

## Work Activity and Subjectivity: A Behind-the-Scenes Look at the Work of Linemen

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Volume 50, numéro 4, 1995

L'ergonomie et les relations industrielles  
Ergonomics and Industrial Relations

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/051055ar>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/051055ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)  
1703-8138 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Brun, J.-P. (1995). Work Activity and Subjectivity: A Behind-the-Scenes Look at the Work of Linemen. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 50(4), 811–825. <https://doi.org/10.7202/051055ar>

Résumé de l'article

Depuis ses débuts l'ergonomie n'a cessé d'enrichir et de préciser sa conception de l'être humain au travail et de son activité. Le constat que l'on peut dresser est que cette discipline scientifique a réalisé et continue de réaliser des avancées importantes pour faire valoir la contribution des individus dans le travail. Mais dans la poursuite de cette quête de la connaissance, les ergonomes ont très peu considéré les dimensions émotionnelles et subjectives de l'individu. Pourtant, travailler n'est pas uniquement se mobiliser, s'activer ou agir, c'est aussi vivre, ressentir et expérimenter. Pour reprendre un concept cher à l'ergonomie, nous dirions que l'être humain n'est pas qu'un opérateur ou une opératrice, il est aussi un sujet qui entretient non seulement des rapports utilitaires avec le travail, mais aussi des rapports affectifs. Cela signifie donc que le vécu intime (ex. : souffrance, plaisir, peur, anxiété, etc.) du sujet constitue un déterminant, au même titre que les propriétés physiologiques ou cognitives de l'acte de production. À ce titre, l'ergonomie ne peut plus faire l'économie de l'étude de la subjectivité qui accompagne l'acte de production.

Pour parvenir à questionner le vécu subjectif du sujet et son articulation avec l'activité de travail, l'ergonomie doit inévitablement redéfinir son cadre d'analyse et ouvrir ses frontières à une discipline comme la psychodynamique du travail. Cette approche pose comme postulat de base que l'être humain entretient avec l'acte de travail une relation subjective, voire identitaire et non une simple relation utilitaire et distante. En fait, le sujet et sa subjectivité sont considérés comme des opérateurs fondamentaux de la construction de l'activité de travail. La mise au jour du rapport concret qui s'inscrit entre l'individu et les réalités du travail constitue une contribution importante à la compréhension de l'activité humaine de travail. Malheureusement, les points de vue analytiques et théoriques développés par la psychodynamique du travail demeurent encore peu intégrés dans les analyses ergonomiques. Cet article présente donc, à travers une étude chez les monteurs de lignes électriques, comment l'ergonomie peut interroger le travail humain à partir de ses dimensions subjectives.

# *Work Activity and Subjectivity*

## *A Behind-the-Scenes Look at the Work of Linemen*

JEAN-PIERRE BRUN

*Using a study of linemen, this article shows how analyzing the subjective experience of linemen can enrich the understanding of work activities. The demonstration is based essentially on the phenomenon of defensive strategies, which allow human beings to maintain their psychic equilibrium despite the harmful effects of work organization. Finally, it is proposed that ergonomics should pay closer attention to the more personal phenomena that inevitably influence work activities.*

Trying to understand the dynamic relationship between work activity and a person's subjective experience is not common in ergonomics. Knowledge of the personal relationship that individuals have with their work nonetheless offers meaningful insight to those who, like ergonomists, are aiming to bring about a genuine transformation in work situations. The viewpoint developed in this article is that a description and understanding of the different manifestations of subjectivity (e.g., fear, shame, suffering, pleasure, etc.) are useful in the analysis, correction or design of production systems. Using the theoretical and methodological corpus of the psychodynamics of work (PDW) to examine a study of linemen, we will show how an analysis of subjectivity can bring new insight to ergonomics. We will begin our analysis with a rapid overview of how the ergonomic conception of humans and their work has evolved over time.

