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**INTRODUCING THE FRENCH PSYCHODYNAMICS OF WORK PERSPECTIVE  
TO CRITICAL MANAGEMENT EDUCATION: WHY DO THE WORK TASK AND  
THE ORGANIZATION OF WORK MATTER?**

**Abstract**

In this essay, we call on critical management education to focus on the organization of work and the nature of work tasks. While critical action learning and both reflexive and psychodynamic approaches to management education situate learning in actual work experiences, they do not explicitly encourage reflection on work tasks and the organization of work. Our aim is to draw on the French psychodynamics of work perspective to argue that reflection on concrete experiences and processes of work is important because work has significant implications for workers' health and for society. We also use two vignettes to discuss the implications of French psychodynamics of work for the practice of critical management education.

## **Introduction**

In contemporary workplaces, we witness the widespread poor treatment of workers, increased precariousness of work, high levels of stress, and work intensification. The way in which organizations are managed and how work tasks are structured both have profound implications for workers' health and life spans (Pfeffer, 2010). While organizations today are more attuned to tackling suffering (Allard-Poesi & Hollet-Haudebert, 2017), “suffering bodies at work” (Courpasson, 2016: 1095) remains a significant social issue as evidenced by the prevalence of feelings of powerlessness in organizations (Felstead, Gallie & Green, 2015) and workplace suicides (Clegg, Cunha & Rego, 2016; Waters, Karanikolos & McKee, 2016). Insofar as suffering is related to oppression, social justice, and democracy, it should be of key concern for critical management education (CME).

The topic of poor health or suffering as a result of work can potentially be addressed by critical action learning and reflexive and psychodynamic approaches to management education because these perspectives encourage reflection on emotions, power and dominant ideologies by situating learning in actual work experiences (Cunliffe, 2004; Mowles, 2017; Reynolds & Vince, 2004; Rigg & Trehan, 2004; Trehan & Rigg, 2015; Vince, 2010, 2011; Vince, Abbey & Langenhan, 2018). However, although these perspectives focus on the issues that workers face—including obstacles that limit practice and learning—they do not explicitly aim to reflect on work tasks or the organization of work and how these may lead to suffering or health of workers.

Reflecting on emotions, power, and dominant ideologies in organizations and in the process of learning is fundamental, but it should be complemented with an analysis of concrete work tasks; indeed, such analysis was a crucial component of action learning as it

was originally developed (Revans, 1983). As scholars have recently implied, however, there is a general trend in organization theory to focus more on abstract phenomena and less on how work is organized and conducted (du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2016; Lopdrup-Hjorth, 2015; Vikkelsø, 2015). In this essay, therefore, we call on CME to give greater consideration to the concrete organization of work and the nature of work tasks. First, we aim to explain why these issues should be of interest to CME, and second, we discuss their implications for the practice of CME.

To achieve these aims, we draw on the French psychodynamic of work approach (FPW) (Dejours, 2009a; 2009b; 2015a; Dejours & Deranty, 2010). This framework provides a convincing argument for focusing on the nature of work tasks and the organization of work in management education: from the FPW perspective, the work activity—the concrete and embodied experience of working—has a significant impact on workers’ health and on society. As with Frankfurt School theorists (e.g. Honneth, 2009), health from this perspective is seen as the capacity for the development of autonomous subjectivity and a sense of self-worth (Dejours, 2015b). In this context, therefore, health does not mean the absence of illness but rather the constant struggle to maintain a stable conception of the self, which can be derived from being able to do proper and good-quality work and from recognizing oneself in the product of one’s work as well as having one’s work recognized by peers (Dejours, 2015b). The extent to which workers are able to develop this kind of health depends on the organization of work and, crucially, on whether the worker is integrated into a work collective, an important source of social bonding. FPW clearly explains the working conditions required for workers’ health and, as such, it is not a “performative instrumental” approach (Tweedie, Wild, Rhodes & Martinov-Bennie, 2019). The consideration of the work task and the organization of work is thus important not in terms of making workers more productive in the interest of business, but to allow them to experience their “power of acting”

*(potentia agendi)* (Spinoza, 2010), which lies in the interest of themselves and society. Only workers and work collectives can therefore determine what is healthy depending on the extent to which they are able to exercise their autonomy at work.

We begin by outlining some of the CME literature on critical action learning, reflexivity, and emotional dynamics in workplace learning. While much of this literature situates learning within specific work contexts, we argue that the concrete activity of the work itself and its organization is largely overlooked. We then introduce the FPW approach, explaining why the organization of work and work tasks should be the focus of management education. Subsequently, two vignettes demonstrating the use of FPW in teaching are presented. Finally, we discuss some implications of FPW for the practice of CME.

### **Critical Action Learning, Reflexivity, and Emotions**

Critical action learning (Reynolds & Vince, 2004; Trehan & Rigg, 2015; Vince, 2004, 2008; Vince et al., 2018) questions both the content and process of traditional management education. Action learning, as it was developed originally by Revans (1983), involves group reflection as a way to find solutions to shared work problems and to change organizational practices. This reflection relates primarily to problem-solving and the analysis of day-to-day tasks (Reynolds, 1998). As such, this learning is directly related to and situated in everyday work experiences. In critical action learning, on the other hand, the process of critical reflection examines the sociocultural and political assumptions embedded in management practice (Reynolds, 1998; Vince et al., 2018). Critical action learning thus explicitly engages with the way in which power relations and emotions—both in action learning groups and in individuals' working lives—support or inhibit learning and actions (Vince et al., 2018). In contrast to action learning, the emphasis is on collective, rather than individual, reflection (Reynolds & Vince, 2004). However, practical or critical reflexivity incorporates a social

constructionist and dialogical view and involves an in-depth questioning of anything that is taken for granted (Pässilä, Oikarinen & Harmaakorpi, 2015); it is concerned with unraveling “unspoken assumptions that influence (unconsciously or otherwise) our actions and interactions” (Cunliffe, 2004: 414). This analysis is thus centered on ideologies, ways of seeing the world, and tacit assumptions that shape our automatic, reflex actions and how we interact with others. Ultimately, paying attention to actions that are habitual or taken for granted can help to develop ways of relating to others that are both socially responsible and more compatible with democratic principles (Cunliffe, 2004; see also Cunliffe & Easterby-Smith, 2004). Rather than simply problem-solving, therefore, reflexivity involves exploring “our own reflex actions” and implicit assumptions that drive behavior (Cunliffe, 2004: 421).

