

Conflicts in working relationships between university professors

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Abstract

This is a descriptive-interpretative study with a qualitative approach, conducted in a public university in Mato Grosso. It aimed to know the conflicts in the working relationships between university professors. The study took place between January and April 2017, through a semi-structured interview guided by a pre-tested script prepared by the researchers themselves. Data was examined based on content analysis. The constant presence of conflicts, dishonesty, exclusion, excessive requirements/(self) demands, and indifference to collective work, which impairs the full development of teaching activities, were observed in the university environment. It is concluded that promoting more harmonious working relations, based on dialogue, respect for others and for their work, and conflict mediation, can help to overcome this scenario.

Keywords: Bioethics. Faculty. Interpersonal relations.

Resumo

Conflitos nas relações de trabalho entre professores universitários

Trata-se de estudo descritivo-interpretativo de abordagem qualitativa, realizado em universidade pública de Mato Grosso, que teve como objetivo conhecer os conflitos nas relações de trabalho entre professores universitários. O estudo ocorreu entre janeiro e abril de 2017, por meio de entrevista semiestruturada guiada por roteiro pré-testado, elaborado pelos próprios pesquisadores. Os dados foram examinados com base na análise de conteúdo. Foi observada no ambiente universitário a presença constante de conflitos, desonestidade, exclusão, exigências/(auto) cobranças excessivas e indiferença ao trabalho coletivo, o que prejudica o pleno desenvolvimento das atividades docentes. Conclui-se que promover relações laborais mais harmoniosas, pautadas no diálogo, no respeito ao outro e a seu trabalho e na mediação dos conflitos pode ajudar a superar esse cenário.

Palavras-chave: Bioética. Docentes. Relações interpessoais.

Resumen

Conflictos en las relaciones de trabajo entre profesores universitarios

Se trata de un estudio descriptivo-interpretativo con un enfoque cualitativo, realizado en una universidad pública en Mato Grosso, que tuvo como objetivo conocer los conflictos en las relaciones de trabajo entre docentes universitarios. El estudio se realizó entre enero y abril de 2017, a través de una entrevista semiestructurada orientada por un guion pre-evaluado por los propios investigadores. Los datos fueron examinados en base al análisis de contenido. Se observó en el ambiente universitario la presencia constante de conflictos, deshonestidad, exclusión, exigencias/(auto)reclamos excesivos e indiferencia frente al trabajo colectivo, lo que perjudica el pleno desarrollo de las actividades docentes. Se concluye que promover relaciones de trabajo más armoniosas, basadas en el diálogo, el respeto por el otro y por su trabajo y en la mediación de conflictos puede colaborar en la superación de este escenario.

Palabras clave: Bioética. Docentes. Relaciones interpersonales.

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Declararam não haver conflito de interesse.

In the last decades, teaching work has been undergoing significant transformations, based on the logic of economic neoliberalism. In public universities, this direction has brought some consequences, such as the intensification of the control and evaluation of teaching productivity, unequal power relations, and precarious working conditions, endangering the integrity of professionals in the university environment¹. These circumstances also threaten the principle of human dignity, because they prevent the teacher from developing through his professional activity, subjugating them to an economic and productive logic that precludes a pedagogical *praxis* in which he can exercise autonomy and freedom to conceive their practices².

The predominantly heterogeneous power relations in the university are perceived by many teachers as unfair and disrespectful, generating anger, dissatisfaction, irritability, and social behaviors incompatible with good working relationships. The problem can also be aggravated by the teachers' idealization of the sense and meaning of the teaching work from the idea of vocation and sacrifice, abandonment and self-renunciation, which reinforces the sense of loss of dignity³.

In this context, the ethics of life – “bioethics” – is called to the field to promote respect for human rights and dignity, cooperating with the achievement of autonomy and responsibility⁴ that underpin their concepts, principles, and values. Bioethics in the university environment is not only focused on the teacher-student relationship, so strong and representative in research but expands to the dynamics of the faculty, in which scenarios of individualism and interference in labor relations accentuate vulnerabilities and conflicts that are detrimental to the whole collective⁵.

Also, the important role of Brazilian public universities, especially in directing technical, scientific, social and cultural advances, reinforces the need for permanent studies aimed at the operationalization of work, to leverage improvements or identify conflicts that compromise the development of professionals and, consequently, from university⁶. Thus, the study aimed to know some conflicts in this context.

