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Activity Clinic and Affects in Workplace Conflicts: Transformation through transferential activity

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Abstract

This paper presents some reflections about an approach in work psychology: the Activity Clinic. After a brief introduction to the conceptual background of the "Activity Clinic", it covers three deeply interconnected themes. The first concerns the meaning attributed to the development of the affects present in the work situation under analysis; the second discusses the reasons for the conflicts that are ultimately due to these affects; the third considers how a method of co-analysis of the activity can lead towards transformation of those conflicts.

Our reflections refer to the process engendered by this methodological approach as one of "transferential activity". The paper explains this process by empirically describing the "transport" of affects involved in the conflicts. The personal interpretation of the cause of problems gives way to the understanding that they are due to organizational dysfunction rather than to individual personalities. Measures can then be taken to break the deadlocks experienced both at the personal and collective level.

Keywords: affects, instructions to a double, dialogic process, transferential activity, analysis of activity, workplace conflict

Introduction

The "Activity Clinic" can be defined as a domain of development and application of studies, research, and interventions in work psychology. Our activity as researchers and "clinicians" consists essentially in providing a framework that permits the people who request our intervention to reflect on their own activity. Usually the requests we receive concern quandaries or obstacles that impede or complicate performance of the work in question. Such requests are often due to an experience of crisis on the part of both those who manage the activity and those who perform it. To meet these requests, we rely on two key principles:

The first is a *conception of the work activity*, which defines the scope of action in view of the goals previously set together with our contacts onsite.

The second concerns the *application* of such a conception. We employ this term in the sense of “techniques of action”, which consist of methods of intervention that initially allow us to understand the issues around which the request is centred, and then to be able to respond to them. These methods operate through co-analysis of the work situation by the persons concerned, as protagonists in a framework proposed by the Activity Clinic team.

Conceptual background of the Activity Clinic

The studies and research in the Activity Clinic aim to produce a pertinent scientific conceptualisation of the psychological function of work and the activity that is at its base. The clinical interventions that we practise aim more directly at developing the situations in the workplaces that ask for our help. This dual aim is nested in the internal debate within francophone work psychology and ergonomics, which, since the 80's have pushed to determine the true focus of research, whether theoretical or practical, in these disciplines. To summarize this debate, we note that on one side it concerns the self-referential attention of francophone ergonomics towards the human-tool interface and the active processes in this relationship¹. On the other, this focus is not fully shared by certain innovative schools of thought in work psychology, which are oriented more towards a conceptualisation of the *subject at work*². The attention here is directed more towards understanding psychological manifestations – defensive strategies, whether individual or collective – that the subject enlists in the effort to “resist” work constraints. The possible forms of psychopathology or alienating standardisation that may be due to the work organisation thus become the issues to address during research and intervention in human work. What is missing in the ergonomics approach is a clarifying focus on the web of *subjective* relationships that individuals and workgroups always weave between themselves, production requirements, and their tools. One particularly “subjectivist” form of work psychology, for its part, considers work as a test, a source of suffering or pleasure depending on individual or collective capabilities to protect themselves from alienating aspects and forms of domination, and has thus attributed a decidedly secondary place to the study of activity. Work activity was not regarded as a useful subject of analysis to be able to understand the dysfunctions, difficulties, and the conflicts engendered by the work among the men and women who perform it. Instead, the analysis would need to unveil the personal and collective defensive strategies – with their historical links – engendered in a context of power struggles caused by the organisation of the work. Subjectivity and work activity thus seem to be orthogonal, as if operating in two disparate dimensions.

Nevertheless, francophone ergonomics has provided an operational framework for human-machine interaction whose importance is internationally recognized. It introduced the conceptual distinction between prescribed work (what one has to do) and real work (what one really does) (Leplat, Hoc, 1983). The gap between the two is determined by the

¹ Representatives of this significant stream of francophone ergonomics include: Wisner, 1972, 1995; Daniellou, 1994, 1996; Teiger, 1991, 1998, Lamonde, 2000; Guerin et al., 1991.

² Among these approaches are the psychodynamics of work (Dejours, 1980, 1988, 1993, 1995, 1998; Molinier, 2001), the psychosociological work clinic (Lhuillier, 2010; Hajjar, 1995)

subjective processes inevitably evoked by the attempt to perform the prescribed task. But a key element is missing from this approach. This is where the conceptual and methodological contributions introduced by the Activity Clinic – for which the works of reference are still “The Psychological Function of Work”, written by Yves Clot in 1999, and his subsequent “Work and the Power to Act” in 2008 – have provided an innovative addition to this debate. During all analyses of work, it is necessary to consider the “realisations” of francophone ergonomics as representing no more than the tip of an iceberg among the ensemble of thoughts, choices, and actions – disparate, repeated, invented, failed imitation, findings either useful or ineffective – that each person deploys to be able to work. In sum, such realisations are nothing other than the visible form of all that a person puts into action at work to do what he or she considers appropriate. An “activity clinic” thus set itself the goal to reveal the submerged part of the iceberg – the processes that give it its form.

