# The paradox of work. A world of losing and winning

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## Abstract

The study of work-related illness needs a comprehensive view that goes beyond the analysis of illness alone. If we are to better understand its causes and effects we should take into consideration what both illness and work mean to workers themselves. In this paper, I present preliminary results from a medical anthropological study focused on the social construction of stress among a group of female phone operators from Telmex: the largest telephone company in Mexico, and until recently the only one. Ethnographic data on the operators' views and feelings towards their bodies, lives, and health/illness/attention processes, such as stress, were linked to the accelerated change experienced a few decades ago in the labor process. Results show that recently there have been changes in operator's views and feelings in such a way that it may be said that operators create themselves through their daily work experience. Thus, work may be seen as a world filled with meaning and experience in which the self, the body, and even life itself, are being continuously transformed through a process that involves both losing and winning.

**Work, Illness, Social meaning, Local Worlds, Narratives**

**Citation:** RAMÍREZ-VELÁZQUEZ, Josefina. The paradox of work. A world of losing and winning. ECORFAN Journal-Republic of Colombia 2016, 2-2: 19-39

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## Introduction

In recent decades Mexico has experienced a continuous transformation towards modernisation. A number of private and government institutions have contributed significantly to this process by implementing new technologies that have changed working strategies and social organization. Within this context, the telecommunication industry is no exception.

*Teléfonos de Mexico* is one of the most important telecommunication companies operating in the country, and was, until very recently, the only one. In this way it has generated changes at an economic, social, political and cultural level during the last two decades.

These changes have been studied by analysts from diverse fields to try to explain, among other things, the crisis experienced in the Mexican telecommunications industry in relation to worldwide changes such as the scientific and technological revolution, economic globalisation, restructuring procedures in productivity, changes in Government, the effect of transnational companies, crises in unionism and alternatives to more flexible working conditions and technological changes.

Since the 1980's, and under the influence of Braverman (1975), many scholars and unionists have suggested that the change in technology increased managerial control of the labor force, reducing it in size by transferring the skills and capacities from the workers on to technology, thus reducing the workers skills.

However, Braverman´s analysis is seen as deterministic by some (Linn, 1987) because of his emphasis on the influence of technology on workers.

From my own perspective Braverman´s view is limited because of his treatment of workers as a homogenous group characterised by identical working relationships, ignoring the diversity of labor, social and cultural contexts. In this way failing to consider differences in gender, age, and social rolls, rarely taken into account when analysing the effects of technological change on workers.

A number of scholars are convinced that technological transformation results in economic, social cultural and political changes in the working environment and have tried to explain these phenomena without considering the effect of these changes in the individual's conditions. I would even go so far as to say that if the individual is not taken into consideration, neither is work satisfaction, or even health. Although work and health relationships are observed to some extent by occupational health their analysis is still limited.

For this reason, I believe it is important to analyze the effects of technological progress from a medical anthropological perspective taking into account work type, labor demands, and above all, individual appreciation of work. Only in this way can we expand our research boundaries to go beyond the general and conventional idea that technology affects all workers in the same way.

The purpose of this paper is to present the "work" as a world of meanings and experiences that would allow us to see the construction of the body, the self, and the workers' life as a process of transformation that moves from earnings to losses.

My point of view diverges from the conventional model and recaptures the relationship between work and illness as seen from the individual, thus finding its positive and negative expression.

In this way, the relationship <work-stress-illness> becomes less mechanic and may be explained in its complexity through a spectrum of circumstances that employees have to face.

I begin my analysis by mentioning briefly the main premises that lead to the study of stress on a group of telephone operators by considering their relationship to work as a world of meanings. I then present the procedures for collecting the information for the study and mention the people involved.

I briefly describe the telephone operators' perception of their work based on their own words and elaborate on two recurring trends in their descriptions.

The first one is related to the condition of their work that is increasingly associated to stress perceived as a health problem. From my perspective this represents the negative side by becoming a "world of loss". The second, corresponding to the positive side offers space for recreation, which in this paper we may call "world of winning".

## Framework

In Mexico the analysis of the labour process as a cause of illness has been studied mainly through occupational health, social medicine and psychology. Stress as a work health problem, irrespective of the point of view of this study, is more widely analysed through the model developed in 1976 by Karasek (1998), denominated *Contorl/Demand Model*.

This model's proposition is to analyse the relationships between the psychological demand of work (in quantitative terms), and the control of tasks and use of capacities (field of decision-autonomy and utilisation of skills).

This model has a social, emotional and psychological focus on the risk of stress, and also takes the development of active behaviour into account. This is of interest to researchers as it emphasises the importance of the characteristics of the work's social organization (i.e. social relations) and not only the quantitative requirements of the work, which allows differentiation between "positive stress" and "negative stress" in terms of a combination of control and demand.

Nevertheless, the few studies done in Mexico on workers are more concerned with stress from its negative side.

My background in anthropology has been enhanced by the theoretical and methodological tools obtained from medical anthropology. These tools have helped to define such concepts as illness/ disease, sickness, (Kleinman, 1988, Young, 1982) and health/illness/attention process, (Menéndez, 1990). We see proposals that introduce us to the analytic conflict between representation and praxis through the questioning of conventional the opposition "subject-object" (Csordas 1990).

