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## **Work as affective experience: The contribution of Christophe Dejours’ ‘psychodynamics of work’**

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### **Abstract**

Psychoanalytic perspectives (such as the Kleinian/Bionian and Lacanian literature) have made significant contributions to the study of affect in organizations. While some have pointed out the affects involved in work tasks, most of this literature generally focuses on the affects linked to organizational life (such as learning, leadership, motivation, power, or change). The center of attention is not on affects associated with the work process itself. We draw from the French psychodynamic theory of Christophe Dejours—who is yet to be known in English language organization studies—to make the following contributions. First, we show the relationship between affect and working by discussing Dejours’ notions of affective suffering, the real of work, the significance of the body, and ‘ordinary sublimation’. Second, we advance critical research in organization studies by demonstrating the centrality of work in the affective life of the subject. Third, the article reinterprets Menzies’ well-known hospital case study to illustrate how Dejours’ theory extends existing psychoanalytical approaches, and especially to point to the significant role of the work collective in supporting workers to work well. We conclude by suggesting that if the centrality of work in the affective life of the subject is acknowledged, it follows that resistance strategies, and work collectives’ struggle for emancipation, should focus on reclaiming work.

### **Keywords**

Affect, Dejours, psychoanalysis, work, work collectives

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## Introduction

Psychoanalytic approaches to work and organizations related to the Tavistock Institute have long studied affective dynamics in organizations (Fotaki et al., 2012; Gabriel and Griffiths, 2002). Drawing mainly from Klein and Bion, they have particularly focused on how anxiety and defenses against anxiety shape organizational behavior (e.g. Jaques, 1953; Menzies, 1960). Recent publications, inspired by Lacanian psychoanalysis (e.g. Kenny, 2012; Stavrakakis, 2008; Vidaillet and Gamot, 2015) have also centered on affect, especially to explore the operation of power in organizations. Generally, the psychoanalytic literature has investigated and demonstrated the affects associated with organizational life (such as leadership, power, learning, and change) but the affects due to the activity of work itself are not adequately explored. The aim of this article is to address this gap by introducing the psychoanalytic and critical perspective of Christophe Dejours to organization studies.<sup>1</sup> The originality of Dejours' approach is that it illuminates the affective, subjective, and embodied experience of *working*, focusing particularly on the affect of suffering—as a consequence of the encounter of the subject with what Dejours calls the 'real of work'—and the way in which this affect can—or cannot—be sublimated. This framework also articulates the role of the work organization and the significance of the work collective in creating and/or transforming such affect. Dejours' theory is much needed in psychoanalytically inspired research in organization studies because it points out the centrality of work in human life and, as we will see, this has political implications.

The article thus develops a threefold contribution. First, we extend existing psychoanalytic perspectives by showing how the work process itself is affective. Second, we advance critical research in organization studies by demonstrating the centrality of work in the affective life of the subject. Third, we point to the significant role of the work collective in supporting workers to work properly and in overcoming affective suffering. While we recognize a variety of activities as work, this article focuses on work conducted within formal organizations.

Dejours, a French psychoanalyst, psychiatrist, and occupational health physician, is associated with the 'psychodynamics of work' movement, an approach that has been developed in the last 40 years in the *Centre National des Arts et Métiers*. The latter does not draw on the Kleinian 'psychodynamic

approach' to organizations or the Lacanian organization studies literature and has been advanced separate from these. While also using Hegel, Henry, and Merleau-Ponty, Dejours' central reference is Freud. This is because Freudian metapsychology is the only intellectual and clinical tradition that explores the development of human subjectivity by focusing on the articulation of the body and the psyche and explaining the central function of sexuality (in its transformations) in this process (Dejours, 2009a). 'Sexuality and work have much closer relationships than usually thought. Subjectivity is structured by sexuality but it is also, whether we want it or not, totally involved in the relation to work' (Dejours, 2009a: 20–21).

Dejours' (1980) theory is thus clearly psychoanalytic. His original field 'the psychopathology of work', which studied illness from a medical perspective, did not investigate the psychic processes involved in 'non-ill' people. He therefore founded a new field called 'the psychodynamics of work'—with Freud as the key reference—which explores the unconscious dynamics implied in the working process. Dejours extends Freud by integrating the issue of 'work' into Freudian theory and designating a central role to affectivity at work.

To a large extent, Dejours' work is concerned with identifying the conditions that turn the experience of work either into one of pleasure, subjective expansion, and freedom or one of pathological suffering. The general viewpoint is that work is central to subjectivity and health, to the relationship between men and women, to the community, and finally to the theory of knowledge (Dejours, 1998, 2009a, 2009b). Deranty (2009), who has extensively interpreted Dejours' theory in English within philosophy, points out that it has become unpopular in social theory to claim the centrality of work to subjectivity; work is generally depicted as carrying nothing more than a utilitarian value. This 'thin' understanding of work is reflected in neoliberal economic thinking, which prioritizes rationality and the instrumental aim of work. Lacanian organizational research, outlined below, along with many other critically oriented organizational scholars (such as Fleming and Mandarini, 2011), also view work as a field of exploitation for instrumental reasons. Dejours' perspective concurs with this, but it would also show how work has important affective and subjective functions.

We begin by reviewing psychoanalytically inspired studies on affect, work, and organizations (mainly the Kleinian/Bionian and Lacanian approaches) and argue that while they demonstrate the central role of affect in organizational life, their theorization of the affects related to work activity is limited. We then outline Dejours' theory of work, focusing on affective suffering, the significance of the body and 'ordinary sublimation' in work. Subsequently, we point out the importance

of work organization in creating and transforming affects at work. Next, we reinterpret Menzies' (1960) well-regarded case study through the viewpoint of Dejours' theory. We have chosen Menzies (1960) because it is a key resource in psychoanalytic approaches in organization studies. More importantly, the case helps to illustrate how Dejours' theory can extend existing psychoanalytic perspectives. We end the article by discussing the political implications of Dejours, highlighting in particular the ethical, creative, and emancipatory aspects of work, and the significant role of the work collective.

