stress and they create the conditions for this phenomenon to occur.

The social and economical crisis we are going through in our country has enormously affected the job market in general and, therefore, the professions as well.The perception of work instability and its consequences for the people have begun to be felt. The work instability has become a macro-contextual stressor that reaches both personal and professional fields.

Gavilan (2001/2002) studies the relationship between mental health and job instability. The methodology used involved interviews to key informers –mostly psychologists and psychiatrists-from mental health services at regional hospitals. They found two basic problems these professionals must deal with: Unemployment and work instability.

The interviewed professionals mentioned that the frequency of cardiorespiratory and dermatological diseases has increased. Also, individualism has increased. These problems are extensive to families. The age of the reference population goes from 30- to 60 year-olds.

The author presents a classification based on 4 categories, all of them related to regional unemployment with different degrees of implication and levels of psychosocial risk:

1-The unemployed with no previous studies;

2-The unemployed from public enterprises;

3-The unemployed with previous studies;

4-The unstable at work –people who are employed but are afraid to loose their jobs due to the socio-economical situation and the high level of unemployment.

In the above mentioned study the author comes to the conclusion that work instability acts as a chronic stressor whose negative effects are deeper as time of exposure to instability increases (p. 122).

In a study addressing the burnout syndrome Schutte, Toppinen, Kalimo, Schaufeli (2000) found differences among nations and working groups. These findings are consistent with others regarding the same subject.

The psychologists –as working professionals-cannot avoid being exposed to this current phenomenon at their workplaces. They find themselves involved as actors but must act as professionals when it comes to deal with the effects of this phenomenon.

Historical contextualisation of the Career of Psychology and the psychologists in our professional background.

As an introduction we will do a brief historical tour to the Career of Psychology and point out some pertinent remarks. After that, we will observe how this situation of job instability affects some of the people that practice this profession.

Lucia Rossi (2001) quotes in a chapter of her book the file with the statement of Creation of the Career of Psychology, taken from the Office of the Chancellor of the University of Buenos Aires:

"Honorable Board: Your Commission of Teachings and Second Teachings has examined the evidence by which the Faculty of Philosophy validates the resolution taken by the Dean and by which the creation of the Career of Psychology is set. This Commission advises its approval by the following resolution:

The Honourable Board of the University of Buenos Aires resolves:

Article 1: To create the Career of Psychology which will be ruled by existing laws;

Article 2: The Faculty of Philosophy will provide the following certificates and diplomas:

      a) Doctor in Psychology

      b) Graduate in Psychology (mentioning the field of specialisation)

      c) Professor of general and special secondary teachings in Psychology.

In another chapter of the same book Rossi states that the creation of the Career of Psychology had a complex and conflictive origin. In its foundation diverse academic traditions converge: The long history of medical and philosophical influences are clearly seen in the subjects of General Psychology I and II, from the beginnings of the previous century. To these traditions the creation of certain institutions must be added, for instance, the Institute of Psychology, created in 1930 and connected to the

Psychological Society. Also, the publication of the *Anales del Instituto de Psychology* in three volumes. The deep academic reforms –framed within the drastic political changes- mark changes in the faculty and academic criteria. To better understand the role and the field of practice of the psychologists it is necessary to take into account the historical process from which this identity was formed (p. 245)

Psychology is a relatively new science in the history of university professions in our country. In 1956 the career is created in Rosario and the following year in Buenos Aires.

When we look into the files referring the career creation, all of the researchers agree that –at that moment- the subjects were equally distributed among liberal philosophers and psychiatrists with biological and psychoanalytic background. In time the last group replaced philosophers and the career was divided into introductory subjects for the biologists and those with instrumental and professional practice contents for the psychoanalysts.

From the beginning the professional field was an important concern: almost all of the professors were physicians and psychotherapy was their general field of practice. Nevertheless, the first psychologists had the need to differentiate themselves. The clinical field was the most developed, the rest of the areas were inexistent and needed to be created.

At this point the contradiction in the professional practice identified with psychoanalyst teachers and the need to create a distinctive professional identity begun.