The interpretative-hermeneutic perspective (Scheper-Hughes y Lock 1986) that offer a new way of thinking and writing about the body and its experience, a proposition which uses the metaphor as a strategy for communication of insincere and unsaid suffering (Kirmayer, 1992; Low, 2000). As well as the dominant analysis metaphors elaborated by the medical profession closely related to policies of reproduction and ideas on the ageing of the female body (Martin, 1987).

Moreover, Young's perspective (1980; 1995) whose further critical revision of stress studies concludes, among other things, that the concept itself lacks precision because it is loaded by ideology.

All of these perspectives converge on one point: the interest in the analysis of illness from the point of view of the patients. Furthermore, this point of view can be translated as a form of resistance (Ong, 1988; Dunk, 1989; Van Schaik, 1989; Lock, 1990 y Scheper-Hughes, 1992).

From my own perspective (Ramírez, 2010) I suggest that any illness has a social meaning, and exhibits differences and similarities found in societies and cultures. This not only in general terms, but also in smaller social groups formed through shared beliefs, norms and values that produce a diversity of notions and attitudes from varied sources marked by gender, age, class and ethnic origin. It is because of this that it offers a different viewpoint on illness, from a socio-cultural understanding of individual life and experience, and the way in which personal history and relationships are affected by their presence.

This proposal does not attempt to explain whether a particular affliction is or not a disease, as stipulated by biomedicine, but rather to understand why certain individuals see it as such, as it affects their lives. In addition, I emphasize that the worker is a *social, cultural and political being* and not another element of the working environment; speaking figuratively, the worker does not take his head off like a hat when he arrives at work. That is to say the individuals work capacity, -seen as the physical body- and his mind (feelings, emotions and representation), are inseparable.

In this way, the worker conveys his or her culture and ideology expressed in every scope of life through personal experience and social interaction.

Despite Fordism and Taylorism, which tend to disqualify and simplify the content of work, these individuals will offer a result depending on gender conditions.

The concept of *work* is treated as a socio-political field, which does not only refer to conflict and negativity, but also creativity, negotiation and benefit of social groups. It is composed of a hierarchic, ideological, technical and social organization and set of regulations, conceptions, traditions, beliefs, praxis, senses and meanings prompted by *relationships of power and of gender.*

From this perspective we can also understand how workers face subjective conditions on a daily basis (hierarchical relationships of power loaded with ideology and meaning) that constitute local worlds, as Kleinman (1994), points out. In these local worlds beliefs, behaviours, symbols, and conflicts come out to the health analysis arena and include the significance that the illness has to the individual and his/her work, including the more general aspects of personal, working and family experience.

By broadening the concept of the employee (men and women) as a social and cultural entity we are aware of a number of social roles which they play. In the case of phone operators, as well as workers they are also: daughter, mother, wife, sister, student, friend, head of the household, activist, and health care practitioner, etc.) roles which have specific and additional demands for women.

The analysis of these other areas of development offers us access to their everyday life and look at how they perceive themselves and the construction of illness.

The study of illness from this perspective allows us to understand it beyond the listing of symptoms, as indicated by Good (1996), and more as a world of experience which alters life but also allows us to understand subjective representation of the worker's body, in order to provide better attention (Csordas, 2000).

Traditionally biomedicine has not taken these factors into account, and often the ill worker also fails to consider these facts. This may seem contradictory, but it is this initial stage that intends to explain the anthropological perspective.

**Participants, interview design and procedures**

The 25 phone operators interviewed belong to two traffic departments in the Teléfonos de Mexico Company, located in Mexico City. Selection criteria included a previous stress diagnose, or have detected signs of stress in the last year. Other characteristics were taken into account such as age, seniority, civil status, and the existence of children. The company was solicited the possibility of carrying out interviews within the workplace and during office hours, with the objective of observing work methods and development during a normal working day.

The first interview was conducted during regular working hours, and took about 40 minutes. The women were asked to generally describe their ideas about stress, parting from their knowledge and body experience as well as strategies they have used to cope with stress. The following interviews, that lasted one and a half hours on average, were conducted working hours. I suggested to each worker that they talk about their life as phone operators, focusing on ailment, and offering specific details regarding first symptoms, conditions under stress begun, and the first time they heard the word stress.

Working activities of the women surveyed include the following: 6 of them work in the national long distance department, (lada 020); 9 in the international long distance department (lada 090): 4 of them work at the information department (040); and 6 in the claims department (050).

The age of the women ranges from 32 to 54 years old, with and average of 41 years. The length of time in the company ranges form 6 to 27 years, with an average of 17.5 years. The marital status is: 12 operators married, 6 divorced, 4 single mothers and 3 single women. All the operators except the single women have children.

According to the type of work, defined by the department to which each operator belongs, the level of education varies. The operators working in national long distance have a lower education level (9 years education on average) as the company at one time required a basic education. On the other hand, the international long distance operators have a higher level of education (12 years on average), as they are expected to have basic knowledge of English. In this department, all the women have completed high school and three women have professional careers.

An interesting point to make of the 25 operators is that they have worked from a very young age, ranging from 11 to 29 years of age and averaging 17 years of age. Due to the importance of labour seniority, which generates a higher income, these women are constant in their work. Moreover, it can be said that since the labour productivity program was implemented, there are rarely absences, even in cases of illness, due to the pressure against absenteeism, as well as the economic problems which might follow.

The purpose of this paper is to present the hegemonic discourse from the operator's perspective. The idea is to explain work as a world of winning or loosing. The presentation of this article demands a synthesis of information, for this reason I will highlight only some fragments of the operator's interviews, in order to illustrate the two directions of their presentations.