### **Psychoanalytic perspectives on affect in organizations**

Psychoanalytic approaches associated with the Tavistock Institute have been significant in showing how affects shape organizational life (Gabriel, 1998; Obholzer and Roberts, 1994). This approach, drawing from Klein and Bion, often uses the term emotion, rather than affect (see Eisold, 1994; Jaques, 1953; Menzies, 1960; Obholzer and Roberts, 1994). From a psychoanalytic perspective, the main difference between 'affect' and 'emotion' is that affect—as described by Freud's (1915a/1957, 1915b/1957) use of the German term *Affekt*—refers mainly to the translation and expression of the sexual drive in the psychic apparatus (the drive being translated in the psychic apparatus into affect or representation). This process denotes both the subjective and qualitative dimension of the affect; it can be pleasant or painful, precise or undefined, and so on—as well as its quantitative and energetic dimension; the affect being related to a specific quantity of libidinal energy that makes it more or less intense. Emotion, on the other hand, emphasizes the function of communication with the external world; our emotions are reflected and expressed by our body and can hence be interpreted by our environment. Klein studied the relationship and the mutual adjustment between the child and their mother, and she treated some elements of the intrapsychic world as external and vice versa via the concept of 'object'. The notion of 'emotion' thus enabled her and her successors like Bion to describe a quality of the links between the subject and their objects (Widlöcher, 1992).

The Tavistock perspective mainly uses the term emotion to refer primarily to unconscious (paranoid or depressive) anxiety, which is seen as an inevitable part of organizational and group life, but is often too painful to acknowledge (Halton, 1994). Such anxieties and the defenses against them—such as denial, projections, and splitting—can prevent people from conducting their work properly and inhibit organizational performance. Jaques' (1953: 3) classic study of the Glacier Metal Company showed how changes in roles altered the protections staff had erected to defend themselves against psychotic anxiety. Menzies' (1960) study of nurses in a teaching hospital has been

the key resource for many subsequent researchers in the psychoanalytic approach to organizations (e.g. Czander, 1993; Diamond, 1998; Eisold, 1994; Hirschhorn, 1988; Hirschhorn and Young, 1991; Hyde and Thomas, 2002; Obholzer and Roberts, 1994; Willcocks and Rees, 1995). Menzies (1960) suggests that the nursing service has been built, over time, to provide a socially structured defense system that offers some protection against anxiety caused by the nursing task. Later in this article, we further discuss Menzies (1960) in our re-analysis of the hospital case study.

More recent literature has foregrounded the role of anxiety in organizational change (Carr, 2001; Vince and Broussine, 1996), organizational learning (Bain, 1998; Brown and Starkey, 2000; Vince, 2002), leadership (Stein, 2005), company takeovers (Vince, 2006), and public health policies (Fotaki, 2006; Fotaki and Hyde, 2014). Most of these approaches focus on emotions (predominantly anxiety) related to organizational or group life generally, and some show the importance of the containment of anxiety in organizations (Gilmore and Anderson, 2011).

Following Menzies (1960), the anxiety produced by the work task has also become a central aspect of the social defense theory (Fraher, 2004, 2005; French and Vince, 1999). Obholzer and Roberts (1994) devote many chapters in their edited book to the emotional difficulties in care work. While such researchers acknowledge the positive impact that 'good' work performance can have on the health and maturity of workers (see, for example, Menzies Lyth, 1991: 375, 377), the focus of attention is anxiety. Largely, such studies center more on the defenses that workers establish to cope with difficult emotions produced by the work task and less on the relationship between affect and the work activity.

Voronov and Vince (2012) adopt a more eclectic psychoanalytic approach to explore affect in institutional work, suggesting that in order for institutions to reproduce themselves, people need to invest affectively in their work. Again, however, affect largely refers to the affective investment in practices—such as engaging in expected behavior or enthusiastically carrying out roles—that maintain or change a given institutional establishment. In recent years, some have drawn on Lacanian psychoanalysis to elaborate on the relation between affect, power, and dominant social organizations. It is affect, Stavrakakis (2008) argues, 'that binds subjects to the conditions of their symbolic subordination' (p. 1053). Similarly, Kenny (2012) in her study on identity in a non-profit organization investigates the significance of affect in the subject's relation to power.

In contrast to the perspectives inspired by the Tavistock Institute (such as Menzies Lyth, 1991 and followers), Lacanian scholars hold a pessimistic (or ambiguous) position with regards to the role of work in the health of subjects. These researchers focus rather on ideological and fantasmatic discourses on work (see in particular the chapters in the edited book by Cederström and

Hoedemaekers, 2010).<sup>2</sup> Affective discourses of boundaryless careers, creativity, personal development, self-fulfillment, and freedom subtly control workers, especially when such discourses match objectives of production and efficiency (Bloom, 2015; Bloom and Cederström, 2009). Ekman (2013) understands passion and emotional devotion to work as an ideological fantasy, which combines 'free-market ideals about limitless financial expansion on the one hand and existential ideals about limitless self-realization on the other' (p. 20). Lacanian researchers often demonstrate how discourses that present the work organization and work as the route to freedom disguise work intensification and the 'un-free' nature of workplaces (Fleming, 2010; Spicer and Cederström, 2010). Affect is studied in relation to ideological function of fantasies about work and how they shape the affective meaning subjects attach to work, rather than in relation to the actual conduct of work, which refers to the affective experiences of the worker while working.