Since the beginning of this century, ergonomists<sup>1</sup> have explored how human beings function in work activities and have examined the potential for "work initiatives" (*initiatives industrieuses*, Clot 1992). The initial premises were the following:

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1. The history of ergonomics is told in Laville (1988), Resche-Rigon (1984), and Valentin (1978).

work poses different risks for workers than it does for technical devices, even though certain misleading terms, such as fatigue, wear and age, can be used indiscriminately for men and machines... What is more, certain pathologies and infra-pathologies are specific to work, or at the very least, are encountered more often in work environments than elsewhere. Work can contribute to human development in certain conditions, but can also diminish our capacities in others, accelerating negative aspects of the aging process (Laville 1988: 3-4).

Starting from this perspective, initial research in ergonomics concentrated on the study of bodily constraints, since the body was clearly and undeniably involved in work. At the time, physiology and human biology were almost the sole fields of interest (Lahy 1916), as they were considered to comprise the main capacities used during work. Inspired by the functionalist and deterministic thought then current in the natural sciences, ergonomists of the first half of the 20th century classified, quantified and put forward laws to explain the effect of work constraints on the physiological functioning of the human body. They were also looking for a new logic behind work that would bring about new standards, and maximum and minimum values, thereby lessening the damage caused by industrialization and Taylorism (Lahy 1916) and, at the same time, making work more efficient. In general, research on work activity was carried out in laboratories and only rarely in real-life situations.

In the 1950s, a tendency began to develop among ergonomists to analyse work problems there where they occur, that is in factories, workshops, yards, etc. This contact with real-life situations, as well as the rise in psychotechnical and behaviourist approaches, transformed earlier models of work activity. Ombredane and Faverge (1955) were among the first to propose theoretical and methodological strategies that focused on human behaviour in genuine work situations.

Through the development of this field approach to the relationship between human beings and their work, ergonomics has established that operators have the capacity and means to orient – in part – their work activity. They plan their actions, resolve problems, prevent accidents, and coordinate their efforts with those of others. Clearly, this scientific discipline has furthered and continues to further our understanding of the contribution made by individuals in the work environment. Nonetheless, in their pursuit of knowledge, ergonomists have seldom considered the emotional and subjective dimensions of individuals. However, work is not solely a question of moving, acting or reacting, it is also living, feeling and experimenting. To paraphrase a common ergonomic concept, a human being is not just an operator but also a person who, in addition to having a production relationship with work, also has an emotional one. This means that an individual's personal experience (e.g., suffering, pleasure, fear, anxiety, etc.) is a determinant of work activity in the same way as are physiological or

cognitive properties. Ergonomics can therefore no longer pass over the study of subjectivity, since it is part of the act of production.

If research is to be conducted into subjective experiences and their link with work activity, ergonomics' analytical framework must be redefined by opening its boundaries to disciplines like the psychodynamics of work. The main postulate of this latter approach is that the relationship that human beings have with their work is subjective, even identity-forming, and not simply utilitarian and distant. In fact, individuals and their subjectivity are considered to be basic operators in the construction of work activity.

The psychodynamics of work is consistent with scientific approaches that advocate "returning to the subject" (Giddens 1987; Bourdieu 1980; Touraine 1984). In an organizational context, an individual's activity is not a simple reaction but rather a reply to work organization (Clot 1992). The fact that the individual plays an active role in this conceptual framework naturally leads PDW to focus on the subjectivity present in work activities. This subjectivity is expressed in the struggle against mental suffering and the pursuit of pleasure at work.

By bringing this relationship between individuals and work realities to light, an important contribution has been made to the understanding of work activity. Unfortunately, until now there has been little integration into ergonomic analyses of the analytical and theoretical viewpoints developed in the psychodynamics of work. This article thus presents, using a study on linemen as an example, how ergonomics combined with PDW can explore the subjective dimensions of work activity.