First, as a hegemonic model which defines stress as the result of work, and second from the personal experience which shows particular responses depending on each of the operator's (individual, family and work) circumstances. The responses allow us to see how work not only represents the illness negatively, but rather allows us to interpret it as a space for creation, negotiation and freedom.

**Phone operator work and conventional knowledge about stress**

The phone operator's work in Mexico has been considered a convenient employment for women for a long time, since it apparently does not require further preparation. It offers a good salary and working benefits that are extended to other family members. Over the last two decades, the implementation of personal computers (video display terminal VDT) resulted in greater productivity for the company through the increase in the number of phone calls completed by a single operator in a working day. This change contributed to maintain a better control of both the service and the customers that lead to a permanent surveillance of operators by supervisors. The demands imposed by productivity and quality goals have become central to the development of operator's working relations and health problems.

Despite the predominantly negative connotations of working roles as stress producers there is a positive aspect that ought to be recovered. From the operators own perspective work organization based on shift rotation allows them to better organize family and working demands in such a manner that they are able to manage their personal needs. These conditions influence the operator's perception of work primarily as a source of economic assets to satisfy the needs for every day life, and also to maintain a certain social status.

Only secondarily could their work be seen as a mechanism for personal achievement (self-realization). The perception of work either as self-realization or cause of stress depends on three conditions. One is the transition towards modernisation which implies the new application of technology in the working environment, and therefore a new labour organization which causes a negative notion of work under stress.

Second, the matter of creativity or limitations which cause changes in the workers. Three, the personal response of the workers to these changes. These must be observed in relation to their personal lives, including the roles they play, and the social support, which they rely on. These can lead them to consider work as a medium for self-realization or as a stress producer; or even as a dynamic pivot from which both circumstances may be expressed.

The technological change which has taken place in Telmex over the last two decades has lead to the progressive incorporation of the notion of stress through a complex process combining rumour and social reality.

Examples of typical representations derived from rumour the following can be listed:

- Phone opertor´s work will no longer be needed with the progressive introduction of new technology.
- Use of personal computers – representing the new technology- will cause new health problems, among them stress will be central.
- Technological change demands changing operator's "attitudes". This refers to commitment to service, and amiable attention and comfortable solutions readily offered to customers.

During the process of change, the union itself persuaded the workers with permanent contracts to employ new strategies to negotiate with employers. Among these, one example was to show willingness to face this new reality and the changing attitudes to seek political and labour goals.

The phone operators associated work simplification through the use of computers with the necessary appearance of stress.

However, this idea that expresses a conventional knowledge of work/stress interaction is exceeded by phone operator's narratives when seeking an explanation to their doubts about stress within the context of work.

I based this study on the narrative perspective because it provides an opportunity for phone operators to express their suffering through different circumstances, moments and situations; through other people and even themselves by taking advantage of their movement back and forth through time. Narrative represents a powerful tool to communicate and to provide experience with meaning; its richness is expressed in the reconstruction of the past, the explanation of the present and anticipation of the future. By looking at the whole time perspective it is possible to explain the ailment –which is the main interest- and also to see the transformation that phone operators experience in their body and self when facing illness, either real or imaginary.

It is possible, from this perspective, to articulate the internal and external dimensions of the phone operator's world during illness as declared by Mattingly & Garro (1964). This is possible because narrative helps us to understand concrete events, as there is a need to relate the internal world of understanding and motive to the external world ruled by observable actions and situations of interaction.

The stress process and its various responses have been comprised by phone operators, as a working group, throughout two decades in a continuous process of changing roles: from worker to woman. In this process, for most of them, stress exists as an entity itself in the working environment that alienates their lives. From operators to union representatives, stress is considered a consequence of work.

During the first informal meeting with workers to explain the purpose of this study, a number of operators expressed their agreement, influenced by their perception of being under a hostile working environment. A clear example was the following expression: "it is great you will carry out this study because here we are all very neurotic, yes, truly hysterical!"

With a very open mind a number of phone operators approached me to show what they though to be evidence of stress on their bodies: hair loss, blemishes on skin, digestive and circulatory problems and even insomnia. A number of them openly volunteered to be part of the study.

Stress, related to problems such as "nervousness" or irritability and low self-esteem, had created broad semantic network that showed situations, symptoms, and feelings that were shaping the meaning behind their suffering. The expression of stress became more objective as represented by the symptoms detailed by the operators.

However, a hidden side was also present in the worker's perception, that expressed other meanings, as stress control, stress of supervision, stress as an expression of gender complaints, conformed by hierarchical relationships between operator and supervisor and in the daily exchange with their partners. Stress was also defined as the expression of hard-worker and a woman.

As will be seen, the operator's narratives express the Cartesian dichotomies: *body/mind,        objective/subjective, real/imaginary*, found in the illness, making it tangible and allowing for discussion of the causes of absenteeism.

**Work as a loss**

**Illness from its social meaning**

Seeking an explanation for stress, the informants established a direct work/stress relationship beginning with a spontaneous response determined by their conventional knowledge of stress.

Only later on when they were required to give a more detailed explanation of their personal experience did this result in a broad range of circumstances which may define stress in its various shades.

One of my first observations relates to the type of information received by operators through the media (television, magazines, radio, newspapers, physician/patient interaction) which provides a popular image of stress that overlaps with that derived from biomedical information, promoted also by the media.

