Il decent work

Tra professionalità ibride e organizzazioni adhocratiche

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Sommario

Il tema del decent work sottolinea importanti aspetti relativi alle condizioni materiali e immateriali che rendono sostenibile e adeguato il lavoro nei differenti contesti organizzativi. Il presente contributo partendo dall'etimologia del termine decent, ne delinea aspetti distintivi connessi con temi canonici della Psicologia del lavoro e delle organizzazioni, dal benessere, alla sicurezza, alle condizioni materiali e immateriali, personali e collettive, manageriali e organizzative. Viene ribadito il valore del paradigma del significato per il decent work. Inoltre nella complessità dello scenario attuale e della pandemia Covid-19 si evidenzia la consapevolezza che per governare l'inatteso servono organizzazioni adhocratiche (flessibili, adattive, agili) che richiedono a loro volta professionalità Ibride, generate da processi di apprendimento organizzativo opportunamente sviluppati. Viene aperto il dialogo tra la *Psychology of Working Theory* e altri e consolidati framework concettuali (practice based studies, prospettive socio-costruzioniste, ...) per alimentare dibattiti generativi e produttivi di ulteriori interessi, centrature e domande di ricerca e costruire in concreto autentiche esperienze di decent work.

Parole chiave

Decent work, Organizzazioni adhocratiche, Professionalità ibride.

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Decent work

Between hybrid professionalism and adhocratic organisations

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Abstract

The concept of decent work highlights important aspects related to the tangible and intangible aspects that render work sustainable and adequate in different organisational contexts. This paper, starting with an introduction about the etymology of the term decent, outlines its distinctive aspects connected to canonical themes of work and organisational psychology, from well-being and safety to tangible and intangible, personal and collective, and managerial and organisational conditions. The value of the paradigm of meaning for decent work is underlined. Furthermore, in the current complex scenario and with the Covid-19 pandemic, we raise awareness of the fact that in order to manage the unexpected, adhocratic organisations (which are flexible, adaptive and agile) are needed, and these in turn require hybrid professionalism, generated by well-developed organisational learning processes. The dialogue between the *Psychology of Working Theory* and other, consolidated conceptual frameworks (practice-based studies, social constructivist perspectives etc.) is opened in order to spark generative and productive debates on additional issues, points of focus and research questions, and create tangible, authentic decent work experiences.

Keywords

Decent work, Adhocratic organisations, Hybrid professionalism.

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Decent work

The concept of decent work raises important issues regarding the tangible and intangible aspects that render work sustainable and adequate in the various organisational contexts in which it is performed. Let us start with the clue offered by the meaning of the term «decent» — it provokes some interesting observations, whose consideration will enable us to enact further in-depth analyses. As a matter of fact, the etymology of decent expresses both something that is dignified, characterised by dignity, and something that is decent in the sense of acceptable, proper and proportionate. On the one hand, when we think about something respectable, we connect it with something which is worthy, and which sometimes takes on the shape of an axiom or principal of reference, in order to ensure *eubiosìa*, meaning a good, untroubled life. On the other hand, when compared with the more immediate resonance of what is deemed indecent, decency evokes dimensions of appropriacy, coherence and propriety again, which render work sustainable, productive and performative. In this initial semantic reading, we can pick up on references to a representation of work as a higher dimension, structurally embodied into the culture of our civilisation in such a way that it represents the cornerstone of constitutional principles and of expectations and regulations which ratify rights and duties, rules and order.

Howard Gardner (Mucinskas & Gardner, 2013) has already broken down the concept of *good work* into three distinct aspects:

– excellence connected to the quality of performance given;
– generation of social value, referring to the prospect of overcoming an exclusively individualistic logic of the benefits produced;
– work enjoyment, to be taken as a combination of effort, dynamism and satisfaction gained through a person's work experience.