The concept of *jouissance* (Bloom, 2015; Bloom and Cederström, 2009; Cremin, 2010) is sometimes used to explore affective investments in work. According to Lacan (1977), the emergence of the subject in the symbolic order, specifically in language, presupposes that something is lost forever: a pre-symbolic (and fantasmatic) enjoyment the subject will then endlessly try to recover. *Jouissance* is what comes to substitute for this irremediable loss. It differs from notions of pleasure or satisfaction because, by definition, total enjoyment is impossible. Lacanian researchers describe how work in contemporary capitalism includes a fantasy that full enjoyment—through work—would be possible, a promise supposed to stimulate the involvement of workers. They also expose the subtle forms of power that are exercised, less by traditional authority than by an imperative to enjoy (an imperative of *jouissance*) and that require the complicity of the subject. In the organizational context, this can be translated into an imperative to work; it 'can lead individuals to reinvest in work as the foremost priority in their life' (Bloom, 2015: 11).

Bicknell and Liefoghe (2010), for example, point out that strain and stress at work may be experienced as painful, but workers can paradoxically enjoy stress (as a form of *jouissance*) as they respond to the desire of the Other. Contu and Willmott (2006) employ Lacan in their reanalysis of Orr's (1996) study on the work practices of copier technicians. Contu and Willmott argue that the technicians improvisational practices investigated by Orr—despite bending the dominant bureaucratic rules of the organization—are shaped by an enjoyable fantasmatic frame that ultimately serves to reproduce the fiction of liberal freedom and the bottom line of the company. Similarly, Kosmala and Herrbach (2006) explore how playing with the rules provided the auditors in their study with a sense of *jouissance*. Such transgressions enabled auditors to conduct their work properly and therefore made them compliant. Much of the literature

inspired by Lacan does not view the bending of rules in the work process as necessary improvisations in formal, organized work. In much of the Lacanian literature, because the focus is on the relationship between domination and subjectivity in the workplace, the work activity is not theorized as necessary for the emancipation of workers. We illustrate in the following how Dejours' theory is significant because it can help to push further the psychoanalytic perspectives outlined above, by focusing on the affects associated exclusively with the working activity.

### **Working as answering to 'the real'**

Dejours draws from his decades-long clinical experience with individuals who suffer from workrelated distress and his role as a researcher and consultant in organizations, to generate a theory that explicates the relationship between the subject, work, the material, the social, and the political, and that focuses on the ways in which work has an impact on subjectivity and human life. Dejours' approach is clearly Freudian; he uses the Freudian term 'affect', rather than emotion, because, as we will see, this concept, which denotes the link between the body and the psyche, takes into account the sexual drive and its transformation through the working process. Dejours considers that the Freudian metapsychology did not give enough importance to work; his ambition is hence to complement psychoanalysis by understanding the specific role of work in subjective construction and the connection to the sexual drive. Dejours' theory is really centered on what working does psychically to the subject, how it *affects* him or her.

For Dejours, some level of suffering is inevitable in all types of work (even though, admittedly, some categories of work are more painful than others). Nevertheless, and fundamentally, work can contribute to subjective and social enrichment. The underlying assumption is that human beings generally want to work well, and they gain satisfaction when given the opportunity to do so (Dejours, 1980, 1998). Dejours (2007) highlights the working process and the subjective investment required to complete a task:

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

This theory directs attention toward the objective world that poses a challenge to the subject and



limits action. The planned organization of work—prescriptions, guidelines, or instructions—is never the same as the actual reality of the concrete work activity. For Dejours, to work is, first, to experience the ‘real’, which is not the Lacanian real; Dejours’ real does not refer to a register within subjectivity. Rather, it points to the objective aspect in work that obstructs the work process. This may include fatigue, insufficient skills/experience, contradictory or excessive organizational rules or instructions, or the occurrence of unexpected events (e.g. breakdowns of machines, tools, materials and systems, or disruptions that arise due to other colleagues, bosses, or subordinates). The real implies ‘the experience of the world’s resistance’ (Dejours, 2009b: 21). As a consequence, for Dejours (2003), working consists [for the subject] in bridging the gap between the prescriptive and the real. But what has

to be done to bridge this gap cannot be planned in advance. The way to go from the prescribed to the real must always be invented or discovered by the working subject. Hence, for the clinician, work is defined as what the subject must add to the prescriptions to reach the objectives that are assigned to him. (p. 14)

In order to conquer the resistance of the world, the subject needs to apply effort: to mobilize intellect and affect and ‘give’ himself or herself to the task. Work, therefore, consists of three dimensions: the social dimension, which is essentially the formal organizational dimension, including instructions and prescriptions, but also social relations in ‘a human world characterized by relations of inequality, power and domination’ (Dejours, 2009b: 33); the objective dimension, which manifests itself as resistance of the real; and the subjective dimension, which refers to the affective experiences of the worker at work.

### *Pathos as the first affect at work*

Dejours points out that the real of work is experienced as a failure—something does not work—which creates an unpleasant ‘feeling of helplessness, even of annoyance, anger, or also disappointment or discouragement. The real makes itself known to the subject always through a bad surprise effect, that is on an *affective mode*’ (Dejours, 2009b: 21, emphasis in original). Hence, this confrontation with the real involves an ‘affective suffering’ (Dejours, 1980, 1998, 2003, 2009a) engendered by the ‘doing’ of work. For Dejours (2011), subjects are essentially ‘vulnerable, prone to psychic conflict and anxiety, [they] have to constantly fight against the risk of psychopathological decomposition’ (p. 144). Suffering has two related meanings in Dejours (1998, 2009a, 2015a). First, it refers to pathos, the capacity of the subject to be *affected* by the world and experiencing it in his or her body: ‘There is no suffering without a body that can feel’ (Dejours, 2009b: 23). Second, suffering implies pain; the fear of not being able to cope. In such circumstances, suffering can become pathological and seriously damage health (Dejours, 1998, 2014, 2015a). Although the

experience of suffering is inevitable, hope means that one has adequate resources to handle it. Health depends on believing or 'sensing in one's bones so to speak' (Deranty, 2008: 449) that one will be able to cope with one's vulnerable existence.

