

Experiences of Retail-store Workers in Chile. An Approach from Dubet's Sociology

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Abstract: The article presents the main findings of a research on the social experience of the workers of the Department Stores in the retail sector in Chile, an economic field that has experienced a profound process of modernization and productive restructuring in Latin America since 1990. The research was driven by the theoretical approach of François Dubet's sociology of experience and resorted to a qualitative methodology that included 31 interviews with sale workers of the three major department stores in the country and six interviews with key actors in retail, which were analyzed through the codification procedures of the Grounded theory. The results describe the logics of action (integration, strategy and subjectivation) and the specific modalities in which they articulate to give rise to three figures of work experience: engaged, blocked and in transition. The conclusions elaborate on the study's contribution to the field of Labor Studies in Latin America.

Key words: sociology of work, social experience, retail, Chile, Dubet.

Resumen: Se presentan los resultados de una investigación sobre la experiencia social que construyen los trabajadores de las tiendas por departamentos del sector del retail en Chile; un sector económico que ha experimentado en América Latina un profundo proceso de modernización y reestructuración productiva desde 1990. Se empleó la perspectiva teórica de la Sociología de la Experiencia de François Dubet. Se utilizó una metodología de naturaleza cualitativa que consideró 31 entrevistas a trabajadores de las tiendas, y seis entrevistas a informantes claves, analizadas mediante los procedimientos de codificación de la teoría fundamentada. Los resultados describen las lógicas de acción (integración, estrategia y subjetivación) que despliegan los trabajadores en las tiendas y las modalidades específicas en que se articulan para dar lugar a tres figuras de la experiencia laboral: comprometida, bloqueada y en tránsito. Se concluye discutiendo el aporte empírico y conceptual del estudio al campo de los estudios laborales en Latinoamérica.

Palabras clave: sociología del trabajo, experiencia social, retail, Chile, Dubet.

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Introduction¹

As well as in several Latin American countries, the world of work in Chile has experienced significant changes in the past few years (De la Garza, 2000; Ramos, 2009). In the framework of the global capitalist restructuring process (crisis of the fordist-keynesian model and consolidation of a new flexible-neoliberal model), profound changes are observed at the level of the organization of production process, business management strategies, labor relations, technological pattern and work cultures (Boltansky and Chiapello, 1998; Castells, 2001; Ramos, 2009).

As analyzed by the New Labor Studies in Latin America, such productive restructuring processes, carried out since the 1980s in the region and guided by flexibilization logics, are far from being homogeneous, they present deep variations according to national contexts and economic sectors, and coexist and are articulated in the heterogeneous and unequal labor landscape of the region, with family, artisanal or (neo)Taylorist production logics (Antunes, 2003; De la Garza, 2000).

Such transformation of labor scenarios must be understood, in turn, considering the region's particular modernization project, marked by a semi-peripheral position in the global economy and by the transition from national-developmental model of import substitution industrialization (peripheral Fordism), towards a new (neo) exporter-oriented and a neoliberal development matrix based in strong processes of privatization, mercantilization, flexibilization, individualization and commercial openness to global networks (Domingues, 2009).

Within this context of structural transformations in the world of labor, a relevant line of social research has been oriented to understand the impact of these economic and socio-labor changes at the experience and workers' level (Battistini, 2004; Soto, 2015; Stecher, 2013). The question of how individuals interpret, orientate their actions and constitute themselves as labor subjects in the context of work contexts marked by processes of business modernization, organizational flexibilization and new neo managerial discourses, has given rise to a broad empirical production and conceptual discussion.

1 This article was developed within the framework of the Fondecyt Project No. 11130095, "Processes of identity construction at work in Chile today: The case of store workers in large retail companies. Empirical and conceptual contributions to the debate on work and identity in Latin America" and Fondecyt Project No. 1181041 "Work and construction of identities in workers of the retail industry in Chile. Study in 3 cities on regional productive contexts, identity narratives, forms of recognition, managerial control and union organization".

In empirical terms, research has reported, in different industries and work settings of processes of weakening of collective identities linked to the world of industrial labor (class, union, organizational and trade identity), of increasingly individualized forms of identity construction based on personal self-realization projects of new neo managerial discourses that seek to model the labor identity based on values of entrepreneurship and corporative values internalization of the tension of traditional gender models, of generational changes in the subjective link to work and an increase of experiences linked to feelings of precariousness, helplessness, and uncertainty (Antunes, 2003; Araujo and Martuccelli, 2012; Battistini, 2004; Dubar, 2001).

Conceptually speaking, theoretical developments has been produced oriented to conceptualize identities and work experiences from complex perspectives that go beyond structural reductionism-functionalist, marxist- or psychologistic that have prevailed in the analysis of laboral subjectivities through the 20th century (De la Garza, 2000; Du Gay, 1996; Stecher, 2013).

These are analytical frameworks that seek to study the experiences and identities of workers, recognizing both the incidence of techno-socio-productive structures and institutional frameworks that define work scenarios, as well as the reflexivity, agency and creation of meaning carried out by the labor actor in the crucible of interactions and daily challenges of his or her labor insertion. Labor actor always considered in the light of their biographical trajectories, their collective belongings inside and outside of work, and their structural positionings of class, gender, generation and ethnicity (Battistini, 2004; Stecher, 2013).

This article seeks to contribute to this line of research by presenting the results of a qualitative research project aimed at describing and understanding the work experiences and identity processes of store workers in the retail industry in Santiago, Chile. Specifically, an analysis of the narratives of 31 department store workers (commission salespersons, cashiers, sales assistants, department heads) is presented, oriented from the perspective of the Sociology of Experience (Dubet, 2010). The article describes and discusses in detail the way in which workers, within a strongly modernized industry, orient their action based on the three logics of social life (integration, strategy and subjectivation) distinguished by Dubet (2007, 2010 and 2013) and build, based on the articulation of these, particular forms of social experience at work. The analysis distinguishes three modalities or figures of experience –committed, locked and in transit– within the collective of department store workers.

The importance and contribution of the article is played on a double level: empirical and conceptual. In empirical terms, it contributes to the understanding of subjectivities and work experiences within a specific industry such as retail. A labor-intensive industry which, both in Chile and in Latin America, has undergone profound restructuring and modernization processes as a result of the concentration of the market in large holding companies, which have implemented important organizational and technological innovations in the retail space (supermarkets, department stores, home improvement stores) (Calderón, 2006).