Five conceptual and operational principles were specified to better articulate the debate cited above. The first introduces a distinction central to the concept of activity, by noting the difference between *realized* and *real* activity. The second directs attention to a non-material but nevertheless decisive dimension involved in the passage from prescribed work to real work, the function of the *professional genre*: a collectively created interface that is present in all work contexts with a history, and that is aimed at performing the prescribed activity in a sensible and efficient manner. The third concerns the conceptualisation of work as “directed activity”. The fourth clarifies one of the aims of the clinic: developing workers’ power to act. The fifth focuses on the problem of method. To evince these points, it is necessary to have a methodology that elucidates their associated processes and functions. The activity clinic is thus the methodological approach to render intelligible the sought-for action of situational transformation. It was designed as a tool to restore to subjective and collective activity its unspoken history and its suspended realisations – in brief, to turn the intelligence and conflicts contained within it into tools for transformation.

Realised activity and real activity

A second point, essential for a deeper understanding of the gap between prescribed work and real activity, is the notion of a *professional genre* and its correlation with *style*. The gap between what the individual has to do and what he or she does is not solely the product of the individual’s solipsistic endeavours to accomplish the prescribed task, based on his or her experience. One never starts an activity “from scratch”: People enter into a work activity in the same way as entering an unknown milieu, which over time has constructed its own rules, both written and especially unwritten. They participate in a history of accepting or rejecting ways of doing things, of approving or criticizing behaviours, and of ingenuity that is recognized and shared or is dismissed. They seek to appropriate a collective domain of activity that has forged its own “grammatical” rules to perform the actions required of it. This world of specific activity that implicitly organises the actions of those who work within a given context is at the origin of the notion of the *professional genre* (Clot, 1999a; Clot, Faita, 2000). When speaking of the collective, it is necessary to think of a dimension completely distinct from the idea of a “collection of individuals”. It is more a dimension where individuals have a history of knowing how to construct significant links that contribute to enlarging the meaning of their activity. Therefore, it is necessary to interpret the term “work collective” as a dimension that is, in

a certain sense, *internal* to the subjects who comprise it. “My work collective” is the collective within me, the entity to which I refer in a completely implicit way when I work, when I need to make decisions in the field of my activity, and when I think about how to do something in the manner most appropriate for me while performing my assigned tasks. The practical and theoretical objective of the Activity Clinic is to elucidate the organisational work of a collective in its domain of action, its vicissitudes, its equivocal aspects, its errors, and its fault-lines. In other words, it is not only to reveal its history of what was possible but also what was impossible.

We have proposed a symbolic architecture for the notion of the professional genre. Following the work of Clot (1999a, 2008) we represent this using four dimensions. Our analyses consider in effect that all work activity is always carried out by an individual. This is the *personal* dimension. The individual, in his or her work, is constantly involved in relations with others, whether peers, superiors, or members of the public. This day-to-day relationship constitutes the *interpersonal* dimension. The personal and interpersonal dimensions are potentially describable. This is also the case for the third dimension, the *impersonal*, which is concerned with the task to be accomplished. We use the term “impersonal” because the prescribed task is designed without regard to the person who will perform it; it is waiting to be personalized. However, there is another dimension that underlies all organized activity but is neither observable nor directly describable. This is the *transpersonal* dimension, which we can define as being derived from the history of know-how deployed over time in the activity, its transmission across the generations that have constructed its forms, and the ways of acting and talking specific to the activity – without any of this being written down.

A professional genre is definitively the result of a subtle alchemy in which these four dimensions nourish each other. Finally, the notion of style is a reminder that, between the individual and the professional genre to which he or she belongs, each person always interposes his or her particularities, which are the result of a complex link between individual and collective, and between personal history and the profession’s history.

Work activity as directed activity

Subjective and collective work activity is always aimed at multiple addressees.

In the Activity Clinic we speak of “directions of activity” because we consider that work activity is always aimed in three directions: It is first directed towards the task to be performed, then towards others who are involved with the task, and finally towards oneself, as all meaningful activity participates at a deep level in a process of subjectification (Clot, 1999a, 2001, 2008). In other words, the work activity engages the self through the mediation of the object of the work, resulting in an inevitable encounter with the other. However, this triple direction of activity is necessarily under pressure and is never in a state of equilibrium. Such a pressure-filled movement in the affective, between self and the object in question, and between self and others who contribute to that activity, participates in the construction of a “sense of self”, which we define – without the ability to deeply explore its meaning here – as the sense of self-agency (of a core self). It means the sense of authorship of one’s own actions, having volition, having control over self-generated action, and expecting the consequences of one’s actions (Daniel Stern, 1985, p. 71).

This simple model of directions of activity can permit us to track the avatars of those directions whenever subjects are attempting to understand what they do at work and what the work does to them. When confronted by a problematic situation, we can assume that it is perhaps linked to unresolved obstacles in (at least) one of those directions of activity. In such a case, even though accomplishment of the prescribed work requires the subject to invest in actions encompassing the triple direction of activity, this investment risks being inhibited by an excessively inflated passion for one of these axes, with the consequent destabilization of the others (Scheller, 2007, 2001a).