But 'the affective suffering, totally passive, that results from the encounter with the real, as it emphasizes a breakdown or interruption of action, is not the endpoint or the final outcome of the process that relates subjectivity to work. Suffering is also a point of departure' (Dejours, 2009b: 22) because it will set the subject, his or her intelligence, and body in motion. It will be a point of departure for transformation, empowerment, and the overcoming of the initial pathos, which from this viewpoint refers specifically to an affect that is related to an intense feeling of being passive (cf. Gagliardi, 2007). 'Suffering, as absolute affectivity, is at the origin of this intelligence that goes to explore the world in order to feel, transform, and expand itself' (Dejours, 2009b: 22). Thus, suffering leads to the deployment of one's inventive 'practical intelligence'.

Work can, therefore, lead to the expansion of new subjective powers. This highlights the transformative potential of work; when affective suffering can be transformed into pleasure and empowerment, working becomes an emancipatory experience that sustains health.

#### *Ordinary sublimation*

Freud (1930/2002) states that working can be for humans a very efficient way of sublimation because it enables them to transcend the discontents of civilization, to inscribe themselves in the community and to contribute to its development. But Freud refers here more to the Great Work of artists or researchers than to ordinary work, which he believes is avoided and hated by most people and conducted merely to earn a living. According to Dejours (2011), the process of sublimation occurs also in ordinary work in the form of 'ordinary sublimation' (p. 137), when the worker uses his or her body, intelligence, and subjectivity to overcome the difficulties arising from the occurrence of the real. Ordinary sublimation also indicates how work and sexuality are linked for Dejours (2009a): it is the sexual drive that is at the origin of the desire to move, to act. The drive is at the frontier between the body and the psyche and closely associated with affect (because the drive cannot be 'directly' visible: affect is a translation of the drive into a feeling). The drive has to renounce its sexual component to be transformed into the involvement of the worker in the process of answering to the real. And the affect of suffering (as pathos) refers to the stopping of the movement of the drive when it is suddenly interrupted. For Dejours' (2009a), the working process enables the drive to be transformed and sublimated. While working with tools and technologies, and deploying

the body and thought to 'work on' something, the subject is also conducting a kind of 'psychic work' on the drive. However, when ordinary sublimation is not possible (for reasons we will consider below), the passive suffering will develop into what Dejours (1998, 2011, 2015a) calls 'pathological suffering', thus creating illness, depression, and pain.

### *The body: central in the affect of suffering at work and its transformation*

In Dejours' theory, the body plays a central role. Experience in the world entails sensing the restrictions posed by one's body. Work plays such an important role in subjectivity because it is the foremost activity in which the subject is affected by the world and experiences the limits of his or her body (Dejours, 1998, 2009a, 2011). The body at hand here is the subjective body of psychoanalysis: the erogenous body that constitutes itself out of the biological body, but it is also the lived body, the body that experiences affectivity, love, excitement, sex, helplessness, the body that appropriates the world (Henry, 1987). First, working presupposes an intimate familiarization with the reality of work, via an obstinate, bodily confrontation with the obstructing materiality defining the reality of the task at hand: with the tools, the technical objects and rules, but also the inter-personal condition framing the task (with the clients, the other colleagues, the hierarchy). (Dejours and Deranty, 2010: 171)

Realizing a task means physically 'touching' the world, getting to know it and appropriating it in the body (Dejours, 1980, 2009a). Dejours refers to 'embodied intelligence', highlighting the inextricable link between the cognitive and the corporeal faculties involved in the working process (Deranty, 2010: 201). Second, the breakdown of action, the disruption of the way things go, consequences of the occurrence of the real, are experienced in the first place in the body; bodily movement is interrupted. The impulse to act is stopped. Third, the affect of suffering that results from this interruption, and translates the powerlessness of the subject, is also felt in the body. Finally, the ability to transform this initial pathos into empowerment requires the involvement of the body. This centrality of the body in Dejours' theory also explains why the success or the failure of the sublimation of suffering at work ends up either in good health or in illness; at the end, it is the body that is most affected by this process.

### *The work organization: transforming pathic suffering*

Dejours (2015a) indicates the central role of the work organization in the sublimation of suffering:

Depending on the characteristics of the work organization [...] suffering can in some cases lead to illness, but in other cases it can be transformed into pleasure and become a core element in the construction of mental health. (p. 9)

The capacity of the work organization to produce cooperation, instead of coordination, is a decisive factor here. Working effectively implies changing the prescriptions. Workers answer to prescribed coordination by engaging in effective cooperation. While coordination implies a system of domination that artificially imposes how people should relate through their tasks, cooperation implies a 'deontic activity': a collective activity of producing 'work rules' and agreements between workers that enables them to answer to the real of work and most of the time contrasts with the formal rules and prescriptions implied by coordination. By 'deontic activity', a term used by Dejours himself, 'is meant the activity of making rules for work, in order to make work work' (Dejours and Deranty, 2010: 175). In this process, the role of peers, the 'work collective', is essential; it is a place where agreements and compromises between workers concerning the way to operate are found, where priorities are established (because workers cannot answer to all the prescribed rules and have to choose what is the most important; they base their choice on a common sense of their professional identity and mission), where the trickery and the know-how of workers are confronted, discussed, elaborated, tested, and transmitted through 'work rules'. The 'work collective' is also a main source of support for workers; in order to work properly, people often have to choose between contradictory rules (unless they cannot work), do things that are not officially authorized, and sometimes even cheat a little—not necessarily because they enjoy transgressing rules but because they need to slightly change the prescriptions in order to work properly. The work collective is a place where these choices are made collectively, based on professional reasons, and where workers know they will find support when they engage themselves at work; without the support of work collectives, people struggle to deal with the real of work. A worker's choice, for instance, not to apply a prescribed rule because it is not compatible with another rule, can have dramatic consequences in case of problem or failure; it may be interpreted as individual irresponsibility or pure transgression. If, however, they can refer to the rules decided collectively, their choice can be justified and placed within a professional frame and identity.