### ***THE ORIGINS OF THE PSYCHODYNAMICS OF WORK***

The work of Le Guillant (1952, 1954) and Le Guillant and Bégoïn (1957) were among the first studies of what was then known as the *psychopathology of work*.<sup>2</sup> Basing their work on a causal-type psychophysiological model, these authors described how the constraints of "modern" work can trigger nervous disorders and emotional illness among workers. Their famous clinical studies of telephonists and punch card operators revealed the causal links between task fragmentation, high work pace and repetitive work on the one hand, and the manifestation of various

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2. In recent years, the term "psychopathology of work" has been replaced by "psychodynamics of work". Dejours explains this terminological substitution as follows: "The psychodynamics of work covers a larger field than was initially covered by the psychopathology of work. Pathological investigation continues to be conducted, but it is now part of a larger set of questions, which include concepts that not only take into account suffering, madness and alienation, but also pleasure and normality" (Dejours 1993: 250, our translation).

neurotic syndromes on the other. The “neuroses” of telephonists and punch card operators took the form of general nervous fatigue, moodiness and sleep disorders, which Le Guillant and Bégoin qualified as physical and mental asthenic syndrome. During the 1950s and 1960s, research into the psychopathology of work retained its deterministic and behaviourist viewpoint. The constraints of work stemming from Taylorism were regarded as being the main causes of mental pathologies, the individual being seen merely as being subject to these constraints.

At the time, these concerns were similar to those of ergonomics, which was almost exclusively interested in the constraints of Taylorism, albeit in their physiological and psychological forms (rate, work load, schedule, etc.). It was not until the early 1980s that the psychopathology of work underwent a theoretical renewal that would shake many ergonomic concepts. In his book entitled *Travail : usure mentale*, Dejours rejected the deterministic and naturalist interpretation of previous research. Using several clinical examples, including fighter pilots and construction and chemical workers, he demonstrated that most working individuals in fact show no signs of mental illness, not because the work environment has no harmful effects on their psychological state, but rather because these perfectly normal individuals develop *defensive strategies* to protect their psychic equilibrium. It is these very defensive strategies that bring about important modifications in work activity. Following Dejours' work, research in the psychopathology of work shifted from a focus on the sources of mental illness to the methods used intentionally by subjects to counteract it. These methods are considered to be an expression of *mental suffering* on the health-illness continuum. The fundamental question asked in PDW research thus has become: How do individuals avoid work-induced mental illness?

### ***PRINCIPAL CONCEPTS OF THE PSYCHODYNAMICS OF WORK***

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PDW researchers have devised the following conceptual guidelines in order to achieve their research objectives.

To begin with, the psychodynamics of work investigates the intersubjective phenomena that emerge when individuals establish a direct relationship with the human, organizational and technical environment of their work. The focus on intersubjectivity is based on an epistemological position stating that human behaviour results from, among other things, a subjective rationality comprising emotions and affects. Users of PDW have discovered that defensive strategies employed to counteract mental suffering are developed collectively through intersubjective relationships. PDW is thus concerned with the internal dynamics between human beings, their activity and work organization. It should be pointed out that the presence of

subjectivity in an action is not indicative of weakness, but rather of an infinite human potential which exercises power over actions and work organization. This is consistent with the ergonomic view of physiological and cognitive capacities, which are not seen only as limits but also as properties allowing individuals to act on work.

The second postulate laid down by PDW to analyse these intersubjective processes is as follows: human beings move spontaneously towards a concerted use of all their physical, cognitive and subjective potential in order to harmonize their desires and plans with their working environment. It is through this quest for harmony in the individual/organization relationship that issues of psychic equilibrium, mental suffering and pleasure come into play. These issues also form the basis for the construction of work activities. However, this harmonization is not always recognized within organizations, and may be restricted or even prohibited. Obstacles of this sort reduce individual effort and trigger a level of mental suffering which nonetheless falls short of being qualified as illness. Contrary to illness, mental suffering is not completely morbid. Rather it is dynamic, constituting a state of struggle within which individuals try to protect a psychic equilibrium threatened by the harmful effects of the work environment. This struggle eventually results in a subjective and emotional restructuring of the individual's actions.

