



# Outsourcing and the growing precarity of psychologists' work in social services in Brazil: repercussions for subjectivities

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Published online: 13 November 2019  
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## Abstract

In this article, we present and discuss the repercussions of working conditions in social care services on the subjectivity of psychologists who work with this public policy in Brazil. Based on interviews with psychologists, we argue that the subcontracting process of the Unified Social Assistance System (Sistema Único da Assistência Social—SUAS) brings about the establishment of fragile employment relationships, low salaries, lack of training, and high staff turnover. Besides this insecurity due to precarious work, outsourcing makes those workers' lives precarious, since it makes them feel insecure, emotionally overwhelmed and “suffocated.” To cope with this situation, these professionals seek technical and emotional support from their colleagues, especially engaging in study groups outside working hours. Their discourses have allowed us to conclude that, despite advocating a crackdown on the insecurity of labor and the end of subcontracting, Brazilian laws leave loopholes for feeble labor bonds.

**Keywords** Social psychology · Social work · Third sector · Work psychology · Precarious life · Subjectivity

## Introduction

In this article, we aim to present means through which Brazilian psychologists acting in social assistance services experience and give meaning to their work experiences, as well as to point out how these experiences contribute to their constitution

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as subjects. It is therefore a contribution that is part of the field of studies on subjectivity and work (Jacques 2003; Nardi 2006; Nardi et al. 1997; Pulido-Martínez 2007).

To think about the relationship between subjectivity and work implies considering the social, economic, and political context in which this relationship is inserted (Pulido-Martínez 2004). Thus, we will begin our reflection on the relationship between subjectivity and work in social assistance services by speaking about neoliberalism, specifically about its outcomes for the ever-growing precarity of work conditions, and the migration of the neoliberal logic (Pulido-Martínez 2015) to public administration. In a second phase, we will present the core characteristics of social assistance services in Brazil, and ensuing that, approach the viewpoints of psychologists on their work conditions and the repercussions for their subjectivity.

### **Precarity, outsourcing and “turning the State into an enterprise”**

As a peripheral country, Brazil has never fully witnessed what has been called the welfare state. A large part of our population has always lived on the fringe of social protection networks offered by the State, and access to regulated and protected labor has always been limited, as a part and parcel of the population (approximately 60% in periods of crisis and approximately 40% during the moments of boom in our economy) are inserted in the formal labor market. A significant contingent of the population spends its life alternating between attempts to become inserted in the formal labor market and in non-regulated activities, the “informal” market.

Therefore, this growing precarity has always been the hallmark of the work of most Brazilians, and due to the neoliberal adjustment, this precarity expands to segments of the population that had access to some sort of protection. Something is similar to what Castel (2013) called the “destabilization of the stable.”

From the viewpoint of economic production, this flexible accrual takes place based on the elimination of the greater number of “barriers” for the production of merchandise and exports its practices to other aspects of social life. The flexibility imperative transforms production and labor relations: Temporary short-term, intermittent contracts adjusted to the company’s demands become the standard. The outsourcing of labor is what fulfill this flexibility imperative, as it allows companies to hire workers in the exact measure of their needs, the latter always being variable, transferring to workers the market insecurities and uncertainties.

According to Druck and Franco (2007) and Druck (2016), outsourcing or subcontracting grew considerably in the first two decades of this century and, very soon, we will be facing an “epidemic” of outsourced and precarious labor. After all, the Brazilian legislation recently underwent transformations that made it possible to have unrestricted outsourcing for all types of work activities, not only for the mean activities (Antunes and Druck 2014).

In Brazil, the 1988 Federal Constitution of 1988 (FC-1988), the so-called Citizen Constitution, upon foreseeing the duties of the State to guarantee social rights to the population, set forth parameters regarding the management of workers involved with the implementation of such rights. In this sense, it defined rules for the hiring



of public servants (public contests), besides guaranteeing rights for these workers (employment stability, career plans, retirement systems, etc.). Such parameters were aimed at enabling public servants to carry out the public service without suffering interference from vested interests of the different groups that come to power, as well as to avoid their having to carry out activities in private institutions concomitantly with the work in public administration. To sum up, they aimed to guarantee the execution of State policies, and not merely the plans of governments that come and go.

Notwithstanding this, with the justification of a change in the role of the State, in a context of globalization, the PSDB government (The Brazilian Social Democracy Party, a center-right party) implemented a State reform beginning in 1995. Guided by liberal principles, the Minister of the Federal Administration and Reform of the State, Bresser-Pereira, advocated the adoption of measures to replace the “bureaucratic administration” with a “managerial public administration” (Bresser-Pereira 1996). Such measures, nevertheless, threatened the implementation of the rights foreseen in the FC-1988. Criticisms of ideologues of this government to the FC-1988, as relates to public administration, resided in the fact that it can provide security conditions to public servants, and because of that not allow for flexibilization of work management. At the same time, they also criticized the size of the State in the social field and attributed the State crisis to precisely that size, which would justify the reform. Therefore, another important pillar of the State related to the conception on the relationship between institutions and public and private interests.

