

“NOBODY LOOKS AT THESE WORKERS”: THE PRECARIOUS WORK OF THE PROFESSIONALS INVOLVED IN DEATHWORK AND THE PANDEMIC OF COVID-19 IN THE RIO DE JANEIRO STATE

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research was to discuss the worsening of the characteristics of precarious work among workers in the sale of products and the provision of various services related to deathwork, resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, we adopt the definition of precarious work as that which causes various types of insecurity for the worker, ranging from financial insecurity to fragility of business ties and those related to health and worker safety. The present work originated from data collected in the period before the outbreak of Covid-19. Therefore, to achieve the objective, reports extracted from four in-depth interviews with market workers in the city of Rio de Janeiro, carried out before the pandemic, and articles from a widely circulated newspaper in the same city, during the pandemic, were analyzed. As results, it is possible to notice the accentuation of existing precariousness and new precariousness, such as high health risk and suffering at work. We conclude with some proposals to reduce existing precariousness.

Keywords: Precarious work; Covid-19; Deathwork; Job Insecurity; Lack of rights and protection

“NADIE MIRA A ESTOS TRABAJADORES”: LA PRECARIEDAD LABORAL DE LOS PROFESIONALES INVOLUCRADOS EN EL TRABAJO CON LA MUERTE Y LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19 EN EL ESTADO DE RÍO DE JANEIRO

RESUMEN

El objetivo de esta investigación fue discutir el agravamiento de las características del trabajo precario en la actividad de los trabajadores que actúan en la comercialización de productos y en la prestación de diversos servicios relacionados al trabajo con la muerte, como consecuencia de la pandemia del nuevo coronavirus. Aquí adoptamos la definición de trabajo precario como

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aquel que genera diversos tipos de inseguridad para el trabajador, que van desde la inseguridad financiera, la fragilidad de los vínculos empresariales y las relacionadas con la salud y la seguridad del trabajador. El presente trabajo se originó a partir de datos recopilados en el período anterior al brote de Covid-19. Así, para lograr el objetivo, se analizaron informes extraídos de cuatro entrevistas en profundidad a trabajadores del mercado de la ciudad de Río de Janeiro, realizadas antes de la pandemia, y artículos de un periódico de gran circulación de la misma ciudad, durante la pandemia. Como resultado, es posible notar la acentuación de la precariedad existente y de nuevas precariedades, como el alto riesgo para la salud y el sufrimiento en el trabajo. Concluimos con algunas propuestas para reducir la precariedad existente.

Palabras clave: Trabajo precario; Covid-19; Trabajando con la muerte; Inseguridad laboral; Falta de derechos y protección.

"NINGUÉM OLHA PARA ESSES TRABALHADORES": A PRECARIZAÇÃO DO TRABALHO DOS PROFISSIONAIS ENVOLVIDOS EM TRABALHOS COM A MORTE E A PANDEMIA DA COVID-19 NO ESTADO DO RIO DE JANEIRO

RESUMO

O objetivo desta pesquisa foi discutir o agravamento das características do trabalho precário na atividade dos trabalhadores que atuam na comercialização de produtos e na prestação de serviços diversos relacionados ao trabalho com a morte, em decorrência da pandemia do novo coronavírus. Adotamos aqui a definição de trabalho precário como aquele que causa diversos tipos de insegurança ao trabalhador, desde a precariedade financeira, a fragilidade dos vínculos empresariais até aquelas relacionadas à saúde e à segurança do trabalhador. O presente trabalho originou-se a partir dos dados coletados no período anterior ao surto da Covid-19. Portanto, para atingir o objetivo, foram analisados relatos extraídos de quatro entrevistas em profundidade com trabalhadores do mercado na cidade do Rio de Janeiro, realizadas antes da pandemia, e as matérias de um jornal de grande circulação da mesma cidade, durante a pandemia. Como resultados, é possível perceber a acentuação de precariedades existentes e novas precariedades, como o alto risco à saúde e o sofrimento no trabalho. Concluímos com algumas propostas para reduzir as precariedades existentes.

Palavras-Chave: Trabalho precário; Covid-19; Trabalho com a morte; Insegurança no emprego; Falta de direitos e proteção.