Therefore the first ideas that come to mind when asked to define stress are those of greatest resonance.

Their answers, although in different words, appeared hesitant as a tautological expression, that is "*something that makes me tense, which stresses me*". Moreover, there is a uniform response that describes stress as an emotion or an attitude formulated by most of the operators as a state of irritation, anguish, anger, courage, rage, fear, envy, overwhelming anxiety.

It is interesting to point out that none of the operators mentioned physical ailments such as head or neck aches or backaches, and their definitions generally resembled the following: "*stress is madness*", "*it is produced to a large extent by envy*", "*it represents hold range, producing aggression*", "*it is a state of permanent anxiety*".

The complex nature of this issue comes from its own vague definition as expressed by a number of authors (Vingerhoets y Marcelissen, 1988) and presented in the popular anonymous proverb "*in addition to being itself, and the result of itself, is also the cause of itself* ".

Following these comments, some of them wanted to be more precise by using their hands to express pressure. Elsa used both hands to indicate generally: "it is a hole in the stomach." Aura, Lilia, Tina, Regina, Mary shared a similar expression. Although for the latter, the hole was located in the thorax; for Norma it was experienced as a feeling of emptiness. In a similar attitude, Bertha refers to a "*wave of fear*", and Nely to a "*releasing anxiety*".

I observed an undeniable influence of professional notions of stress, as implied in the expression "it is like an adrenaline shot", presented by Elsa. This reflected Seyle´s idea, which outlined three phases: first alarm, when adrenaline is released, followed by resistance, which considers an adaptation of the organism, and last, fatigue which entails an incapacity for response.

These professional notions are shared by phone operators and become popular as operators develop their own interpretation as in the Nely´s case: "from my point of view stress is something that helps me in the beginning but later on makes feel like crap".

Another perspective presents ideas offered by those women affected by the disease, who have received ample information from their physician.

Norma shows knowledge derived from her own research, intended to change her depression diagnosis. Her first image of stress is one of life experienced from the dark side; therefore a stress free condition would be a cheerful life.

Maya considers herself an informed patient, she is one of the oldest operators, who suffers from asthma and presents severe crises. She defines stress with confidence: "*stress is a detonator for every other kind of illness, it is symptomatic*". Moreover, she was the only one who clearly perceived stress as typical female problem related to menopause, "*it is a physical manifestation of menopausal women*".

Nora´s answer: "*It is something that dominates people´s will and prevents them from acting with self-control.*" also applies elements from biomedicine and psychology that have developed from the idea of personality types - defined as type A-, which run the risk of suffering from stress.

Here stress is pictured as an external factor that conveys an individual with some degree of susceptibility. At the same time, this denotes a stigmatising aspect that Nora expresses sometimes by denying suffering from stress based on her perception that people who suffer from stress are always in a bad mood, resulting in constant problems at work.

Parting from these notions I intend to draw attention to the manner in which medical knowledge influences the operator's ideas to the extent that they strongly believe they have the right information.

**Stress and the notion of separation**

Other definitions were more difficult to understand given the unclear expressions used: "*how can I explain it*". They find it difficult to express their feelings when describing themselves as if the person was divided in to two spheres, one exterior and one interior, with different demands.

On one hand: "being a good worker" and on the other, the personal, or family related need, that is "being a good mother or sister". The conflict arises when both roles appear as unresolved.

Bertha said "there is something that I do not understand and that I can not explain, but for me it is like life is divided… outside, things are slow despite of my desire to make them go faster. Stress is very much like doing things in a hurry because we are running late, my head is breaking apart, it's as if all of a sudden I were no longer myself and then a wave of fear comes me".

Cora declares: "it's what we perceive as a lack of coherence between what you have to be and what you can be. I believe in working well, because I do it for me and for my children, but there is no recognition of these efforts because there is always something else to be done.

The same happens with children, as in addition we have to leave them alone at times. What I have experienced as a result of stress is a progressive deterioration of myself, my hair is falling out, I am loosing weight, and I have skin problems." Further, she indicated, in regards to her body, "I am not feeling myself these days because of the changes in my body, there is no consistency between what I want to be and I can be".

Lilia also referred to this idea of being divided by indicating that stress is a constant pressure from family and work demands. It is an example of duty, she affirms, "*I have to help to my bothers and I also have to perform well at work*". Lilia defines stress from her own experience. She describes her current situation as being very stressful, -anguish, sadness, defeat, loneliness-, because her "duty" helps her brother to obtain housing, as a benefit of her work, although for her it represents having no money left over, and as a result "*working too much*". From her expression "*I feel bad because I don't have any one's approval*", my judgment is that she represents a lost and abated self.

Norma's description was quite short, and among the silent intervals, she formulated the idea of stress "*as being a blast that leaves one empty and fractures the head from inside*".

Socorro said sullenly that, "*stress is a burden that numbs the mind, and then the body wants one thing, and the mind another.*"

The external/internal division revealed by Bertha, is expressed in Socorro´s description as a chasm between body and mind, as felt by Martha, for whom stress is a load of emotions (..)…self contained and separated between body and mind; the body may seem well and be considered by others as having no symptoms, but the mind cannot stop dwelling on a number of things that make her worry. From her interpretation, the mind keeps passing through images that she rather erase by keeping herself busy on crossword puzzles, even if causes sleeplessness.

But stress as described by most of the operators could be many different things, depending on what causes it. Martha emphasises that it can cause a number of problems, from loss of appetite to over eating, insomnia or hair loss, etc.