Consistent with this conception, another emerges: that of companies with a certain social vocation. A conception that leans on the idea of “entrepreneurship” but that, because it is geared to developing activities in the social field, is labeled as “social.”

This “social entrepreneurship” would purportedly be directed to organizations called “the third sector.” This type of model for the implementation and management of public actions opened the way for the adoption of outsourcing by government agents. Actions that would have been the responsibility of entities and workers hired directly by the State (public servants, with the abovementioned labor guarantees) continued to be carried out by Civil Society Organizations (CSO), that is, by “non-profit private organizations that carry out public interest activities and do not have profit as their goal” (Brazil 2014, p. 3). These organizations act in the promotion and defense of rights, in the field of human rights, health, education, culture, science and technology, agrarian development, social assistance, housing, among others.

However, it is necessary to underscore that, in the CSO, ties with the State are fragile (as they depend on temporary contracts that have no guarantee of renewal) and ties with workers are marked by flexibility, keeping in mind that the latter do not have the same guarantees as the so-called public servants (professionals hired directly by the State). With this, the outsourcing space expands, going beyond the traditional private companies and begins to be applied, as in the case under discussion, to organizations that carry out work in the social area.

It can be stated that the diversity of problems that come with outsourcing of labor in private companies (Antunes and Druck 2014; Druck 2016) is repeated once this is adopted in the public sector (Coutinho 2011; Oliveira et al. 2018),



with the aggravating factor that there are consistent threats, such as we will see below, to the State's capacity itself to satisfactorily carry out its obligations, relating to populations encompassed by social assistance policies.

The ties and the precarious working conditions arising from this model have important subjective repercussions for those workers who experience them day after day, a phenomenon that is precisely the focus of this work. When we speak about subjective repercussions, we are referring to the way of being, of relating, of suffering, of understanding reality and the collective knowledge produced by workers, vis-à-vis the concrete conditions, they deal with to carry out their work (Bernardo and Sato 2010; Sato et al. 2004).

Therefore, speaking of subjective repercussions means thinking that subjectivity is not something ready-made and finished, defined once and for all throughout childhood (Gill 2008). But it is something produced, and this production process is permeated by cultural, economic, historical, and political factors. Thus, following the reflections of Henriques et al. (1998, p. 3), we use the term "subjectivity" in this article "to refer to individuality and self-awareness—the condition of being a subject—but understand in this usage that subjects are dynamic and multiple, always positioned in relation to particular discourses and practices and produced by these—the condition of being subject." Discourses and practices currently cannot be analyzed without considering the neoliberal context in which they are inserted.

It is important to point out that the concept of subjectivity can be used to understand and tackle inequalities and neoliberal power relations, but it can also reinforce them. According to Blackman et al. (2008, p. 14),

This because neo-liberal power establishes a social order not primarily through liquidating otherness, inferiority or subjectivity, but by fabricating and regulating otherness and subalternity through the multiplication and assimilation of subjectivities that are created by one's own reflexivity of one's own positionality.

Besides that, in neoliberal economies work is marked, among other things, by flexibilization, precarization, unemployment and outsourcing. These phenomena have deeply impacted the constitution of labor subjectivity. If workers keep the same resources they used to use to constitute their subjectivities, they can be considered "inflexible," afraid of changes or unable to adapt to new demands. So they must "reinvent" themselves in order to achieve the supposed advantages offered by labor market (Pulido-Martínez 2015).

And psychology has played an important role in this process: It provides concepts and practices that make possible to reinvent this subjectivities. Pulido-Martínez (2015), discussing the role of psy-knowledge (Rose 2011) in neoliberalism, analyzes how the strategies of control over workers and the management discourses have been modified in the neoliberal context: There is a requirement of a permanent activity of the worker, as a process of psychological requalification which seeks to radically transform his/her interiority to become a tireless proactive being.

We also considered the importance of the dimension of resistance in the study of subjectivity, which sets in motion other forms of sociability (Blackman et al. 2008).



By relating subjectivity to work, we seek to emphasize the processes through which labor experiences conform ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Modes of thinking, feeling, and acting are always historically situated and located, and they evoke the connection between various elements, values, needs, and projects. We also seek to reflect upon the possibilities of inventing and creating other ways of working, in the form of transgressions or even of resistance powers (Nardi 2006).

To comply with the goals set forth, we interviewed 15 psychologists acting in basic and special protection services, located in three Brazilian states, occupying both technical and managerial positions. The interviewees were selected through snowball sampling. Four interviewees were public employees, and 11 were hired by EAS. These interviews had a semi-structured design, and they were recorded in audio, fully transcribed, and submitted to a constructivist-based discourse analysis (Nascimento et al. 2014). Our option for interviewing merely psychologists is justified by the fact that this work is part of a broader research, geared to discussing the insertion of psychology in the Brazilian social assistance policy.

As pointed by Blackman et al. (2008), experience is an important element to understand subjectivity, so we have accessed the repercussions to subjectivity, through the psychologists' experience, expressed by discourse.