INTRODUÇÃO

The pandemic that began in 2020, caused by a coronavirus responsible for infection called Covid-19 (PAHO, 2020), is identified as the cause of the worsening of the precariousness of work in several economic sectors due to the increasing number of dismissals, increasing informality and decreasing wages (GHIRALDELLI, 2021). And this is

not peculiar to Brazil. There are widespread concerns that workers in precarious jobs have suffered the most from the Covid-19 pandemic, and deserve special attention (McNAMARA et al., 2021). The world of work is also facing a pandemic and an economic slowdown that is having serious effects around the world, with workers in precarious jobs, both formal and informal, being among the most affected.

In the health sector, professionals who worked on the front lines of the fight against the pandemic still dealt with risks inherent to the profession and with the precariousness resulting from the lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) (SOUZA et al., 2021). In this group, less prestigious professions, such as nursing assistants and technicians, were more affected (GANDRA et al., 2021). In fact, the Covid-19 pandemic made explicit the consequences of precariousness in the health sector, highlighting the psychological suffering of workers in the face of the existing scarcity of resources, long working hours, and inadequate professional training to face the crisis, among other examples (SOUZA et al., 2021).

International and national crises highlight labor market inequalities and disproportionately affect individuals from marginalized backgrounds (KANTAMNENI, 2020). It can be said that the responses to contain the crisis tend to follow neoliberal recipes, using austerity and privatization measures, affecting the working class, which is more impoverished and precarious (GHIRALDELLI, 2021). In a crisis, firms, labor relations, and workers are strongly affected, exposing workers to the whims of the market (COSLOVSKY et al., 2017).

In 2024, the unemployment rate decreased; in the first quarter rate was 7.9% (IBGE, 2024). Thus, there was a considerable drop in the initial year of the pandemic (the initial year of the pandemic, unemployed reached 14.3%) (IBGE AGENCY, 2020), but the number of informal workers remains high, 38.8 million people in February/2024 (AGÊNCIA BRASIL, 2024). In a pandemic, despite the health emergency and economic crisis, some sectors of the economy experienced growth in their activities, as is the case with the funeral sector

(SIQUEIRA; GOIS, 2022). Sadly, this growth stems from the significant number of deaths caused by the pandemic.

The present paper is based on observing the precarious nature of the work carried out by the professionals in the deathwork (professional work involving the dead), with data collected before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. In many cases, the precariousness of work shows itself in three different ways: provoking objective precariousness (the type that removes rights and benefits), subjective precariousness (that which affects the worker through excessive pressure for results), or deepening the vulnerability of work (something that puts the worker at risk) (VARGAS, 2016). In this context, precarious work causes many types of insecurity for work, ranging from financial insecurity caused by the frailness of employment bonds to those related to the health and well-being of the worker. The main argument here is that the pandemic raises some challenges that should have already been faced.

Considering the scenario described and that workers in this market are in precarious jobs and may be among the hardest hit, as highlighted by McNamara et al. (2021), this paper aims to discuss the worsening of precarious work characteristics in the activity of workers who work in the sale of products and in the provision of various services related to death, as a result of the new coronavirus pandemic. To achieve the objective, reports extracted from in-depth interviews with workers from the deathwork in the city of Rio de Janeiro, carried out before the pandemic, and articles from a newspaper of great circulation in the same city, O Globo, were analyzed. We chose to analyze the articles that correspond to the initial period of the pandemic in the country.

Such an analysis is relevant for understanding public policies and changes in the market that may be necessary due to the situation where the loosening of some laws and rules may have placed workers in situations of greater vulnerability and precariousness. It is worth remembering that despite the Brazilian Ministry of Health having decreed the end of the pandemic, by establishing the end of the Public Health Emergency of National Importance (ESPIN) in April/2022, through an Ordinance (AGÊNCIA BRASIL, 2022), the Covid-19 is still a