In this way, critical action learning challenges both the content and process of mainstream management education by adopting politicized ideas and teaching methods that are nonauthoritative, participatory, and student-centered. However, while these methods challenge conventional approaches by situating learning directly in managers’ working lives, they do not explicitly prioritize a detailed analysis of work, its essence, and the way it is organized.

Indeed, critical reflection and reflexivity that focus on relational, emotional, and political issues often imply a move away from the organization of work and work tasks. For instance, Reynolds and Vince (2004: 445) present the case of a team of human resource managers reviewing the process of bidding for contracts. Failed bid contracts were associated with difficult emotions, blame and disappointment. The importance of exploring “why the bid failed, the processes and approach they had taken to the bid, and how they might improve them in the future” is mentioned, but the team’s focus was on analyzing the “group processes and behaviour” and the “politics that were having an impact on the team from both outside and within” (Reynolds & Vince, 2004: 445). Reflection was thus not centered on the bidding

process itself; what was the nature of the bidding task? How is it organized and conducted? Why does the task give rise to certain emotions, such as disappointment? In other words, the interest lies in the group dynamics and “the social and cultural processes that are being constructed by the bid-review teams” (Reynolds & Vince, 2004: 445). Of course, it is important to consider socio-cultural and group processes especially because they seem to direct attention away from the task, but such processes are not necessarily viewed as arising directly from the nature and organization of the task.

The psychodynamic perspectives on management education and learning involve a similar move away from the organization of work and work tasks toward an analysis of the influence of psychic, emotional, and group processes on learning (Antonacopoulou & Gabriel, 2001; Gabriel & Griffiths, 2002; James & Arroba, 2005; Mowles, 2017; Vince, 2008, 2011; Vince & Saleem, 2004). Nevertheless, within this literature, some interest in the work task, its impact on workers, and the way in which people deal with it is demonstrated. Vince (2010), for example, distinguishes between learning-in-action and learning inaction. Learning-in-action emphasizes learning as being closely associated with practice. Learning inaction, on the other hand, represents the “(conscious and unconscious) knowledge, fantasies and perceptions about when it is emotionally and politically expedient to refrain from action, when to avoid collective action, and the organizational dynamics that underpin a failure or refusal to act” (p. 29). For instance, in an action learning group of pharmacists in a leadership development program, it appeared that their work—dealing with staff sickness and interpersonal conflicts and the difficulties of managing people—created anxiety in the pharmacists. This anxiety was managed by (mis)placing responsibility with human resources functions, thereby stalling action. Critical reflexivity thus reveals that actions and change initiatives may fail because of emotions such as anxiety. However, while the ways in which the work task creates anxiety are explored, critical reflexivity focuses mainly on the

manifestations of such emotions in groups; the work task itself, how it is embedded within the wider organization, and how it is coordinated and conducted is not the focus of attention. For example, if an individual displays anger about a resourcing problem at work, they are encouraged to reflect on the emotions involved, which, it is argued, would help the individual to understand their situation in a broader context (Trehan & Rigg, 2015: 803). The resourcing problem itself, how it gets in the way of the completion of work tasks, how to address it, and what organizational and political structures it gives rise to, and so on, are not necessarily the core of the reflective practice.

This relative disinterest in the organization of work stands in stark contrast to classic researchers of psychodynamic orientation, such as Trist and Bamforth (1951), whose research centered on work organization, work tasks, and their impact on workers. Menzies' (1960) famous study on nurses in a London hospital, for example, focused on the way in which the nursing task would create anxiety in nurses as well as exploring how the organization of work was structured to protect nurses from this anxiety. Similarly, Bion (1961) was deeply interested in the organizational task. He argued that groups in organizations develop "basic assumptions", which are more or less "fantasmatic" beliefs, that protect its members from anxiety, but which direct attention away from an analysis of the primary task of the organization and the work itself. The role of the social and technical aspects of an organization in enabling or constraining its primary task was thus of great importance in classic Tavistock approaches (see Emery & Trist, 1960).

CME's indifference to the work task and work organization may reflect a broader trend in organization theory and critical management studies (CMS). Indeed, scholars have recently condemned the interest in more abstract concepts—such as power, emotions, networks, and change—at the expense of concrete issues, such as those related to the way in which work is organized, conducted, and coordinated in specific organizations (Lopdrup-

Hjorth, 2015; Mogensen, 2018). Vikkelsø (2015) reminds us that what distinguishes an organization from other social collectives is a focus on a collective task, which was of particular concern to classic organization theorists. Further, Vikkelsø argues that current organization theory has moved away from the detailed analysis of how tasks should be arranged in different types of organizations.

Given that CMS and CME aim to challenge instrumental rationality (Grey, 2004) and performativity (Fournier & Grey, 2000), focusing on work tasks can be problematic. From a CMS perspective, for example, tasks are contested and shaped by power dynamics that should themselves be questioned. Indeed, we agree with CMS' concerns that, from a managerial perspective, analysis of the work task is of interest only insofar as it may enhance performance and control of workers. Nevertheless, we also take note of scholars who caution that CMS' over-fixation with management control and power risks directing attention away from other equally significant aspects of organizational life, such as "the organization itself" (Mogensen, 2018: 226). Of course, in management education, it is possible that detailed analyses of the work organization as a task-oriented entity would be understood by students as being in the interest of business, profit, or efficiency. This often taken-for-granted assumption is itself ideological and should indeed be challenged. It is therefore important for students to reflect on alternative reasons for seriously considering the work task. For the Tavistock approaches, the organization of work is of crucial interest because it has implications for the psychosocial well-being of workers (Trist & Bamforth, 1951). However, FPW provides an even more detailed exploration of the immense impact that both work and the organization of work have on workers, their psychological and social lives, and on society. We therefore suggest that FPW provides students with an alternative to the managerialist view on why the organization of work should be a significant object of consideration.