From here, we can move on to breaking down decent work according to the aesthetics and ethics of good work (Scaratti & Kaneklin, 2013) when belonging to interactively complex and dynamic organisational situations with ambiguous and unpredictable characteristics. Those that prevent a univocal and linear reading of risk factors and require the application of experiential, context-sensitive rationality in order to deal with the unexpected in organisational life, in its multiple manifestations of the unforeseen, the instable, the uncertain and at times even the bursts of tragedy and drama. The connection with the work experience and transformative tension which characterise such a perspective must nevertheless face up to counter-intuitive dimensions, starting with the recognition that work structurally promotes factors of stress and anguish, issues that are impossible to elude despite the fact that we attempt to regulate them. It is almost as though we should embrace the opportunity to learn to «suffer»

a little within organisations, to welcome even elements of pain and anguish amongst the excesses of meaning. The prospect of pausing a while on these aspects should be fostered, not with the aim of passively succumbing to them but of viewing them as a whole, in order to be capable of talking about existing problems, to enact the experience of facing them, thus experimenting the relief connected to such an approach (Scaratti & Ivaldi, 2015). The unavoided relationship with anguish and suffering raises questions about professional and organisational culture, mobilising awareness of how the quality of working life, a person's relationship with their job, and the relational system that they share and help to create are all elements that have a bearing on productive processes (Scaratti & Kaneklin, 2013).

Decent work and work psychology

From these initial reflections, tangible evidence and associations with established themes of work and organisational psychology emerge, ranging from well-being and safety to tangible and intangible, personal and collective, and managerial and organisational conditions, which all provide work with its characteristics of dignity and decency. From this point of view, the construct of decent work can claim the credit of drawing attention to three registers of in-depth analysis and knowledge:
– that linked to processes of prevention and inclusion, connected to the reduction of discriminating factors of varying nature;
– that linked to the lived experience of workers, with reference both to their representations and to the multiple factors that influence their working life;
– that linked to the paradigm of meaning, whose relevance is defined as transversal and widespread in the various studies put forward.

There are various points of focus and specific subdivisions of the aforementioned dimensions:
– the identification of positive psychological resources and the promotion and training of these in order to connect value and meaningfulness of work and wellbeing (Di Fabio & Blustein, 2016; Di Fabio & Svicher, 2021);
– the subject of job crafting as an interweaving of connections between different elements, amongst which intuition, in order to represent paths of meaningful mediation which connect structured variables with more unforeseen/unpredictable and spontaneous dynamics (Svicher & Di Fabio, 2021);
– the elements inherent to the struggle of work and related conceivable prevention prospects in order to guarantee conditions of individual and organisational wellbeing (Di Fabio, Svicher, & Gori, 2021);

– the exploration of the work representations of new generations and career education programmes that unlock important processes for influencing and promoting more evolved working cultures (Di Fabio, 2017; Di Fabio & Tsuda, 2018; Di Nuovo, Di Corrado, & Magnano, 2021; Ivaldi & Scaratti, 2020; Zammitti, Magnano, & Santisi, 2021; Ripamonti et al., 2018).

What is important in these and other observations is the drive towards a direction of purpose which is capable of stoking further trajectories and research paths: in other words the possibility/necessity of adopting the paradigm of meaning (Bodega & Scaratti, 2013; Cunliffe, 2017; Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017; Di Fabio & Blustein, 2016; Scaratti, 2014; 2017; 2019; Scaratti & Kaneklin, 2012, 2013; Weick, 1997) as a catalyst and driver both in directing further studies on decent work, and in exploring practical work experiences within which mediation, connections and relationships find articulate and vivid expression.

The prospect of formulating research questions that take into account this complexity and the situational condition of the working life of individuals is at play, contributing thus to consolidating and further increasing the relevance that the issue holds for our contemporary and future social coexistence (Blustein, Kenny, Di Fabio, & Guichard, 2019; Di Fabio & Kenny, 2019).