Augmenting the power for action

Based on these principles, an activity clinic makes a clear distinction between power for action and power in general. One can have very limited power but great power for action, or, conversely, have power (such as institutional power) but little power for action. In the domain of work, power for action means the assumption of a practice that permits the individual and his or her collective of reference to efficiently confront the real dimension of his or her work. And this is due to an opening or reopening to the possibilities inherent in the situation. The definition of what may be possible or impossible thus becomes the central question. The margins for action that a subject and the collective know how to discover, through analysis of past activity, are the point of departure for developing current work activity. The development of power for action is predicated on the perception that such power exists in the activity, which each person, subjectively and collectively, performs in a given milieu. It is only through the discovery of this seldom-known power – which requires appropriate tools to become apparent – that the arc of possibilities can be determined, which can then form a zone for development of individual and collective activity. The evolution of the individual's own power for action is correlated with the ability to make active use of the affects at play in the activity under investigation. This involves entering the realm of individual and collective defensive systems, knowing that the greater the rigidity of the defences, the less affects circulate, or else, as Spinoza says in *Ethics* (1998), they take the form of “sad passions”: resentment, resignation, and envy (Scheller, 2002, 2007; Clot, 2008, 2010, 2013; Vygotsky, 1998; Rimé, 2005). However, the best defences are always those that permit action to circulate in an innovative way rather than solely in a conservative one. In other words, the less one is enclosed by excessively tight defensive structures, the more one becomes open to creating possibilities. But recognizing these possibilities, and in consequence one's own activity as a constituent unit of a wider dimension, requires the understanding that their characteristics were formed and developed within a milieu inhabited and constructed by others. Such understanding can only be achieved by structuring the meetings necessary to make the activity of each member of a collective an *enigma* for each of the others.

The problem of methodological approach

We follow Vygotsky in affirming that: “It is only in movement that a body shows what it is” (1930/1978, p. 64). It is only through a *transformative experience* that psychological activity can reveal its secrets. Development is not solely the objective of psychology, but its method.

Our interventions are based on construction of a framework for activity analysis to be conducted jointly with professionals who have directly or indirectly made the request for assistance. Interventions take place within a framework intended to engage three different

processes: An *analytical activity* promotes a *dialogic activity* within the work group; these paired activities in turn help reveal what we refer to as “transference activity”³. This designation consists of a conceptualization of process that has its source in the problem of *transfer* – a concept justified for use in our clinic by certain phenomena that span and define our interventions. We have extended the concept knowing well that our framework is highly distinguished from others by its goal and by the methods it employs from the psychoanalytic domain, the initial theoretical source for the concept. It is thus necessary to define the term *transference activity*, as this is the first time that it has been employed in a theoretical paper on work psychology: Transference activity should be envisaged as a process of “transport of affects” across the instances that structure all dimensions of work, meaning the development of forms of action more or less determined collectively, within a historical context. We shall attempt to clarify its meaning using an empirical case later in this study.

Our definition of this clinical approach in work psychology serves to show how we can use analysis to grasp the dynamics that destabilize the work situation in which we are requested to intervene. We are typically faced with a weakening of the collective forms of cooperation previously developed by professionals to work together effectively. These forms are now empty of meaning – as if they have no content. Individuals then seem no longer to have the means to deal constructively with disagreements that arise in the personal and interpersonal dimensions of the activity concerned. The situation deteriorates into covert or overt conflicts that appear insurmountable.

In these cases, it is always important for us to focus on the work activity underlying the conflicts that people have experienced. In a way, we “force” our interlocutors to suspend the commonly held opinion that the conflicts are usually due to the problematic personality traits of others (Drida et al., 1998; Enriquez, 1997; Pagès, 1993; Scheller, 2002). Instead, we get them to redirect their attention to the *real activity*. In our interventions we do not approach work conflicts as being determined by the personality or character traits of the professionals involved. This is a methodological bias distinct from the “psychopathological” approach to conflicts. If the problem at work is indeed caused by the psychopathological personality of an employee or manager – which can occur – we decline to intervene. Its resolution would require accounting for the psychopathological dimension of a person rather than the work as such. Conversely, when a work situation is heavily affected by tensions, resentment, deadlocks, and a conflictual atmosphere, we form the hypothesis that it may not be due to personal (or collective) psychopathology but rather, it is the *work itself* that could be ill.