Another mistake that arises at that time is the confusion between the professional role and the professional itself. This lead to increase the notion of an almighty role.

There was still another paradox in that context: In Argentina, psychotherapy was carried out by physicians and psychologists had no defined business in this. In 1966 the Law 17.132 restrains the practice of the psychologist to a medicine auxiliar in the clinical field. This situation lasted until 1984 when the Law that ruled the professional practice of psychologists (Law 23.277) was passed on September 27th.

Regarding today's professional conditions, in the first chapter of the book *Globalized Psychotherapy***,** Eduardo Nicemboin (2002) informs us that, according to Alonso and Molina (1997, 1998), in our country there are around 35,000 psychologists, near 37,000 graduates and 39,000 psychology students –with 80% of average desertion among them. The first author (quoted by Nicemboin) estimates that 28,000 psychologists are psychotherapists and 3,500 physicians practice psychotherapy from a total of 97,000. From the IPA (International Psychoanalyses Association) dependent organizations, there are 2,500 psychoanalysts already included in the previous numbers. Ninety percent of the psychologists are female and, among those with clinical

practice, 80% are women. In the mental health services of Buenos Aires there are 700 psychologists and 547 psychiatrists that receive a salary, and 750 psychologists that work with no payment at all. Argentina and Uruguay have the largest percentage of psychologist-psychotherapists per inhabitant. In Argentina, out of a total of 36,050,042 inhabitants and 26 universities, there are 1,025 inhabitants per psychologist. In other words, 98 psychologists every 100,000 inhabitants. In the continent and Spain there are around 335,000 psychologists. Robiner points out in a study at the beginnings of this decade that in Europe there are among 25 and 50 psychologists every 100,000 inhabitants but only in Buenos Aires there are 500. Worldly, these numbers are very surprising.

Raúl Courel and Ana María Talak (2001) describe the academic and professional background of the Argentinean psychologists and they say that the competences and professional insertion of a professional are commonly linked to the university degree and the predominance of counselling, assessment and diagnoses, and psychological rehabilitation and treatment. In the same way they point out that the importance granted to clinical psychology and psychoanalyses is congruent with the image of the psychologist as a health professional, less devoted to other professional tasks. On the other hand, the ethics related fields are generally linked to a subject related to an ethic goal only (p. 42).

With this historical background characterised by the search of a professional identity through different ways and by a large matriculation, we will analyze the psychosocial stressor -work instability, in our case- in a sample of professional psychologists.

Problem characterisation

We consider work instability as a stressor at workplace (Leibovich de Figueroa; Schufer; 2002-a). Nevertheless, how can we characterise this psychosocial stressor in our own profession?

It is an ethical commitment for the psychologists to look into their own profession in the first place in order to take actions in other contexts. Work instability constitutes a new social claim in which psychologists are involved in the incertitude and due to the transformations suffered in the universe of work. What is our own perception of this macro-contextual phenomenon?

Among the relevant questions we should consider the following:

- Is work instability perceived in the psychological profession?
- What impact does this stressor produce in a sample of psychologists?
- How frequently is it perceived?
- What relations can be drawn between the perception of this stressor and

general satisfaction?

The Association of Psychologists of Buenos Aires and the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Buenos Aires are interested in the characteristics work instability has in the profession.

As a part of the UBACYT (University of Buenos Aires, Science and Technology) P50 Grant (*Psychological stressors at work, uncertainty and loss of work*) an agreement has been reached between the Association of Psychologists and the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Buenos Aires. It enabled the study of work instability impact in a sample of psychologists.

The conclusions of the present study will help tailor future actions to reverse the negative effects the current crisis has on the professional collective.

Conceptual definitions

Psychosocial stressor

In the context of professional stress, psychosocial stressors have their origin in a social process, as part of a social structure. They affect the organism through the perception and experience and –in some circumstances and certain groups- they may be suspected to be the cause of diseases (Levi, 2000).

Work instability perception

The current fast transformations in the context of work lead to its perception as an unstable work situation. The most common feelings are: uncertainty, insecurity, fear, etc. And their expression are the signs and symptoms of uneasiness.