An example with train drivers can help to illustrate this point (Clot, 2010; Fernandez et al., 2003). Rule number 1, the absolute priority in their work collective (for all drivers), as defined by their identity as drivers, is to maintain passenger safety. All drivers will refer to this rule when they refuse to use an insufficiently repaired material that may threaten safety. It will contradict the rule of other departments: the maintenance department that has to be efficient and spend the minimum amount of time on repairs, and the commercial department that prioritizes on-time trains and

wishes to prevent any changes in materials leading to delays and unsatisfied passengers. In order to choose not to drive a train the drivers judge inappropriate for safety, they need to be assured of the support of the group of drivers: collective support provides acknowledgment that they have to fight for a good reason and their refusal and the tensions with the other departments will be justified by a collective conception of how to do a good job and by the feeling to defend this conception they are proud of. Otherwise, they will either choose to fight against other departments alone, or they will decide to use the faulty material, knowing that they are doing a bad job and failing in their mission of ensuring safety. In both cases, they are at risk of suffering pathologically: in the first, because they will find no support from other drivers and have to fight alone the intense pressures from the other departments; in the second, because they will be anxious about the risk of safety failure (and feel guilty for taking such a risk), and because they know that they have not done what is considered a 'good job' as defined by their profession. Dejours (2009a, 2015a) refers to this pathological suffering as 'ethical suffering' and points out its increase in contemporary organizations; a consequence of a work process dominated by top-down, standardized rules that prioritize financial incentives and short-term profitability. The work collective is therefore very important in enabling workers to maintain the ethical dimension of their job by assessing what it is to do 'a good job'. It also entails a 'deontic' aspect, as it is a place where rules and norms are produced related to this ethical dimension.

The work collective is also significant in mitigating the suffering experienced at work and turning it into a sublimating experience through 'peer recognition'. According to Dejours (1980, 2003, 2009a, 2009b), two kinds of recognition derived from work are important for workers: (a) recognition of the utility of what they do (economic, social, or technical utility), a contribution that can be judged by the society, the hierarchy, the clients, and so on; and (b) recognition of the 'beauty' of what is done: recognition that the actual work done respects the 'state of the art' and produces a qualitative result. The latter form of recognition is 'based on the quality of the relationship that the worker has maintained with the "real"' (Dejours and Deranty, 2010: 172). Because peers are familiar with the effort required to overcome the real of the work (they themselves face the same difficulties), they are in the best position to grant recognition based on 'doing'. Recognition at work compensates for the renunciation of the sex drive involved in ordinary sublimation (which implies a loss for the subject), and acknowledges the contribution of the subject in the human community. Recognition 'grants meaning to the suffering in work' (Dejours, 2012: 228). The work collective is thus of absolute significance in Dejours' theory. This is not to idealize the work collective but to point out its importance in (a) supporting the individual worker in overcoming the real of work and thus sublimating the drive, (b) taking care of workers, and (c) granting a valuable form of

recognition.

Implications for organization studies are the following. The importance of the work collective is often described in terms of the emotional support it provides (see, for example, Lewis, 2005). Dejours' perspective suggests that this is secondary. The primary focus should be on the capacity of the work collective to support workers to work properly via cooperation. As such, organization studies should explore the extent to which work collectives play this role—or not—in organizations.

### **Returning to a classic case study**

Following other scholars in organization studies who have re-analyzed well-known cases from novel theoretical perspectives (Contu and Willmott, 2006; Lok and Willmott, 2014), we show in this section how Isabel Menzies' (1960) hospital case study can be reinterpreted from the point of view of Dejours. We have chosen this study, first, because it has made significant contributions to the psychoanalytic understanding of organizational life and, second, because it demonstrates how a dysfunctional work organization obstructs the work process and produces affective suffering. It is thus useful in illustrating aspects of Dejours' theory.

Despite roots in different psychoanalytic traditions, there are many similarities between Menzies and Dejours; both discuss social defenses as a response to emotions (affects in Dejours' case) produced by the work task, and both are interested in practical solutions to organizational problems. Both perspectives are therefore normative; they are underpinned by an idea of what it means to 'work well' and concerned with installing organizational health. Reinterpreting Menzies using concepts from Dejours helps to explore some similarities, but also to research differences between the two, and highlight how Dejours' perspective can bring out certain issues that are implied, but not made the center of attention by Menzies. In short, Dejours would emphasize much more than Menzies does, the symptoms and problems in the hospital as characteristics of pathological suffering directly related to work: high drop-out rates from the training program, high sickness rates, strong feelings of discontent among staff, withdrawal of duty, and avoidance of responsibility. For Menzies, anxiety is produced by the primary work task and exacerbated by social defenses. As we suggest below, a Dejourian (2009a, 2015a) approach would acknowledge this, but would insist more on pathological and ethical suffering caused by the inability to work well due to a dysfunctional work organization and the absence of work collectives.