## **Insights from the French Psychodynamics of Work Perspective**

### ***The Centrality of Work***

FPW has been developed over the last 40 years at the *Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers*—a French education establishment for working adults—with psychoanalyst, psychiatrist, and occupational health physician Christophe Dejours as its key theorist. While it is well established in France, Dejours' theory has only recently been noted in English-language management and organization studies (Dashtipour, 2014; Dashtipour & Vidaillet, 2017; Guénin-Paracini, Malsch & Paillé, 2014; Tweedie & Holley, 2016; Tweedie et al., 2019).

FPW has some similarities with the Tavistock perspective but differs in certain respects and, as such, is a complement, rather than an alternative, to the latter. Both approaches emphasize the work task and its impact on the worker's psyche, and both note the potential benefits of work. Like Menzies (1960), Dejours (1980) highlights the defenses that workers establish to cope with the suffering induced by the work task. However, there are some important differences (Dashtipour & Vidaillet, 2017). First, FPW provides a much more detailed theory of the implications of the work activity on workers and on society; second, having links to the Frankfurt School and Marxist theory, Dejours' (1980, 2009b) framework is more concerned with changing power relations in organizations and is explicit about the importance of allowing workers to organize and design their own work.

For FPW, the organization of work is a central concern. This is based not on managerial or functionalist views, but on strong philosophical foundations. Work is perceived to have direct and profound implications on the sanity of workers and on the development of a democratic society. Some of the roots of this approach can be found in Marxist and Hegelian philosophy, which emphasizes the potentially liberative function of work and the

importance of the human being to feel alive by engaging in creative, productive activity. Such thinking is also dominant in the theories of Frankfurt School scholars such as Honneth (1996), who point to the role of work in autonomous self-development. Underpinned by these ideas in philosophy and social theory (including in the work of Merleau-Ponty and Henry), as well as by Freudian theory, FPW defines work as a distinctly human, embodied activity that involves facing constraints.

Work is what is implied, in human terms, by the fact of working: gestures, know-how, the involvement of the body and the intelligence, the ability to analyze, interpret, and react to situations. It is the power to feel, to think, and to invent. In other words, for the clinician, work is not above all the wage relation or employment but “working”, which is to say, the way the personality is involved in confronting a task that is subject to constraints (material and social) (Dejours, 2007: 72).

The material and social constraints faced by the worker while working are a central component of this understanding. Constraints may include fatigue, insufficient skills/experience, the occurrence of unexpected events (for example, the breakdown of machines, tools, materials and systems, or disruptions that arise due to other colleagues or subordinates), contradictory organizational rules or instructions or, indeed, management or managerial discourses. Such obstacles are referred to as the “real” of work because they denote the contingent aspect of the work process and often cannot be determined or prescribed in advance. The “real” is the concrete world that poses a challenge to the worker and limits action (Dejours, 2009a: 21). All work entails this element of the “real” because to work never means to simply follow instructions from a manual. The “real” is “that which makes itself known to the working subject through resistance to know-how, to technique, to knowledge, that is to say, to mastery” (Dejours, 2015a: 94). Work is thus primarily viewed as *working*, which implies the activity and effort required to overcome the “real” and

accomplish the prescribed task. Confronting the “real” is an embodied challenge and is therefore first experienced by the worker as suffering (Dejours, 1980, 1998, 2009b). In this context, suffering means the painful sense of powerlessness brought about by a breakdown of action and movement (Dejours, 1998, 2009a, 2015a). When the constraints of work are overwhelming, the worker experiences pathological suffering. In contemporary organizations, work processes are dominated by top-down, standardized rules that prioritize financial incentives and short-term profitability, thereby posing significant constraints on work. As such, Dejours (2009a, 2015a) notes widespread suffering in workplaces.

Dejours refers specifically to embodied suffering that is associated with the worker’s engagement in the work activity. Although injustice, oppression, humiliation, and bullying in organizations are explored in critical and psychoanalytic literature (e.g. Czarniawska, 2008; Diamond, 1997; Fay, 2008; Gabriel, 2012; Liefoghe & MacDavey, 2001; Stein, 2001), insufficient attention is paid to the embodied experience of suffering (Courpasson, 2016) and especially to the suffering due to the performance of the work task. Furthermore, critical research often investigates the way in which management technologies—such as human resources strategies, teamwork, or cultural control—may induce insecurity and suffering at work (e.g. Knights & McCabe, 2003; Kunda, 2006; Townley, 1993), but suffering is seldom defined as being directly connected to the concrete process and organization of work. There are some exceptions, however. For example, McCabe’s (2014) study of a bank’s back office showed how workers were distressed because the design of the work “rendered [it] meaningless” (McCabe, 2014: 258). McCabe (2014: 258) points out that “harm may unintentionally occur when employees suffer fatigue, stress, boredom or injury, when work is organized with little concern for employee welfare”. Employees in the bank carried out extremely monotonous, strictly monitored, and isolated tasks, such as processing direct debits. The evaluation of workers’ performance mainly measured individual output and error

rates, which were meticulously recorded against individual names. Here, suffering is directly linked to the nature of the work process. The FPW perspective, however, provides the conceptual tools that are missing in current CMS theorizing to understand the monotony and strict surveillance of tasks as constraints that affect the worker at an embodied level, creating a sense of powerlessness. Moreover, although McCabe argued that this type of work regime “limits what [employees] do and can be – and may negatively affect what they become, physically and mentally” (McCabe, 2014: 265), he does not consider if work *could* have self-affirming qualities.

In contrast to many CME or CMS approaches, but in agreement with some Tavistock scholars (see Menzies, 1991), FPW is explicit in its position regarding the possible benefits of work. Drawing on Freud, it highlights how work can lead to sublimation. From Freud, we learn that the drive—a concept that borders both the body and the psyche—is a source of libidinal energy that needs to be transformed and elaborated and the psychic “work” needed for this transformation is central to the constitution of subjectivity. As a productive activity, work supports this psychic process: while working with tools and technologies and deploying the body and thought to “work on” something, the worker is also performing a kind of “psychic work” on the drive. As a result, the working process can transform and sublimate the sexual drive (Dejours, 2009a), redirecting it toward nonsexual, more creative and socially desirable aims. Dejours thereby makes Freud’s notion of sublimation relevant not just to artists and scientists, but also to ordinary workers, a notion he calls “ordinary sublimation” (Dejours, 2011: 137). The opportunity provided by “living work”—work that honors life—for sublimation is a central notion in Dejours’ (2009a) theory. While facing the “real” at first creates suffering and a sense of failure, subjective investment in work sublimates the drive and allows workers to overcome suffering and to enhance their subjectivity.