In conceptual terms, the article presents the theoretical model of Dubet's Sociology of Experience (2007, 2010 and 2013), illustrating, from its use in an empirical research, its analytical potential for the understanding of work experiences in the context of work transformations. Although this model has been used in some research in Chile and Latin America, its use has been rather scarce in the field of labor studies. As we hope to show, Dubet's model offers a useful conceptualization and analysis tool for empirical socio-labor research, allowing the development of a socio-psychological understanding of workers' social experiences that recognizes both the subjective dimension of the logics of action and the structural or systemic dimension of work scenarios.

The article is organized as follows. This introductory section is followed by a background section that characterizes the retail industry and department stores in Chile, and a synthesis of the central concepts of the Sociology of Experience. Subsequently, the methodological design of the research is presented. Fourth, the main results are presented, showing how the logic of actions of department stores are deployed (integration, strategy and subjectivation), and then characterizing three figures of social experience (committed, blocked and in transit), which constitute particular modalities of articulation of the three logics. At the end, the main contributions of the study are synthesized and briefly discussed.

Antecedents

The retail industry in Chile

The notion of retail industry is used to distinguish, within the retail subsector, the large mass retailing holding companies, labor-intensive that manage large supermarket chains, department stores, home improvement stores, fashion retail stores, pharmacy chains or other specialized stores (Stecher, 2012). In

the case of Chile, as at the global level, this industry has undergone a strong process of productive restructuring and business modernization since the 1980s (Calderón, 2006; Du Gay, 1996; Wrigley and Lowe, 2010).

This process was characterized by a strong capital investment and the opening of stores throughout the country, a strong market concentration in a few companies, the incorporation of profound technological and management innovations (lean retailing), and the professionalization, standardization and rationalization of processes throughout the business model chain (Calderón, 2006; Gálvez *et al.*, 2009). In Chile, the retail industry employs around 500,000 employees (Fundación Sol, 2016), with seven large business groups standing out: Cencosud, Falabella, La Polar, Ripley, WalMart-Chile, SMU, ABCDIN.

As well as large multinational retail corporations (Walmart, Carrefour, etc.), the most important Chilean holding companies have expanded into different Latin American countries and are part of global networks for the design, manufacture and supply of products, they simultaneously manage different commercial chains and store formats, articulate the sales business with other profitable niches (financial retail, real estate business, private labels, insurance sales, etc.) and have played a central role –through advertising, the expansion of shopping malls and the provision of credit cards– in the expansion of consumer practices and imaginaries that define contemporary modernity (Stecher, 2012).

Regarding the specific format of department stores, it is possible to point out that they are commercial establishments organized in different sales floors and departments (clothing, sports, toys, computers, household appliances, white goods, etc.) and that they offer a variety of durable consumer goods. The stores operate as independent business units and each is managed by a store manager, to whom floor managers in charge of a set of departments report. The departments, in turn, are managed by department heads, who are in charge of a team of front-line workers (salespeople, cashiers, sales assistants), with whom they must meet monthly sales targets. Stores have between 200 and 500 workers, depending on square footage and sales volume; in 2015 the three largest companies in Chile (Falabella, Ripley, Paris) employed a total of 49,253 workers.

Like other retail formats, department stores predominantly employ female, young, low-skilled workers with little previous work experience and belonging to urban-popular sectors (Stecher, 2012). This is a workforce with high turnover rates and receiving average incomes between 1.5 and 2.5 minimum wages (Fundación Sol, 2016). Despite the high turnover rates,

there is a significant percentage of workers (around 15%) who have more than 10 years of seniority and have made a career within the companies.

In terms of labor relations, these are companies with a high unionization rate (over 50%), a strong asymmetry in the company-worker relationship, and a strong managerial orientation towards individualization of the labor relationship. Regarding management strategies and the work process, there is an intensive use of various flexibilization strategies: atypical contractual forms (especially temporary contracts during high season); flexible working hours; variable salary systems; outsourcing of functions; polyfunctionality; reduction of downtime and intensification of the workload; strong demand for emotional work; regulatory control mechanisms based on the promotion of corporate culture; permanent performance evaluation systems; strong orientation towards service quality; training programs; among others (Gálvez *et al.*, 2009; Stecher *et al.*, 2010).

These strategies coexist with (neo)Taylorist-Fordist principles: standardization and protocolization of the work process (especially in the case of cashiers and sales assistants); strongly hierarchical and pyramidal organization; low participation of workers in decision making and the presence of surveillance and direct control mechanisms (Stecher *et al.*, 2010).

The Sociology of Experience

The analysis of the workers' accounts and the reconstruction of their work experience in the stores was carried out through Dubet's Sociology of Experience. Such a perspective is part of the broader field of Sociologies of the Individual (Martuccelli and De Singly, 2012), a research program that starts from the diagnosis that contemporary social life can no longer be understood from the classical analytical operators that sociology generated to analyze the industrial society of the nation-state (Dubet, 2007; Martuccelli, 2007).

These operators consist of, on the one hand, the idea of society, understood as a stable and coherent system, and on the other hand, the idea of social character, which refers to the correspondence between the actor's position in the social structure and the values, norms and identities that are internalized.

Faced with this crisis and exhaustion of the image of "society" as a functional order in which there is a fit between the system and the actor, sociologies of the individual propose to study contemporary social life, starting from the analysis of individual experiences and the work of self-construction carried out by the actors (Dubet, 2013). It is not a matter, in

any case, of renouncing the analysis of social processes and mechanisms, but of reconstructing them from the level of experiences, logics of action and interactions of individuals (Dubet, 2013; Martucelli, 2007).

In this framework Dubet (2007: 117) proposes to analyze social life from the notion of social experience, understanding by this “the crystallization, more or less stable, in individuals and groups, of different, sometimes opposing, logics of action, which the actors must combine and hierarchize in order to constitute themselves as subjects”. The proposal assumes that individuals are permanently confronted with the task of articulating different logics of action to build a consistent and meaningful experience, and to configure themselves as its authors (Martucelli and De Singly, 2012).