## Social assistance in Brazil

Before presenting the results obtained through this interpretative process, it is important to historically, culturally, and politically locate the discourses under analysis. It is important to mention, for example, that this history of Brazilian social assistance is marked by welfarism practices, founded on the conception that access to social policies is an act of kindness, charity, benevolence, and not a citizenship right. And religious groups, especially those connected to the Catholic Church, have always played an important role in that history (Cruz and Guareschi 2013). After all, as Castel (2013) reminds us, in Catholicism, charity represents the route par excellence to redemption, a currency for trade, with the ability to redeem Christians from sin.

Another mark of the history of social assistance in Brazil—at least in the last century—is the “first-ladyism.” That is, the delegation to the first ladies of the municipalities, states, and the nation important roles in the social assistance policy, such as secretariats, ambassadorships, and program coordinators. This practice clearly illustrates our comprehension of social assistance: something like “a woman’s task,” which depended on outside kindness and charity, not requiring professional training and could be used to enhance the image of governing entities.

This reality began to change in the 1980s, principally after the enactment of the FC-1988. The new constitution broke with—at least at the discursive level—that character of urgency, clientelism and charity of social policies. Additionally, it established that the Brazilian social security system would be founded on a tripod, formed by Health, Social Security and Social Assistance policies. This change represented an “expansion in the field of human and social rights, and, as a consequence, introduced the demand for social assistance as a policy, to be able to formulate, with



objectivity, the content of the citizen's rights in its field of action" (Sposati 2009, p. 14). With the idea of social assistance as charity, benevolence, and aid, it further gave way to notions of rights, citizenship, and public policies (Cordeiro and Sato 2017; Cruz and Guareschi 2013).

Based on the guidelines set forth by the Constitution in effect, in 1993, the Organic Social Assistance Law (*Lei Orgânica da Assistência Social—LOAS*) (Law No. 8,742/1993) was set forth, establishing that social protection should be a non-contributive policy, an inalienable right for any citizen in a situation of vulnerability and social disenfranchisement (Macedo et al. 2011). Besides that, the LOAS instituted the centrality of the State in guaranteeing rights and access to social services and innovating by proposing that society participates in the process of formulating, managing, and executing social assistance policies (Couto et al. 2010).

It is important to mention that the social protection model that underpinned the LOAS and the Constitution of 1988 took its inspiration from English and French experiences (Sposati 2004). In the case of England, the main influence was the Welfare State model, with the Beveridge Plan at its base (Beveridge 1943).

Despite this, it is interesting to observe that constitutionally Brazil instituted its social security system in "the opposite direction," counter to structural, economic, and political transformations taking place in other capitalist countries. In the ides of 1988, the feasibility of the Welfare State model was already being questioned in many European countries, including England and France. For that reason, perhaps, the social security system implementation process in Brazil ended up being so contradictory. Proof of that is that despite the conceptual advances brought about by the LOAS and the Constitution of 1988, for over a decade, the impoverishment of the Brazilian population continued to be faced with focused programs, emergency social funds, and social compensatory programs (Cruz and Guareschi 2013).

It was only in 2004, with the approval of the National Social Assistance Policy (*Política Nacional de Assistência Social—PNAS*) that this reality began to change—albeit partially, as the contradictions continued to inherent to the Brazilian social policies. The PNAS goes against the concepts of charity and "first-ladyism" and, resuming the principles and guidelines set forth by the LOAS, determined the construction and implementation of the Unified Social Assistance System (*Sistema Único da Assistência Social—SUAS*) (Cordeiro and Sato 2017).

The SUAS is not a program, but instead a form of management of social assistance as a public policy, that foresees continued actions for an indeterminate time (Sposati 2006). It is a unified system responsible for regulating and organizing the program offers, projects, services, and social assistance benefits throughout the country. It is divided into two levels of social protection: basic and special. The first is preventative. It aims to prevent situations of personal or social risk, by developing the service user's potential and strengthening their family and community bonds. The second aims to provide services to families and individuals who are already identified as being at risk from their current situation. For example, personal or social risk caused by abandonment, physical or psychological violence, sexual harassment, drug abuse, community service, homelessness or child labor. The special social protection is divided into two levels of complexity: medium (for those who still have family and community bounds) and high (for those who are homeless or



need housing services). The basic protection services are directly executed in the social assistance referral centers (Centros de Referência da Assistência social—CRAS) and indirectly executed in social assistance entities and organizations within the area covered by the CRAS (Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social e Combate à Fome 2005). On the other hand, the special social protection consists of services that require individual monitoring and greater flexibility in the protective solutions deployed by the specialized social work assistance referral centers (Centros de Referência Especializada de Assistência social—CREAS), the specialized referral centres for the homeless population (Centros de Referência Especializados para População em Situação de Rua—Centros POP), and the services they refer to. Complementary services are often implemented not only by public agencies, but also by Civil Society Organizations—the so-called social assistance entities (EAS).