Uneasiness

The signs of specific disturbances at work context are considered uneasiness. The psychological and social adverse conditions which are permanent at the workplace affect the worker.

In the context of work instability certain mechanisms are activated in order to facilitate the psychological exhaustion, expressed in unspecific symptoms.

To observe and assess the characteristics of work instability in our own field becomes an ethical need because of the social importance of this phenomenon.

Method

The present is an exploratory - descriptive study on a sample of working psychologists.

Instruments

1. Perceived Uneasiness in Work Instability – Psychologists Inventory (in Spanish, IMPIL-PS). It has been specially designed for the present research (Leibovich de Figueroa; Schufer, 2002 b, c). It is considered to be an instrument of ecological assessment due to its design. It is based on the inherent background characteristics of the work context that is being assessed and its items are elaborated from interviews with the very same actors of the target work field.

The psychometric analyses of the instrument has shown the following results (Table 1) that indicate a good item homogeneity in each one of the sub-scales. Regarding its contextual validity, the scores per sub-scale enable the differentiation of specific working groups (Leibovich de Figueroa; Schufer, 2003).

Table 1: Alpha coefficients for the eight IMPIL sub-scales

Sub-scale	Alpha Coefficient
Interpersonal Problems	0.88
Personal Competence	0.90
Health Concerns	0.60
Environmental Disturbances	0.92
Economical Concerns	0.91
Concerns about the future	0.86
Emotional Disturbances	0.96
Cognitive Disturbances	0.94

The IMPIL-PS is inscribed in the assessment of work instability as an everyday stressor. This stressor has a high chance of occurrence due to current socio-economic conditions and therefore it has a greater incidence in the active population.

The IMPIL shares with other instruments of everyday events the fact that it measures the number and relative impact of a regular uneasy event.

It is considered to be an everyday uneasiness assessment test. That is why the last 6 months are asked to be considered, with the following answer options: it occurs but it does not cause you uneasiness, it causes you little uneasiness, it causes you a lot of uneasiness, it causes you excessive uneasiness, it causes you panic – fear.

Uneasiness, as it is defined and assessed by this instrument, is the subjective perception of the accumulative impact of a relatively minor event but daily disturbing or annoying.

Both impact and occurrence are important dimensions in the experience of subjective uneasiness. Disturbing everyday events can vary from high to low frequency of occurrence and from low to high impact value.

Stressing –disturbing- events can be classified into relative categories based on the type of origin context of the stressor. The definition of these categories has led to sub-scales for their assessment. Since and individual is more exposed to certain situations and not other ones, this distinction will allow us know which of them are more disturbing than others.

Among the items that form part of the questionnaire the following contexts are represented, according to the stressor area of origin, namely:

1. Interpersonal problems (PI) (10 items) It assesses the impact of interpersonal or inter-individual related events that produce uneasiness.

      Examples: Rules at work are being changed

      To have to develop informal relationships to stay in my position

2. Personal competence (CP) (21 items) It assesses the impact of those events that come from other's judgement on personal performance.

      Examples: To feel I am efficient and that I cannot prove it

      To feel myself underrated as a worker

3. Health concerns (PS) (6 items) It assesses the impact of work-related psycho-physical symptoms.

      Examples: I feel I smoke more because of work concerns

      I feel tired because of overwork

4. Environmental disturbances (MMA) (11 items) It assesses the impact of the organization's socio-cultural environmental
related events.

      Examples: I constantly think the company / institution will close.

      Constant gossip and then nothing happens

5. Economical concerns (PE) (12 items) It assesses the impact of economical incomes – expenses work related.

      Example: I have to cut down my expenses.

      I will have to ask for a loan

6- Concerns about the future (PF) (5 items) It assesses the impact of near and far future-related thoughts linked to
work.

Examples: I cannot sleep at night thinking about the future.

I do not know what is going to happen tomorrow.

7 – Emotional disturbances (EE) (21 items) It assesses the impact of current work- and work instability-related feelings.