To maintain a dynamic equilibrium between the subject's subjective rationality (e.g., desires and plans) and the organization, mental suffering favours the development of *collective defensive strategies* which arise from people resisting the same organizational constraints. These collective defensive strategies are the result and condition of a union between individuals sharing similar conditions of existence. It is not a case here of collective suffering (of a group or profession); suffering, like pleasure, is an essentially individual emotion. Indeed, there is no such thing as mass pleasure nor mass pathology. Nonetheless, while the affects and emotions themselves concern a single, whole, concrete subject, the resulting actions may become the focus of conscious or unconscious intersubjective agreement between individuals, and in this way take the form of collectively-regulated practices. It is a particular characteristic of defensive strategies that their goal can be both to change the situation causing the suffering and change the individual's perception of that situation. In some ways, their role is to act upon a situation and to begin "euphemizing" the workers' perception of it. The changed perception is expressed in the workers' speech but also leads them to adopt challenging or provocative attitudes directed at the causes of suffering in their work environment. The concept of defensive strategy thus states that the subject, when faced with conditions that cause mental suffering, is generally placed in a position of resistance, or even

subversion, rather than one of submission or coping. The psychodynamics of work approach thus sees the presence of collective defensive strategies as being symptomatic of mental suffering.

### ***A SPECIFIC RESEARCH STRATEGY***

While feelings of pleasure and suffering are emotional manifestations shared by all human beings, they are not completely "public". Indeed, pleasure and mental suffering tend mainly to form part of an individual's private, personal life. They are the core of the individual's subjectivity, and vital pieces of his or her identity. Given the health and identity issues inherent in both pleasure and mental suffering, uncovering their full meaning and rationality requires a research method that involves close contact with the actors and the situations in which they find themselves. Since we are concerned here with questions of body, soul, emotions and subjective perception, as expressed through speech and the interaction between individuals and organizational structures, we therefore believe it to be essential that researchers make a subjective as well as physical investment in the subject's daily experiences, much as certain ergonomists have done in the past. This requires a methodology that will allow researchers to travel along the continuum of internal human phenomena and their consequences on work activity. In keeping with this goal, the two inquiry tools used in this research were participant observation and group interviews.

Participant observation has three characteristics:

- (1) it allows the observer to obtain a contextual understanding (here and now) of the different phenomena involved in the subject's action. This understanding of the observed individuals' work activity is not passive since the observer is participating actively in it. In some ways, it could be described as a process of observation promoted by the mind (speech) and the body (action);
- (2) it also provides real-time access to the communication activities (Habermas 1987) of the actors being observed;
- (3) it allows live observation of facts, that is, at the time they happen, rather than recorded observation.

As concerns this research, we accompanied different teams of linemen for a series of observation periods totalling 65 days. Each day, we followed the linemen from the beginning to the end of their shifts, working, talking and resting at the same time as they did. In this way, we were able to come to a better understanding of their work activity. Although only an observer, the researcher was at the heart of the action, not alongside it. In

other words, we were walking in the countryside that we were observing rather than seeing it from a moving train.

In addition to participant observation, a number of group interviews were conducted with the linemen. The objective of these interviews was not simply to enrich field data; they fulfilled very specific functions. The first function was to create a space for collective discussion where individual expression and the intersubjective relations between the actors and researcher were encouraged. The second was to allow for *contradictory discussion* (Dejours 1993), in which everyone was able to express their opinions and emotions freely. The third was to provide the actors and the researcher with a better awareness of the subjective aspects of human behaviour. More precisely, the group interviews made it possible to "objectivise subjectivity" (Dejours 1993). Following the logic of the method used in the psychodynamics of work, we concentrated mainly on collective comments, i.e. on consensus, contradiction and paradoxes, and also on silences and unease that may have been related to the characteristics of the work organization. Group interviews should not be confused with group dynamics or seen as a place to "let off steam"; the researchers' role was to put into context what was said, left unsaid, or understood. Our own subjectivity was also present, through questions and requests for clarifications, and it played an important role in the dialogue established with the linemen. The interviews were not simply question/answer sessions, but true intersubjective discussions, semi-directive but rigorous, where the linemen and the content of their speech took centre stage.