The theoretical and methodological framework of our approach aims to employ dialogue so that each member of the work collective – and the collective as a whole – gains the means to grasp the threads that each of them weaves into the web of common activity, starting with analysis of the three directions of activity. The new understanding of these relationships should allow participants to reconsider the origin of the current destructive conflicts, and, in doing so, find active solutions. This also serves to identify the emotional constituents that exacerbate the problems. The co-analysis then allows a deconstruction of

³ In section III we provide a description of one of our methods of intervention and research: the method known as “instructions to a double”. Among our methods, see also simple and cross self-confrontation (Clot, Faïta, Fernandez & Scheller, 2000).

the significance attributed to different ongoing conflicts through elaboration of their meaning in each case. The course of this elaboration follows the dynamic that we attribute to the transferential activity: starting with a highly subjective description of their personal activity, which implies both their operations *and* the interpersonal relations that punctuate their work, the professionals participating in the group of analysis find themselves creating or identifying other meanings for the conflicts they have experienced. This is made possible through discussions of subjective and group work solicited through the framework of co-analysis. What was previously seen as an obstacle or as a person who causes problems at work can come to be understood as the manifestation of a type of conflict more related to (dis)organization of the profession, that is, the transpersonal dimension specific to that profession. The effects of this transport of conflict-inducing elements from one dimension to another are shown in the new connections that appear. The transpersonal dimension that had been weakened by the conflicts – signified by a commonly voiced and too often personalized interpretation – then begins to regain strength. New resources arise to permit resolution of the problems that had prevented working in a sensible and effective manner. Task redesign, which defines the *impersonal*, is also one of the results of the transformation in question.

Transferential activity can reveal how personally experienced conflicts are often the result of dysfunction in the transpersonal dimension.

Context for the Activity Clinic Intervention

It is necessary to provide a more precise account of the processes we have so far described in abstract and general terms. We will do so using a concrete intervention situation, proposing a specific example of analysis of emotional expression, which led to a heavy, oppressive work atmosphere within an administrative unit. We will also show how collective engagement in analysis of their work was able to transform the situation, starting with a new perception of the cause for that atmosphere.

We had received a request for intervention from a trade union regarding one of its administrative departments, which, following the long medical leave of an employee due to depression, faced constant tension between certain employees and their management. The union's works council called on our team to help determine the reasons for this tension and the conflicts it generated. For some members of the works council, the employee's depression was viewed as a potential indicator of forms of harassment within the department, while the resignation of two other employees beforehand constituted a prior sign of the problem. Nevertheless, this point of view remained less a conviction than a question. The employee had fallen ill, we were told, following the refusal of the unit manager to approve her request for promotion to a position of greater responsibility. Reportedly, the manager had told her with a certain degree of aggressiveness that she did not have the competence required. Another employee complained that she did not understand any more what she was doing, because the reorganization carried out by the new management, while reducing the workload from its overly high, prior level, had seriously fragmented her work. Similarly, the employee responsible for the computer-based layout of the newsletter published by the department had passionately taken the side of the employee who had fallen ill, and identified to a certain degree with her complaint. Like her, she felt she was the victim of malicious lack of recognition, with a tendency to devalue her competence. However, younger employees who had been hired after the reorganization reported that the overall work situation functioned well, with each person

able to do what they needed to do without too much difficulty. The overall situation, before exposure to our methodological framework, was marked by a very passionate emotional charge, which heavily affected exchanges during our initial meetings with the group of employees. The long-term employees made fiercely accusatory speeches about their management, while more recent hires expressed mostly non-verbal irritation at the formers' version of the facts. In brief, the narration of the conflicts was deeply marked by hatred on one side and by annoyance with that hatred on the other. These "negative" emotions – resentment, hate, annoyance – all seemed to prevent any opening towards the state of reflection necessary for conflict transformation.

Analytical Framework

The particular framework that we proposed nevertheless permitted this aspect of hatred to be turned around within a more productive context. We agreed to become involved in this conflict context on the condition that both the employees and line managers commit to work with us, using specific analytical methods, to redefine the activity and history of the department. We indicated the basic principles of our approach: a collective analysis group is always composed of peers and cannot include the presence of people hierarchically superior to its voluntary participants. The situation here was analyzed based on the viewpoints of two separate groups of professionals: the group of employees and the group of managers. The latter, whom we cannot describe here due to lack of space, have generally accepted the resolutions of the employees' group, as discussed in the conclusion to this article. Participation in the analysis must be voluntary; participants must make themselves available; each participant must describe their daily work activity, and the methods that they have developed through experience to perform it, so as to be intelligible not only for others, but also for themselves. In short, this includes everything that seems self-evident, but is only the result of a more or less subjective construction over time. In this intervention, we used the method known as "instructions to a double" (Oddone et al., 1981; Clot, 1995, 1999b, 2001; Scheller, 2001a, 2003), in which the facilitator organizes the exchange by directing each participant as follows: "Tomorrow I will replace you: Tell me what I should do so that no one notices that I've taken your place." The professional has to answer questions from his or her virtual replacement, and so has to describe the experience of actions and gestures developed through daily confrontation with prescribed tasks and interaction with all others involved in the same activity, whether peers or superiors. Each member of the team takes turns in performing the same exercise. The aim is to highlight on one hand the subjective contributions that each makes to the collective activity, and on the other to help find common ground within situations that seem more often to be obstacles or conflicts with personal associations. In the next step, each participant in the analysis has to take a recording or transcript of the instructions they gave to the facilitator, to reflect on their content. The last step consists of a subjective and collective review of the description of the situation being analyzed. This review leads to the construction of a common position, possibly in the form of a document signed by the workgroup and addressed to the sponsor of the intervention.