It is pointed out, in turn, that in the context of the transformations of contemporary societies –globalization, individualization, pluralization of life worlds– the logics of action are dissociated, tensioned and do not respond to a common articulating principle, falling on the individuals themselves the task of giving shape and consistency to the experience in the continuous process of facing and solving the challenges of social life.

Dubet will distinguish three major logics of action in social life: integration, strategy and subjectivation. Each logic of action refers to subsystems that precede it, expresses a certain form of attribution of meaning, defines specific parameters of legitimacy of action, accounts for certain ways of representing and positioning oneself as an actor in social life, and constitutes a particular way of defining oneself and linking to others (Dubet, 2013).

The logic of integration

The logic of integration accounts for those behaviors and thoughts that come from the internalization of identities, norms and cultural models offered by society in general, and the specific collectives of reference and belonging in particular. From this logic, the actor sees society as a system of integration, in which he occupies a role and sustains an identity that defines the appropriate way of acting. From this perspective, the actor orients and justifies his action by appealing to collective belongings (“we sellers”, “we women heads of household”, etc.), to norms, mandates, roles and internalized social values (“to be a good worker”, “to be a good father”). In this logic, the production of differences between “us” versus “them” operates as a key mechanism, from which one’s own position and identity in society is defined and sustained, groups and collectives are differentiated, and the affirmation and stability of the social order is sought (Dubet, 2007, 2010 and 2013).

The logic of the strategy

In this logic, the actor represents social life as a market or field of competition, where each individual is a strategist who mobilizes different means and resources to achieve his or her objectives. Here, behaviors and thoughts are justified according to the interests pursued by each actor, which may or may not be consistent with the collective values of integration. Interests may be multiple, changing, and give rise to calculations and the definition of strategies within the specific rules of the game of the different social domains.

At this stage, the actors mobilize their social identities not as an expression of belonging, solidarity and tradition, but as strategic resources with which they seek to convince, manipulate or pressure others to obtain certain results and increase their own power. Here the differentiation between collectives is not in terms of us/them, but in terms of allies and competitors, changing and contingent, in the local networks of the different interactions in which the actor participates (Dubet, 2007, 2010 and 2013).

The logic of subjectivation

This logic reflects the perspective whereby every actor thinks of himself as a singular and critical individual, who is not reduced to his collective membership or his strategic actions, and who is capable of taking a reflective distance with respect to society and the self. From this perspective, society is neither a system of integration nor a market or field of competition; it is a system distant and distinct from the individual that operates as a source of domination and a blockage to the actors' potentials and desires for self-realization and authenticity.

In this logic, behaviors and thoughts are justified as expressions of (or attempts to express) autonomy, moral convictions, vocation, the singular and irreducible perspective of each individual, in the face of the systemic mechanisms of production and social control. Generally, this logic of subjectivation is expressed in negative terms, where the individual recognizes and critically distances himself from the system and institutions, or where he suffers incarnationally from those forces or situations that oppress him and limit his desire and potential to be a subject (Dubet, 2007, 2010, 2013).

The world of work is a sphere of social life where it is possible to clearly recognize the deployment of these three logics by workers (Dubet, 2006). On the one hand (integration), work, especially in the form of salaried employment, is a central mechanism of socialization and integration, of

access to groups of belonging and identification (trade, class, company), of inclusion in networks of protections and rights that give individuals a place and a legitimized status in the social order. In turn (strategy), work is a mercantile exchange where the employee leases his labor force in exchange for a salary, and strategically seeks to improve, or at least maintain, through individual negotiations or collective actions (unions), the conditions of this exchange (income, mobility, benefits, material conditions, etc.). Finally (subjectivation), work is for the actors a space that potentially allows them to express their vocation and affirm their autonomy and singularity, while at the same time it is a fundamental sphere in the subjective experiences of control, domination and suffering that the actors experience in the face of the productive and systemic imperatives of modern social life.

Methodological design

A qualitative methodology was used based on interviews with department store workers in Santiago, Chile, which were focused on their work experience and were analyzed following grounded theory procedures (Strauss and Corbin, 2002).

Participants

The study focused on both front-line employees and direct managers. In both cases, the employees were directly hired by the company on a full-time, permanent basis. Thirty-one workers participated, of whom 25 were front-line workers (commission salespeople, sales assistants and cashiers) and six managers: 19 women and 12 men. The average age was 39 years with a range between 22 and 61 years. The average time in the company was six years, ranging from four months to 24 years.

In addition, the participation of six industry experts was considered as key informants: store managers, union leaders, human resources managers and researchers.

Information production

The study considered the use of two different interview modalities. On the one hand, with store workers and with the aim of accessing the deployment of workers' action orientations and the construction of their work experience

in the stores, semi-directive interviews were conducted (Martuccelli and de Singly, 2012), a modality characterized by giving a central role to the reflexivity of individuals during the conversation.

In this context, the interview device sought to emphasize the workers' work on themselves, stimulating their reflective capacity through questions aimed at understanding the actions deployed and the meanings given in the different areas of work. While delving into the workers' previous work trajectories and the narratives and meanings associated with them, the interviews also addressed the complexity of the "here and now", directing the questions towards the meaning of the workers' actions in the present, in order to seek reflective feedback on the current circumstances of their work experience (Martuccelli and de Singly, 2012).

On the other hand, a semi-structured interview (Flick, 2004) was used with the key informants, which was aimed at gathering information about department stores as a labor scenario and their recent transformations.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted during 2014 and 2015 by the research team at locations close to the workplace. Access to the field considered various modalities for arranging interviews, including direct contact with workers during the workday, liaison with unions and the "snowball" strategy. In the case of key informants, direct contact was made via email.

In all cases, an informed consent form was signed, which explained the objectives of the study and guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. The average duration of the interviews was 90 minutes, and they were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Analysis

The open and axial coding procedures of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 2002) were used. In the first stage of "open" coding, the data were interrogated to open up the meanings expressed in the interviews, generating simple and concrete codes to relate them to each of the three logics of social experience (integration, strategy and subjectivation). In a second stage, "axial" coding was carried out in which the previously generated codes were related and a more dense and complex understanding of the logics of action was elaborated. The analysis revealed, through a constant comparison exercise, specific declines in the logics of action according to the characteristics of the

workers (gender, age, seniority and position). From this it was possible to construct three figures of work experience in the stores. The key informant interviews were analyzed with the same coding procedures, but with a focus on the description of the stores as a work setting.

