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Work stress and social trauma in bank employees during the political, economical and social Argentinean crisis of 2001-2002
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I. Aims

We intend to research the immediate effects of the Argentinean crisis of 2001-2002 ("corralito") on a group of bank employees.

II. Sample

From the beginning of Dec. 2001 until Aug. 2002 Argentina's population suffered a strong political, economic and social crisis: the peso (local currency) was devaluated 300%, three successive leaders occupied the presidency of the Nation and the banks (where a great number of citizens deposited their money in dollars) were inhibited by the government from returning the money to their owners ("corralito"). Legal pressures from the clients were combined with daily threats, insults and aggressions against the bank employees. They received changing and contradictory instructions from national and institutional authorities and consequently their responses were often conflicting, inconsistent. Among the employees some psychosomatic diseases, insomnia and the increasing drug consumption of for anxiety related disorders and other psychotropics were reported.

13 employees (having different institutional status), belonging to two branches of the same bank.

III. Tools

Tool for collecting the material

A questionnaire, dated Apr. 2002

| | Until December, 3, 2001 | From December, 3, 2001 to end of March, 2002 | From end of March onwards |
|--|-------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| What expectation and need the clients had and have? | | | |
| What expectations and needs have you had and have concerning the Bank and your work? | | | |
| What expectations and needs does the Bank have regarding you (employee)? | | | |

Each employee produced 9 short narrations, and the group gave 117 of them.

IV. Analysis

IV. a. Analyzing erotogenicities

Despite the variety of stories, it is possible to detect in practically all of them the same common issues and scenes.

| | |
|-----|--|
| IL | The employees see the group as having lost its previous economic equilibrium, and suffering an oscillation between an unbearable tension and a lasting asthenia. Because of contradictory instructions from inner authorities they feel their work stability threatened. |
| O2 | The employees consider the bank as a family, where love and reciprocal identification link each person to the other. In this context, the crisis is seen as losing a haven and remaining in a situation of abandonment. They react stressing their sacrificial tendencies, delaying their project of progress. But then they see that in the future their sacrificial efforts will be unuseful. |
| A2 | The employees consider that the social contract was disregarded and the institution lost its prestige and distinctive features. They are unable to organize their work, suffer from an absence of information and norms regarding the decision-making process and from the absence of criteria regarding assessment of own or others' merits and limits between correct or corrupt actions. They see that the bank increases its demands of efficacy. The future is pictured as atomless, hazy, bewildering. |
| UPH | The employees consider that the usual practices leading to personal and professional progress were severed. Competition and a feeling of impotence are hypertrophied. The future is seen as a pessimistic routine characterized by merely going through daily motions. Also when they gain awareness that in the future things can continue as they are, their sacrificial position becomes unfit for dealing with the present conflicts. . |

Comments

It's possible to see that the four visions of the past imply the prevalence of a stable situation. Three of the four narrations (IL, A2, UPH) show that pleasant situations of the past change to unpleasant conditions at the present and that is expected to continue in the future. But for one of the languages (O2) the present and the future differ from the rest. In this case, the employees react to the passive situation and change it to an active one. The employees place themselves in a sacrificial position, revealing their effort for recovering their previous haven. When considering the present, sacrificial efforts succeed; but regarding the future those efforts fail.

| Eroticism | Past | Present | Future |
|-----------|------|---------|--------|
| IL | E | D | D |
| O2 | E | E | D |
| A2 | E | D | D |
| UPH | E | D | D |

IV. b Analyzing defenses

Defenses, even failed, are considered according to the critical situation

| Erotogenicities | Defenses | State | Function |
|-----------------|------------------------------|--|---------------|
| IL | In accordance with the goals | Successful / Failed | Complementary |
| O2 | Functional disavowal | Successful (Past and present) and Successful / Failed (Future) | Main |
| A2 | In accordance with the goals | Successful / Failed | Complementary |
| UPH | In accordance with the goals | Successful / Failed | Complementary |

V. Discussion

Despite the unpleasant perspective (especially for IL, A2 and UPH and the corresponding failed defense), the prevalence of O2 and a successful mechanism (supported by a sacrificial attitude) allows the employees to maintain a certain psychic and psychosocial equilibrium, at least regarding the past and present situations. It is possible to infer that social contracts (A2) and routine situations (UPH) previously had great relevance, inducing each one to see the bank as a great family (O2) where an equilibrium of tensions (IL) prevailed. But during the "corralito" social contracts and routines are disregarded and a permanent state of tension and exhaustion appears. To adopt a sacrificial attitude means to try to recover the lost haven corresponding to the equation bank=family where love is the main ideal. Defenses, even failed, correspond to the normal constellation and are a response to uncomfortable context. This fact implies that a positive change in the context also can change the state of the defenses, from failed to successful. Nevertheless, regarding the future, O2 is connected with

VI. Conclusions

1. Dealing successfully with work stress caused by social, economical and political crisis requires employing certain defenses (functional disavowal) combined with sacrificial projects (O2). This attitude allows the employees to bear the collapse of previous balanced states in order to deal with various other projects and orientations. Economic downturns (IL), lack of a hierarchical order that previously allowed to maintain inner organization (A2) and disorientation and postponement of ambitious projects (UPH), can be tolerated when sacrificial orientations is combined with successful functional defenses. When that defensive system fails, somatic alterations emerge replacing the previous euphoric O2 position.

2. Each libidinal drive appears transformed into a specific ideal, life-project, wish, etc., and the ensemble of drives can have different vicissitudes (defenses) with the prevalence of one over the others.

failed functional disavowal. Joining the Past-Present perspective with the Future one, the disavowal combined with O2 has two orientations: 1) allowing to maintain employee's psychosocial equilibrium, 2) anticipating the collapse of the precarious existent equilibrium. That mix between Past-Present/Future perspectives leads to conclude that, seen as a whole, the state of disavowal is successful-failed. That state prevails when the future appears as the main employee's perspective.

Concerning the increasing psychosomatic diseases, insomnia, etc., reported during this period, we can infer that they depend on the failure of mechanisms connected with O2 (from successful to successful/failed disavowal), leading to the global breakdown of the defensive system. Usually defenses connected with O2 are a regressive response regarding A1 conflicts and feelings of being an object of abuse and injustice. If defenses connected with O2 succeed, the Ego can bear affects corresponding to A1; if not, those affects invade the Ego lacking other resources for dealing with them, and the body is transformed in the space where inner and outer violence is displayed.