reality in the country. Potential consequences of the pandemic, in the deathwork, can be catastrophic, with special emphasis on professionals who worked in cemeteries and who have experienced an intensification of work in light of the underreporting rates of the disease (CNN BRAZIL, 2020). This is due to the significant increase in deaths that required burials in shallow graves, which can pose risks to health and the environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and intensified historical precarity in the funeral sector, with impacts that persist in the post-pandemic period (GRANDO et al, 2024). Recent reports (AUDI, 2024; SERAFINI, 2024) show that problems worsened with the privatization of public cemeteries, leading to increased costs for vulnerable families and deterioration of essential services. The persistence of these conditions reveals how the pandemic acted as a catalyst for structural inequalities, transforming the "hour of death" - already marked by difficulties - into an even more dehumanizing process for workers and bereaved families, without effective public policies being implemented to reverse this situation in the post-crisis period.

Although this study focuses on a Brazilian context and its implications for local public policies, it was written in English to broaden its academic reach. This choice aims to facilitate dialogue with the international Organizational Studies community, particularly considering the prior presentation of this research at the Academy of Management (AOM). Furthermore, by publishing in English in a multilingual journal such as RBEQ, we seek to engage foreign researchers interested in emerging realities, without diminishing the relevance of the discussion for the national context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Deathwork In The State Of Rio De Janeiro

The deathwork has undergone many changes in the West, with the adoption of new practices (WALTER, 2012). In Brazil, for example, the main changes occurred in the 19th Century, and it can be said that these changes involved the places where the dead were buried – from churches to cemeteries – and the arrival of other agents (RODRIGUES, 1997).

Brazil has followed suit with the changes that occurred elsewhere in the West, meaning that doctors, funeral agencies, and cemetery agencies, among others, started to offer products and/or provide services for the market (WALTER, 2012).

In Rio de Janeiro, each City Hall is responsible for the regularization and normalization of deathwork, even though the Government may create special legal provisions with this in mind (SILVA; BARROS, 2018). Government agents are responsible for the regulation of the activities of funeral services companies and people working in the segment. In addition, the city also grants, through tenders, the management of public cemeteries to private ownership (DECREE NO. 39,094/2014). In the city of Rio de Janeiro, there are twenty-one cemeteries, of which thirteen are in the hands of two concessionaires and many funeral agencies. These concessionaires have been managing the cemeteries since 2014 and have taken over the space formerly occupied by a charity organization, the Santa Casa da Misericórdia, that ran the cemeteries for over 500 years (SILVA; BARROS, 2017). In addition to the management of public cemeteries, the concessionaires also manage the funeral services companies. These facts show the sheer scope of activity of concessionaires in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

The death market is concentrated on four main lines of business, namely: cemeteries; companies offering funeral service plans; insurers offering life insurance, and, in some cases, funeral assistance plans (SILVA; BARROS, 2018). At present, Decree No. 39,094/2014, as enacted by the Rio de Janeiro City Hall, regulates how companies/professionals on the market act, establishing rules for this business segment.

The Workers In The Deathwork

The majority of the workers in the deathwork are based in cemeteries or funeral service providers. The Municipal Decree of the city of Rio de Janeiro No. 39,094/2014 thus defines the funeral agency and its responsibilities. "[...] Funeral agencies are assigned activities such as the hiring of funeral services in the name of the companies they represent" (DECREE NO. 39,094/2014, p. 45-46).

From the terms of this Decree, one can conclude that the Decree gives the same responsibilities to the base workers and the owners of the funeral agencies. The Brazilian List of Occupations (Cadastro Brasileiro de Ocupação – CBO), as established by the now defunct Ministry for Labor and Jobs (Ministério do Trabalho e Emprego – MTE), has a more complete description of the activities of these agents, namely:

CBO 5165-05 – Funeral Services Agent –Thanatopractor, funeral services attendant, Funeral Company assistant. They perform tasks regarding the organization of funerals, arranging registers of death, and other documents, as necessary. They also arrange for the release, transport, and transfer of corpses. They also prepare for wakes and burials and lead the funeral procession. They prepare the corpses in special urns and ornament them [...]. (MTE, 2002)

Through the CBO, the Ministry of Labor and Employment (MTE) states that people who work in this area are officially registered workers who can work any shift or even follow a shift rotation system. For these professional people, according to the information supplied by the Ministry, only primary education is needed, as well as the learning of some techniques. The CBO describes that people working in this segment ‘work under pressure and are often exposed to chemicals and bacteria’ (MTE, 2002).