### *Reinterpreting Menzies via Dejours*

Menzies (1960) studied a teaching hospital in London that was experiencing problems related to the allocation of nurses and a 'high level of tension, distress, and anxiety' among the student nurses (p. 97):

Nurses are in constant contact with people who are physically ill or injured, often seriously. The recovery of patients is not certain and will not always be complete. Nursing patients who have incurable diseases is one of the nurse's most distressing tasks. Nurses are confronted with the threat and the reality of suffering and death as few lay people are. Their work involves carrying out tasks which, by ordinary standards, are distasteful, disgusting, and frightening. (pp. 97–98)

These 'objective features of her work situation' generates in the nurse 'many of the feelings appropriate to [infantile] phantasies' (Menzies, 1960: 98–99), and in particular, 'intense and unmanageable anxiety' (p. 100). From Dejours' perspective, while primitive phantasy is not insignificant (important, though, to bear in mind that Dejours is Freudian and not Kleinian), the focus is on the objective features of the work situation and the real of work: exposure to disease and death, tasks that arouse disgust in the nurse, the uncertainty of recovery and so on, are factors that 'resist' the efforts of nurses in conducting tasks according to prescribed rules. For Menzies, the nature of the task alone does not, however, explain the level of anxiety. What exacerbates the anxiety is the social defense system, 'which appear as elements in the structure, culture, and mode of functioning of the organization' (Menzies, 1960: 101). The social defense system includes splitting of the nurse–patient relationship, depersonalization, detachment, ritual task performance, checks and counter checks, and avoidance of responsibility—mechanisms orientated toward helping the nurse to avoid 'anxiety, guilt, doubt, and uncertainty' (Menzies, 1960: 109), but in fact generate a great deal of 'secondary anxiety' (p. 110), and a dysfunctional and 'rigid work organization' (p. 111).

While not referencing Menzies, Dejours (1980, 2015b) also discusses collective defenses invoked in some professions as a response to high exposure to accident and risk. Like Menzies, he believes defenses are generally inappropriate and prevent workers from coping. The difference between Menzies and Dejours in this regard, is first, that Dejours considers much more explicitly those 'real' factors of the immediate work situation that obstructs the work process; the importance of working well is a much more central theme. Second, Dejours does not associate defenses with primitive anxiety. Contrary to Menzies and some other perspectives influenced by the Tavistock Institute, which tend to ignore power and the structural inequalities inside and outside organizations (Kersten, 2001), Dejours' model makes links between subjective experience at work and

broader cultural and political factors including changes in modes of production (Deranty, 2011). For example, he emphasizes the relationship between managerialism and changes in work organizations (such as 'lean' production, project based production, the use of sales targets) and increased levels of suffering at work (Dejours, 1998, 2015a). Such changes make it difficult for workers to cope as they increase the discrepancy between the prescribed and real work. Defenses, from Dejours' perspective, are thus a response to fear and risk exacerbated by specific types of work organizations.

What Menzies identifies as social defenses would, therefore, from Dejours' viewpoint, be considered as characteristics of the work organization that appear as another aspect of the real for the worker: variation of the work-staff ratio and the number and type of patients, excessive movements of student nurses, ritual task performance are factors that oppose the effort of the nurse; they pose a limit to action. For example, 'the minutely prescribed task performance makes it difficult to adjust work-loads when necessary by postponing or omitting less urgent or important tasks' (Menzies, 1960: 110). Excessive standardization deprives the possibility for nurses to 'accommodate' the prescriptions: 'the nursing service is cumbersome and inflexible. It cannot easily adapt to short- or long-term changes in conditions' (Menzies, 1960: 110). This 'minimizes the exercise of discretion and judgement in the student nurse's organization of her tasks' and leads to underemployment (Menzies, 1960: 112). Furthermore, the splitting of the nurse-patient relationship produces too many movements of student nurses and deprives nurses of 'ordinary job satisfaction' that comes from using one's nursing skills' (Menzies, 1960: 113). While they are told to care for the patient as a whole person, 'the functioning of the nursing service makes it impossible' (Menzies, 1960: 113). For instance, nurses are instructed to wake patients to give them sleeping pills. As a consequence, 'nurses find the limitations on their performance very frustrating' (Menzies, 1960: 112) and they seem to have a constant sense of impending crises. They are haunted by fear of failing to carry out their duties adequately as pressure of work increases. Conversely, they rarely experience the satisfaction and lessening of anxiety that come from knowing they have the ability to carry out their work realistically and efficiently. (p. 110)

This excerpt can be analyzed with Dejoursian concepts: the nurses feel incapable to answer to the real of work, to transform the interruption of their action related to the occurrence of the real into good work, and therefore suffer. Importantly, for Dejours, it is not the task in itself, the numerous surprises that happen, or the social defenses that create painful affects, but the fact of *not being confident in one's own resources to deal with the real of work*. Menzies (1960: 116) did discuss



nurses' feelings of helplessness. The 'satisfaction' or 'lessening of anxiety' is, however, not just a by-product of good working; it is associated with the sublimation of the drive that is, according to Dejours, a very powerful process at work. While Menzies (1960: 116) acknowledges the importance of 'sublimatory activities in which infantile anxieties are re-worked in symbolic form and modified' (see also Hirschhorn, 1988), Dejours emphasizes the relationship between ordinary sublimation at work and human emancipation. It is worth repeating that Dejours' theory is underpinned by the idea that humans experience a sense of embodied and ethical pleasure when they view themselves in the product of their work. Menzies (1960: 112) noticed that nurses in the hospital suffered immensely when not given the opportunity to observe the recovery of patients 'in a way that she can easily connect with her own efforts' or expressed 'guilt' when they practiced 'what they consider to be bad nursing'. She mentioned the importance of 'applying the principles of good nursing' instead of following prescriptions, insisting on the fact that nurses want to do a good job and have a strong professional sense of their mission, and she describes the painful consequences of being unable to respond to this (p. 116). Thus, Dejours does not contradict Menzies here, but he speaks of the sublimation of the sexual drive, rather than infantile anxiety, because the former involves the desire to move and act. This may be why he underlines much more the suffering of workers when not given the opportunity to work well; when what they produce does not conform to their ethical conception of what should be 'good work', because this obstructs the sublimation of the drive. In sum, the nurses in Menzies case study were prevented from ordinary sublimation because they could not cope with the real of work, and could not 'work well', experiencing ethical suffering as a result.