Examples: I cannot do anything to feel safe at work

I feel my emotional insecurity increases

8. Cognitive disturbances (EC) (15 items) It assesses the impact of current work-and work instability-related thoughts.

Examples: I constantly think I am going to loose my job

I try not to think of the situation but I cannot achieve that

Self-perception of current general work instability was assessed by the following question: How do you perceive current work instability? Answer options were the same as the ones provided by the IMPIL-PS.

Event scores

They provide an objective measure of frequency of occurrence of the uneasiness-producing events and they indirectly reflect the degree to which a subject is committed to his-her environment.

Impact score

This score represents the best indicator of uneasy personal experiences.

Impact-event relationship

High scores here might indicate that an individual is vulnerable to the perception of uneasiness. It may also mean a high-sensitivity temporary state due to excessive environmental demands and linked to a disturbing event. Low scores in impact combined with high scores in event suggest good coping skills or a tendency to minimize or deny the impact of stressing experiences.

2. Socio-demographic and general opinion questionnaire

The aim of this instrument is to collect general information (gender, age, seniorship, specialty, etc-).

3. Satisfaction questionnaire

This questionnaire is based on the Olson and Barnes's (1982) Life Quality Scale. In our questionnaire, satisfaction is considered a subject's answer in relation to affective states in different areas (family, friends, neighbourhood, work, etc.) (Aranda Coria *et al.*, 2003).

Sample

Who are our interviewees?

The intentional sample of Psychologists –collected among the members of the Association of Psychologists of Buenos Aires and that is why it cannot be generalised to the universe- consisted on 44 professionals, mostly women (77.3%), married women (54.5%), with children (72.7%), among 24 and 67 years-old (mean age= 47 years).

Most of the subjects (70.5%) finished their studies at the University of Buenos Aires. It took them 5-6 years to finish their graduate studies and –although they do not have another university degree-they attended post-graduate courses (90.9%).

Also, most of them (93.2%) work as clinicians and nearly half of them have a teaching position (from which, almost half of them receive a salary).The professional practice in other fields (such as community, education, forensic, work, etc.) constitutes a minority in the sample.

Seventy-five percent of the subjects work from 6 to 8 hours a day and place themselves in the "satisfied" category when asked whether they are satisfied with their income. Thirty-five percent include themselves in "dissatisfied".

Conversely, when asked about their degree of work satisfaction, more than 50% answered they were satisfied and had not thought of changing their jobs during the last year.

An interesting fact is that half of these professionals consider that their job is unstable.

Results

Uneasiness mean

In general terms, the results obtained in the Self-perception scale of their own "work instability" show that -and in spite of the fact that half of the subjects think their job is unstable- seven out of ten subjects say this situation does not cause them uneasiness. And even though none of them say they feel fear, 27% claims to feel much or excessive uneasiness (Table 2).

Table 2: In general terms, how do you feel "current work instability" regarding your job?

	%
* it occurs but it does not cause you uneasiness	70.5
* it causes you little uneasiness	2.3
* it causes you a lot of uneasiness	15.9
* it causes you excessive uneasiness	11.4
* it causes you panic - fear	0.0
Total	100.0

A detailed analyses of impact-event by sub-scale shows their order (Table 3). Then, the economical concerns are placed at the top position of the list, followed by interpersonal problems, environmental, emotional and cognitive disturbances, that share the same level of uneasiness. With a little lower scores, personal competence, health concerns and concerns about the future are the ones that follow in the list.

Table 3: Impact-event score statistics in the IMPIL-PS sub-scales in the sample of psychologists

Sub-scales	Impact/Event		
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Median
Economical concerns	2.35	1.10	2.60
Interpersonal problems	2.25	.82	2.40
Environmental disturbances	2.24	1.09	2.43
Emotional disturbances	2.19	1.01	2.36
Cognitive disturbances	2.11	1.29	2.33
Personal competence	1.70	.76	1.64
Health concerns	1.68	1.31	2.00
Concerns about the future	1.52	1.38	2.00

Which are the events that produce more uneasiness?

The changing of rules at workplace and the lack of respect for people's rights, among interpersonal problems, are those that affect the most the interviewed subjects.

On the other hand, how they feel about the personal competence in general seems to produce the subjects little uneasiness –for instance, to do other things or change their jobs by their own decision. Nevertheless, the fear of not finding a new job affects eight out of ten subjects.