Methods

This descriptive-interpretative and qualitative study was developed in a public higher education

institution in Mato Grosso, Brazil, chosen because it is considered a reference in the region and is based in one of the largest educational centers in the state. In addition, the choice was motivated by the signal from the university rector that there were no on-site researches on this subject, and that a study such as this, on the health and welfare of public servants, would help to draw new management and development strategies.

The study included teachers who met the inclusion criteria: minimum of seven years of teaching at the institution, in the areas of humanities (education, geography, philosophy, and sociology), exact (physics and mathematics), engineering (civil engineering) or biological and health (nursing, pharmacy, and biomedicine). The seven-year period as a criterion was due to the literature revealing that professionals in this occupational phase tend to become sicker more often and, consequently, to withdraw further due to medical request⁷. Physical education, arts/artistic education, music teachers were excluded, informatics and foreign languages, as the practice of teachers in these areas differs in several aspects from traditional subjects⁸.

The study sample was non-probabilistic, and its limit was defined based on the completeness of the information of interest and the saturation of the data⁹. Interviews with participants took place between January and April 2017. Initially, there was contact with the university dean to make him aware of and authorize the study. Subsequently, in order to present the research to faculty and university management, a document containing information about the study, objectives, purposes, risks, and benefits of participation was sent to the departments by e-mail. Before data collection, the interview script was tested with teachers from the same environment as the participants, chosen at random, but also respecting the inclusion criteria.

After this stage, the researchers began approaching teachers on the university campus during classes, at breaks, or the end of the work shift. With the first teacher willing to participate, a meeting was scheduled at a place and time preferred by the interviewee, aiming at their comfort, anonymity, and confidentiality. Prepared by one of the researchers, the interview script contained closed questions (sociodemographic and professional data) and open questions (perceptions about the university environment and the relationship between peers). The average duration of the interviews was 20 minutes.

Once collected, the interviews were fully transcribed and examined using the content analysis method described by Bardin¹⁰, going through the steps of pre-analysis, material exploration, and treatment of the results. To maintain anonymity, the narratives were identified by the letter “P”, for “participant”, followed by the number referring to the order of the interviews.

The study was originally a doctoral thesis presented in the graduate program in Bioethics of the Centro Universitário São Camilo (Cusc/SP) (São Camilo University Center). All ethical aspects were respected, according to Resolution 466/2012 of the Conselho Nacional de Saúde (CNS) (National Health Council), and the research was approved by the Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa Envolvendo Seres Humanos (CEP/Cusc) (Research Ethics Committee Involving Human Beings).

Results

Of the 108 teachers eligible to participate in the study, 21 (pre-test) were approached in the first moment and their interviews were used only to improve the data collection script and were not included in the results. Then 58 other teachers were approached; Of these, 27 refused to participate in the study (without justification, only with a brief negative and thanks for contacting), totaling 31 participants at the end. These teachers were from the humanities (n=6), exact sciences (n=3), engineering (n=5), and life and health sciences (n=17). Predominantly male, and aged between 28 and 60 years, most participants declared themselves white, married and childless, having some religion.

Regarding the professional profile, most have the title of doctor and had been working between seven and ten years in the institution, under exclusive dedication, with 12 hours of teaching per week. Regarding the relationship with peers, participants reported not knowing all the teachers in their department, not participating in voting/decisions of the course, or in gatherings promoted by colleagues. Most stated that there were conflicts between department teachers which had been at the center at some point in their didactic-pedagogical activities.

Dishonesty and exclusion experience

Some educational policies adopted by the university under study were not discussed and/or

sufficiently understood by the faculty, which eventually contradicted ethical-moral beliefs:

“Because we are heavily charged with MEC [Ministry of Education] assessments, where we are forced to lie, at the risk of losing our job” (P3);

“To achieve the institution’s goals, management made use of threats” (P4);

“During the implementation of Reuni [Restructuring and Expansion of Federal Universities], I had conflicting moments, because the composition of the program brought the need to approve 90% of students in order to have access to funding” (P11).

This professional profile, incompatible with the recognition of the place occupied, can lead to a work dynamic that generates suffering to the university professor, who understands not to have the same involvement as the other colleagues, generating a feeling of disadvantage or disregard:

“I feel isolated and excluded from collegiate and course decisions. (...) I think I have autonomy, but it seems that I don’t have the same value and recognition as others, or [I feel] that I don’t have the same rights.” (P17).