This incapacity to cope was related to the absence of a work collective. When workers are separated from each other and assigned to a fragmented part of the work process on which they are evaluated, work collectives cannot define work rules and use 'work trickery'; they struggle to answer to the real of work. In Menzies' case study, there is evidence of the absence of work collective. For example, workers are isolated and constantly moved between wards. This has profound impacts on the quality of work and on the health of the nurses:

Working-groups are characterized by great isolation of their members. Nurses frequently do not know what other members of their team are doing or even what their formal duties are; indeed, they often do not know whether other members of their team are on duty or not. They pursue their own tasks with minimal regard to colleagues. This leads to frequent difficulties between nurses. For example, one nurse, in carrying out her own tasks correctly by the prescription, may undo work done by another nurse also carrying out her tasks correctly by the prescription, because they do not plan their work together and co-ordinate it. (Menzies, 1960: 114)

Menzies (1960) also explains that the idealization of the potential nursing recruit, and the belief that 'nurses are born not made', means that there is no supervision of student nurses and no small group teaching (p. 107). This prevents the development of a work collective that would transmit tacit knowledge and collective skills. Furthermore, and significantly, while Menzies underlines that 'gratitude' from the patients is very important for work satisfaction, Dejours would insist on recognition by colleagues. Gratitude from patients is recognition of the utility of the nurses' work, and although essential, the recognition from peers that a given job conforms to what is considered 'a job well done' according to the nursing profession is absolutely crucial in the sublimation of the drive and the affective suffering caused by the nurses' primary tasks.

While Menzies (1960) acknowledges the importance of 'work-teams', she tends to emphasize the significance of cohesive teams, rather than the centrality of the collective in the organization of the task (p. 114). Menzies (1960) noted that teams in the hospital are 'notably impermanent', making it 'difficult to weld together a strong, cohesive work-team' (p. 114). However, for her, an efficient team would function 'on the basis of real knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of each member, her needs as well as her contribution, and [adapt] to the way of work and type of relationship each person prefers' (Menzies, 1960: 114). Dejours' approach would be less concerned with such psychologizing of work relationships; it could even be dangerous and lead to marginalization of vulnerable workers. The function of the work collective is centered on work, on the way tasks should be done; it implies a discussion on/confrontation with work processes, the possibility to reflect collectively on one's professional ethic and to engage in deontic activity. Dejours' perspective downplays interpersonal regulation and adaptation, and focuses on how to construct collective answers to the real of work. Of course, this process can generally lead to good interpersonal knowledge and to 'friendly relations with colleagues' (Menzies, 1960: 114), but this would be a consequence of a more fundamental process of reflecting on work; for Dejours (1998, 2009b, 2015a), it is work that creates the first and foremost link between colleagues and enables mutual help and support, not vice versa.

This conception of work collectives has strong operational implications. First, Menzies (1960: 107) observed the lack of role definition, boundaries, and containment. While clearly defined roles are not unimportant, from Dejours' viewpoint, they risk leading to a more prescribed organization, thus exacerbating the problems observed. The emphasis should rather be on the role of work collectives in defining work rules, supporting workers to cooperate efficiently and enabling the sublimation of the drive. Second, Menzies (1960) criticizes the impact of the unduly frequent moves that affected nurses who 'grieve and mourn over broken relationships with patients and other

nurses' (p. 111). She suggests that people need emotional stability and advised to 'work [in advance] on the anticipated trauma of separation' (Menzies, 1960: 111) to alleviate its effects, thus again increasing the risk of rigidity. From the perspective of Dejours, what people need first is to belong to a work collective, which would help them to cope with frequent moves of colleagues and patients. Even if the situation would require such moves, people would not automatically suffer pathologically if they had a sense of belonging to a work collective that would ensure the job is done properly. Third, Menzies (1960) underlines that the 'diffusion of responsibility prevents adequate and specific concentration of authority for making and implementing decisions' (p. 110). Dejours would not advise to concentrate authority but to elaborate work rules that would then allow nurses to make decisions with autonomy and safety when working. Dejours is at pains to emphasize the importance of focusing on work tasks and the role of the work collective because of their impacts on the affective life of the worker.

Menzies' study was conducted in the 1950s. It is remarkable the extent to which similar levels of stress and anxiety observed in her hospital can be found in organizations today. It is not surprising that, rather than pleasure and hope, Dejours observes fear and pathological suffering as the main affects in the contemporary workplace (Dejours, 1998, 2009b, 2015a). While Menzies and the Tavistock perspective provide useful thoughts on the causes and treatments of such suffering, Dejours' theory should also be considered as a very relevant solution to the suffering that high numbers of workers experience. Menzies' (1960) recommendation for change in the hospital was a radical restructuring of the social defense system, such as removing the task-list system and replacing it with 'some form of patient assignment' (p. 119). From a Dejoursian perspective, such interventions would be fitting if they would reduce the limits to nurses' actions, enabling them to deal with the real of work and thus to sublimate the drive through the development of strong work collectives.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This article has contributed to the psychoanalytic approaches to affect and organizations in three ways. First, it has highlighted the affects associated with the work activity. While the Klein/Bion approach has foregrounded the operation of anxiety and its defenses in organizations and in the conduct of the task, by concentrating mainly on anxiety surrounding organizational life generally, it has only a limited theory of the affects related with the experience of work activity. The originality of Dejours' perspective is that it is, to our knowledge, the only one that extensively illustrates the affective and embodied experience of *working*, by demonstrating how the subject needs to