The makeup of the reference teams at each of the services that are part of the SUAS is defined by a document called the Operational Basic Human Resources Standards for the SUAS (Norma Operacional Básica de Recursos Humanos do Sistema Único de Assistência Social—NOB-RH/SUAS) (Ferreira 2011). This standard sets forth aspects that relate to work management, including guidelines for Plans of Careers, Positions and Salaries (PCCS), as well as the definition for contracts with social assistance organizations and entities. Among other factors, it determines that work management at the SUAS should: guarantee an elimination of precarity in labor ties and the end of outsourcing or subcontracting; guarantee permanent education for workers; carry out strategic planning; and guarantee participative management with social control, besides integrating and feeding the information system.

The NOB-RH/SUAS (Ferreira 2011) additionally determines that career plans, positions, and salaries should encompass all workers participating in the SUAS working processes—be they public servants or “outsourced.” Despite the fact this document emphasizes the end of outsourcing, in many Brazilian municipalities, a large part of the social assistance services are subcontracted. Presently, agreements with entities in charge of offering such services are regulated by Law 13.019/2014, more known as the Regulatory Framework for Civil Society Organizations (Marco Regulatório das Organizações da Sociedade Civil—MROSC). It is worthwhile underscoring that this law regulates all partnerships celebrated between public administration and the CSOs—be it in social assistance or other fields—and encompasses the entire partnership process: beginning with a screening of proposals, going through their execution up to accounts rendering.

On the one hand, the NOB-RH/SUAS (Ferreira 2011) associates “outsourcing” to growing precarity in work—and points out that “outsourced workers” should be replaced by “permanent staff”; on the other hand, the MROSC follows the opposite path: not only suggests the transfer of public services to civil society organizations as something inevitable, explicitly stating it is desirable. In the document it presents, published in the Portal Convênios, the Federal Government (Brasil 2014) states, for example, that incorporating these organizations lies at the base of a “Project for the transformation of an exclusively representative democracy into a participative democracy, besides collaborating for the country to take that necessary leap in terms of the formal equality guaranteed in our Constitution—in which are all equal before the law—to a society that is in effect free, just and solidary.”



There is a broad variety of formats, sizes, and characteristics for those entities that take on responsibility for offering services which are part of the social assistance policy. This diversity leads to different work contexts for psychologists. Some have different services and count with hundreds of employees, while others have merely a small team and offer a single service. Some count with sponsorships from large corporations, and others survive only with the funds transferred by the City Hall. There are those that are linked to religious groups, and those that arise from neighborhood associations or social movements. Some exist for many years already and were already active in the field even before the SUAS came into existence. Others are recent and were created in the molds of the new social assistance policy. Regardless of the format or size, all the EAS work with people (users) in a situation of vulnerability.

## **Features of precarity of work in the social assistance policy: the psychologists' viewpoints**

### **The triangular relationship: psychologists, social assistance entities (EAS), and the public power**

The triangular relationship involving psychologists, the EAS that hire them, and the public power is structured and dynamized in a variety of ways, arousing or eliciting feelings of injustice and lack of recognition, besides an excess of responsibilities.

The feeling of injustice relates to the values that the City Halls transfer to the EAS. As stated by an outsourced psychologist: “... *an entity costs one third of what a direct service costs. Therefore, it represents an absurd savings for the public power. And, as it is so absurd, it ends up being unfair to us. Because our work is quality work.*” Although in some cases the value of the salary received by subcontracted personnel and by public servants in social assistance is similar, the instability and the precarious working conditions guarantee such a savings. A savings produces workers that feel diminished, unvalued, and wronged.

Some of the subcontracted interviewees also resent the lack of recognition by the public power of their knowledge. One of them reports that the content he records in the periodic reports delivered to the public institutions—with criticisms and suggestions for the policy—is incorporated into the official documents that serve as standards for the field. This situation makes the person feel a certain ambiguity regarding his competency and legitimacy to participate in the definition of a public policy, as, on the one hand, he feels honored upon verifying that his knowledge is incorporated into official documents, but on the other hand, he does not participate at the decision-making instances, nor is his authorship acknowledged.

But it is not only in the recognition or in the working conditions that this triangular relationship interferes. It interferes equally in the identity construction process itself of the person working in the social assistance policy. One of the psychologists interviewed stated that she had to repeat, in a reiterated fashion that, despite being outsourced, she is a public servant, as her work services the public. Another





reported she felt she was working for two “bosses” simultaneously—the State and the social assistance entity—that have different principles and forms of organization.

When reporting these situations, interviewees show they are placed in uncomfortable positions, because they bring together various and even opposing agendas; hence, the latter have a potential role conflict.

### **The entrepreneurial logic in social assistance**

Interviewees proved to be quite critical with the entrepreneurial logic and the presence of religious values in the orientation of social assistance entities. About entities that follow the entrepreneurial logic, an outsourced psychologist states: “*looks like an entrepreneur with a weight on his conscience, got it? (...) it’s almost a company, but it is not....*” This definition expresses the ambiguity present in the social entrepreneurship discourse, which allows for practices that are in accordance with private companies to be put in place.

Regarding the EAS of religious origins—a common reality in the field due to the proximity with charitable practices—there are those that incorporate religious acts into the institutional day to day, by making a prayer a mandatory activity. Others demand that their employees sell raffles to the church, a practice that is clearly derailing the function and the purpose of social assistance work.