(Self) over-demands and damage

Lack of opportunities to participate and contribute to the course and university interferes with productivity and affects the health of teachers:

“I suffered most when I was in a private college, but here I also found myself at a dilemma, under pressure to work at a different pace from mine. It made me feel bad and I got sick at that time” (P3);

“Due to work overload, career priorities have been changed, leading to a compromise in the postgraduate course. I had panic and anxiety attacks” (P4);

“[There were] situations of pressure, assignments of subjects with high workload and coercion to accept everything quietly, which increases stress and favors physical and mental illness” (P9);

“The university requires a lot of class time, taking the professor out of the lab. The teachers who do research, who are very few, are harmed because they work with

research and also have to give the same amount of class time compared to the ones who do not. At the end of the semester, teachers are exhausted, overworked, which reduces their productivity” (P10);

“Sometimes I didn’t even see myself as useful anymore, it was a lot of stress. Wow, I don’t even like to remember. I take medicines now” (P11);

“I made a huge effort not to get sick, but at university, happily or unfortunately, the teacher’s work is very lonely and sometimes unfriendly” (P15).

Indifference to cooperative work

The behavior of colleagues, individually or in groups (collegiate of the course), interferes with the well-being and interpersonal relationships. Some teachers feel disrespected, isolated, without support and recognition, which ultimately brings different forms of discouragement:

“I have already refrained from doing a lot of things in this course because I am unmotivated because very few people strive for a better course. When I joined the university, after understanding what my job would be, always surrounded by selfish and individualistic people, who never cooperated for teamwork, I had crises of crying, despair, isolation, because it was not what I expected. It was very hard, but I got over it” (P5);

“Yes, especially when I received negative feedback from my co-workers [collegiate of the course] about my release for training, as there were no other colleagues on leave and my departure was legally correct. And that is demotivating, (...) as if I were a terrible professional, a total lack of ethics” (P6);

“In my case, I feel discouraged, often because I charge myself to do things correctly and, when there is not the slightest acknowledgment, you lose the heat” (P8);

“It is not always easy to work hard and watch colleagues not doing the same for the same salary. It is tiresome to want to change the status quo. However, each individual has their expectations and everyone must be respected, starting from the premise that each one does his or her best. (...) But the environment is very conflicting, it’s difficult not to get sick” (P12).

Discussion

As noted in the narratives, teachers report circumstances in which they are alienated or ignored in decision making, their ethical convictions confronted by the authority of leaders whose power is incompatible with what they consider to be right for institutional integrity and the academic community. The lack of smoothness in the conduct of academic activities by university management and the impossibility of fulfilling the teacher’s ethical commitment in higher education generate discomforts of various orders. In this scenario, where mediations are lacking, academic activities lose their effectiveness, assuming an automatic character that, according to Freire¹¹, nullifies the possibility of didactic-pedagogical initiatives and affects the protagonism of both teachers and students.

These consequences occur at both the individual and institutional levels. In the first, there is the suffering of submission in conflict situations, with the development of burnout, absenteeism, and abandonment of the profession; in the second, high turnover rates and institutional difficulty in maintaining the quality standard appear, which seems to be associated with the constant lack of prevention and attention to the demands of the faculty^{12,13}. In the institution’s inability to approach and act on these losses, professionals become more vulnerable, struggling with guilt, shame, moral confusion, and meaninglessness; problems that may persist for long periods and create obstacles to positive change¹³.

However, the philosophy of institutions can also produce pleasure at work. To this end, management must be democratic, with visible but thoughtful leadership, capable of establishing rules and norms with worker participation, managing individual and organizational needs. When this does not happen, the result is disorder and illness¹⁴, inhibiting the critical thinking and proactivity of teachers⁷.

In this context, Latin American bioethics proposes a more plural dialogue, which includes social issues, involving individuals commonly oppressed and deprived of their autonomy. This bioethical perspective also evaluates social inequality by subjective criteria, indicating the correlation between the person’s perception and reality¹⁵. Thus, with the identification of feelings of pain and pleasure in the teacher’s bodily experience, in their

relationship with others and the environment tends to signal interventions to be implemented.

In the present study, the influence of these aspects seems evident, although, for now, the problem has not received attention from academic management, it could recognize these issues to reorganize work management practices, as well as mitigate conflicts. However, every decision-making requires a reflective process, which the immediacy and bias in judgments normally prevalent in these spaces, hinder and interfere with this conduction.