Results

Logic of action in department stores

Integration

This logic is strongly determined by the time of entry to work in the store. This is lived as an experience that marks a before and after, and that implies acquiring the role of salaried worker and employee of a large company. In this sense, at the heart of this logic is the configuration of a “promise” of integration, at the level of the labor market and the company itself, which is to some extent atypical in light of the profile of the workforce: low level of qualification, lack of work experience, discontinuous labor trajectories and in many cases in the informal sector.

The formal employment situation in the companies (permanent contract, full-time, stable monthly remuneration, benefits, social protections, training opportunities, internal mobility, participation in unions and collective bargaining, etc.) contrasts with the previous labor trajectories of many of the retail workers, characterized by disjointed and discontinuous employment paths that are far from the ideal of an ascending and protected career path. As one of the interviewees points out: “The good thing is the stability of the salary and the stability of the payment dates, which is very important. My contract said that I was paid on the last day of the month, and I was paid on the last day of the month, always” (Saleswoman, 57 years old).²

As studies in Chile have documented (Araujo and Martuccelli, 2012; Todaro and Yáñez, 2004), the work experiences of important segments of the labor market in Chile are characterized by “pluriactivity”, the diversity of trades and activities carried out both along a trajectory (diachronic) and also at the same moment in time (synchronic); by “inertial paths” based more on horizontal displacements and taking advantage of contingent situations than on the planning of an ascending career project; and by cycles –especially in women– of entry and exit from the labor market based on childcare and housework.

2 Personal interview, April 21, 2014, Santiago, Chile.

In this sense, the entry into retail companies homogenizes the plurality and instability of previous labor and biographical trajectories into a common employment status, and operates as a cleavage between previous work experiences and a mode of salaried insertion, with greater stability, which creates or reinforces in a diverse group of workers the role and identity of employees of large companies in the commerce sector. Socially legitimized and normatively regulated role from which they orient their action, demand rights and assume tasks and responsibilities in the work in the stores.

They were always sporadic jobs, as I said, during the Christmas season, [...] I also worked in a marketing company and they called me from time to time, as a telephone operator. A long time before I became pregnant with my first child, I also worked in a private kindergarten, I was a cook, I always worked in nothing that I studied [...]. When I recently separated, I obviously had to work in whatever I could because I needed money and I started working in a private home doing housekeeping, because that was what generated the most money for me [...] It doesn't matter, I told her [in the interview upon entering the store], I don't mind earning a little less here [...] because I like working in retail [...] I didn't want to continue working at home (Sales assistant, woman, 34 years old).³

Secondly, this logic is linked to the conditions of sociability in stores and to the symbolic place of retail in the imaginaries of consumer society. The work inside the stores involves participation in a daily sociability, given by the functional demands of the coordination of sales work, and by the spaces of informal and interpersonal sociability that are generated during the day (Stecher *et al.*, 2010). The store is conceived as a work environment, not without tensions, which has widened social circles and where horizontal links and modalities tend to predominate, especially at the level of close colleagues, known customers and direct management, of reciprocal support and recognition.

The opening of spaces for sociability also operates for workers on a broader symbolic plane, linked to the generation of greater possibilities for participation in social practices, interactions and urban spaces (the big company, the mall, the technological devices of the stores) that express global imaginaries of consumption, progress and modernization.

Thirdly, work in the stores is recognized as a learning opportunity, either through formal training or through the daily exercise of the position. The work experience involves learning a set of specific functions and skills (cashiering, replenishment of merchandise, inventory, customer service, etc.), as well as the products and brands that the store offers (clothing, footwear,

3 Personal interview, October 13, 2014, Santiago, Chile.

electronic devices, etc.). Among these, a special place is given to the so-called “soft” skills, linked to the emotional work involved in customer service, which requires self-regulation of the attitudes and behaviors of salespeople. For workers with many years of experience in the industry, on the other hand, department stores offer the opportunity to build and develop true trade identities related to commerce and sales, around which a strong sense of belonging is built to guide action.

Fourth and finally, the analysis of the interviews indicates that the logic of integration is linked to the promise made by the company, especially at the beginning, to develop a career within the organization, based on the principles of merit and the symbolic offer of identifying with the corporate demands and values. In fact, the workers recognize that job offers are constantly appearing in the company and that the managers not only often mention the existence of opportunities in the store, but also present themselves as a testimony to the possibilities of internal promotion. A sales assistant says that when he entered “the boss told me ‘look, here is the option’ he said to me, ‘you could enter, I don’t know why, doing housekeeping there in [the company] and you could end up like me... and that is not going to be in a 10-year period. If in a year or two years you did well, they evaluate you here...’” (Assistant, male, 28 years old).⁴

Strategy

This logic accounts for forms of action oriented by calculus and the strategic goal for maintain the employment position achieved, maximize the benefits offered of employment in the stores (bonds, commissions) and, in some cases, projecting –from performance, contacts and employability improvement– mobility opportunities in the organization or in the labor market.

Overall, especially positions of lesser-qualified and responsibility (cashiers, sale assistants) In general, especially in positions of lower qualification and responsibility (cashiers, sales assistants), there is a predominantly defensive strategy: a disposition that, rather than being oriented towards advancing in the labor market and designing long-term strategies, would try to sustain the current position of employment, get by on a day-to-day basis by ensuring the monthly income and not backtracking on the conditions achieved.

However, if the strategic orientation in the work project register is particularly defensive and presentist, in the daily life of the store it attains

4 Personal interview, January 20, 2015, Santiago, Chile.

a somewhat broader and more defined expression, as a consequence of the managerial strategies of the company. The work process and human resources management is a carefully planned element for retail holding companies, seeking to reduce labor costs, increase productivity and extract maximum profits, specifically through customer service models, which are based on variable remuneration schemes based on different economic incentives.

On the one hand, the personalized service model works on the basis of the figure of the commission salesperson found in the more complex and specialized product departments (furniture, white goods, computers). Under this model, the organization of work is conceived as a market in which sales commissions represent the capital at stake, and the salespeople who compete individually compete to maximize their profits.