There are yet, according to the interviewee’s understanding, entities that act in a “amateur” way, indicating that they have no domain whatsoever of what she calls a “*professional structure*,” that is, they do not have the material nor technical conditions to carry out the work. In face of such precarity, the entity’s activities are based on “*charity*.” A common expression among the professionals in the field clearly demonstrates this situation: “Social Assistance is a poor policy for the poor people.” This situation not only compromises the result of the work, but also makes the professionals feel frustrated, impeded from carrying out their activity as they believe they should. According to one of the interviewees, they are not able, for example, to adequately plan and assess the interventions, as they constantly need to “put out fires” in their daily activities.

The entrepreneurial logic is manifested by the fact that there are EAS that, in the opinion or evaluation of the interviewees, offer excessive types of “*services*,” as they encompass a broad spectrum of activities with different natures (from children’s education all the way to social–educational measures). The perception of excess results from their knowledge on the complexity of each type of service rendered, vis-à-vis the real ability of the entity in adequately rendering services in all these areas. Knowledge and different tools are required for each of these different services. In this way, the offer is looked upon with mistrust and criticism.

In this sense, there are entities that maintain contracts with municipal secretariats to act in the different regions of a city. Nevertheless, these entities are unable to follow a single line of work, being that their main goal is to be able to maintain this diversity of contracts with these secretariats. That is, the main purpose of the entities is to guarantee



the continuity of their own existence, in detriment of servicing the population. This tactic, adopted by some entities, directly affects the work of outsourced professionals.

### **Work conditions and organization in social assistance services**

Work conditions in social assistance in Brazil and the ways in which work is organized day after day have important repercussions on the quality of the services rendered, and on the life of the workers involved.

When it comes to the resources needed to carry out activities in social assistance, there are lacks relating to infrastructure offered by the institutions, such as a lack of adequate physical space to service users, including, in some situations, the lack of privacy or insufficient dimensions for group work or work with families. Some interviewees report the lack of financial resources to purchase equipment and consumption material and state that, in some situations, they end up buying these inputs from their own pocket: *“the public resource is only the salary, food and maintenance,”* says an interviewee. Besides the lack of resources, something that happens regularly is a delay in transferring the public funds for expenses, a lack of stability that makes it ever more difficult to plan actions.

One of the interviewees further reports that even though, at times, management decisions to expand the population serviced do not take into account the lack of material infrastructure to withstand this change, and the decision to service more users goes beyond the centers' capacity.

The same happens with the availability of human resources: Many services have a short list of professionals that falls short of the true needs to service the demand, which generates an overload of work for the teams, hampering the quality of the attention offered to the population. Social assistance core activities compete with a diversity of bureaucratic activities and the scanty time that remains to prepare actions, forcing workers to take home this work, outside of their working schedules. Many vital activities, such as home visits, are left aside. Many interviewees report feeling frustrated for not being able to manage the demand and express their discouragement.

Workers not always have the technical training to carry out specific activities, as in the case with social and educational measures. They also complain of the lack of technical supervision and spaces to reflect upon the work they are doing, as supervisors, when present, play an oversight role, as there is insufficient time for more in-depth discussions on the practices.

Added to that are the low salaries, the disrespect to labor rights—such as delays in payment, for example. In the case of the entities, the instability of the contracts signed with the government, the high turnover of employees, makes work in social assistance begin to consider as a “salary enhancement” among others, as some workers need to work in several activities to guarantee support to their families.



### **Instability at work, the experience of insecurity and forms of dealing with them: confrontation, resistance, and adaptation**

Instability is an important mark of the work of outsourced psychologists and arises from several environments: from the public institution (that provides the resources to hire them), the entity (that hires the workers), and the relationship between both.

According to one of the psychologists, the definition of policies at the municipal level (local) is fragile and uncertain. As she understands it, those in charge of the policy at the Municipal Secretariats “*are highly impulsive*”; “... *the secretary does not know what he is doing. Neither does the Mayor.*” In the final account, often-times, important political roles, such as the social assistance secretary, end up being taken on by the people of trust of the mayor, people who do not necessarily have the necessary knowledge regarding the SUAS. Due to this, professionals with decades of experience have to submit their work to the guidelines set forth by people who know little about the history and the daily activities of a social assistance service.

At another level, insecurity is experienced because of the City Hall's hiring process for the EAS. A core condition for this experience is the fact that these contracts are for specific periods of time; therefore, there is no certainty that employees will be able to keep their jobs—a condition that is characteristic of outsourcing. The risk of unemployment is constant and a concrete one. To this regard, there are many experiences of sudden dismissals, leading to an interruption in the activities carried out for the population, without ever consulting the professionals on the potential harm this measure may cause to the population serviced.