Bioethics fosters these reflections, and allows us to unveil the universe of human, social, cultural and health dimensions. In the academic field, in addition to efforts and measures that seek interventions and teacher protection, a new theoretical foundation is conceived, Bioeticare, understood as a bioethical care, aimed at consolidating the principle of justice, the integration and interaction of group diversity, as an emancipatory resource to guarantee rights and the possibility of social participation in the workspace.

This bioethical care favored by the awakening of a critical conscience ensures the care for the environment and makes transformation grow within the institution. And, as care requires practice, a commitment of oneself to the other, this care is a constant thinking about the other, the valuing of the human being in all its singularities, raising the risks and evidence that will determine effective action. Thus, Bioeticare leads to the understanding of a practice that prevents, interrupts or minimizes the adverse impacts experienced by professionals, a process of life preservation and living in different environments.

A study conducted in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, indicates that the more conflicts in working relationships between teachers without effective actions to prevent or mitigate them, the greater the indifference and distancing¹⁶. One of the motivators of this excluding behavior is the centralizing attitude of some university management professionals, strongly associated with ideas of work and worker adaptation and flexibility, and the belief that the transformation of professional practices and culture depends only on a strong central power that is the *locus* of institutional innovation and solutions to be applied by the lower hierarchical levels. In this way, the specific contexts and particularities of professionals are greatly simplified, in which all the complexity of the social world manifests itself¹⁷.

The role of the professional is not restricted to the mere administrative support of academic

activities; technical, scientific, didactic-pedagogical and human involvement must be valued, with the prerogative of not only being evaluated but also contributing to the analysis and building of the knowledge applied to the praxis. This professional practice, which carries the unique function of promoting citizenship, justifies the construction and re-signification of new paths, intending to reduce social differences of the teaching collective¹⁸.

According to the participants of the present study, the rights guaranteed by the function performed do not guarantee equal participation, a new citizenship is necessary, one in which the subject is the author – inherent or empowered – of social transformation. For Freire¹¹, in the teaching work, this transformation occurs through emancipatory education, which, in order to be effective, requires the concrete participation of all individuals involved in this universe, based on intentional practices that signal directions for transformation, having freedom and autonomy as constituents of the ideal of citizenship, in order to bring teachers closer to the dimension of knowledge and ethical values of their profession¹⁹.

Subjects who are indifferent to others in the workspace are characterized by conservative values and harmful attitudes. On the other hand, social responsibility, an inclusive morality and a more critical and constructive relationship with authority contrast this indifference in the group and facilitate interventions²⁰.

Added to the indifference is the pressure on teachers, especially by the increase in work demand within the established workload – commonly in exclusive dedication, which intensifies the idea that the teacher can produce more to match the determinations of the didactic and scientific market. As a result, peer relations begin to wear thin and become increasingly distant, or authoritarian and inordinate, depending on the university²¹.

The requirement for teachers to assume responsibilities beyond those expected to perform their primary work activity needs to be offset, at a minimum, by the recognition of the teaching action. If this does not occur, the responsibility for the pedagogical process becomes perceived as overload and generates intense uneasiness. In this way, the teacher loses the meaning of his *praxis*, that is, the sense of teaching, and consequently the teaching work loses value. Human praxis is socially mediated, so work is not limited to the

mere execution of a particular activity; to work is to transform oneself and others²².

Researchers conceptualize excess workload – along with similar constructs such as responsibility – as a stressor that makes it difficult to promote less conflicting relationships^{23,24}. What we find in universities today are dissatisfied professionals, working in conditions that lead to frustration and alienation. The teaching, research and extension triad has not been integrated¹⁷, and this mismatch, coupled with the indifferent behavior of teachers to cooperative work, also causes conflicts, as confronting peers and management to justify or charge ethical conduct produces a sense of isolated and fruitless work.

In the *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights*, cooperation is associated with solidarity, which, according to Garrafa²⁵, requires bilateral and reciprocal relationships between people, groups or sectors in different historical and social situations. Cooperation between teachers tends to soften conflicts, given the possibilities of didactic, pedagogical or cultural intervention that open up. From this interaction between peers, “learning communities” are born, participants in the whole teaching-learning process, spaces to share experiences, difficulties, and ways to overcome them, to situate themselves in the world and receive support from the collective²⁶.