Analytical Processes

In turn, each member of the organization's administrative and technical service (six secretaries) described their activity according to the specific procedures that we proposed. One element emerged immediately during the first analysis of the overall department: Long-term employees were the only ones to assert that problems were present at the

organizational level. Recognition of the problems would not have been possible without knowing the organizational history of the department, especially the different ways in which the *division of tasks* had been prescribed during the last decade.

Part of the department's activity included the writing, layout, and distribution of a newsletter for the union's retired members. The description of the different phases in development of an edition showed how "hot or cold periods", according to the urgency of tasks and deadlines, were experienced differently depending on whether a team member could track the overall progress of the newsletter's production. Thus, as we will see in more detail below, the analysis from the desktop publishing (DTP) operator, Ms. C., one of the long-term employees, showed that even though her workload had become less heavy than before, her work had at the same time become arid and devoid of meaning. In fact, her activity had been split from the global context of the newsletter's production through a division of labour that kept her distant from the decisions taken regarding the practical organization and the content of the newsletter.

Even more classically administrative activities had suffered a similar fate. The analysis has demonstrated that before the reorganization, the employees' tasks had been particularly tied to the needs of the managers. Afterwards, the employees considered the organization of tasks as being too fragmented, without a clear and shared relationship to the overall activity. In addition to this imbalance due to the nature of the job, the issue of dependence on the managers remained unresolved. Thus, as we shall see, the reorganization of tasks had failed to remedy the issue of pathological dependence between subordinates and managers characteristic of the previous model of organization within the department. That reorganization had in fact worsened the situation: The restructuring of tasks had only drained meaning from the activity of the long-term employees, depriving them of a source of interest in the life of the union's retirees, which had been permitted beforehand due to their performance of extra work for their managers. We will illustrate these points using an extract from the *instructions to a double* provided by the department's DTP operator, Ms. C.

An Example of the Elaboration of Professional Conflicts

The DTP operator for the newsletter, Ms. C., had taken the side of the employee who had fallen ill, stating, like her, that the managers of the department had been contemptuous of the employees' work since the reorganization. The extract we present below demonstrates one of the difficulties faced by Ms. C.: It was less the technical aspects of the tasks that posed problems but rather the aspect of work relations, which were apparently riddled with deadlocks. This aspect constitutes one of the directions of activity that the researcher attempts to investigate using the Activity Clinic method. The DTP operator described the start of her work to the interviewer, as if the latter were to replace her on the following day:

Ms. C.: Well, well! How to say it? So, the difficulty for me to describe my work is that everything depends on what Martha, I think, called "the cold pages and the hot pages", so....

Interviewer: Does it change radically?

Ms. C.: I have not been able to figure it out. Sometimes it's lukewarm. And ... when it becomes hot, in fact, that's just before a deadline. So, how to say it exactly ... Oh! If you were actually going to replace me tomorrow, I would not know what you would

do. Oh! With what I have just been doing, it's possible I risk having.... Will it be a cold or a hot period? I don't know....

Interviewer: How is that? I have a hard time knowing whether tomorrow I will be in a time with a heavy workload or a time when?...

Ms. C.: Ah, it doesn't surprise me that you have a hard time understanding because I don't either ... well, it's that there are probably cold periods for Marthe⁴ and for me, along with hot periods. I think that our hot periods are more alike, as the cold periods for her and for me are not the same. Maybe she ... her cold periods are when she gets the articles, when she gets the articles, she keeps them – that's normal – she doesn't know which [edition] they're for, not yet – they haven't yet had the meetings ... *but then you need to know that I don't participate in any of the meetings to prepare the newsletter!*

Interviewer: ... is it a choice that comes to mind?

Ms. C.: It's not a choice that comes to my mind or to yours ... absolutely not! I always wanted to participate in the early days of the newsletter, but then there were several years – we could say seven years – when I even participated at several editorial board meetings, where I had nothing to say, but at least that allowed me ... that came, all of that was at the discretion of Bruno⁵, who sometimes wanted to include me and at other times not.

Interviewer: Depending on?...

Ms. C.: Depending on ... he didn't necessarily have reasons. Sometimes, at some times, he said quite unpleasant things to me, like I was only a technical worker and that I didn't have ... and that he was the manager, and anyway, at moments like that and at others he might be the first to acknowledge my technical skills or at other times to disparage them, so it's rather disconcerting, unsettling, in any case the editorial board ... I haven't participated in any more content development meetings, and haven't tried to request it; there are at least two content development meetings, and I should have been able to participate in them. But, since the reorganization, I haven't been invited again....

Interviewer: Who no longer invited you?