The fear of being sick because of the situation and the feeling that physical uneasiness is due to work-related thoughts appeared frequently among health concerns.

The lack of chances to find a new job, not knowing until when their jobs will continue to be stable, and the lack of job offers cause uneasiness among environmental factors.

Regarding economical concerns, not knowing whether their salary will be enough, not being able to save money, and knowing it could be difficult to find another job seem to affect them.

Among the concerns about the future are: not knowing what is going to happen with their job next month, and feeling future instability.

Finally, among cognitive concerns, suffering a lot of changes of different kinds, and the general situation of not knowing where they are standing, are events that produce uneasiness in a high proportion of these professionals.

Personal satisfaction and the uneasiness produced by work instability

If we take into account that satisfaction might vary among: 1) Very unsatisfied, and 5) Very satisfied, in general terms and in average, the interviewed psychologists are satisfied in many aspects of their lives, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: The measure of personal satisfaction

What is your degree of satisfaction regarding...	Mean	Std. Dev.
• your children	4.72	0.58
• your family	4.34	0.75
• the level of education you have reached	4.21	0.77
• your friends	4.16	0.68
• the space you have got at home	4.05	0.96
• the space your family has at home	3.95	0.97
• your partner	3.95	1.10
• other members of your family´s health	3.81	0.91
• the neighbourhood you live in	3.77	0.80
• your ability to manage financial difficulties	3.64	0.78
• your health	3.61	0.92
• the responsibilities assumed at hombe by other members of the family	3.58	0.87
• the amount fo money you owe	3.58	1.26
• the responsibilities you assume at home	3.56	0.78
• the recreational facilities in your neighbourhood (outdoor places, malls, etc.)	3.45	0.93
• the amount of money you can devote to your family	3.38	0.94
• the amount of spare time	3.20	1.07

• the amount of time you can devote to yourself	3.20	1.05
• the health services you count on	3.02	1.16
• how clean the city you live in is	2.05	0.81
• how safe is the city you live in	1.74	0.79
Satisfaction Scale (Total)	70.37	10.65

A detailed analyses of the resulting order shows that the most frequent satisfactions have to do with their close ones (children, family, friends, partner) as well as the fact of having graduated from university. They are also satisfied with the comforts they have and the neighbourhood they live in, but not with its cleanliness and safety.

It is important to remark that the spare time they have –to themselves or their families- reaches values close to dissatisfaction.

The satisfaction measure was correlated with impact, event and impact event scores. We found a negative and significant relationship between satisfaction and all the scores for the sub-scales, except for impact-event in cognitive disturbances.

Conclusions

The stressor work instability is perceived in the profession of psychology, which is practiced mostly in the clinical field.

Being exposed to this macro-contextual situation of instability places the economical concerns in the first place.

Evidently, the uneasiness brings along problems among people and institutions.That is why interpersonal and environmental problems become the most important ones.

Then, the emotional and cognitive disturbances come next in the list:

Considering the current conditions it is impossible not to have feelings and thoughts regarding their jobs.

In a lower step we find personal competence, health concerns and concerns about the future. We might think that these professionals are certain about their work identity and that is why they are not concerned about their future. This professional identity plays a role as a moderating resource to cope with work instability.

The last place that health concerns have turn on a red light because it might be due to the lack of consciousness about this kind of problems.

Another evidence that further supports the previous analyses are the correlations found between satisfaction and uneasiness. It seems to be evident that satisfaction in the studied sample is inversely associated with job uneasiness –and it is expressed by seven out of eight considered sub-scales.

Regarding the questions posed at the beginning of this research, we can say that work

instability is perceived at psychologist's workplace. Furthermore, this stressor impacts in different areas and its frequency of occurrence varies according to the perceived impact.

It is important to stress how useful the IMPIL-PS has been since it enabled us detect the particular characteristics in a sample of psychologists.

We want to highlight once more the need to design eco-psychological instruments of assessment that express the characteristics of specific contexts (Leibovich de Figueroa; Schufer, 2002-a).

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