However, when teachers perceive inequality or indifference, they tend to be self-destructive concerning the teaching activity, which directly reflects the quality of the work dynamics²⁷. As students mirror the behaviors and interpersonal relationships of their teachers²⁸, conflict, which initially seemed to be restricted to teachers, can reach the entire academic community and affect professional and ethical training.

It is known that cooperative work and group unity are sources of satisfaction and means to minimize conflicts²⁹ which, when they remain invisible and without intervention, increase to the point of producing disease. The bonds of solidarity and ethics are thus weakened, and individualism and competitiveness prevail, against which *Freire proposes an educational and liberating pedagogical project, aimed at the construction of an environment favorable to a democratic and participatory praxis, which has the development of learners’ autonomy as its fundamental assumption*³⁰.

Final considerations

With the present study, it was possible to note conflicts in the work relations of university professors, highlighting among the problems the dishonesty, exclusion, excessive (self) demands and indifference to collective work, revealing deleterious space and with explicit inequality between peers. These characteristics affect the work and performance of professionals, interfering in the development of the institution.

There are colleagues or groups who, using unequal power relations, condition the other according to their own particular interests or predilections. These attitudes generate didactic and pedagogical losses, impoverish teaching practices and diminish the possibilities of interaction and cooperation with the collective. The defense of ethics that values the dialogue between peers and respect for the specificities of the individual as potentiality of the group are confronted with competitiveness in interactions between colleagues, leading to a sense of injustice and vulnerability in the face of work dynamics imposed by the leadership. Teachers are then unprotected without management support to minimize conflicts and their impacts. This, on the contrary, does not honor the worker as a human being and member of the team, creating a feeling of frustration and demotivation.

From this scenario, it is observed that conflicts are constant in the university studied, which impairs the full exercise of teaching activities, with consequences for the entire academic community. Thus, promoting more harmonious working relationships, based on dialogue, respect for others and their work and mediation of conflicts, is a favorable way to overcome these problems. Therefore, the actions can be based on bioethics, which operates in academic environments as a promoter of human dignity among teachers and seeks timely and concrete solutions to conflicts that manifest themselves in daily life.

Universities can adopt behaviors and policies that identify the working and personal conditions of these professionals, with strategies that foster bioethical care, improving the work dynamics and quality of life for all. For this, further studies are needed to elucidate individual and institutional resources, seeking the well-being and growth of all who live in the academic environment.

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Participation of the authors

Vagner Ferreira do Nascimento conceived the project, wrote the manuscript, critically reviewed and approved the final version. Ana Maria Lombardi Daibem conceived the project, critically reviewed and approved the final version. Márcio Fabri dos Anjos conceived the project.

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Annex

Interview script

Date of birth: ___/___/___ Age: _____ Date: _____

Sex: _____

1. Social demographic aspects

1.1. How do you define yourself in terms of color/race/ethnic group?

() White/Caucasian () Brown () Black () Yellow () Indigenous

1.2. What's your marital status?

() Single () Married () Stable Union/Relationship () Separated/Divorced () Widow(er) () Other _____

1.3. Do you have children:

() Yes. How many? _____ () No Age of the children: _____

1.4. Do you have any religion: () Yes () No

If you do, which? () Catholic () Protestant/Evangelical () Spiritist () Other: _____

1.5. What is your Academic background? _____

1.6. Highest degree: () Undergraduate () Specialization () Master's degree () Doctorate () Post-doctorate

1.7. Work regime: () Exclusive dedication () 40 hours () 20 hours () Other _____

1.8. Number of hours of class weekly dedicated to teaching: () <8h () 8h () 12 () 16 () >16h

1.9. Period of stay at work: () Integral () Morning () Afternoon () Evening

2. Work environment

2.1. Do you know all teachers in your department? () Yes () No

2.2. Do you participate in the voting/decisions of your department? () Yes () No

2.3. Do you participate in festivities/get-togethers promoted by the teachers of your department? () Yes () No

2.4. Have you ever been dissatisfied with the behavior of any teacher in your department? () Yes () No

2.5. Are there or have there been ethical problems among the teachers in your department? () Yes () No

If there have been, were you a victim of the situation? () Yes () No

2.6. Comment if at any point in your teaching practice have you ever had your teacher rights violated by a colleague or by your manager? And how was that?

2.6.1. How did you see this?