Ms. C.: ... (Pensive): Yes, Bruno.... When he was in his better moments, he came into my office – I don't want to call it my office, with my machine and all ... but anyway, I was not accustomed to it – I have to say that since I started working here I've had an office, I've had a machine, but I ... well then ... in my office, among the new furniture, with the new furniture, there was even – I should have the plan somewhere – a chair, Bruno's chair ... (*she pauses for two seconds*) ... that proved in any event that we worked together ... but there was a question about hiring a new senior editor and Bruno came and gave me an account of the workgroup's activities, where he kept me informed, but it was completely up to him whether to do it or not, or whether he felt that it was not necessary. Well, one day he might come and another day not, but the proof is that he did come, which is something which made me ... it was never up to me

⁴ During her “instructions to a double”, the senior editor (Marthe) had spoken of “cold and hot pages”, meaning periods of light or heavy workloads, in describing her tasks as the lead copyeditor for the newsletter.

⁵ Bruno is the pseudonym for the Managing Editor of the newsletter, the manager of Ms. C.

to decide. I placed a chair for Bruno to use when he came ... there was even a joke about it ... it was *his* chair: I even added it to the plan I made to furnish the office and then ... then Marthe was hired, there was all of that, and I no longer participated nor was invited to come because there was already ... and then afterwards I realized that I was no longer invited and *that was something, really something, really something!* ... (*she expresses rage*) I felt that there was no point in insisting, that indeed there was no one other than Bruno in the team who could refuse to include me, so as a result, I almost never know what's happening until the last moment.... (*she is silent, visibly tense*).

Interviewer: When there are things like that, that is to say, what you felt ... it's to see how I can deal with it, myself ... you felt in some way that you were no longer formally invited to the meetings. It's to understand what to do ... participating in them is important to me, yet I don't permit myself to request it from Bruno, for example?

The question led to accounts of different events that demonstrated the interpersonal nature attributed by the employee to the performance of her activity, and which were almost entirely focused on the opinion of the head of the newsletter. The crystallization of this interpersonal focus, as exemplified in the extract presented, overshadows the importance of the technical skills she had developed (in terms of producing the mock-up for the newsletter). In other words, she focuses in the beginning solely on the ambivalent relations with her manager, and only recognizes the technical skills, which she developed almost completely on her own, after giving her instructions to a double. That focus, shared in common with other long-term staff, thus constitutes the principal symptom of the problems experienced in their work. The awareness of this symptom serves mainly as a generalizable example of the form taken by relations between employees and managers in the departmental environment. The analysis shows that the tense relations experienced by the employees vis-à-vis their managers – to the extent that Ms. B. fell ill with depression – was linked to an attempt by the latter to “put in order” the overall activity of the department. During years, in fact, its functioning was fundamentally based on work relations between departmental managers and subordinates that had proved particularly harmful for the latter.

Discussions in the Analysis Group to Move Beyond Negative Emotions

The descriptions of subjective activity permitted by the instructions to a double, which were discussed in the analysis group during ten meetings⁶ led to a new, collectively achieved understanding of the subjective relations of the long-term employees with their managers. The analysis found links between the issues brought to light by Ms. C. and other specific events of the same nature, and tended strongly towards the conclusion that the department suffered from distorted relations between managers and their subordinates. Usually this relationship is intended to provide a separation between that which belongs to the company and that which continues to belong to the individual (Doray, 2011). Prior to the reorganization, the long-term employees had found themselves enmeshed in work relations overly charged with the interpersonal dimension by their managers. The managers thus created an affective dependence with one or another of the employees under the guise of providing specific assistance for the employees to perform their work.

⁶ 1 meeting dedicated to every member of the group (6 employees), 2 meetings for co-writing with employees a final document, 2 meetings with managers

Without being fully aware of it, the employees accepted this dependence and the resulting workloads, to a certain extent because they felt constrained to do so, but also to “distract themselves” from their day-to-day activity. Some tasks directly related to the recipients of the department’s services were not completed or finished late due to lack of time. These tasks sometimes took second place to those felt to be more interesting, such as accompanying the manager in certain aspects of his managerial activity within the union (conferences, seminars, and meetings).

However, the “other for oneself”, the manager who chooses his protégé, could disappear from the scene. This was the case with the manager who had designated Ms. B. as his protégé – the employee that afterwards fell ill. The group analysis concluded there had been a major malfunctioning of work relations that had affected both her and her colleagues. For Ms. B., this malfunction translated into a very rewarding dependence vis-à-vis the former manager in the department, but on his retirement, she fell ill the same year. He had supported and protected her to the point of hiding her lack of expertise, especially in terms of computer skills, which she had not been able to surmount. Faced with her knowledge of this lack and the impossibility of her former protector’s return, the employee had unconsciously chosen a way out by falling ill. Then, with a clearer understanding of the situation, she chose to quit her job and negotiate financial compensation with the help of the works council.

The search for the “other for oneself” on the part of both employees and managers, which meant surrender of all power and volition by the former (and giving all), had in fact disturbed the transpersonal dimension of the profession, undermining it by breaking the rules governing collective relations with the activity in common. It is in this sense that too much of the interpersonal had devitalized the collective aspect of the profession, abandoning the efficiency criteria essential to perform work well – criteria based on the extensive experience of others from the same profession. As long as this transpersonal dimension governs workgroups, allowing for negotiation of the place of each member within the overall organization, the profession can be said to be in “good health”.