In this sense, commission salespeople must permanently deploy a strategic rationality on a daily basis, since the salary they will receive at the end of the month depends on it. For this reason, although salespeople value their colleagues, at the same time they know that they are competitors, which conditions them to remain in a state of alertness that sometimes generates conflicts among them.

On the other hand, there is the assisted sales model (sales assistants and cashiers), associated with store departments (clothing, toys, children), where the presence of a specialized salesperson is not indispensable, and in which economic incentives are organized on the basis of bonuses –and not commissions as a percentage of sales– of a collective nature (associated with the achievement of sales goals and customer satisfaction indicators) and individual (related to attendance and punctuality at work).

Therefore, strategic rationality is less stimulated, since with the elimination of individual commissions, the income has a fixed and lower limit than that of a commission salesman. It also makes the achievement of incentives less straightforward, because they no longer depend on the individual worker, but on the entire departmental team. All in all, while the strategy space is reduced, it does not eliminate it, for –as the following excerpt suggests– pay still depends to some extent on performance.

I'm a curious person, I don't know, if I can take care of... "how much is this month's goal?" or "how much was this week's goal?" or "how are we doing?" I'm like that because I do care about how much I earn, [...] I need to know if this month will be enough to cover everything I have to cover (Assistant, female, 22 years old).⁵

Another axis of the strategy's logic is related to the actions deployed by workers to face and lessen the negative consequences of a set of

5 Personal interview, December 7, 2014, Santiago, Chile.

organizational innovations implemented by the companies in the last years. These are measures that aim to reduce costs from the reduction of personnel (via automation and self-service systems), and the replacement of older and better paid workers by a new profile of young workers, with lower remuneration and inserted in positions that involve the deskilling of sales work and the undermining of trade identities of the sector (Stecher and Martinic, 2018). This generates a vigilant, attentive and suspicious attitude towards management changes implemented by retail companies.

We know [...] that a new contract is coming for our area and I am not going to sign it. Because I prefer to be fired with what I have and what I earn at the moment [...] and I think that in retail there are no more [those old contracts], because I think the only thing they want is to reach a schedule with a minimum wage... I think that for another two or three years there will be no one to attend to you in retail, it will be self-service (Saleswoman, 59 years old).⁶

On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that trade unions, as a collective mechanism of strategic action, have an ambivalent character. On the contrary, they have a high membership rate in department stores, and the leaders are well known and play an important role in the stores when it comes to informing about benefits, interceding in specific situations, accompanying complaints processes before the Labor Directorate and organizing collective bargaining processes. However, the power and strategic strength of the trade union collective as a socio-political actor, capable of massively articulating workers and achieving a greater redistribution of power and benefits within the company, is still weak. This is due, among other factors, to the impossibility of labor law in Chile for collective bargaining by branch, the high heterogeneity and turnover of the labor force, the more individualized cultural orientations, the great economic power of the holding companies and the instrumental link of many workers to the union.

Finally, it should be noted that some of the workers interviewed deploy a strategic action logic that, beyond the above, is oriented towards a broader time horizon and with higher levels of planning in light of upward mobility objectives in the organization or the labor market.

Subjectification

In subjectivation, a domain opens up in which the worker's action, modes of behavior and representation in the space of the store go beyond the role of wage-earner or employee; as well as beyond strategic action. It is an orientation

⁶ Personal interview, March 29, 2015, Santiago, Chile.

with a multiplicity of registers, at times ambivalent and even contradictory, which encompass the sense of personal fulfillment at work, the sufferings of domination and labor injustices, and the capacity for distancing and critical analysis with respect to the company and work.

In the first place we find references to significant, satisfying and unique experiences of personal fulfillment while working in the stores. On the one hand, there is a motive of realization linked to work and the set of activities it involves, which is enjoyed for a wide range of reasons: for its intensity and constant feeling of being in motion; because it is fun, entertaining and enjoyable; because it has allowed the discovery of individual capabilities and a sense of usefulness or because it is the space in which an expertise or office knowledge is deployed; because it has allowed the discovery of individual capabilities and a sense of usefulness; or because it is the space in which an expertise or office knowledge is deployed. On the other hand, another motive for fulfillment is built around social relationships, colleagues, bosses and even customers, constituting one of the main existential supports for workers that make work and life itself more bearable.

But subjectivation, secondly, is also a logic that refers to suffering and suffering at work, and to frustration due to unfulfilled personal expectations or organizational promises. Undoubtedly, one of the main sources of suffering is related to the temporary demand associated with working hours from 11:00 to 21:00 hours and a 5x2 shift system. Workers feel that they lose the day at the store, that they leave late in relation to “office hours” and arrive home even later, when their children are sleeping. In addition, as shifts are constantly changing and they work weekends, they are often not present for family gatherings such as celebrations, birthdays or Christmas. However, although the condition affects both men and women, it is the women who suffer the most from it: both emotionally due to the distance from their children, and as physical and mental fatigue due to the double workday involved in caring for the home.

Retail is hard and heavy. It is complicated, because you have no family quality, because you lose everything. You don't have family quality, that is, many times you leave your house and your child has gone to school and when you come back your child is sleeping. And the days off, between quotation marks, you use them to clean and do everything, to organize your house, and you have the few moments left (Saleswoman, 34 years old).⁷

Regarding working hours (long, variable and atypical), but in a broader sense, the interviewees report experiences of suffering linked to the physical

7 Personal interview, August 14, 2014, Santiago, Chile.

and emotional fatigue of working on their feet, regulating their own emotions in interactions with clients, bearing in mind the continuous demands of achieving goals, and in a context of work intensification due to the reduction in the number of workers.

In retail we work with the warranty issue, if you don't sell warranty, they put the burden on you all the time: "sell that, sell that". That is the most important thing. If you sell a product it has to go with that, they put pressure on you [...] I got anxiety and sleep disorder from working so much in the store. In fact, I also had colleagues who were also on psychiatric leave. I have a colleague who is on medication, because she can't sleep. The pressure they put on you all day long is something that makes you pretty crazy (Salesperson, 25 years old).⁸

Likewise, the issue of low salaries for those workers with family responsibilities and who do not have individual commissions for sales, in the context of companies with high profit levels, also appears as a reason for dissatisfaction associated with an experience of injustice.