**Stress is what causes it**

Immersed in the problem of defining stress, the operators chose to speak about the reasons for stress in an attempt to explain, although they were not asked, the motives and causes that they considered responsible.

In this sense, some of the answers indicated not what stress is, but what they believe causes it. They referred to the pathological conditions of society, such as violence, noise, agitation, as if they were natural.

**Stress related to the pathological and violent state of society**

Elsa´s discourse shows knowledge and interest in the union's formation and in "political conscience". She expresses great interest in the remark: "*stress is a condition characteristic of capitalism, and a situation of alienation, that certainly affects workers more than any other group of people, which is even more problematic in the case of women due to the amount of preoccupations we have…*"

Norma explains, "*stress is the product of daily life characterised by agitation, violence at work, but everything seems normal*".

Isabel expressed a similar notion: "*stress is the product of life organization, that we cannot change, full of work and agitation*".

Rocío and Jazmín defined stress as overwhelming due to the numerous tasks that have to be undertaken, at the same time stress was associated to a life, where work occupies most of their time since they must complete both paid work and work at home. They define this way of life as "agitated".

This idea portrays a society perceived as dangerous due to conditions of repression and regulation that set the basis for work, according to what the operator's narratives outline as the general framework for stress production.

Stress is also at times considered to be normal and unresolved; the answer to the question: how do you imagine life without stress? was primarily "without work!", this response shows a strong feeling of release. The most common response among the operators concluded that absence of stress depends on work without pressures and with equity.

**Stress as a controlling and normative mechanism at work**

The strongest and most powerful description of stress is present in the work microcosms. It appears first under a negative perspective since the working environment is seen as cause of stress.

By work environment they refer basically to personal relationships between directors and workers and among piers; this is the prime motor relating to stress. Carla, Cora and Mary describe the surveillance and control of bodies as "machines" as the daily exasperating routine.

Another reason why operators feel their work is not valued is the company´s premise that "the customer is always right" even when the customer has been responsible for the problem, and the company does not trust the operators on this argument.

The operators also see the unfairness in the supervisor's lack of thrust when they complain about the high number of obscene calls with which they are threatened. The supervisors consider this argument unsupported.

This complaint, in addition to the control and surveillance applied with the purpose of reaching productivity goals, supports their mistrust of supervisors and their rage.

Other elements that result anger and general irritation of the workers who are not closely related to supervisors, are inequity, preferential treatment and psychological harassment.

These conditions added to the unqualified, monotonous, tedious and long lasting work sessions, contribute to development of the common situation of phone operators, where physical, social and moral problems prevail.

Shift rotation and working hours have a double meaning for phone operators because the degree of mobility associated to this schedule gives them some opportunity to distribute their time between family and working demands.

The way this is organised is follows: if an operator faces a problem they can exchange their work schedule for a different time of the day, this change is relatively easy, particularly if they plan it ahead of time. On the other hand overtime is assigned by an informal organization which is the responsibility of the operators not the companies. It consists in covering someone who is unable to go to work.

This is a convenient strategy for operators to support each other, by doing their partner's work the operators those who have been covered do not loose their productivity bonuses, and the operator working overtime makes extra money. Form the operators' point of view this informal system represents a significant economic advantage (refer to table 1).

| Table 1 | |
|---|---|
| Regular/less expensive shifts Monday to Saturday | Sunday Turns |
| Morning and Daytime $450.00 By hours $57.00 | Morning and Daytime $652.00 By hours $82.00 |
| Night $500.00 By hours $72.00 | Night $702.00 By hours $100.00 |

**Table 1** Wages according to working turns

However they are not aware of the serious negative effects on their health: by simply adding the number of hours worked in a week we observe that most operators have no time off. The working week is on average 65 to 83 hours long.

Summarising, I would like to remark that although operators recognize that work organization is a condition that triggers stress, operators give more attention to the deteriorated interpersonal relationships, which they blame on their work demands and on jealousy among operators.

From this perspective the operator's perception of changing shifts is only seen through its potential for stress production, but the lack of awareness on the excess of working hours deserves more attention.

**Work, From a perspective of winnings and losses**

The idea that stress is a generalised threat for operators overlooking the fine differences that could be hard to see in an institution such as Telmex. Here the trend is towards homogenisation, diluting human responses, showing rhythms, reasons, and capital needs that together reduce workers to simple numbers.

As a control measure for certain administrative processes, operators they are not referred to by name, but by number. The working record on which productivity payment, permissions, days off, shift changing, are all based, are registered and referred to only by this identification number, allocated by the company to each operator.

I had begun the fieldwork at the San Juan Center when, on a number of occasions I tried to find the operators for the interview, the supervisors would ask me their number while I insisted on calling them by name.

This situation occurred very often and therefore I was told: *you should ask them their number and memorize it will make it easier.* Then I realised that I systematically rejected such a way of referring to people probably due to personal conviction. But I found that the operators also showed resistance to number system, as a voice inside saying: "machine".

For example Carla becomes simply number 324, during a working day she has to repeat the phrase at least 500 times. Although the only time she should indicate her name was when making the connections. She refuses to repeat the "made phrases" including her name. She chooses a quick answer in passing the call through and moves onto the next, and in this way fulfils the production demands. The greatest problem for her at work is perfectly clear, she dislikes the surveillance and control system, but more than anything else her behavior denotes a consistent rejection to being a machine.