As part of this subjective investment, finding solutions to the constraints of work is an inventive and creative process and embodied intelligence is developed gradually. In the literature on management education, Cunliffe (2008: 134) also uses the phrase “embodied intelligence”, though specifically in referring to the knowledge about how to relate to others in organizations: “what to say, how to act, how to respond, often intuitive and spontaneous to the moment of interaction” (Cunliffe, 2008: 134). In FPW, embodied intelligence refers more broadly to the strategies that the worker learns over time to cope with the challenges of the work activity, whether this entails knowing how to interact with colleagues, clients, subordinates, managers, how to use a spreadsheet, or how to diagnose an illness. Keevers and Treleaven (2011: 506) call this “reflection-in-action”. In their study, they found that in the concrete moment of work, counselors improvised and developed, over time, an embodied knowing of how to deal with their clients creatively, rather than following any prescriptions. FPW provides a theoretical framework for understanding such forms of learning and knowing through the actual conduct of the work task as a process that involves an embodied confrontation with the “real”, which interrupts movement and creates suffering, but which urges the worker to find solutions to “repair” the interruption.

FPW also highlights that to develop embodied intelligence, some amount of bending the organizationally prescribed rules and even “cheating” is often required while working. Cheating frequently arises when the worker must choose between contradictory prescriptions, for instance quality and cost reduction. Developing embodied intelligence implies knowing how to juggle such contradictory prescriptions; it involves the worker’s human (cognitive and embodied) investment in work and the deployment of their creative capacities. If the work process is heavily monitored and controlled, the work activity is constrained, preventing the worker from fully deploying their human capacities and, as a result, suffering. The FPW approach therefore insists on the importance of worker autonomy (Dejours, 1980, 1998,

2009a) as this enables the worker to find their own tricks in order to complete the work task successfully.

Cheating is often a way to make a monotonous work process more tolerable (Roy, 1958), but it can also facilitate the work task and “good quality” work. The fact that organizations can be more efficient when workers persistently bend rules is well-known in classic organization theory (Blau, 1963). However, various strands of CMS scholarship have described such activities as helping to generate consent to the existing social relations of production because they contribute to the achievement of the aims of the business (e.g. Burawoy, 1979; Contu & Willmott, 2006). FPW provides another perspective to this typical CMS viewpoint: while it may not deny that bending rules to get work done can reproduce capitalist relations of power, FPW shows that such activities may also occur because work is psychologically important for workers.

Although some scholars note a disengagement from work (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016; Arnaud & Vanheule, 2007), others highlight that workers may be more concerned about getting work done and doing “good work” than is implied by much mainstream and CMS scholarship (Mogensen, 2018; Tweedie & Holley, 2016). But from a CMS perspective, an interest in doing “good work” demonstrates the power of modern management discourses and strategies to gain the commitment of workers through self-exploitation. Such strategies involve instituting the management function within workers themselves, shaping their subjectivity, and making them dedicated and responsible for their work (Fleming, 2012). Indeed, FPW’s emphasis on the centrality of work and the importance put on worker initiative, investment, and autonomy, could be equated with the “managerialization of the informal organization” (Fleming, 2012: 2010). However, this would be a stark misunderstanding of Dejours’ theory. Dejours (1998, 2009b, 2015a) is in fact a vocal critic of modern management. He implies that, contrary to what its proponents say, post-Fordist

management methods do not lead to autonomy and empowerment, but rather create suffering because responsibility is transferred to the individual worker who is competing with others, which destroys solidarity and cooperation between workers and creates a toxic environment of fear. As with CMS approaches, FPW is preoccupied with power (Tweedie et al., 2019). Dejours' perspective, however, explores power explicitly in relation to work tasks. It is for this reason that he strongly defends the autonomy and power of workers in the conduct of tasks and organization of work.

Workers' investment in work and their concern with getting work done can therefore not be reduced to management control. As Tweedie et al. (2019: 14) have recently stated, "a too narrow focus on power risks losing sight of other aspirations or social processes that also structure our relationships and institutions". FPW suggests that workers' interest in work may reflect the significance of the concrete experience of work—the work activity—in sublimation and self-transformation. This is why humans generally want to work well. Doing a "good job" in this theory refers to the capacity of doing a "beautiful job" according to the group of workers who know the challenges and constraints of work. In other words, it depends on recognition from the work collective (Dejours, 2009b, 2015): "Recognition is a symbolic *reward* granted to the person doing the work, in exchange for the *contribution* they make to the company, and through it, to society as a whole" (Dejours, 2014: 124, emphasis in original). FPW therefore shows that workers' interest in work may not just reflect the success of managerialism in constructing compliant subjectivities, but it may also be due to the role of work as a source of sublimation and recognition. However, whether work generates suffering or allows for autonomous self-development and recognition depends on the organization of work and whether or not it helps to sustain or dismantle work collectives.

### ***The Organization of Work and the Role of Work Collectives***

From the point of view of FPW, work collectives are significant for two main reasons. First, work collectives can provide recognition of individual workers' work. A denial of such recognition is, according to FPW as well as other perspectives in critical theory (see Honneth, 1996), associated with suffering. Moreover, recognition from colleagues is different from and more valuable than recognition from managers, customers, or society because only other colleagues know the constraints and challenges of the work task (Dejours, 1980, 2003, 2009a, 2009b). Second, work collectives can constitute social bonds that cannot be found in other domains of life. This view of relationships created through integration into the division of labor has roots in certain strands of social theory, including Durkheim (1933).