Each discussion was retranscribed and then a process of post-field analysis was performed. The results of the analysis were discussed with each group of linemen, and confirmed, qualified or rejected. Discussions also continued along some themes, thus enabling the researcher to refine the analyses.

Having finished with methodological questions, we will now take a look behind the scenes of linemen's work. After presenting the general context of their work, we will examine more closely the phenomena of defensive strategies as a significant structuring element of work activities.

## ***FIELD RESULTS***

### ***General Working Context***

The electrical force that linemen are subjected to is not only mysterious, ethereal, invisible, and silent, but also powerful, destructive and lethal (Brun 1992). In an environment where risk is a permanent factor, linemen



are proud of their profession. They make an important contribution to the creation of a weblike electricity transmission network composed of more than 120,000 km of cables carrying electrical current that varies in strength from 120 to 34,500 volts. Because of the presence of electricity, the linemen's environment is subject to a number of constraints linked to the danger itself and the control of that danger. For example, they must wear fireproof overalls, which may be too hot in summer and too restrictive in winter. The equipment they work on is installed on wooden poles 10 metres above the ground. Because of minimum distance requirements, the tools of their trade are attached to poles one to three metres long. When using the glove method, the linemen work alone from a basket, in a space filled with electric wires, transformers and electrified isolating switches. They manipulate all these by hand, wearing thick rubber protective gloves that limit prehensile movements. One false move, one bad contact, one dropped cable could cause a short-circuit, electric arc, burn and even death. Because of these numerous work constraints, linemen always work in teams of a minimum of two people.

In a wider perspective, the organizational context within which the linemen work also imposes a specific framework that affects their mental health and consequently their work activity. As is the case in many very large firms and complex structures, there is a strict division of tasks and a high level of standardization, both characteristic of bureaucracy. Regulated work is omnipresent, leaving the individual very little opportunity for autonomy. Every member of the organization must conform to a particular role, defined by a series of explicit and implicit rules and regulations that tend to exclude, completely or partly, any form of autonomy and individuality within the act of working. For the most part, linemen find themselves limited to executing tasks. Their experience and knowledge is rarely called on in such areas as work organization or plant and equipment design. These technical and organizational conditions lead linemen to express their anxiety and respond to the restrictions imposed by their work through the creation of collective defensive strategies. The following paragraphs describe two examples of strategies used by the linemen.

### ***Protecting Against Risk or Exposing It?***

Before working on electrified equipment, linemen must install a number of protective devices intended to avoid accidental contact with the electrified components. Given the dramatic consequences of involuntary contact with electrified equipment, it is reasonable to think that the linemen would comply strictly with company safety directives. In fact, the reverse is true. Linemen do not bother to install all the protective devices required by safety standards, and some electrified equipment remains exposed and

unprotected. This equipment is dangerous both in theory and in practice, since the linemen can easily enter into contact with it. Practices such as these contravene the safety code and are condemned by management, which accuses employees of being reckless, incompetent and offhand in the face of danger.

The linemen, however, perceive their own behaviour quite differently. In discussions with them, they explained that covering every possible risk of accidental contact is not the best solution. The working environment becomes too cluttered and cramped; the number of actions, gestures and movements increases tenfold, which lengthens production time and creates an added risk of accidental contact when the protective devices are being installed or removed. What is surprising here is that the equipment intended to protect and to reassure the person exposed to the risk actually causes new safety problems which are themselves sources of anxiety. This paradox was expressed by a lineman as follows:

It's more dangerous to have too much protection than to leave some aside. If you're over-protected, you end up not seeing what you're doing... It's like wearing three pairs of safety goggles because the thing might explode! In fact, it's worse, because with three pairs of goggles you can't see anything and then it's almost for sure the thing will explode! That's why we often choose to use only three-quarters of the protective equipment.