She also rejects the supervisor's dehumanising treatment which is largely reflected in the indications of what is forbidden at work, such as not being allowed to laugh and talk, or show signals of being uncomfortable, tired or bored since personal lives have nothing to do with work commitments.

What is a phone operator's personal life like? Does it capture the attention of labour studies? How could supervisors, who were operators once themselves, tell someone that personal life does not count, since they also have one? This last question is central to my study because it provides an explanation for their answers. Nevertheless this is a complex question to answer immediately; therefore I ask it only to outline some elements that from my point of view influence the development of ideas about stress (which could also be read as a metaphor for resistance) as related to technological change.

Carla is 41 years old, she completed junior high school and studied translation, she is married and has two children. Her working experience is as international (090) long distance operator (LD). Her working experience is of particular interest since she has seen the change of modernisation: she points out that determination and preparation were essential to survive the technological change.

Her personal life changed at the time, as she got married in the interim. At first she had to deal with the restructuring of her life as a wife. She had to try and make her husband accept her working schedule due to the rotating shifts, and furthermore, understand the night schedule. Later on, when her children were born, new arrangements had to be made and she had to look for the family's support to care for the small children. She stopped working only during the period the company establishes for maternity leave. Afterwards she has worked without rest (except for vacations) and has even worked more hours a day to make extra money.

Carla's husband saw that as positive at the beginning, but later on when he realised she was making more money than he was, and spending more time away from home, away from the children the problems started. A vicious circle was underway.

Carla does not know exactly when it began, however she says that as she worked more hours, her husband began to drink, and she links these events to her personal deterioration. Among the symptoms related with this condition, are: dermatitis on her arms, neck and lower face. Despite medical supervision it did not improve.

The diagnosis was nervous dermatitis caused by depression. She started drinking as a result to the long silent spells and sour faces seen from her family members at home, in addition to work pressure. At work she was told to check her behaviour since she was becoming irascible and gloomy. Carla traces this period 9 to 10 years back. Whereas Carla focuses on marital problems as the central cause of her health deterioration, I reconstruct the context in which it developed.

In 1990, for example, modernisation of the traffic department began, her first child was about 2 years old, and she was expecting her second child, with risk of abortion. Her mother also passed away around that time. Although Carla states that the use of computers at work never troubled her, she is aware that there was a climate of uncertainty due to the threat of layoffs.

The context of this complex situation put Carla and her family in an unstable position. In answer to the questions if she suffered from stress and what the symptoms were, she indicated that she was not the same, she was very depressed, but at the same time her body was restless. She continuously tapped her fingers on the desk, and always moved her legs and feet. She had a lot of anger that she could not release, because she could not talk. *My stress -she underlines- surfaced when talking to my husband about changing my work schedule. I felt every part of my body shaking, I was nervous, lost my voice and started to feel angry towards my children.*

I recognised that I was alcoholic, and this took me and my husband to seek for help at AA where I found relief. At present I can talk, I have changed so much that people tell me that they it is noticeable.

Nevertheless I do not have the supervisor's sympathy because I do not comply with the phrasing and conflicts arise from being more expressive.

The AA meetings have taught me to say how I feel and here (at work) I would like to be allowed to laugh, to talk, to help the customer the way I know how, without having to use unnecessary words. At present my conflicts have to do with my dislike of being treated as a machine. What I want is to be trusted and to convince then that there is more than simply saying that the customer is right.

Carla's current state of stress is physically expressed as nervousness, anger and irritability. She declares her ability to recognize it and to control it. It is expressed through digestive problems, diagnosed as colitis, but for her there is no need to treat it since she knows that it is related to an unavoidable state of nervousness.

She emphatically asks: how could I avoid it if every week payday destroys our expectations due to the unfair salaries? It is not fair that we have to live with this lack of flexibility when workers are faced with a personal problem. Working demands are excessive and you cannot miss a working day even if you child is dying.

They refuse to believe it is true! They also disregard our complains about customers abusive behaviour, or when we receive obscene phone calls; that there are family emergencies that prevent you for coming to work, that you may be ill, we are not allowed to get ill!

I intended to briefly present Carla's response to stress and how she lives with it. For Carla the technological change had less impact that the changes in her personal life which affect every social role she plays: wife, mother, the cultural implications of being the household caretaker, and her mother's death. She was overwhelmed by the demands of her multiple roles.

Carla had to deal with a hegemonic social culture that precipitated in her husband's anger, as a consequence of her work responsibilities she overlooked her responsibilities as mother, wife and affectionate housewife.

I would like to suggest, based on this, that the emergence of stress and the health problems described by Carla, outline a social context that tends to be ignored at work.

This is more evident form the company's perspective and has a subtle but persistent ideological profile throughout the various hierarchical levels (union and company): the constant surveillance and treatment of workers as computerised machines, just to meet the working goals within the schedule.

Furthermore, there is a lack of knowledge of family or personal details. Scholars interested in work health, even within the widely accepted model of analysis of the relationship between stress and work, do not include the social component of family life and conflicts as causes of work health problems.

According to Waitzkin (1991) health workers often ignore the contextual sources of pain, mainly those of the family environment, by medicating or implementing social ideology to reinforce the message of social roles and structural power.

The social causes of stress appear to be clear from Carla's example and are verified by Aneshensel's (1992) hypothesis since the issue is structural rather than generated by a preceding psychological disorder. However, it could be said that the emphasis on the motives is the social change or life event, understood as the technological transformation, as has been pointed out by research in work sociology.