The establishment of social bonds depends, however, on the extent to which an organization can enable cooperation between workers in the realization of the organizational task. According to many management theorists, such as Fayol, one of the key roles of managers is to enable coordination—to organize and allocate tasks among workers in order to complete the assigned work—rather than cooperation. Coordination implies a system of domination that artificially dictates how people should relate to each other through their tasks. But if everyone merely followed the organizational prescriptions in their own individual ways without regard for others, the organization would collapse. Cooperation, in contrast, entails a collective activity of producing “work rules” and “tricks” that enable workers to answer to the “real” of work. These agreements do not necessarily conform to the formal rules and prescriptions imposed by coordination, and are referred to as “deontic activity” (Dejours & Deranty, 2010). Dejours (2015a: 166) asserts that the manager can “enable cooperation” between members of their team through collective deliberation centered on work: obstacles to work, how to overcome them, the solutions invented and tested by workers, and so on. In collective debates, participants can expose, compare, and confront their ways of answering to the “real” when they work (Dejours, 2011: 82). It is through such



reflective processes among the collective that workers can identify the “real” of their work. This approach encourages some level of conflict about work—a form of “professional dispute” (Clot, 2010)—that should lead to collective choices on the best way to engage in production. These collective spaces may be institutionalized and include formal spaces, such as team meetings, staff meetings, or debriefings. They may also consist of informal spaces that can facilitate the development of trust and mutual knowledge between colleagues, and where the decisions on how to work can be discussed and internalized.

Keevers and Treleaven’s (2011) case study of a counseling organization provides an empirical example of how some organizations incorporate such practices. The counselors had routines of reflection embedded within their organization. For example, immediately after a session with a client, counselors would share their experience with colleagues. They also had collective supervision processes and regular reviews with each client and another team member. In their monthly management committee meetings, organizational and work practices were collectively reviewed. The organization adopted a flat structure and an environment where mistakes were admitted to and the questioning of each other’s work was allowed. FPW provides a theory that explains why such reflective practices of the work task and the work organization are important: they support each worker to cope with the constraints of their work, provide opportunities for recognition, and create an important source of social bonding.

The emphasis on the work collective and the social bond established through it is different from the widely celebrated “team work”. Team-building exercises, “away days”, and so on represent a form of “forced sociality” (Fleming, 2012: 214) that creates only a superficial bond in workplaces where no grounds for such bonds exist and that are, in fact, deeply individualized and permeated by distrust. While the aim of cooperation is primarily technical—concerned with how to overcome the challenges of work and perform the task—it

teaches workers the fundamental virtues of democratic and civic life in two ways (Dejours, 1998, 2009b; Dejours et al., 2018). First, collective deliberation teaches trust between colleagues because it requires people to explain what does not work, the constraints they encounter, the prescriptions they follow that make it difficult to follow other prescriptions, and so on. Second, cooperation necessarily entails disagreements and debates—which are central to vivid democratic processes—about how to work.

Cooperation is in fact a very effective way of preventing domination by managers or external agents because it is based on finding collective work rules to make work possible and improve work quality. As such, the domination of work by others can be challenged in the name of production and quality of work (Deranty, 2010; Tweedie & Holley, 2016). Cooperation also acts against the domination of individual workers because it guarantees the collective support of individuals when they chose to do work in ways that are not accepted by managers.

### **Implications for Teaching**

In this section, we provide two examples of activities that present the principles of FPW to students and that encourage reflexivity on the work task and the organization of work. The exercises also evoke reflection on how the latter may relate to the subjectivity of workers, the quality of work, the existence of a work collective, and the kind of management implemented.

#### ***Reflecting on the Work Task***

The following example is based on a simulation exercise conducted by one of the authors with management students on a human resource management course in France. Students are presented with the extract below taken from Dejours' (1993) case study of a control center at a nuclear plant. Before it is shown, it is emphasized that it is a “real world” case study and

that the employees in the study are highly skilled workers. The students are given the following brief.

The operators who monitor the control room facilities regularly play Scrabble during routine operation. This practice seems odd in a workplace where monitoring should be continuous and is a source of concern and guilt for the workers themselves. The operators hide this regular practice and quickly clear the table when they hear one of the managers approaching the process control room. The managers have been informed that workers engage in Scrabble practice during working hours. They disapprove of it and attempt to prohibit it, however, they do not impose any sanctions. You are a consultant in a management consulting firm. The plant's management team calls on your services to solve this problem. What is your analysis? What recommendations do you make?

The groups then prepare their responses and briefly present them to the rest of the class. Most students tend to agree that workers should not play Scrabble and recommend that managers should enhance the monitoring and surveillance of work to eliminate the practice by introducing standardized procedures. They then read together the analysis proposed by the researchers who worked on the site.

When the system runs steadily and is well tuned, the workers are bored. This inactivity irritates and annoys them, and eventually causes anxiety among them. Playing Scrabble is a convivial pastime that they can enjoy while sitting close to their consoles and that helps them stay calm. But while playing, they do much more than they seem to. The game of Scrabble sometimes pauses as a player reflects on their next move, giving the players time between each turn to get up, monitor their console, and adjust the flow or pressure if need be, and then go back to their seat at the game table [...].

While they are playing, they are, in fact, “listening to” the process: they are listening to the noise, the vibrations, the periodic alarms, and the hum of the machines. And then, amidst the background noise that permeates their bodies, an abnormal sound, a lower frequency vibration, is heard. The body reacts, and the worker gets up. Thus, while playing, the workers continue to listen carefully to the functioning of the facilities.

[...] The workers have not been trained in this form of hearing-based monitoring, nor have they been given instructions on how to use it, but according to them, it is very effective. All of them participate in it, with varying levels of talent. This practice cannot be explained; the workers learn through contact with the more experienced workers. Thus, the operators have developed an art, a “trick”, for monitoring the process. But the engagement of the body in this type of monitoring is tricky: if the worker actively listens, by thinking about or focusing on the noise, he [sic] can no longer hear. He no longer hears anything, or all noises become suspicious. The worker then becomes confused and overcome by anxiety. He can no longer rely on his hearing perceptions. When the system runs steadily, the worker must, so to speak, relax. He must be in relative rest. Only then does he manage to physically and with his senses tune into the process and recognize without hesitation any anomaly occurring during working hours.