For linemen, complete protection against electric shock means loss of visual contact with the source of danger. When this happens, they can no longer observe, survey and intervene quickly when necessary, which forces them to trust blindly in their protective equipment. To counter this anxiety-creating passive situation, linemen have adopted a collective defensive strategy of exposing the risk, leaving it visible and keeping an eye on it. By installing only the protective devices they consider necessary, they are taking back control of their environment, their actions and their own destiny. Through behaviours that might seem like senseless acts of bravado that are incompatible with the working context, the linemen are in fact establishing defensive strategies that are essential if they are to come to terms with this context. At the same time, they are organizing a more appropriate working environment by making a compromise between their own desires, production constraints and safety requirements. One lineman summarized this as follows:

When we install protective equipment and do our work, we apply our own logic and knowledge... We have no control at all over the protective equipment, all we can do is hope it still works... But when it comes to my own powers, I know I'm still good for a while longer!

This example shows how suffering is a primary source of motivation in the collective defensive strategies observed in the linemen's work activities.

Officially, the risk is supposed to be covered and a material boundary established. However, this creates anxiety for the linemen since they can no longer see what is going on and are exposed to the electricity for longer periods of time. The resulting break in contact almost inevitably creates a discrepancy and imbalance in the relationship between work organization and the worker's personality. Confronted with the reality of a situation, linemen have no other choice but to disobey the regulations defining their activity. Two different rationalities are thus brought into confrontation. On the one hand, management which implements all the available technical means to provide the fullest protection possible; on the other, linemen who want to preserve a degree of autonomy and control over their own destiny, which necessarily requires a deviation from regulations if a visual surveillance of risk is to be possible. The anxiety and dissatisfaction provoked by this discrepancy lead the linemen to question the ambiguity of the situation and the causes of their suffering. They soon try to change this conflicting situation by introducing concrete changes that will allow them to continue their activity. This is why they prefer to leave the risk exposed, decrease the exposure period and preserve a visual contact that forces them to be more vigilant. Through this collective defensive strategy, the linemen have established work conditions and practices in which they can maintain their psychic equilibrium.

This desire to take control of one's actions, to change what is set and unchangeable, requires a reinterpretation and transformation of the procedures inherent in work organization. A defensive strategy that consists of *exposing risks* is thus an act of competence based on another rationality and another subjectivity than those employed by the designers and managers of these procedures. A defensive strategy is thus synonymous with a breach or violation of regulations. Negative judgements of these strategies are not unique to the field of linemen, having been observed in completely different sectors, such as those of stonemasons (Cru 1983) and operators in petrochemical factories and nuclear power stations (Dejours 1990). Individuals who use such strategies leave themselves open to sanctions and reprimands. However, the clever and ingenious nature of these strategies is not solely restricted to their efficiency in changing unsatisfying work processes; it is also found in the ability to avoid being caught or disciplined.

Such defensive behaviour, perceived by outsiders as a sign of incompetence, is in fact the product of individuals who, to combat mental suffering, have acquired an excellent knowledge of their work organization. In order to be able to question working methods, orders and safety rules in an active way, the first requirement is to be aware of one's strengths and weaknesses, to be skilled enough to develop effective alternatives and then

to be clever enough to avoid punishment. The defensive strategies developed by linemen reflect all these characteristics. The motives that push them to act do not result from a particular perception or misunderstanding of the organizational environment, but from a different subjective experience and a different and relevant interpretation of the context in which they are required to work. In fact, people who are thought to be disobedient and ignorant actually know a great deal about their environment (Willis 1977).

### ***The Ordeal of Risk or Risking an Ordeal***

Field research also showed that the linemen would not be satisfied by simply drawing a curtain over the cause of their suffering, since human beings have difficulty in tolerating the straightforward passivity brought about by denial. It may seem paradoxical, but the energy the linemen put into changing their situation led them to adopt even more foolhardy and dangerous practices than those previously described.