Another source of suffering is related to the mistreatment that some workers have suffered from customers. These are experiences of abuse, humiliation, verbal and psychological violence, where clients seek to demonstrate class and gender superiority (as it is usually exercised on women) over the frontline worker. As one interviewee points out: "There are people who can throw the title on you saying that you are anything or that you earn money because of them [...] there are people who tell you that because they buy, you earn your salary [...] 'I am paying you', that's how it is" (Sales assistant, female, 25 years old).⁹

Finally, the logic of subjectivation is expressed in the way in which workers establish a critical distance with respect to the company, affirming, in the face of the systemic demands of the industry, a singular perspective of reflexivity from which they also orient and give meaning to their actions in the stores. For example, older workers with strong trade identities have a critical view of the recent reorganizations carried out in the stores, which, as we have pointed out, have been aimed at reducing costs and decreasing the quality of work, and have been implemented without consulting the workers, which has led to their reification.

According to one testimony: "It has ceased to be the old family business, which it had been, and which treated the employee... as an employee! That is, I knew him, he was not a number for the company, but someone who was worthwhile, with whom you could talk and everything" (Saleswoman, 57 years old).¹⁰

8 Personal interview, December 7, 2014, Santiago, Chile.

9 Personal interview, October 2, 2014, Santiago, Chile.

10 Personal interview, April 21, 2014, Santiago, Chile.

Figures of social experience

Along with the reconstruction of the logics of action, the analysis identified the following three figures of social experience in the work of the stores, which emerge from singular forms of articulation of integration, strategy and subjectivation. Each figure reflects a particular modality of construction of meaning and orientation of action within department stores and is linked to certain trajectories and/or specific groups of workers.

Committed experience

In this type of experience there is a strong relationship of belonging to the company or the industry; an identification with the work performed is developed, which is also conceived as a motive for personal fulfillment; the projections are related to continue working in the trade or to make a career in the organization. It is thus an experience characterized by a strong commitment and subjective involvement with the work in the stores, which although it does not exempt workers from the sufferings of working in retail, these appear in the background with respect to the valuation of the work career and the personal fulfillment achieved, and are assumed as part of the rules of the game that govern the working conditions of the sector.

The sense of belonging (integration) that is generated here goes beyond the mere role of employee and extends to identification with the values of the company and/or with a profession valued by the organization. Therefore, this is the case in which socialization in the organization achieves its highest degree of success, since the work experience is constituted taking this as the main reference, largely thanks to the professionalization that have meant the training provided by both companies and brands of products, the development of skills in the exercise of the positions and the accumulation of experience over the years in the line of work.

In salespeople identified with their trade, the fundamental aspects of socialization are related to specialization in the products of an area and in technical knowledge about them, as well as in customer service in which they are experts and where the person in control of sales is the one who has worked for the company. In the case of middle management of departments, where there is also usually an alignment with corporate values, identification with the profession occurs at the level of the management of a department, of the “know-how” of a manager. Indeed, management is a key dimension that reflects operational efficiency, a sense of competence

and mastery of one's work, revealing the acquisition of a practical sense (managing teams, offers, customers, goals, etc.), which is key to the day-to-day running of the stores.

In turn, this form of "committed" work experience is dominated by a better knowledge of the development opportunities in the company, an orientation to take advantage of them in a long-term perspective and with higher expectations in terms of professional development. The strategy has given rise to a project based on building a career in the company or industry, which is true even for the case of front-line workers with trade identities who have not been promoted.

In this case, practice as a salesperson has an important degree of compliance with the renumbering regime based on commissions –since it is encouraging– the project consists of continuing under these conditions that made possible access to a stable situation for workers and their families, and continuing to get the most out of them.

Those who became managers noticed how good relations with colleagues and superiors, and the aptitudes, and willingness to assume different tasks, always be available and committed to the company without resistance. To account for the use of promotion opportunities that appear at work, with a sense of guaranteeing or increasing income, but also encouraged by the company's recognition of their skills.

In general, this form of experience tends to emphasize "self-worth" and an individualistic life orientation, where achievements are the result of personal efforts and sacrifices. In this sense, working in the store has been the basis for consolidating a personal project, but also a family project, in which the fight for the children's education and access to a better standard of living stands out. "I owe everything I have, my house, to Ripley, to my work and to Ripley" (Saleswoman, 59 years old).¹¹

When a critical distance appears, it refers mainly to the recent reorganizations of retail companies, which have implied the reduction of salespeople with more seniority, experience and remuneration, and their replacement by young, inexperienced and uncommitted workers, with high turnover, and inserted in strongly protocolized sales work processes. These changes in companies are criticized, as well as the low commitment and the low value given to work in the store by the younger generations, all of which appears to question and threaten their own work trajectories and identities. In middle management, there are also added difficulties and challenges to the exercise of authority involved in directing and coordinating the sales process

11 Personal interview, March 29, 2015, Santiago, Chile.

of young workers, who are less involved and do not project themselves in the sector.

This form of committed experience is associated above all, but not exclusively, with workers with greater seniority, linked to positions of higher autonomy and symbolic and material recognition (department heads, specialized commission salesmen), who have made a career within the industry, which can be expressed both in the construction of work identities linked to the sales profession and/or belonging to the organization, as well as in the processes of promotion and development within the company.

The blocked experience

This second type or figure of work experience arises in cases where the initial promise of integration is not fulfilled, either because of the force of daily experiences of discomfort, abuse and suffering, or because the subjective costs associated with being promoted are greater than the benefits, or because the expectations of mobility initially generated by the company were higher than what was actually offered. In any case, work experience in the stores is blocked by the absence of job fulfillment prospects and/or alternative work projects.

Although working in retail has meant access to a certain stability and formalization as salaried employees, in this type of work experience, socialization in the company's norms and values never resulted in identification with the company and the store. In turn, neither the conditions associated with the job nor previous labor insertions have allowed the crystallization of a trade identity associated with the occupation. Rather, the categories of identification and belonging from which meaning is endowed and action in the stores is oriented are found outside the work space, mainly in the family. Thus, the work experience is narrated from the point of view of a worker who struggles daily in the labor market to ensure the livelihood of his or her family group.