One understands, after observation of the situation, that the practice of playing Scrabble is brilliant. They play Scrabble—which is unusual—and not Belote, which is a much more popular card game among French blue-color workers. Indeed, while playing a game of Belote, players talk a lot and make noise, whereas Scrabble players play quietly. By counteracting boredom and anxiety, playing Scrabble refines sensory performance. The game reconciles the pursuit of comfort and technical efficiency.

[...] Once this clarification was made, playing Scrabble was unreservedly tolerated, both by the workers themselves, now freed from guilt, and the management team, reassured about this unusual practice. They work for real. (Dejours, 1993)

This analysis reveals how the students initially failed to reflect on the particularities of the operators' work in favor of an approach defending the use of general management tools, regardless of the nature of the work to which they apply. It draws attention to the nature of the specific work in the nuclear plant and what is required to carry it out at the triple level of the cognitive and affective functions and of the body. For the workers in the present case study, the game facilitates the work task. It is a special game that requires the ingenuity of workers, their embodied intelligence in work. Students can reflect on how the task brings about specific emotions, in this case anxiety created by the fact that they are waiting for a possible, but unlikely, incident. Scrabble is then a trick found by the workers themselves to deal with the anxiety of the prescribed task. Furthermore, this case study illustrates the process of the sublimation of the drive that is first transformed into anxiety, and then—thanks to the game—and converted into the ability to achieve the required task. Students can also see the role of the work collective: the group of workers has found a trick that enables them to work autonomously on the work task and to produce high-quality work, which is taught to new workers. The case study shows, moreover, that managers need to understand this functioning to be able to defend such practices (even as strange and unusual as Scrabble-playing) to their own superiors.

### ***Reflecting on the Organization of Work***

The second activity presents a case study undertaken by Flageul-Caroly (2001) comparing two post offices, A and B, that belonged to the same French postal service company and had the same type of clients. Within the span of a year, seven of the fifteen postal workers in

office A left the team and the team leader “had a breakdown”. Post office B, however, had high staff stability.

Within each post office there is the “counter”, the “till”, and the “cubicle”. The “counter” is where members of the public are received and served. The “till”, which is in the back office, is where money and the products for sale are stored. The “cubicle” is also in the back office, and it is where the registration of registered letters and packages takes place. The top management of the company had separated the functions performed at the counter, the till, and the cubicle. The postal agents in office B collectively decided, in agreement with the team leader, to maintain some flexibility between the counter, the till, and the cubicle despite line management ordering against this flexibility in the wake of a theft that occurred in the post office. When queues are short, this flexibility enables postal agents to leave the counter and make progress on work in the cubicle, which remains open during working hours. Tellers also have easy access to the till, especially when there are many customers, enabling them to serve customers faster. On the contrary, post office A has one person assigned “to the cubicle”. Similarly, tellers have no access to the till and must therefore wait for the cashier to be available if they need to exchange money or products.

Concerning the processing of registered mail (which takes longer than other types of mail), the official rule stipulates that the notice of registration of a letter must be placed in the tray immediately after the registration is processed on the computer. This implies that the tellers must move away from their counter twice, reducing their availability to customers. In post office B, the tellers decided to look for ways of working around this rule. Since the registration of the first page of the registration form on the computer automatically records the registered mail, which is in line with the production target, the tellers put aside the distribution notifications and process them at the end of day using a laser gun. Though contradicting the official instructions by managing the queue rather than compartmentalizing

the functions, this collective modification of the organization of work helps the clerks cope with “real” work demands. In post office A, however, this is perceived as a transgression by the line management and by the workers themselves. When, faced with the pressure of a queue of customers, the person in the cubicle puts the notification slips aside without processing them immediately, they alone face the consequences of transgressing the rules or not.

In post office B, the tellers have arrangements with each other so that, for example, when one is short of stamps, they use the other teller’s instead of having to leave their counter to fetch what they need. The employees also use a communal logbook to write down customers’ names and account numbers to avoid going back and forth between the computer (in the back office) and the till. The turnover generated by sales is considered collectively. This is not the case in post office A. In post office A, the team manager is forbidden from “merging” with the teller, whereas in post office B, the manager can intervene “palliatively” when difficulties arise at the tills and help the employees.

The differences between the two post offices relate to the way in which work is organized and the nature of management in relation to this organization. In post office B, the team manager encourages cooperation and deontic activities between the team members. He ensures that staff can meet to discuss the contradictions between the prescribed rules and the “real” difficulties, and, above all, to set priorities to enable them to work and to make sense of their work. These moments have helped staff to collectively invent ways of operating and organizing work to make their work easier (such as the communal logbook, the agreements to minimize having to systematically move away from their work station to fetch items from the back office, etc.). The team manager in post office B not only allows his staff to develop priorities and methods of operations, but he also ensures that those choices are complied with and applied, so that the workers’ activity can be performed in a stable and professional

environment. His role as mediator between his team and line management is essential here as he negotiates the procedures developed by the team with management. The team manager has also chosen to collectively award bonuses, so as to be coherent with the fact that the work is performed by a collective.

This case study illustrates the limitations of management that is based only on prescribed rules and the consequences for workers who are not able to face the “real” of work when such rules impose too rigid a frame. It creates enduring suffering and has negative consequences such as shame (of not doing good work), fear (of customers’ aggressive reactions), guilt (of sometimes transgressing the official rules), and feelings of loneliness (because there is no work collective). The comparison between the two workplaces also shows the conditions under which a creative process can develop that enables workers to find together ways to deal with the prescriptions and to organize work so as to continue to do good-quality work and maintain a sense of one’s own work and one’s dignity as a worker. Not following some prescriptions in the interest of work itself is not considered as a wrongdoing in post office B because it is agreed collectively and is defended by the manager, while in post office A it is viewed as individual transgression. This case study draws students’ attention to the role of the organization of work and the nature of the work collective in either suffering or autonomous self-development. The collective deliberation among workers in the case study is centered on work and its organization as a way to solve technical problems and create cooperation, trust, and solidarity between workers. The case illustrates particularly well the importance of cooperation: in post office B, cooperation is implied in the deontic activity of defining new modes of operating; in the working process itself; between workers and between the team and the manager who helps workers when difficulties arise; and it is strongly encouraged by the manager via different management tools (collective bonuses, meetings, etc.).