What is more, the effects produced by the pandemic have generated rapid transformations and novel accelerations in the scenarios of contemporary organisations: professional mobility and the transfer of workers between different units; the shift in traditional work objects; extended modes of governance; processes of integration, exchange and horizontal and vertical coordination; and speed and agility in decision-making processes. The need to respond to safety requirements and requirements of physical distancing have, on the other hand, expedited the diffusion of digital devices and remote working methods, which, in turn, have led to the devising of innovative ways of working.

The work object and the relationship with the organisation a worker belongs to are today subjected to emerging and volatile stressors, which concern personal traits and professional approaches (willingness to take risks, availability, flexibility, delegation, competences, creativity, artefacts, roles and interpretations) as much as organisational devices and processes (professional mobility, training and communication strategies, reference figures, methods of integration and liaison, help and support policies, use of digital technologies, rewarding, and social and tangible dimensions). Faced with such a scenario, we need to increase widespread awareness that in order to manage the unexpected (be it catastrophic and/or normal) you need adhocratic organisations (which are flexible, adaptive and agile) (Bennis, 1968; Mintzberg, 2009; Toffler, 1970), which, in turn, require hybrid professionalism (McGivern et al., 2015; Ivaldi & Scaratti, 2019), generated by well-developed organisational learning processes.

New challenges for work and organisational psychology

The challenge faced by researchers, scholars, practitioners and work and organisation policy makers is that of formulating new tangible and intangible conditions, together with leadership and management dimensions capable of generating worth, in terms of the collective good and of sustainability. The issue at stake, which is as inevitable as it is necessary, is a paradigm shift that enables us to see that:

– organisations are *dynamic* entities, which are ever-changing on the basis of interactions which are, in turn, volatile, and which involve human elements (individuals, groups, collective stakeholders etc.) and non-human elements (technologies, artefacts, tools, devices etc.) in creating harmony and agreement, enabling orderly systems of activity to be produced and reproduced;

– the behaviour of individuals in work and organisational situations is like *organised action*, enabling them to activate contexts within which situated interpretations of what occurs can be made, within an institutional framework of meanings and structures of sense that comprise a sort of useable «silent organisation»;

– the methods of conferring meaning, enacted by individuals within their organisational contexts of belonging, occur through processes of *social and dialogic construction* (be it cooperative and/or conflictual), and start with the transactions and relationships between the actual stakeholders involved, with all their ambiguities, arbitrariness, narrations and interpretations;

– the destiny of every organisation, as a social artefact resulting from constant negotiations and sense-making, depends on the quality of the *subjective experience* associated with it, in other words, aspects of care, participation, attention and adhesion, practice and application, and investment and recognition of sense and meaning associated with it;

– relationships of trust, organisational identification, personal involvement and meaning attributed to what a person does are fundamental in giving value to the work experience and are connected to positive displays of *organisational citizenship*.

Taking on such a challenge means anticipating a tricky balance of delicate and complex conditions of sustainability in the working life of individuals and groups, with demands, interests and values which are often conflicting and opposing: the importance of efficiency and productivity versus that of the safeguarding of social resources; the importance of the budget versus that of quality of service; the importance of innovation versus that of continuity; the importance of algorithms versus that of meaning.

In summary, we could say that the challenge of decent work lies in being able to adopt, in today's work and organisational scenarios, an approach to planning

which is neither renunciative nor conformist, but instead is open to a universal scope of own agency, one that goes beyond opportunism and instrumentality and which creates conditions that allow people and organisations themselves not only to survive but to regenerate and grow in the future.

Mintzberg (2009) advocates the necessity to redesign organisations as communities, emphasising aspects of trust, respect, collaboration and reciprocal responsibility, which should shape renewed organisational experiences. Ann Cunliffe (2017) also talks about the need to start over with a concept of relational, reflective and ethical management and organisation, one that treats the various individuals involved like human beings.