Transformation of Conflict, development of affects

It now seems possible for us to better understand the role of affects when we intervene in work situations where conflicts appear incapable of spontaneous resolution. From a methodological point of view, the collective analysis of subjective activity permits the transformation of concrete episodes into objects that arouse affects (for example, the description of Bruno’s empty chair).

By focusing on these episodes, the emotions aroused can be expressed, to the self and to others, and thus can be understood and shared. The origin of these feelings is generally hidden from awareness due to self-censure. In such a case, relying on an individual’s description of a situational narrative is inadequate. For example, individual interviews or collective discussions aimed at directly accounting for the causes of conflicts lead, most of the time, only to the masking of the participant’s feelings. This is because the stories we tell ourselves to account for the tensions we feel veil the *real* dimensions of those tensions. We finish by acknowledging only one description of the situation, which we repeat, from a representational point of view, as the single interpretation possible for the affects we experience: “If I am not invited to meetings, I feel excluded = I am excluded; if my boss doesn’t come to talk with me any more (Bruno’s empty chair) = I feel I’m no longer respected = I’m no longer respected”. The real dimension of those feelings is much

more complex, and, in addition, strongly determined by emotional patterns constructed during the course of personal and professional life. We cannot reach this *Real* in a direct way – expressed verbally – but rather can do so through peripheral and often involuntary associations, (Bucci, 1984; 1997; Mergenthaler, 1996). It is then, within the collective, that the affects emerging in the analysis of personal activity can lead to a generalization of their meaning, thus providing a new understanding of the conflicts that are occurring. This generalization may be understood as a shared understanding of the meaning of affects experienced in the work situation.

The commentary of Ms. C. about her instructions to a double may illustrate the first step towards generalization. It was addressed to all the participants in the group of analysis, her colleagues, and the managers⁷. Her writing is very much adapted to its audience, which influences both its style and choice of content. The brief remarks Ms. C. wrote include only certain aspects of what she expressed during the intervention – aspects that were appropriate for public communication. We think, nonetheless, that this constitutes a valid and significant sign of the developmental process that allowed her to regain control of her work situation and contribute to a transformation of the collective situation.

Here is her commentary, which contributed to the writing of a more general document signed at the end of the intervention by the entire group of participating employees.

"Following my interview, here are several clarifications and proposals.
First, an update about the newsletter's "cold periods": I talked about the lack of work, and the feeling of guilt that goes with it, but I have come to see this from another perspective, to realize that, in fact, I used those periods to make progress in other ways – the next mock-up, research to create logos (within the work framework), self-study of software (Photoshop, Illustrator) for which I have never had formal training....
I think that to get a better grasp of the work, the place I currently fill in producing the newsletter, and especially in the "V.N." group, before all else it will be necessary for my managers, meaning Bruno, to conduct themselves differently to avoid placing me unwillingly in the role of a "buffer". It will also be necessary to clarify the role and responsibilities of each person and the work that I can be asked to do by each, without the risk of offending their sensibilities, for this will eliminate some misunderstandings.
To return to "V.N." and the particular work I do, I would like to remind you that if the new job title of DTP Operator describes the work to be done in a coherent fashion, that title has not necessarily helped to integrate me into the team producing the newsletter. It seems quite negative to be confined to technical work and be excluded from the life of the newsletter. I have repeatedly offered to participate in the "V.N." content development teams to remedy this situation. Apparently it was not the place for a DTP Operator.
I understand about division of labour and I recognize its worth when things are clearly defined, but we can't say that they are clear here. Since I am allowed, through this analysis of my work, to propose positive measures to successfully perform my work, I therefore insist on reiterating my request to participate in the "V.N." content development teams, especially in the last meeting before the edition's deadline for content submission.
Actually, in my opinion, allowing the "DTP Operator" to know about the progress of the

⁷ We are unable to address the manager's part of the analysis process in this paper: The manager group co-analyzed their reorganization of the department. That analysis, completed with members of the Activity Clinic team, allowed them to develop their own understanding of the conflicts and to recognize areas of responsibility for them.

newsletter's development doesn't hurt anyone, and definitely does not put anyone's position in question; on the contrary, it can only contribute to make my work more concrete. I feel as if I work on the fringe of the newsletter team. I receive information in a piecemeal and random fashion: Wouldn't it be simpler for me to participate and to have direct communication with the team? This would not affect Marthe's responsibility, as senior editor, to retransmit information – she is in touch with events as they occur – but my dependence on Marthe's availability to stay informed emphasizes the fact that I am not a full member of a team. And no one can retransmit the “life of a newsletter” – either we participate in it, or we just perform tasks, and then, for sure, we are in the division of labour!

I am not asking for review of the status of a “technical worker”, but I propose that we should carefully re-evaluate the methods of organizing the work, and take the DTP Operator into consideration in the work process, and consider the meaning that the newsletter production has for others as well as for me.