## **Discussion**

In this essay, we have called on CME to pay more attention to the work task and the organization of work. We have argued that FPW provides good reasons for doing so because the work activity has a significant impact on workers' health and on society. Our two vignettes show how CME can encourage reflection on the impact and nature of work tasks and organization of work. In this section, we extend our discussion on implications for the practice of CME.

FPW could be viewed as a supplement to critical action learning and existing psychodynamic approaches to management learning and education (Reynolds & Vince, 2004; Trehan & Rigg, 2015; Vince, 2004, 2008, 2011; Vince et al., 2018). Like critical action learning, FPW promotes collective rather than individual reflection (Trehan & Rigg, 2015), however FPW also emphasizes the importance of incorporating the analysis of the organization of work and the work task. This implies that, in addition to reflecting on emotions generated in the learning group or as a result of the relational and power dynamics in the organization, it is equally important to analyze the emotions associated with the experience of concrete work activities (as shown in the Scrabble case study). The focus should, however, not remain on the emotions themselves, but on the solutions that people find to conduct their tasks in ways that may either defend against those emotions or sublimate them. The exercises above are not intended to show students how work should be organized, but rather to enable students to reflect on the specific nature of work, what it takes to complete tasks, and how workers may find their own solutions to the problems they find at work through collective deliberation (as in the post office example) or experimentation (as in the Scrabble example). Students' initial comments in the Scrabble exercise suggest that, if the specific work task is not reflected on and understood, abstract and standardized managerial

rules—which often have the counterproductive effect of preventing workers from doing their work—are easily recommended.

Both of the above case studies draw students' attention to the “real” of work. However, the “real” should not be understood simply as problems in work processes that can be addressed using permanent solutions. Scrabble in the first case study is not a managerial problem-solving strategy; it is the workers' own contingent and collective response to the real of work, and this solution has both affective—i.e. by decreasing levels of anxiety—as well as technical implications. Contrary to a managerial problem-solving strategy, this solution is not formalized by workers. It is a “trick” empirically and locally developed to deal with the “real” of work in this control center, but it is not officially considered as “the” solution and other workers in other similar situations could invent different solutions. The “real” is an integrative aspect of work that needs to be dealt with on an ongoing basis. Students should not be made to believe that the FPW theory would recommend specific activities, such as playing Scrabble (indeed, this would be a managerialist approach), but that it is a framework that enables exploring general dynamics related to how people find ways of coping with work.

The exercises above do not constitute action learning groups, but group activities in the classroom. These groups are not work collectives in the strict sense of the term as these students do not necessarily work together within the same organization, although they may be considered as a student work group since they conduct the activities in class. However, as in collective deliberation, the focus of the reflective practice in these exercises is on the work tasks in the case studies. After being presented with the FPW approach, within their discussion groups, students can discuss their own experience of the “real” in their work-based assignments and how they cope with it. In fact, FPW can contribute to students' learning from their experience of being a member of “task groups” in the immediate context of the

management course. The teacher can give the students a task to complete and allow them to discuss in groups their experience of the “real” in the task. From reflecting on the experience of executing tasks in the classroom, students can learn lessons about completing tasks at work as both involve facing the “real”. The teacher can then invite students to relate the processes experienced in class to workplace situations. This reflective process is facilitated by a feature of work that is well described by the psychodynamic perspective: the subjective process entailing the worker’s intelligence, affectivity, and body takes place once the worker has been interrupted in their working dynamic by the “real” of work. It is also this interruption that may lead students to remember specific working situations they will want to use in a reflective learning activity based on their own experience. The teacher can encourage students to explore such situations with the help of FPW. In this way, the FPW approach contributes both to the content of management education (by showing why it is important to explore the work task and the organization of work) and to the process itself (by utilizing students’ own experiences of work and demonstrating how the conduct of classroom tasks may reflect the experience of tasks in the workplace).

The principles of FPW regarding collective deliberation could also be applied to critical action learning groups, which may consist of people working together in the same organization or in the same profession. However, a discussion of emotional and power dynamics emerging in the group should not be at the expense of deliberation on how each individual experiences the work activity, how they cope with the difficulties of work, and on the organization of work. The objective of such a learning group would thus be for each person to reflect on and reveal how they cope with the “real” of work and learn how others do so. This would also provide a space where “work rules” would be elaborated and established collectively.

The contribution of FPW is therefore to remind us that, in action-based learning, reflection—which entails collectively analyzing and examining the task and the problems that arise in the work activity and the organization of work—should not be neglected in favor of reflexivity and critical reflection. As such, the focus is less on understanding ourselves and our underlying assumptions (Cunliffe, 2004), and more on the concrete process of work.

This does not mean, however, that reflection on the self, power relations, emotions, and dominant assumptions should be ignored. Rather, they should be considered in terms of how they prevent people from working properly. This is perfectly in line with critical action learning, which encourages the exploration of how power relations inhibit practice (Reynolds & Vince, 2004). Critical and practical reflexivity are significant processes because they unveil and unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions, power relations, and emotions that are obstacles to work. Vince et al. (2018), for example, point to tensions in organizations that hinder action, such as being told to participate in decision-making but being unable to actually make any decisions. Such tensions are a result of power relations that constrain people in their work activities. Indeed, management and managerial discourses are often, from the point of view of FPW, the “real” that poses significant challenges to work. FPW therefore encourages learning about how power relations may have a direct impact on the concrete experience of work. Indeed, this is not dissimilar to existing perspectives on critical reflexive practices, which aim to question organizational structures, roles, systems, and power relations (Keevers & Treleaven, 2011). However, FPW helps to make the reason for such questioning more explicit: management structures and techniques often prevent people from doing “good work” and create suffering.

As such, from the FPW perspective, power dynamics in organizations are understood directly in relation to the “real” and suffering in work. In the Scrabble case study, for example, management did not initially agree with the Scrabble-playing, which provoked

difficult emotions, such as guilt, in the workers and made the work process more painful. Similarly, in post office A, the policies of those in power obstructed work, producing despair and illness in workers.