We are dealing with trajectories and paths which cannot be taken for granted and are subject to fears and expectations, uncertainties and dynamics, and aids and obstacles, as the professional and work experiences of many people illustrate.

Experiencing contemporary organisational scenarios, which are characterised by uncertainty, rapid evolution, complexity and ambiguity (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014), requires a process which is still under development, and the enactment of a *hybridisation process*, where a progressive transition of personal, professional and social identity is called for. This involves the activation of a nomadic movement as you move from one place to another, from one unit to another, from one work object to different, often divergent, work objects, according to a trajectory which is only partially pre-definable and is constantly exposed to turbulence and uncertainties, demanding navigation by sight, with continued adjustments and adaptations.

All the organisational stakeholders are called upon to enact an articulated movement which forces them to keep up with mental aspects (representations, expectations and tendencies), relational aspects (exchanges, relationships and integration) and physical aspects (struggle, endurance and rhythm); movement as in knowing when to accelerate and when to slow down, how to regulate multiple variations in speed; movement as in an acrobat's search for a sustainable balance for self and for others, to be designed and implemented creatively.

We can highlight four relevant movements that are strictly intertwined and which give rise to the plural manifestations of professional hybridisation, needed to remain in adhocratic organisations capable of managing the unexpected in the real working contexts in which we are called to perform.

The first movement is internal and concerns personal investment, expectations and the adoption of a choice in how to answer the question «why do I do the job I do?».

The second movement is operational and concerns professional identification with a work object which shifts and can take the shape of multiple tasks and plural work levels with different and often contradictory objectives to deal with.

The third movement is reflexive and is connected to the need for people to transform being absorbed in specific tasks and deliberate efforts, thinking critically about their own position and their own actions and acquiring thematic intentionality (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009) on what must be done.

The fourth movement is institutional and concerns the building of a satisfactory alliance with horizontal and vertical stakeholders regarding the prospect of activating organisational work (Cecchinato, 2019). Through the latter, the framework of meaning and recognition of a person's work, things that need to be done and how to do them, power relations, the division of work, and development opportunities are formulated in a social and negotiable way.

Undertaking and interpreting these movements means adopting a nomadic vision, facing up to a work object which is being rapidly redesigned and to scenarios which are in a state of constant flux; it implies balancing on a boundary line, like tightrope walkers who cross multiple wires and interpret a precise representation of their roles.

Recognising these movements now comprises a significant part of the responsibility of those called upon to perform managerial and social tasks within organisations, fostering *processes of articulation* inherent to the generation, maintenance and shifting of agreements, actions and regulations between people and organisational units functional to the realisation of objectives and aims. The tangible and intangible conditions for decent work therefore refer to the task of contact and connection between the different parties and elements (*networking*) and to that of the intertwining and stabilisation of relations in order to share abilities, resources and knowledge (*knotworking*) (Scaratti et al., 2017), through constant implementation of transactions involved in negotiation, legitimation, and social production and reproduction of systems of shared activity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, imagining and promoting conditions of decent work, on the one hand, induces us to identify recommendations, responses and perspectives regarding methods and tangible conditions which ensure dignified work scenarios and promote more appropriate and popular cultures (Ivaldi & Scaratti, 2016); on the other hand, it demands the exercising of influence that work and organisational psychology can and must deliver, contributing to appropriate handling of the issue of work and of its sustainability and usability.

The dialogue between the *Psychology of Working Theory* (Blustein, 2006; Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016) and the *Psychology of sustainability and sustainable development* (Di Fabio, 2017; Di Fabio & Rosen, 2018) and other consolidated conceptual frameworks (practice-based studies, social constructivist

perspectives etc.) is of further interest, at a more theoretical and reflective level, and has the intention of sparking generative and productive debates (Scaratti, Benozzo, & Ripamonti, 2021; Scaratti & Ivaldi, 2021) on additional issues, points of focus and research questions, and of creating tangible, authentic decent work experiences.

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