Largely because they have followed interrupted trajectories, with entries and exits from the labor market based on child-rearing cycles and home care, the relationship established with work here is of an instrumental nature, conceived above all as a means of supporting the family and financing the education of the children, in whom the promise of future social mobility is placed, which for them appears blocked. Along with access to a formal job that guarantees a regular monthly income, what is most valued in the workplace is sociability, informal relationships with colleagues, bosses and even clients.

Such relationships –similar to what has been seen in previous studies with supermarket workers (Stecher *et al.*, 2010)– constitute an important social and emotional support in the workers' lives, which moderates and attenuates the experience of blockage and lack of job development prospects. Working in the store is, consequently, both a means of subsistence and a place of encounter and sociability with others.

In this type of experience, over and above the dimensions of agency and self-realization at work, subjectivation is dominated by the register of suffering, uncertainty and wear and tear. Due to the huge importance of the family and particularly of children in the construction of the meaning of the work experience, the suffering linked to the long and atypical workdays that force people to be at work when they feel they should be at home stands out, and this absence, especially in women workers and mothers, is assumed as a great cost and with significant degrees of guilt. In addition, especially in the case of women, a significant percentage of free time is dedicated to domestic work, which reinforces the general experience of fatigue and wear and tear linked to long productive and reproductive workdays.

The blockage is also expressed in those situations where promotion possibilities exist but are rejected. Indeed, although for some, being a boss, in addition to gaining access to a position with better pay and status, is a recognition of the work done and a new challenge, for others it is associated with the experience of endless work that entails a working week of between 50 and 60 hours, because contractually they are governed by the regulations that apply to positions without direct supervision, which makes it impossible to enjoy their own time and especially that of their family with greater autonomy. Rejection, therefore, is a way of strategically preserving one's position in the company, since the costs of being a boss far outweigh the benefits.

Likewise, the blocking experience is also observed in some workers who were attracted by the opportunity to make a career in the company, had the possibilities and decided to move up. In these cases, the promise of integration based on mobility, which at the beginning seemed almost unlimited, as progress was made, it was found that it was closed and/or opened for others who did manage to continue advancing, but who in their own opinion did not have sufficient merit. The offer to make a career, therefore, seems not to be equal to what was promised, which generates frustration and awakens a sense of injustice in the face of longings that were blocked, distancing the worker –once again, but in another way– from identification with the company.

This figure of social experience characterized by different modalities of blocking occurs predominantly among adult or older workers, with a certain seniority in the organization, among those with greater family responsibilities and with a stronger expression among women. At the same time, there is a certain transversality in relation to occupational levels, which can be experienced by the lowest positions (cashier, sales assistant, computer), as well as by salespeople or middle management, who at some point saw their expectations of continuing to move up, being recognized and improving their conditions frustrated.

Experience in transit

From the experience we have called “in transit”, the promise of integration is not attractive, and the socialization of the organization does not manage to conquer the subjectivity of the workers. This is mainly because it competes with horizons of meaning outside the company, such as the imprint of a youth culture from which work in the company is devalued, and the widespread imperative of obtaining a degree in higher education. All this generates expectations of fulfillment that the companies in the industry seem unable to meet, producing a form of work experience characterized by being in transit to another state, place or position.

As we have pointed out, retail constitutes a possibility of insertion into formal employment that is easily accessible to young people, regardless of their educational level, previous work experience or socioeconomic status. However, many of them do not see employment in retail as a definitive insertion, but rather as a place of transit in which they will not work forever. Indeed, although working in retail in many cases represents an advance in the employment trajectory of certain young workers, especially for those with previous sporadic employment in the informal sector, as time goes by it becomes evident that it is not precisely what they want for their lives. However, since it has been the gateway to an experience of integration into the formal labor market and a modern organization, it appears as the minimum “floor” from which one cannot descend and as a way of access to other possibilities of personal development, training or labor insertion that were not envisaged before.

If the socialization of the company did not fully materialize, it was because it could not compete with the influence of other referents of meaning. On the one hand, a youth culture that is not seduced by the idea of a job that is presented –particularly in the lower hierarchical and qualified

positions— as routine, controlled and not very stimulating, which also obstructs the enjoyment of free time with its days that end late and work on weekends. On the other hand, the imperative strongly established in Chilean society that life projects and the possibilities of being “someone important in life” are based on going through higher education and obtaining a university degree.

In the case of retail workers, higher education appears as “the” way to develop a personal project and access to better living conditions in Chile. As one interviewee said: “In December I could apply here, as a saleswoman or cashier, and try to reduce my working hours to twenty-five... and be able to study, because I don’t want to spend my whole life in retail” (Assistant, 22 years old).¹²

In this way, this experience strategically combines the effort to take advantage of and obtain the benefits and possibilities offered by working in the stores (learning, contacts, economic incentives), together with a commitment to the future focused on starting or finishing higher education and/or finding a job with higher status and remuneration. The experience of being “in transit” often leads this group of workers to respond erratically to the logic of the economic incentives designed by the company, because although they are oriented towards obtaining them, they are not willing to over-demand themselves or to give up certain personal projects because of the demands of a job in which they do not project themselves. For this reason, even those who perform well and could opt for a certain promotion within the company, have full clarity that their project is played in other areas (study, look for another job with better hours and income, etc.).

The sense of fulfillment, in this context, is played out in the capacity to desire, to project oneself, in that one is building a life project and autonomously generating resources to be able to carry it out. There is an active distance and a critical exercise with respect to the industry and the store, centered on experiences of exploitation or labor burden, but above all on the conviction that work in retail is incompatible in the long term with a technical or university certification project, conceived as the main means to achieve other job opportunities and a better social position.

However, the clarity and feasibility of such a project is often not fully elaborated, and there are often doubts as to what to study, in what type of institution, at what time and with what means. The lack of definition seems to compromise the effective concretion of the project, generating that sometimes the time in the company continues to advance and the work acquires an ambiguous consistency between provisional and permanent.

12 Personal interview, December 7, 2014, Santiago, Chile.

The “in transit” experience is mainly configured among younger workers, with fewer family responsibilities than the other experience figures, with a higher educational level (technical high schools, higher technical education), with less seniority in the stores and usually inserted in jobs with less autonomy, more direct control and low symbolic and material recognition.