An action learning group informed by FPW would consist of the establishment of a work collective where cooperation, rather than competition, is prioritized. This approach would advance existing arguments about the importance of developing students' ability to cooperate at work because it links cooperation directly to the work task. Bedwell, Fiore, and Salas (2014: 175), for example, describe cooperation as requiring skills such as "adaptability; shared situational awareness; performance monitoring/feedback", and so on. However, these skills are presented as general skills that people have or do not have and can cultivate by being in groups, for instance in the classroom, and not as skills that can be developed (or not) through the working process itself or that are directly related to the central issue of the work that work groups face.

Of course, collectives can also limit, rather than facilitate, learning (Vince, 2011) and may instigate competition over cooperation. This is why we agree with Vince (2011) that it is important to explore how anxiety and politics may prevent learning as well as action, which we interpret as the ability to conduct "good work". FPW, however, makes clear why cooperation and collective learning are so important: such practices counteract dominant, competitive, and individualized modes of working that destroy social bonds and communities established in the workplace. Furthermore, the need for cooperation at work is not considered by FPW as a cultural privilege that is related to specific work traditions in particular countries. It is viewed as a universal condition necessary to answer to the "real" of work, to do one's work properly, and to feel healthy at work. The development of studies based on FPW in many European countries, in Latin America (Dejours, Abdoucheli & Jayet, 1994; Dejours & Ramos, 2012), as well as in Anglo-Saxon countries such as Canada, the United

Kingdom, and Australia (Dejours et al., 2018; Tweedie, 2017), supports this assumption. Simultaneously, the increased number of suicides that can be attributed in part to the erosion of cooperation and social bonds at work is not limited to specific countries or cultures (Clegg et al., 2016).

Paying attention to the work task and the organization of work inspires students to reflect on the problems that managers face from the perspective of labor, rather than simply from the perspective of managers or capital (Bridgman, Cummings & McLaughlin, 2016: 734). This can facilitate the learning of more democratic management practices, a topic that is often nonexistent or that occupies a minor place in the business school curriculum (Bridgman et al., 2016). Focusing on the organization of work and the work task in management education, underpinned by FPW, emphasizes the importance of worker self-determination to management and business school students. If the role of management education is to change power relations (Reynolds & Vince, 2004), then an analysis of the concrete work activity is a good way of doing so. This is because FPW advocates for the change of power relations between work and capital at a political level and for the defense of a noninstrumental conception of work (Dejours, 1998, 2009b). Unions have fought for the quantitative sharing of the added value of work (i.e. number of working hours and wage level) without adequately criticizing the instrumentalization of workers in capitalism. Furthermore, they have not sufficiently struggled for the right of workers to organize their work as well as to have the means to do “good work”. Indeed, unions often promote employment from a quantitative perspective (i.e. number of jobs), but the qualitative nature of work—its content and nature—is often not prioritised. From the viewpoint of FPW, the fight between capital and work should include a defense of the qualitative aspects of work.

The emphasis placed on quality and the autonomy of the work collective in the design of work tasks means that FPW has parallels with the sociotechnical systems approach (Emery

& Trist, 1960), the quality of working life movement (Davis & Cherns, 1975), and human relations and democratic management philosophies (such as McGregor, 1960). However, FPW proposes a detailed theory, which is missing from the above, of how the intellectual, affective, and bodily engagement of workers in the work process itself can fundamentally contribute to their health or suffering. Furthermore, while the earlier movements, such as the quality of working life movement, prioritized worker emancipation over organizational performance (see Grote & Guest, 2017), the practical implications of FPW imply more radical organizational changes by transferring power to workers. Therefore, due to its explicit Marxist influence (Dejours, 1980, 1998, 2009b, 2015a), its Freudian perspective, and its critique of neoliberalism/managerialism (Dejours, 2009b, 2015a), FPW is more strongly linked with the Frankfurt School.

CME has been fundamental in challenging managerial assumptions and power relations in the workplace. However, critiquing oppressive practices requires consideration of the organization of work tasks and an explicit normative theory of what would constitute “good”, nonalienated work. Nonalienated work includes the autonomy of work collectives to design and organize their own work and the opportunity to achieve sublimation through work and the recognition of one’s work. Often missing from critical approaches taught in business schools, such considerations and theories are provided by FPW (Dejours et al., 2018).

We acknowledge that the possibility for work to provide sublimation is severely restricted under the conditions of the wage relation. We also recognize that the practical implementation of FPW risks being overtaken by managerialist interests focused on instilling commitment to work and enhancing performance. Similarly, students may understand the analysis of work tasks and work organization in managerialist terms. It is important to be aware of such risks. Indeed, they may reflect a limitation of FPW, as FPW does not outline how strategies for organizational reform aimed at worker health are often appropriated in

managerialist terms. Nevertheless, in the classroom, clearly outlining the nonmanagerialist rationale (as highlighted in this essay) for focusing on the organization of work can guard against these risks. Dejours' approach also has little to say about how managerialist discourses may shape worker identity. In this regard, FPW has much to learn from CMS scholarship. Another limitation of FPW is that it does not include an explicit theory of unconscious dynamics in groups and how these may prevent cooperation and direct attention away from the work task. For this reason, FPW should be viewed as complementary to existing Tavistock perspectives, such as Bion (1961), which do address such dynamics. Of course, organizations do not merely aim to optimize task accomplishment, but other dynamics, as psychoanalytically and critically oriented scholars have demonstrated so well. As such, a sole focus on the work task would run the risk of underestimating the impact of power relations. However, the contribution of the FPW approach is to show the relationship between power/structural dynamics—specifically organizational structures that are underpinned by neoliberal logics (competition, free market, short-termism etc.)—the work task, and the health of workers.

It is only recently that FPW has been taken up by English-language CMS community and organization studies. Much work remains to be done to relate this approach to existing scholarship and to integrate it into management education. Nonetheless, CME should include the organization of work and the work task in management learning because work has vast implications for health and society. To live up to its commitment to contest oppression and social injustice, CME needs to address the extensive suffering currently experienced in society due to work. FPW provides some theoretical tools and directions for teaching to achieve this aim.

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