Other professionals in this market, with a description established by the MTE, are the retort operator and gravediggers, from whom only elementary education is required. According to the description, they ‘help with funeral procedures; construct, prepare, clean, open and close graves’, ‘proceed with funeral procedures, including the exhuming and cremation of corpses, as well as transport of corpses and mortal remains’, ‘preserve cemeteries, machines, and work tools’ and ‘strive to keep the security of the cemetery’ (MTE, 2002). As occurs with the activities of funeral agents, the activities of such professional people are also described by mentioning characteristics that link to vulnerability. Apart from these professional people, the deathwork also has other workers, such as sellers of items such as flowers, candles, life insurance, and funeral plans, among others (SILVA; BARROS, 2018).

The characteristics of the work as described by the MTE point to vulnerability or precariousness. However, Carvalho (2005) suggests that the work in this market is not very professional, which also helps the stigmatized view of these professional people in society. In

addition, the work of many of these professionals, such as funeral directors and burial drivers, is considered a 'dirty job', which highlights social discredit and helps to understand the stigmatization of these workers (BATISTA; CODO, 2018). The idea that they are not very ethical (FLORES; MOURA, 2018) also helps to stigmatize the professional people who work in this area, who also need to cope with the disregard of their trade by society at large (KOVÁCS et al., 2014). However, the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have aggravated the vulnerability of these workers.

Precarious Work

The beginning of the process of work precariousness is reported to have increased the flexibility of work, from the 1970s onwards (BETTI, 2018). In Brazil, strategies to make work more flexible began in the 1990s (ALVES, 2000) and were consolidated and intensified in the 2000s (ALVES, 2014). However, in a global context, before the beginning of the 2000s, precarious work was hardly used as an object of investigation, since neoliberal economists and politicians used 'flexibility' and 'flexible work' as concepts (BETTI, 2018). Flexibility, which is a profitable strategy for companies and easy to implement (ANTUNES, 2009), becomes part of capitalist systems, allowing work to be flexible in several ways (BETTI, 2018): in hiring, salary, workload, workplace, and activities.

This process led to the loss of guarantees and rights, leaving workers insecure and fragile in the face of uncertainties in the global economic scenario (ANTUNES, 2020). In the face of insecurity (KRESHPAJ et al., 2020), the reduction of guarantees and rights (STANDING, 2013), the excessive workload and the increase in the volume of work/work intensity (CAMPBELL; BURGESS, 2018) and low income or salary (KRESHPAJ et al., 2020), such flexible forms can also be seen as related to precarious work. Kreshpaj et al. (2020), when investigating how precarious employment has been conceptualized and implemented in scientific research, identified three dimensions: employment insecurity (employment status, agency work, forms of employment, temporary employment, etc.), income inadequacy, and lack of rights and protection (union coverage, union existence, social benefits, workplace rights, etc.) The precariousness of work can be defined "as an activity with economic

purposes carried out in conditions that place those who carry it out in a situation of risk, vulnerability or degradation" (VARGAS, 2016, p. 313). For Vargas (2016), the precariousness of work can be identified from the social status of the job or occupation conditions of exercising the work and can be manifested through dissatisfaction or suffering that work causes.

A precarious situation is seen as that which removes rights and guarantees, as occurs in hirings different from those using a duly signed work card valid indefinitely (ALVES, 2020) through the practice of paying low salaries (KRESHPAJ et al., 2020), increased workload subjecting the workers to factors of health risk (PADILHA, 2009), not providing the workers with working conditions that could bring them a certain degree of security, such as the presence of strong trade unions, special training to the workers may unleash and develop their skills and make use of their knowledge, among other forms (STANDING, 2013).