The motives are derived from a number of circumstances brought together as a result of the interaction of social roles which specifically contribute to the problem as Perlin (1983) demonstrated in a number of studies of the problems associated with participation in institutionalised roles.

It was surprising to find that, over the last decades, this author defended that men and women may occupy the same role, such as worker, but are exposed to different constraints and obligations as a result of gender stratification (Perlin, 1975a).

As illustrated by Carla's description, social roles are not static, they are naturally dynamic; although there can be negotiation the problem is not resolved.

For this reason, Perlin (1983) suggests we explore the dimensions of ongoing role strains which include the difficulty of satisfying role demands, interpersonal conflict with others in the role context, incompatible demands between roles, role captivity, gains or losses of roles, and restructuring of continuing roles (Pearlin 1983).

I found in several of the interviews that phone operators often experience role conflicts. Some of them present uneven demands, lack of satisfaction and role captivity, but it is also true that many of them have re-established role interaction to the extent that in some cases they are completely inverted.

That is, husbands spend more time at home with their children and participate more in domestic chores, what's more they assume economic domination from their wives.

Therefore, if at some point the situation raises conflict, most women and their husbands work on the relationships through time. In some cases negotiation was not explicit, but it occurred nonetheless. In this respect Perlin (1975) states that when there is agreement and acceptance from the partner, in regards to salary differences, if there is no perceived competition, there is no reason for conflict to arise.

Even through these social conditions, Carla's health deteriorated, and the explanation for her depression and dermatitis is equally that of stress. From my perspective stress is basically the expression of her resistance to unjust social factors in the family and unfair and unequal working conditions.

Such an expression takes the form of anger and irritation that can be observed persistently in workers. This appears to disturb supervisors but it is a way of expressing resistance "to being treated as a machine".

## Work as a place for distraction

The greatest paradox in the operator's work is maybe that dual perspective which they live: that of work as a cause of illness, and yet, as a space for self-realization and distraction for a "self" that acquires a certain degree of freedom.

But although the operator's work has been transformed, it has become a repetitive, tedious, excessive activity, irrespective of the sense of self-realization that this exercise entailed. I find two reasons for this appreciation.

Article

One is closely linked to that monotonous activity lacking creativity and ability that makes the workers consider their daily activity as less and less pleasing and only redeemable in economic terms, since it is sustenance for personal and family life.

Another is the union activist's role that the operator has played which has also been transformed because today her political exercise has a very different effect than it did 20 years ago, given its diminishing strategic position.

In fact when they narrating their work history, being a phone operator has changed in the present; before, it filled them with pride to know that they belonged to one of the most active unions and that their presence and fight was indispensable. This consideration gave the operators a high feeling of self-esteem since, on the whole, they were recognised as spirited women with a "high political and social conscience."

But who are phone operators? Why do I find from the first operators I interviewed, something that makes them distinctive, not only in theory, but also in practice?

The first interviews showed open, articulate, curious and politically involved women. They were interested in stress being explained, avid to speak of their work experience, but also and without pressures, of their personal life experience.

They were enthusiastic to learn my own definition of stress and were thus happy to express their own experience, and also openly interested in sharing information about themselves, their body, and its transformations.

The idea that an operator is a woman tied down to her work, with a history of personal, social and political fight, is assumed among the group.

But there is also another figure reminiscent of other times, when a woman was decent if she was a housewife and she became nobody for the simple reason of having a job. To transgress that limit has been to break the heaviest symbolic burden in woman's history.

It is possible to say that phone operators transgressed this line at an early stage and formed that sector of women "of doubtful reputation" merely for having a public life; this idea was heightened when the work shifts became more complicated and night shifts appeared.

Alicia, one of my first interviewees pointed out that at the end of the 70's, in full union activity and politics in the country, an operator's image apart from being one of activist, was generally characterised as "*angry, crazy and lesbian*". This image was transmitted through her own father (also an operator).

Before I took on the task of corroborating this, the operator's descriptions of their work and personal relationships, of their aspirations and desires offered a view of work in Kleinman's terms: it is a *local moral world*.

This world creates its own behaviour patterns, expressions, imaginary language desires and a collective enjoyable environment which in turn builds a shared value system whose meaning is not of self-realization, but rather an escape. It is a place for the self, for "a rest from family issues", for trivial conversation and expression of desire.

Each of the operators's expressed a sense of work first as a blessing in these uncertain times, as the authorities always threaten them with the possibility of being discharged. Then, the meaning of work acquired another dimension.

Isabel provided one of the clearest metaphors for meaning of work when she said: "*For me, work is like a bubble which you enter and where you rest, and you forget the children, the husband, the house and you only express your own self, the way you want to be....*".

Santa mentioned several times that this work is large part of the family's sustenance, but for her it was the possibility of a change of scenario and this alone, helped her think of other things and not always be overwhelmed by problems.

Similarly, Martha emphasised that work always represented a space for herself, but due to the rotation of shifts and to night work, whether single or married, if she wanted to go dancing with friends she would say she had night work.

In this way, night work and the mobility of shifts provides the operators, on one hand, a space away from family issues which constrain them; and on the other hand, it allows them to exercise their sexuality, in a way not so clearly expressed among other groups of workers.

Before the technological innovation, the operator's work was more flexible, although a short phraseology existed, there was more interaction with the "client", which could be good or bad, depending on the operator's state of mind. On occasion the conversation could even be a possibility for an encounter, or simply fantasy. It is certainly true that many operators met their husbands in this way.