answer to the real at work. Specifically, depending on the work organization, the subject at work may experience pleasure or pathological suffering. The implication of this is vast. It suggests that in order to improve organizational functioning and health—which is, like the Klein/Bion perspectives, the aim of Dejours' theory—containing anxiety, removing defenses against anxiety or altering roles and organizational cultures (see Menzies Lyth, 1991), while significant to some extent in alleviating anxiety, are not sufficient. Rather, the organization of work needs to change to enable workers to work well, via a properly functioning work collective. Our re-reading of Menzies' (1960) study brings out the ethical suffering of nurses produced by the inability to work well (and to sublimate the drive) due to the lack of a work collective.

Dejours' theory also provides a different view to—and in some ways extends—Lacanian approaches in organization studies that imply that affective investment in work may reproduce the dominant oppressive ideologies about work. Dejours' perspective suggests that people may invest in their jobs because work is fundamental to human life, and if the context allows, they may derive a sense of pleasure from work. This is not to deny the significance of the ideological context of work; on the contrary, it is to highlight the importance of exploring how broader political factors, such as changes in modes of production *affect* the subjective and embodied experience of *working*—and not just what work 'means' to people and the extent to which they invest in work. Discourses of limitless potential, career development, and self-fulfillment are ideologies that primarily function to entice workers and intensify work, and as such, they may be effective precisely because work is central to subjectivity. Nevertheless, Dejours focuses on the 'actual conduct' of work, which refers to the subject's confrontation with the real while working and the affects involved in this process (either pathological suffering or pleasure). Ideological discourses of work may thus also be understood as factors that obstruct working well and hence generate suffering because they increase the burden of work. This does not mean that work is not significant in subjective and communal health.

Therefore, our second contribution is to extend critical approaches in organization studies by demonstrating the centrality of work in the affective life of the subject. Our argument is that one does not need to be against work to be critical of work organizations. Indeed, Dejours' theory, despite acknowledging the significance of work, is extremely critical of neoliberal forms of work organizations, which he claims, lead to pathological suffering, mainly due to an ever increasing gap between the prescribed organization and the real of work, and to the absence of well-functioning work collectives. We shall bear in mind that Dejours is an occupational health physician: hence, his political interest in improving health in the workplace. By focusing on the

fantasies surrounding work, many Lacanian organizational researchers often present a negative, or an ambiguous, view of work. From our perspective, any critique of work organizations should be founded on the theory of the centrality of work in the affective life of the subject. The theoretical conception of Dejours has thus strong political implications; 'the organization of work constitutes a political issue in itself' (Dejours, 2015a: 17). A Marxist influence on the way he approaches work, health, and subjectivity is clear in his discussion of emancipation and alienation, the latter resulting from the incapacity of workers to use their intelligence, knowledge, body, and capabilities to sublimate the suffering created by working (Dejours, 1980, 1998, 2006, 2009b, 2015a).

From this perspective, strategies of resistance that do not take into account the centrality of work in workers' emancipation process are inappropriate and lead to a deadlock. Until now, this aspect has not been considered by scholars in organization studies, and more specifically in critical management studies. From the viewpoint of the latter, some resistance strategies at work have been criticized as 'decaffeinated resistance' (Contu, 2008), that is, having the appearance of resistance but being totally void of any real subversive power. This critical stance reinterprets certain seemingly subversive behaviors, such as cynicism, parody, or humor (Fleming and Spicer, 2003) by showing how they can in fact help to stabilize practices of oppression and prevent any effective change (Contu and Willmott, 2006). This approach views other resistance strategies such as work-to-rule or 'flannelling'—whereby workers excessively identify with orders and prescriptions—as much more effective as they have a devastating impact on the functioning of the work process (Contu and Willmott, 2006; Fleming, 2010; Fleming and Sewell, 2002). However, from a Dejourian standpoint, cynicism, parody, humor as well as work-to-rule—whether or not they are able to affect what is ultimately produced by the system—all suffer from the same weakness; they assume that workers could renounce the possibility of feeling alive at work through ordinary sublimation, without long-term effects on their health. The consequence of Dejours' conception of work is that resistance must concentrate on combating work organizations and social conditions that prevent ordinary sublimation through work. Organized, collective forms of resistance are most appropriate.

This brings us to the third contribution of our article, which is to highlight the role of the collective in organizations in supporting individuals to work properly (and hence, sublimate the drive), based on a professional notion of a 'job well done'. The implication of this for organization studies is that it invites researchers to explore the extent to which work collectives play this specific role in organizations. Dejours puts so much emphasis on work because of its ethical, creative, and

emancipatory role. Emancipation necessarily implies that workers and those who represent them (unions, work-councils, etc.) fight for conceiving and defining the organization of work. Dejours (2009b, 2015a) locates the battlefield at this very precise level and laments how it has been paradoxically neglected in political and trade-union struggles. Therefore, our conclusion is that because work is the path to emancipation and ethical living, the work collective has no choice but to reclaim it if they want to fight for workers' freedom.

## Notes

1. Dashtipour (2014) and Guénin-Paracini et al. (2014) are, to our knowledge, the only publications that draw on Dejours in the English language organization and management studies.
2. For definition of—and further discussion on—this perspective on ideology, see, for example, Bloom and Cederström (2009), Ekman (2013), and Glynos and Stavrakakis (2008).

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*34 Organization* 24(1)

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