According to Linhart (2014), these conditions are favorable to the installation of subjective precariousness. This is a reality for those workers subjected to precarious situations. However, Linhart (2014) believes that subjective precariousness may affect everyone, even civil servants and top professionals, a fact also acknowledged by Standing (2013). Subjective precariousness is shown in the light of pressure exercised at work and pressure for results, even if such results are hardly attainable. Work-related illnesses are subjective elements that are strongly analyzed in the form of subjective precariousness (LINHART, 2014). The excess pressure for the worker to produce more, even if conditions for this are not forthcoming, means that workers experience this precariousness, regardless of the type of bond (LINHART, 2014). In this way, we can see that there are different perspectives regarding precarious work, all being linked to aspects that put the worker in a situation of frailness or vulnerability.

Until 2017, there had never been a labor or union reform in general in the country (MOURA; SANTOS; NASCIMENTO, 2022). In 2017, the expanded Labor Reform became a reality and Law No. 13,467, which amends 201 points of the Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT) – e.g., agreements take precedence over the CLT, contract/intermittent work (KREIN,

2018), and Law No. 13,429/2017, which allows outsourcing even in core activities and extends the temporary contract. Another important point, since this Reform, is the issue of remuneration. Krein (2018, p. 90) brings some specificities of the new regulation in this sense, namely: "possibility of a salary reduction through collective bargaining or even through individual negotiation [...]"; "stimulus to the adoption of variable compensation"; "possibility of the company paying not as a salary, but remunerating the worker with goods, bonuses and services"; "payment can be made for individual performance or for productivity"; and "tips can be appropriated by the company". Such legislation contributed to strengthening new forms of exploitation of thousands of workers (MOURA; SANTOS; NASCIMENTO, 2022). In this sense, what was called the 'uberization of work' emerged, a reference to the company Uber to emphasize [...]the phenomenon of the emergence of a new form of work organization from technological advances" (KRAMER, 2017, p. 14).

However, despite the world of work already being in a process of precariousness for some decades (GHIRALDELLI, 2021) – and, in Brazil, the Labor Reform of 2017 has further expanded precariousness –, the Covid-19 pandemic made workers in precarious jobs or employment suffer even more, as they are among the most affected in the pandemic (McNAMARA et al., 2021). Matilla-Santander et al. (2021) call attention to critical ways that the consequences of the crisis among workers in precarious employment will be felt globally:

- (a) precarious employment will increase, (b) workers in precarious employment will become more precarious, (c) workers in precarious employment will face unemployment without being officially laid off, (d) workers in precarious employment will be exposed to serious stressors and dramatic life changes that may lead to a rise in diseases of despair, and (e) precarious employment might be a factor in deterring the control of or in generating new COVID19 outbreaks. (p. 226)

Given this, the authors conclude that a new social contract is needed, which allows all workers to be recognized and protected.

METHODOLOGY

To attain the proposed goal, we sought to understand the deathwork in two separate moments: before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, semi-structured

four interviews were carried out in depth, each lasting two hours, with the interviewees being workers of four different types of companies operating in the deathwork: funeral companies, public cemeteries, private crematoria, and insurers. As subjects of the research, we sought workers holding strategic positions in the companies and, in most cases, people with long tenure in the market. In one of the cases, the interviewee is one of the owners of the company. Since the authors do not work in this market and did not know any workers in this market, one of the authors visited the places where these workers worked (public cemetery and crematorium, funeral home, and insurance company), explained the objectives of the research, and presented the Free and Informed Consent Form (which was signed by all). All agreed at the same time. Only one research subject was contacted by email, since he lived in another state (from the private crematorium). Anonymity was guaranteed to all participants.

In the Free and Informed Consent Form, excerpts were included, such as: "Your participation is very important and before the interview you must be aware that your participation in this study is voluntary and if you decide not to participate or want to stop continuing at any time, you have absolute freedom to do so" (a way of mitigating the risk of fatigue, since the interview was in-depth, or in the case of any embarrassment – risks identified in the research).