At present, that fantasy has gone, due to the use of on-line terminals. Operators can no longer choose on a whim to take a call from Guadalajara, or small unknown town; they have to answer all calls they receive and merely fulfil their requirements, looking to achieve the productivity goal for one working day.

At this time, the anonymous voices which generated the expectation of leisure and desire, of public life, took the possibility of an encounter to street life, as Telmex does not have normal morning, day and night shifts, but rather a number of shifts which begin every half hour.

For this reason the company implemented bedrooms, from the 50's, so that operators that finished their shift at dawn, didn't have to travel at night, or so that they could rest and take another shift.

Night as a symbolic figure became a frontier impregnated with meaning. As for nurses, whose nights signify sacrifice and wakefulness in the fight against human pain, in the case of phone operators, nights are related to proximity with co-workers and the sharing of sleeping quarters; these are elements which contribute to the stereotype of lesbianism.

From I observe the importance not only conceiving work from its positive aspects "as a source of sustenance and creativity", or negative one "a space that affects health directly and deteriorates the physical capacity of workers"; but also from a perspective that incorporates meaning from the actual individuals.

The notion of work that I elaborate, taking into account that the implementation of new technology has come to transform the gender division of work, creating contradictions in the process of gender definition, are seen in family and work relationships and in the necessity of the expression of sexuality.

In this conception, sexuality has no importance or significance in the natural and biological expression, but in its historical and sociocultural construction (Vance, 1991; Weeks, 1998) seen in practice in the expression of sexual identity and individuality.

This highlights that although operators carry these social etiquettes, their practice is in constant negotiation due to their personal freedom (achieved precisely through their work, salary and shifts) and social interaction, which transforms sexual impulse and desire beyond its reproductive function.

For in their own codes dictated in this environment, there is no rigid morality that punishes for having more than one partner, or for sexual preference. Not here, within the center, among them, which suggests an atmosphere with particular codes different to social expectations of women, mothers, daughters, etc.; in this sense it is a different world.

These annotations emphasize the way in which operators behave at the work: they are a product of these comments. Their expectations are contained when the hegemonic discourse that demands certain behaviours (for example, monogamy, education and the children's attention, care of the health) is formulated in their narratives, while answering a question: they answer simply what their duty is. Work is, in this sense, a space for desire, though imaginary. If I motivate conversation, someone shows off, they speak openly, reflecting the topics of the moment, expressing their more rustic side with comments that some are "hysterical", "neurotic", "wound up", if they don't have a sex life.

In their daily life I observed the expression of open sexuality, and a process of reassignment of values that are transmitted through conversation where the operators' choice and decisions regarding their bodies, their lives, their sexual partners stand out. There is always one who boasts being free of prejudice or who openly parade garments in the hand proof of an unexpected encounter before arriving at work; others only listen nodding and laugh but they don't chastise.

Some speak more openly of their experience, although contrary to the male counterparts, the feminine dominate speech doesn't reward, it punishes. Others include their "Toños" (husband, partner…) in this game and comment on the pleasure of their company, but also on their problems, reasons for which they come to work, which they consider a protective haven.

Although sexuality is not the object of analysis of my study, its constant reference in the operator's narrative is important because it constitutes in a sensitive fibber that is connected to stress, in several transgressing images.

At this moment, many were experiencing completely fragmented partnerships, due to working hours, as well as personal problems from stereotypes in expressing a different sexual preference.

Other causes of stress are events in the past which do not find expression; when they cannot be put into words this causes pain and language becomes only whining and screeching.

Observing the structure of work, through it's many shades, and considering it's meaning conveyed through society allows us to broaden our interpretation. As Del Vechio (1994) wisely states, studying patients with chronic pain may lead us to see work as a painkiller, or a defence against illness; an escape and a means for self-esteem and self-realization, despite the chronic pain.

In the case describe, work acquires meaning in terms of its exercise, one which, as I highlighted, comes closer to a space of recreation and personal decision. When I asked the operators the meaning of their work, most of the answers highlighted those many shades.

Although it was possible to notice changes in their meaning in relationship to cultural, ideological, economic, and political change, presented by modernisation.

In these answers I could observe the influence of their political-economic perspectives which considered work as an expression of capitalism, whose main benefit is economic.

But it also means losses observed in the deterioration of health and presence of stress that appear almost as synonyms of work, or because of use of computers.

This deterioration could even be as a result of the Taylorist process that facilitates the progressive adaptation of the human body to machines and causes the divorce of mental work from manual work, as Braverman it highlights (1975), although in a more complex way, taking into account diverse social roles.

But work is also a world of earnings, a place for the collective dissipation of hardships.

Work is a different scenario or a protective world from problems, although they are probably not solved there; but it becomes an incentive to continue in one's personal struggle.

These ideas, aspire to convey meaning, and an explanation, to suffering and work from the perspective of the workers analysed through different metaphors, allowing us to understand what it means for social beings.

As Fernández points out (1986), the metaphor is the principal way in which individuals and cultures make sense of the world. Metaphor is a way to define the indefinable and rising identity of a person or group.

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ISSN-On line: 2539-1372
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RAMÍREZ-VELÁZQUEZ, Josefina. The paradox of work. A world of losing and winning. ECORFAN Journal-Republic of Colombia ECORFAN Journal-Republic of Colombia 2016

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