I should no longer be subject to someone's arbitrary decision as to whether I should or should not know about something. If it is deemed useful for the successful production of the newsletter to limit my work as DTP Operator to developing the mock-up on a computer, I would like that decision to be made collectively and communicated to me officially.

The commentary from Ms. C., with its simplicity in choice of terms and their resonance with the overall experience of other employees, together with the discussions it stimulated, restored the clarity necessary for everyone to work as well as possible, by having better defined the aims of the common activity. Indeed, we could call it a good division of labour....

We can say that in the department this question had been revisited from a somewhat different perspective, which indicated that, for sure, each person had their place, but that each could move from their place, without being a priori fixed to it by confusing dictates. This also showed that the web woven by each person between the three-way directions of activity is always under pressure and that depending on the circulation or obstruction of that pressure, the collective activity can develop further or be stifled. To be able to speak of development, it is necessary to envisage possibilities (Clot, 1999, 2008; Daniellou, 1994) – at least for those who can think of and consider them in relation to the *impossible*, and which they can also imagine based on shared observations. Examples of impossibility in the workplace include relations of domination, embodied by the authoritarian traits of a superior or colleague. Faced with this, only collective action can guarantee that these relations are evaluated and discussed safely using a dynamic of conflict resolution. Alone, one can do little about it. However, to act together with others, one must share some of one's reasoning so that others can concur with it or possibly transform it to achieve other goals

In the commentary written by Ms. C. as well as in oral statements during the collective discussions, the content of the exchange reached a level of generalization that was broader than the specific context. It also provided a degree of detail about the dependencies imposed by the profession and the affective links produced therein, and even proposed reasons to explain the loss of meaning in the employees' activity, when it was divorced from its overall context. Starting with subjective effects, that everyone had seen appear in the description of his or her activity, each employee was able to see how these effect showed commonalities with the experience of their peers, to the extent of participating in a transmission across generations brought about by the process. We were able to see together with Ms. C. that the request for admittance to the editorial team did not originate in a simple claim for a more important place for herself, but was instead an indication of

how much each person's activity gains through inclusion in the collective life of the common activity. The analysis group transformed itself into a work collective, with each person finding a place newly clarified by the analysis, for his- or herself and for others. We could add the following: After each person experienced how a well-constructed framework of dialogue can return subjective activity to the general, collective sphere, the expression of that subjective activity permitted it to be reformulated as *belonging both to oneself and to others*. This perception returns the actual activity to its correct place: one in which a personal contribution to something that is only for oneself permits one to go beyond and thus *enlarge the self*.

Conclusion

Arguably, in this case the conflict resolution took place *dialogically*. This means that the conflicts were able to pass beyond the forms of hate, resentment, and bitterness towards other affects. In Spinozian terms, we refer to the latter as “active affects”, to distinguish them from the initial, passive affects or “sad passions”. The dialogic process we initiated – not as a formal instance of speech about work activity, but rather as a possible renewal of the work at the collective level – obviated the risk of destructiveness implicit in the expression of passions. And the transferential activity engendered by this dialogue permitted the transformation of dilemmas and subjective conflicts arising from the work activity – the desires that stifled the activity and the sacrifices it demanded as well – into dilemmas common to all the members of the work collective, thus leading to a collective resolution.

At this point, the meaning of the “transferential activity” elicited by our methods of co-analysis should be clear. If the activity of analysis permits articulation of problems experienced personally in another dimension than that of interpersonal conflict, it is due to the “translation” of personal problems into professional problems. Transferential activity represents this process. The term “translate”, from the Latin *trans-ducere*, is etymologically the transfer of something from one dimension to another. Here, it is the meanings underlying personal feelings that have been able to be transferred into the transpersonal dimension, by reviving its organisational forms.

Transferential activity follows the process that is at the base of every work of psychological elaboration. We allow ourselves to compare here the work of *elaboration* with the work of *art*, as described by Vygotsky, and we turn to him for the concluding statement in this paper:

... Art's true nature [in our terms, the process of elaboration] is that of transubstantiation, something that transcends ordinary feelings; for the fear, pain, or excitement caused by art [by elaboration] includes something above and beyond its normal, conventional content. This “something” overcomes feelings of fear and pain, changes water into wine, and thus fulfills the most important purpose of art. One of the great thinkers said once that art relates to life as wine relates to the grape. With this he meant to say that art takes its material from life, but gives in return something which its material did not contain. (Vygotsky, L. 1971)

The understanding of the cathartic process proposed by Vygotsky led him to state that “emotions triggered by art are intelligent emotions” (idem, p. 293). In our activity clinics, in the methodological framework that permits elaboration of the affects present in a conflictual work situation, we attempt to adhere to the notion that development of emotions is possible. This is an approach that extracts them from their embodiment in personal and interpersonal relations so as to affect the collective forms of the work people

perform, and thus achieve the transformation of those emotions. We employ the term transferential activity to clarify this developmental process.

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