One of the testimonials, from a manager in three different EAS, states: “... *the NGO is very fickle, it is unstable. We work with the outlook that tomorrow the service will no longer be open. That is what we work with.*” This instability of the contracts leads to a high turnover of employees. In this context, to be able to keep your employment for four years at the same EAS is deemed to be a long period. As other interviewee stated: “*People remain a long time in (social) Assistance, but not much time at the same place.*” Although she is a young professional, who graduated just 7 years ago, this psychologist had also worked in three different social assistance services: one focused on young people in conflict with the law; the second aimed at work with families, and the third was an institutional user embracement service. This employment transience is among the neoliberalism's hallmarks. After all, it “has intensified the liberal humanist project of having a solid and coherent self who can draw on psychological resources to cope with the many changes of work demanded in a deregulated and globalized labor market” (Walkerdine 2006, p. 11). In it, the professional must be “versatile”: He must have varied knowledge and flexibility to adapt to new needs and workplaces. For instance, it is necessary to know how to deal with children and the elderly, with cases of domestic violence and street situations; in addition, there is a need to strengthen family and community bonds and promote restorative justice.

Also, in the face of such instability, the possibility that psychologists hired by the EAS will be unemployed is a permanent one, and it is common to hear from managers the news about the closing down of the services. The speech of an interviewee is illustrative: “*Therefore, this possibility of my not being here accompanies me every*



*single day, nobody needs to tell me this. And this hampers me, because it is different if you will be a reference, — because the permanent staff, they are a reference in the Community, they are a reference for the users, generally the users call them by their name”...’Ah, my social assistant...’They sometimes even mention my name.”* This psychologist tells us that she not only faces the fear of losing her job on a daily basis, but also sees herself unable to do her job as she should. After all, a high turnover does not allow people to build bonds with service users and turn this into their technique of choice. Considering this, she sees herself as just another psychologist who, at that moment, passed through a user’s life. A psychologist who had not—and she surely will not have—time to accumulate knowledge and build a history in the territory, who will not manage to strengthen bonds, nor become a reference for anyone. The phrase “my psychologist” seems to serve only to refer to those with rather stable employment relationships.

In the opposite direction, what is verified is that in one municipality—in which the rendering of social assistance services became the state responsibility recently, with a consequent nationalization of positions as well—the experience is contrary to the one reported by the psychologists hired by the EAS: security regarding the policy lines and conceptions for social assistance, anchors that make it possible to build, accumulate, and solidify knowledge regarding the work. Under such conditions, it is possible to set up routines to act in the more common cases: *“this here [this type of case] is something we do not need to think about, we need to think about it once a year to reassesses if it is useful....”* Due to that, professionals can use *“creativity to go beyond what the cases demand.”* The interviewee is a public servant (permanently hired) in that municipality. Albeit never having worked as outsourced staff, he identifies that in subcontracted services, the construction of a work plan is made more difficult due to the *“immense turnover of professionals.”* His testimony is clear in pointing out that stability in labor conditions and a definition of policies are indispensable requirements for workers to build collective competency. The great difficulty to build the routines needed to solidify work becomes a systemic reality (Sennett 1998).

Therefore, a high turnover hinders not only problem solving at work, but also the construction of a worker’s identity in the social assistance policy. So much so that one of the psychologists interviewed reported having worked for some years in a special protection service as an “outsourced” employee, until he passed a public contest, being able to choose where to work. He decided to remain at the same service, carrying out the same role. According to him, the change in the ties (from an outsourced to a permanent employee) did not imply great changes in the day to day of his work: He continued to sit at the same table, sharing the work with the same people, doing the same activities. The biggest change was that when he became a public servant, he began to see himself as a worker at the SUAS and to foresee a future in this field. With this, he started to want to study more on the policy and got engaged in worker’s movements—as this would be his “home” for many years.

Precarity due to instability attains levels that provoke a delay in the payment of salaries, thus impacting what would be the minimum one expects from an employment contract: punctuality in the payment of salaries. This condition leads to restlessness and uneasiness. As one of the interviewees said: *“all of this*



*has an impact (...) you do not work well.*" In addition to employment instability, the very work type has emotional impact on these professionals. After all, they have to deal with people in situations of extreme social vulnerability on a daily basis. They do hear stories of children detached from their parents, see the marks of domestic violence on women's bodies, and feel the pain of families that have nothing to eat. And, most of the times, there are no support groups or technical supervision to help them dealing with such distress caused by the pain of other people. To do this, there are only defense mechanisms of their own; they rely on "personal strength" and the ability to "separate professional life from personal life."

But this separation is not always easy. Particularly when we consider that affection in social work is often seen not only as an effect of any social relation, but as an inherent condition for intervention, operating as a sort of "working tool" (Curado 2008). And having to deal with this "working tool" involves a series of doubts, anguish, and conflict. After all, it is not easy to establish the extent to which a professional should be emotionally involved or prevented the affections aroused by in-service relationships do not affect his "personal life." According to one of the psychologists interviewed, this separation between personal and professional life is even misleading. After all, the gates of the institution where she works are not a kind of magic gateway, which changes her identity when she goes through it—she does not become another person by starting a work day, nor does she stop being a worker during her rest period. Thus, the two characters merge, complement each other, and they are confused with each other (Cordeiro et al. 2018).