It is also noteworthy that one of the interviewed managers is connected to a concessionaire who manages a good part of the public cemeteries in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

After the analysis stage of the interviews, Covid-19 emerged, which impacted the death market, and, consequently, the workers in this market. Given this situation, it is essential to recognize potentially vulnerable areas that could exacerbate existing issues and possibly create new ones. In this way, as the research was carried out at a time of the pandemic when it would be difficult to access workers in the deathwork, we looked into the analysis of newspaper articles in a mainstream newspaper in Rio de Janeiro. We therefore decided to analyze the 'O Globo' newspaper, between 1 March 2020 and 9 May 2020. It was decided to analyze the materials corresponding to the initial period of the pandemic in the country because it was the worst period for workers in this market (given many deaths and, at the

same time, a lack of knowledge of how to deal with an unprecedented situation). The newspaper articles were referenced based on the keywords 'cemetery' and 'burial'. At the end of the research, forty-nine (49) newspaper articles were selected. Here, we considered those articles covering the whole State of Rio de Janeiro. To interpret the content of the interviews and the newspaper articles, we used analysis of content (BARDIN, 2011).

According to the author, this analysis follows three phases: pre-analysis, exploitation of the material, and, finally, the treatment of the results, where inference and interpretation take place. Thus, first, the transcripts of the interviews and field observations with the four subjects were worked on, and then the journalistic articles were explored and analyzed. After these phases, correlated with the theories on precarious work, the categories that are found in the Frame below emerged. Due to the objective of this research, although we separated by category, we maintained the separation into "before" and "after" the pandemic. Frame 1 shows the panorama of data collection.

Frame 1 - Panorama of data collection.

	Sources and Identification of the Subjects	Schooling and Time Active on the Market	Method for Data Collection	Categories	Terms Found in the News Reports
Situation prior to the Pandemic	Funeral Assistant at Funeral Agency (E01)	Incomplete University Education – 1 year	Interviews and Field Observations	Job insecurity and Lack of rights and protection; Income inadequacy; Lack of training; and Subjective precariousness	
	Director of a Private Crematorium ¹ (E02)	University Graduate – 16 years	Interviews and Field Observations		
	Sales Director of an Insurer – offers life insurance and funeral plans (E03)	Complete Secondary Education – 36 years	Interviews and Field Observations		

	Administrator of a Public Cemetery (E04)	Complete Secondary Education – 26 years	Interviews and Field Observations		-
Situation During the Pandemic	O Globo	-	News articles about the deathwork were collected on the site, based on the presence of the terms 'cemetery' and 'burial'	Job insecurity and Lack of rights and protection; Lack of training; and Increase in work volume/work intensity and suffering at work	Collapse, new protocols, overload, cold storage containers, shallow coffins, increase in burials, increase in spaces, legion of disappeared people in the pandemic, reduced scale, non-compliance with recommendations.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Note: Company with a head office and branches in the South of the country, but with some presence in RJ.

Our methodological approach leveraged the combination of pre-pandemic interviews and empirical pandemic-period data to construct a longitudinal analysis that uncovered how pre-existing precarities mediated Covid-19's impacts. Thus, setting out from the reports and considering a theoretical reference, it was possible to define the categories and make any due adjustments, reaching the categories as described in Frame 1. The analyses have contributed to the identification of the challenges for the Government. The next section presents the results found, separated into two major groups, namely 'situation before the pandemic' and 'situation after the pandemic'.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The next subsections will present the predefined categories that emerged after the analysis. As can be seen in Frame 1, although some categories remained the same, as Job insecurity, and Lack of rights and Protection, and Lack of training, others only appeared before the pandemic (in interviews), such as Income inadequacy and Subjective precariousness, and another one only appeared during the pandemic (in news articles), Increase in work volume/work intensity and suffering at work (but during the pandemic, certainly, workers still had to deal with other forms of precarious work, Income inadequacy, and Subjective precariousness).

Therefore, the subsections were divided into: Job insecurity and Lack of rights and protection; Income inadequacy; Lack of training; and Subjective precariousness (situation before the pandemic), and Job insecurity and Lack of rights and protection; Lack of training; and Increase in work volume/work intensity and suffering at work (situation during the pandemic).