Conclusions

The article proposed a reconstruction of the way in which the three logics of social action described by Dubet (2007, 2010 and 2013) are deployed in the workspace of department stores. Regarding the logic of integration, it was explained how, for the workers, entering the stores represents a promise of integration to a salaried employment status, to a space for sociability, to the development of skills, learning and even trade identities, as well as to certain possibilities of promotion and mobility.

Concerning the logic of the strategy, it was found that, in general, a rather defensive and reactive logic was predominant, aimed at maintaining the positions achieved and adjusting behavior to the incentive systems offered by the stores’ service models.

In terms of the logic of subjectivation, there was evidence of action orientations based on feelings of self-fulfillment and work development in the stores, but also linked to a critical and reflective distancing from the industry, as well as strong experiences of suffering and discomfort at work, especially due to the long working hours and the emotional and physical wear and tear of customer service work.

Subsequently, three figures of social experience at work in department stores were proposed, resulting from specific forms of articulation of the described logics of action. The committed experience shows a subjective link to work in which the promises of integration from the company appear to be significantly achieved; in which strategic action is oriented towards maintaining and taking advantage of the benefits and incentives offered by the management systems in a virtuous way; and in which the components of autonomy, agency and fulfillment predominate in the logic of subjectivation.

The blocked experience shows a modality of subjective attachment to retail work in which there is a predominant experience of non-fulfillment or partial fulfillment of the promises and expectations of integration that entering retail implies; where strategic orientations based on the defense of what has been achieved and on an instrumental attachment to employment predominate without major career projections and with a focus on the

support of the family group; and where aspects of subjectivation linked to suffering and wear and tear stand out.

The experience in transit shows forms of labor integration and socialization in the store that are partially achieved, not so much as a result of blockage or non-fulfillment of expectations, but rather as a result of the strength of other orientations and symbolic referents. In this experience, the actors deploy strategies to make the most of the benefits offered by the job, but with a certain subjective distancing and with the main objective of leaving the store.

In subjectivation, critical distancing from the store and from oneself predominates, signifying work in the company and the role of employee as transitory moments that have value as supports for the realization in the future of other projects where the yearnings of personal fulfillment are really at stake.

The description and analysis presented here constitutes a double contribution to the field of New Labor Studies in Latin America. Firstly, it contributes to the accumulation of empirical case studies on labor experiences in different sectors that have undergone flexibilizing corporate reorganization processes in recent years. It does so in an industry that has a high importance in today's economy, given its labor-intensive nature, its enormous growth and deployment from the consolidation of large business holding companies, and its paradigmatic character in terms of business modernization processes in the service sector.

In this line, the findings presented from the case of retail in Chile constitute a contribution to the analytical effort to identify and understand certain prototypical and transversal forms of the labor experience of individuals in the contemporary world of work. The experience of commitment through a strong integration into the organization and/or the occupation; the experience of blockage associated with disqualification, lack of possibilities for development and construction of meaning from the role of father/mother head of household; and the experience in transit oriented by the expectation of mobility and the experience of labor insertion as something transitory, are three forms of social experience and subjective orientation to work that have similarities with what has been described in other empirical studies of North Atlantic societies (Casey, 1995; Dubar, 2001; Strangleman and Roberts, 1999) and Latin American societies (Soto, 2008; Stecher, 2012).

These studies sketch a landscape of the impact of the processes of business modernization and labor flexibilization in the large organizations of

the modern and formal sector of the economy, showing the fragmentation of work experiences and their segmentation into at least three major categories or work situations:

The (minority) group of those workers whose role and competencies continue to be valuable and recognized under the new flexible management systems, who are committed and adjusted to the expectations and offers of meaning and career development made by the company, and who construct experiences and identities based on content directly linked to their work in the work process and their position within the organization.

The collective that in the context of processes of flexible reorganization, de-skilling and precariousness of employment sees its possibilities of mobility, development and recognition blocked, having to submit to working conditions judged as adverse due to the need for family subsistence and building from there a strongly instrumental sense of work.

The group that joins the organization –usually young and under the figure of projects or part-time employment– with a limited time horizon, with no interest in developing a trade or career in the company, with the aspiration to continue studying and moving in the labor market and that adjusts from that subjective position to the flexible management systems offered by the organization.

These different forms of social experience at work are, of course, mobile –an individual can move between them according to changes in the organization or biographical events– they are articulated in different ways in different productive sectors and decline in unique ways according to the levels of qualification of the workforce and their structural anchors (gender, generation, ethnicity) in the social order.

Secondly, the article contributes, from the presentation and application of the theoretical perspective of Dubet's sociology of experience (2007, 2010 and 2013), to enrich the conceptual arsenal of Labor Studies in Latin America with respect to the study of the subjective dimension of socio-labor transformations. The model of social experience and the logics of action allow for a situated, processual and complex analysis of social life and the world of work, in which both the weight of systemic and structural dimensions and the central role of the actors in the production of the meaning of their work experiences and in the orientation of their action through the reflexive articulation of different logics of action are recognized.

As illustrated by the three figures or types of experience described for department stores, analyzing the social experiences and subjectivity of labor actors in the world of work requires reconstructing both the “objective”

conditions and characteristics of an industry or labor scenario, as well as the way in which individuals within such techno-socio-productive conditions –and in the light of their biographical trajectories and their multiple anchorages in the social structure (gender, generation, class, ethnicity)– permanently articulate heterogeneous logics of action to face daily challenges, link with others and elaborate senses of themselves as workers.

Thus, the use of Dubet's Sociology of Experience (2007, 2010 and 2013) as a framework for empirical research can contribute to deepen our understanding of labor scenarios and their contemporary transformations in Latin America, based on the analysis of the diverse forms of subjective bonding and social experience constructed by actors in the heterogeneous worlds of work in the region.

It remains as a theoretical-conceptual challenge to continue exploring and discussing the articulations (differences and similarities) between Dubet's perspective of the sociology of experience and other conceptual frameworks –identities and labor cultures, subjective configurations, forms of recognition, collective action, governmentality and subjectivation, etc.– currently used in Latin America for the analysis of the subjective dimensions of economic and socio-labor transformations.

Finally, it is essential to continue advancing in ways of conceptualizing labor experiences that better articulate their individual and collective dimensions, that make visible their socio-political implications in the framework of capital-labor relations and that illuminate the centrality of the subjective dimension to understand the world of work and organizations in contemporary societies.

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