Also, thinking of a "working tool," we often imagine something that may be chosen, controlled, and replaced. For instance, buying a computer, we choose the one that best meets our needs; we learn to handle it, and if it is no longer enough, we exchange it for a new one. But we cannot do any of these things with affection. We do not choose or fully control what we feel, we do not even decide when we will not have certain feelings, and they do not come with an instruction manual (Cordeiro et al. 2018).

This unpredictable and, to some extent, uncontrollable "working tool" often blurs some boundaries that might need to be preserved, since such emotional involvement can end up hurting the mental health of social work professionals. Blurring these borders may also lead to poor in-service relationships. For instance, it may lead shelter workers to "attach" too much to some children that they try to prevent or hinder them to be closer to family members again. In these cases, workers end up going against the key service objective because they cannot deal with the possibility of detaching from, of losing someone who—in order to make their work succeed—they had to learn liking. There may also happen what a professional named as a "half bond." That is, workers avoid building bonds (with babies, for instance), because they know the detachment process can be painful.

To avoid such distress and poor relationships, it is not enough for the professional to know the intervention standards, theories, techniques. He has to know how to feel; he has to know how, how much, and the time to feel. To do this, many people undergo therapy or participate in support groups. This is, according to Nikolas Rose (2011, p. 218), another facet of neoliberalism: "contemporary individuals are



encouraged to live as if they were projects: they must work their emotional world, their domestic and conjugal arrangements, their relations to employment.”

The psychologists interviewed report dealing with these problems in different ways: at times they adjust to what is expected from them; at others they build ways to resist institutional impositions. An important resistance strategy has been the political organization of these workers in associations, forums, and collective groups. In these, they take part in negotiation tables, organize seminars, and carry out surveys on working conditions in the SUAS, among other activities.

Participation of workers' representatives in the definition and implementation of the social assistance policy is a right guaranteed by the Brazilian legislation. The Federal Constitution of 1988 foresees the control of civil society over the State's actions. In the specific case of the SUAS, this control comes about mainly at Social Assistance Councils and Conferences. As their main attribution, conferences evaluate the policy and define guidelines to enhance the work of the SUAS. They take place in the environment of the Union, the States, the Federal District, and the Municipalities and are convened by the Councils. Oftentimes, they are preceded by preparatory stages, such as pre-conferences, expanded meetings, or public hearings.

Among other things, social assistance councils have the role of deliberating on and supervising the execution of the policy and its funding (in accordance with the guidelines set forth at the conferences); appreciate and approve the budgetary proposals for the area and the plan to invest the funds. Additionally, they “standardize, discipline, follow-up on and supervise the social assistance services rendered by the social assistance network, defining quality standards for the service and establishing criteria to transfer financial resources” (Ministry of Social Development and the Struggle Against Hunger 2005, pp. 51–52). Councils have a joint composition, that is, they have the same number of representatives from civil society (users, service renderers, and workers in the field) and government segments.

The possibility that the workers' representatives and other segments of civil society have in participating in these social control instances is the result of a social struggle waged mainly in the 1970s and 1980s, in the midst of the re-democratization mobilization in the country. However, it is necessary to consider that despite representing a significant achievement and a fundamental step toward more democratic public policies, the social control spaces are not free from conflict, difficulties, and contradictions. After all, there is always the risk of bureaucratizing, cooption, and taking for granted the operating routines.

There are additionally resistance strategies that escape these institutionalized militancy spaces. Resistances that take place in the day-to-day work at services are less visible, less organized. Simply to mention an example: one of our interviewees is the manager at a social assistance service in a large EAS in the municipality of São Paulo. This entity has services spread throughout the entire city and counts upon hundreds of employees, and its headquarters are in a region that is far from where our interviewed manager works. The control carried out by the entity proceeds mainly through monthly reports and sporadic visits to the service, creating a loophole so that the manager and her team organize the work differently from what has been prescribed. Due to a collective agreement, social assistants have a reduced working day: their contracts can extend up to 30 h per week, while the rest of the



technical staff—psychologists, pedagogues, sociologists, etc.—must work 40 h per week to receive the same salary and benefits. The team at this service deems this difference unfair and believes that all professionals of the SUAS should have their work load reduced—after all, it contributes to diminishing the impacts of a job that is wearing on their mental health, reduces conflicts among professional categories and enhances the quality of the work—as there is time “left over” to study, take training courses, etc. In the face of that, the manager and her team decided that all the workers at that service would work 30 h a week, and that the activities and the service agenda would be scheduled based on that collective decision. A loophole in the entity’s supervision enabled them therefore to create healthier (and less conflictive) working conditions.

Regarding the scarce state investments in continuous training, some of the people interviewed stated they used their “free” time for training. They even pay from their own pockets for specialization courses or technical supervision. To deal with the suffering brought about by the work itself, many times they resort to psychotherapists or support groups made up of professionals from the social assistance network. In the words of one of the interviewees:

We bend over to work on the in-house cooperation system, cooperation among ourselves, to enable us to withstand the hardships of our work, with our private therapies — each has his/her own, right? — and we rationalize a lot, that has been a way out that I personally found.

For another interviewee, the hardships or laboriousness was such that it became unfeasible to remain in the organization. She reports she loved the work but had to request a dismissal because she was “down to bare bones,” “all skinned.”