For example, the linemen sometimes hold informal competitions in which they have to climb and descend a 10 metre pole as quickly as possible. Or they will take off their gloves and work on an electrified wire without protection. They might touch an electrified wire with a screwdriver to check the current, or even begin a false move or incorrect operation and interrupt it at the last second, "just to frighten the other lineman". Earlier, we saw that management accused the linemen of being negligent and unaware of the dangers. Here the situation is more serious, and the linemen are accused of acting dangerously and running unnecessary risks. While it may be true that linemen sometimes intentionally confront risk, their acts of bravado are not necessarily reckless or meaningless games. The linemen are acting with full knowledge of the facts. These acts of bravado between linemen allow them to pit themselves against known and anxiety-creating risks. They observe and judge one another, not to see who is best — although this might also be the case — but mainly to preserve the mutual trust that is essential for the cooperation and loyalty of the work units. Linemen never work alone, and it is vital for them to know how their colleagues will react to danger: "The tests allow us to check on each other from time to time. They let you see whether or not your partner has lost it!"

These challenges also reverse the subjective relationship with danger. Risk and uncertainty are voluntarily introduced by the linemen themselves. They are therefore not "subjected" to it since they are, in some ways, its creators; they decide when and how they will face the risk. When linemen intentionally face danger they are no longer passive agents, they retake possession of their work. This quality of controlling the risk and the activity

increases when the linemen, after creating a dangerous situation, then succeed in controlling it and avoiding an unpleasant outcome, i.e. an industrial accident. The linemen are thus no longer victims of risk, but instead masters of it, and can thereby continue to work while still maintaining an emotional equilibrium.

Instead of being potential victims, passively exposed to an uncontrolled risk, they become willing actors in a pantomime whose plot, this time, is in their hands. Through these strategies, which have a mental price tag, they manage to free themselves from the constant and painful perception of risk and uncertainty. This is the price at which they can continue to work (Dejours 1993: 104, our translation).

The above examples show how defensive strategies, by a process of reversal, overcome a pathogenic situation and then transform the work activity. However, given that what happens is a transformation of reality, we may wonder if defensive strategies are simply a manifestation of delirium or alienation. Might we in fact be seeing a pathological manifestation of a psychic disequilibrium or identity disorder?

Fortunately this is not the case, because a defensive strategy is not an isolated act, nor is it a mass act performed unreservedly under the influence of a group phenomenon. This explanation is supported by two arguments. First, the acts concerned are work practices that are recognized and accepted within the community of linemen. Recognition is not given unthinkingly or automatically, but is the result of a freely-exercised attempt at mutual understanding. Defensive strategies therefore do not lead to alienation of the individuals concerned; on the contrary, they help these individuals become fully committed since the strategies are themselves the product of human effort. Second, defensive strategies can be seen as an intelligent, well-thought-out act (Giddens 1987). We noticed on several occasions that the linemen have specific knowledge that allows them to apply and properly adjust defensive strategies to the situations and individuals encountered. In our view, collective defence phenomena are the result of a judicious mix of conscious and unconscious intention and experience-based competence.

The defensive strategies of risk confrontation and derision that we have just seen will continue to be useful only if a large majority of the community members take part in them and agree on their legitimacy. Although most linemen find them worthwhile, others express doubts, do not join in, contest or denounce the group's dangerous practices.

During our field work, we noticed that individuals who broke away from or went against the general trend often came into conflict with linemen who agreed with the defensive strategies. By refusing to join in the group's defence mechanisms, the dissidents were also refusing to follow the

rules of the game devised by the community. By refusing to perform risky and forbidden acts, they were presenting another version of the facts, one in which linemen accept electricity's domination. In so doing, dissidents significantly disturb the functioning of the collective activity. Opposition to defensive strategies triggers a community self-defence mechanism against the detractors. The stigmatization tactics ranged from non-cooperation, isolation, and derision to insults and exclusion. Small differences are set aside and most of the group members unite against the dissidents.