Official documents emphasize the importance of having the SUAS implemented by qualified, committed and valued professionals that are well paid. They further underscore the need to hire through public contests, advocating for the “non-precariety” of labor ties and an end to outsourcing. However, these same documents allow for that loophole in hiring and ties that “skin you alive” and leave their workers “down to bare bones.” They allow ties which are unhealthy, that sicken (Cordeiro and Sato 2017).

Despite the inherent difficulties in a job geared to the population in a situation of extreme vulnerability and the precarity of the working conditions at an outsourced job, some people overturn this high turnover logic and remain working for many years at the social assistance entities. One of the factors that contributes to this permanence is their commitment with the population they service, the desire to help others, and contribution toward transforming the unequal society we live in. The logic that underlies this conformism is therefore that the professional gives the best of him/herself to a good cause and to the institution and accepts the material conditions of the job which, in other contexts, would be unacceptable. That in the struggle for the rights of others, they accept to deny their own rights (Paiva and Yamamoto 2011).

Thus, the work takes on a rather special meaning in the life of many professionals that work in the “third sector.” It is mixed with, merged with, and confused with the principles, methods and values of the organization. “That way, the labor contract



necessarily becomes a commitment taken with the ideals advocated by the NGO. The psychologist is transformed into a militant... is forced to wear the organization's hat" (Dadico and Souza 2010, p. 126). This interweaving reduces or blurs the limits between work and your private life. With this, the moments of leisure many times are confused with the militant activity carried out by the organization.

It is important to highlight that this need to engage—and to share the “politically committed” discourse of the organization—is one of the fundamental characteristics of work in the “third sector,” so much so that announcements for job vacancies in the field include “social engagement” as one of the prerequisites for any candidate—side by side, for example, with training in the field of human sciences, professional experience, having a car, etc. We should at this point question ourselves how this commitment or engagement is measured, assessed, and compared during screening processes. After all, it is a subjective criterion, which does not refer to a specific skill, nor can be quantified in years of experience or legitimated through an academic diploma. There is more: it is a criterion that involves values, opinions, and political stance(s) of the candidates. Therefore, it is a demand for personal involvement that goes way beyond the adequate execution of a specific task.

## Final remarks

This article has attempted to question the precarious work in the services of government social assistance in Brazil, based on the interviews of workers in the field—more specifically, psychologists—who in their day-to-day work transform the political proposals into concrete actions to service the target population of such policies.

Their testimonies reveal the contradictions of a public policy model based on hiring labor through an outsourcing of assistance activities that are executed by the EAS. This model has migrated through several of the spheres of State action and reflects the rearrangement fostered by neoliberal policies that are under expansion throughout Latin America, and their impacts on the life of social assistance workers and on the populations serviced.

To gear out attention to the daily difficulties of psychologists in materializing the social assistance actions has made it possible to acknowledge the different dimensions of the growing precarity of this work and its subjective repercussions.

This precarity is expressed in the setting up of fragile ties, low salaries, lack of appropriate training for the job, high turnover of employees, in the experience of several instabilities on the job.

Subjective repercussions, on the one hand, refer to the constant feeling of insecurity (about remaining on the job or the continuity of the projects put in place), the feeling of injustice vis-à-vis employers, é oppression and “suffocation.”

The “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999) is perceived on a daily basis by respondents as the expression of a “passionate attack on any limitation of market mechanisms by the State” (Anderson 1995, p. 9), which worsens the working conditions. Recalling Sennett (1998), this context degrades the work ethics, a situation noticed by interviewees, who react critically, resorting to irony.





When prevented from working in accordance with what they see as a well-done job, people are situated in a context that is likely to affect self-image. This obstacle is linked to feelings of frustration and devaluation, and expressions of distress at work (Bendassolli 2011).

In this context, irony plays a role of resistance by highlighting the contrast between what is and what should be (Ferreira and Vieira 2017), even if between the lines. At the same time, it works as a safeguard of one's positive self-image, by considering the obstacles in working conditions that hinder delivering a well-done job.

On the other hand, actions to resist the suffering and the informal practices aimed at getting around the problems generated by the policy itself and that, contradictorily, are an obstacle to materializing the goals idealized by the proposers. In this aspect, we observed that if they become the managers of their own work, this proves to be a way to put in place the broader policy, without the mediation of managers who are not always "competent," that is, find the "loopholes" to make possible the policy they are committed to (in detriment of organizational barriers) is a form of resistance.

It was possible to identify a critical evaluation, by the workers, regarding the quality of the work carried out by the EAS. They are perceptions and assessments on the limitations that attain their own work. The criticisms tend to be twofold: on the one hand, not being able to execute important activities (plan the activities, create articulations with services to build references), safeguarding the ethics of the professional work (not interrupting the service suddenly). On the other hand, having to do so many red tape activities, which has nothing to do with training in psychology and is deemed to be something that disqualifies them. This condition places the concept they have of themselves in check, their competency and dedication. Interviewees point to the desire and the striving to do a well-done job and simultaneously the great barriers for this to materialize.

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