That said, this does not mean that opposition is impossible or that defensive strategies exercise a hegemonic control over the words and actions of community members. While they have certain restrictive properties, they also empower those who support them. In other words, group members have a duty to comply with defensive strategies, and a right to express temporary disagreement or disapproval. What should be remembered here is that the duty to comply and the right to object guarantee the unflinching support of those who adhere to these strategies.

Nonetheless, defensive strategies are not immutable. For example, when a highly symbolic event such as an accidental death happens, defensive strategies can be severely shaken due to a strong rise in the level of fear. Linemen for example no longer take shortcuts or display false bravery. Foolhardiness becomes taboo, and the anxiety and fear of making wrong moves or mistakes moves to the forefront of people's minds. The work activity is transformed in a short period of time, and linemen follow the rules and regulations. Management, likewise, tightens its control. However, these changes are temporary. They do not stabilize, since they slow down work, disrupt the coordination of activities and even go so far as to make cooperation and confidence between linemen more difficult.

### CONCLUSION

The objective of this article was to underline the importance of studying the subjectivity of individuals so that we may better understand how they use its potential and how it influences their experience of work activities. If a more diversified understanding of work activity is to be developed, ergonomics must consider the place of the individual, since it is the individual who executes the work. In other words, work activity must not simply be seen as being physiological or cognitive, but also as being subjective and emotional. It is not because organizations deny the importance of subjectivity that ergonomics is justified in ignoring this aspect of work activity. The challenge for ergonomists is thus to accept that work dynamics cannot be explained using only a production rationality that speaks of loads, capacities and physiological and cognitive limits. Indeed, it

is becoming more and more urgent to consider subjective rationality as indispensable for the analysis of work activities.

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## **RÉSUMÉ**

### **Activité de travail et subjectivité : l'arrière-scène du travail des monteurs de lignes électriques**

Depuis ses débuts l'ergonomie n'a cessé d'enrichir et de préciser sa conception de l'être humain au travail et de son activité. Le constat que l'on peut dresser est que cette discipline scientifique a réalisé et continue de réaliser des avancées importantes pour faire valoir la contribution des individus dans le travail. Mais dans la poursuite de cette quête de la connaissance, les ergonomes ont très peu considéré les dimensions émotionnelles et subjectives de l'individu. Pourtant, travailler n'est pas uniquement se mobiliser, s'activer ou agir, c'est aussi vivre, ressentir et expérimenter. Pour reprendre un concept cher à l'ergonomie, nous dirions que l'être humain n'est pas qu'un opérateur ou une opératrice, il est aussi un sujet qui entretient non seulement des rapports utilitaires avec le travail, mais aussi des rapports affectifs. Cela signifie donc que le vécu intime (ex. : souffrance, plaisir, peur, anxiété, etc.) du sujet constitue un déterminant, au même titre que les propriétés physiologiques ou cognitives de l'acte de production. À ce titre, l'ergonomie ne peut plus faire l'économie de l'étude de la subjectivité qui accompagne l'acte de production.

Pour parvenir à questionner le vécu subjectif du sujet et son articulation avec l'activité de travail, l'ergonomie doit inévitablement redéfinir son cadre d'analyse et ouvrir ses frontières à une discipline comme la psychodynamique du travail. Cette approche pose comme postulat de base que l'être humain entretient avec l'acte de travail une relation subjective, voire identitaire et non une simple relation utilitaire et distante. En fait, le sujet et sa subjectivité sont considérés comme des opérateurs fondamentaux de la construction de l'activité de travail. La mise au jour du rapport concret qui s'inscrit entre l'individu et les réalités du travail constitue une contribution importante à la compréhension de l'activité humaine de travail. Malheureusement, les points de vue analytiques et théoriques développés par la psychodynamique du travail demeurent encore peu intégrés dans les analyses ergonomiques. Cet article présente donc, à travers une étude chez les monteurs de lignes électriques, comment l'ergonomie peut interroger le travail humain à partir de ses dimensions subjectives.