Job Insecurity And Lack Of Rights And Protection: Situation Before The Pandemic

As already observed, Standing (2013) stresses that the subjects of greater job insecurity do not have any security in the workplace (or very little) to protect them against accidents or illness, with the establishment of standards that also limit the time in which they work, and also the hours worked at unpleasant times, like night-time work. In this way, there was a focus on issues more related to the risks to which the workers are exposed. Kreshpaj et al. (2020) also draw attention to the lack of rights and protection, which can put workers at risk due to a lack of rights, union support, and a lack of policies to demand more favorable conditions and to inhibit unacceptable work practices. Therefore, the categories of job insecurity and lack of rights and protection were associated.

Here, we should point out that the reports mention risks to health and risks to the physical integrity of the workers. Kalleberg and Vallas (2018) understand precarious work as unsafe work where workers assume the risks of work. In this way, questions more focused on the risks to which workers are exposed were sought. At this point, it is worth mentioning that the reports pointed to both health risks and the physical integrity of workers, which allows associating the work of these workers as precarious (KALLEBERG; VALLAS, 2018).

One of the interviewees mentions the presence of an important environmental liability arising from funeral activities. We also point out that, whatever the interviewee may have said at other times, about how much the company, a concessionaire of funeral services, shows concern for the workers, this interviewee also mentions that the company would never take on this business opportunity if they were accountable for the irregularities as previously in

existence, from the period when the cemetery was under the management of another company, including any environmental liabilities in this item.

It is also worth mentioning that this report does not show health risks only for professional people working in cemeteries, but also for many other participants in the deathwork, such as funeral agencies, and even consumers, families, and people who live in the vicinity. However, surely those people with more constant exposure are more variable. Another issue that brings a similar risk is that of shallow graves. Despite Decree No. 39.094/2014, the cemeteries have a period of 10 years, starting from the new administrations, to replace the shallow graves with social graves (that are above the ground). The research also showed risks to the physical integrity of workers in the face of episodes of verbal and physical aggression, robberies, threats, and risks to life. All these points can be referred to as precarious work that exposes workers to risks, according to Vargas (2016).

Income Inadequacy: Situation Before The Pandemic

In the opinion of Standing (2013), the sums paid outside the nominal salary are ways to reduce earnings, making work more precarious. Furthermore, Kreshpaj et al. (2020) point out that low income and salary are characteristics of precarious work. During research, it was identified that commission-based work is very much used in this market, according to the statements made by the interviewees.

Workers in funeral parlors, for example, are paid based on commission only. We observed that it is common practice for agents to offer products or services to consumers when the services are not always necessary, as a way of boosting their commission on sales. This practice, when family members are in great distress, suggests that this is one of the reasons why consumers are vulnerable when facing the market, as mentioned by Silva and Barros (2018).

Despite this, some understand that the benefits and commissions paid by their insurance company are good because they can "make your salary" (E03). This understanding can also be directly associated with the idea that the salary should be variable, especially

because of the Labor Reform in the country, which regulates and encourages variable remuneration (KREIN, 2018). The little study also suggests that knowing that it would be difficult to find another occupation, workers subject themselves to the conditions imposed by this job. This fact also points to the lack of guarantees in the labor market, referred to by Standing (2013), because if not even those with good qualifications can have this guarantee, perhaps those who do not have them will. Conditions as experienced by many of these workers suggest why they end up accepting excessive workload, an extremely precarious mode of work, and a socially stigmatized activity (BATISTA; CODO, 2018).

It was therefore confirmed that, as shown by Standing (2013), the market makes use of commissions and benefits as a way to reduce nominal salaries and get the workers to increase their working day even further, to earn more. It can still be said that this 'flexible' remuneration strategy (BETTI, 2018) allows the job/employment to be considered precarious due to the inadequacy of income (KRESHPAJ et al., 2020) and the lack of minimum guarantee of remuneration security (KREIN, 2018).

Lack Of Training: Situation Before The Pandemic

The lack of training, according to Standing (2013), is considered a characteristic of precarious work, as it does not allow the worker to evolve and reproduce his or her skills. Kovács et al. (2014) have identified, in their research, a lack of training for professional people in this market. The reports show an absence of constant ongoing training, as the training is not enough for the professional growth and training of these workers. "In the State of Rio de Janeiro, as I told you, there was only one course, one class, one lecture [...] the Union only did it for the sake of showing up for the new City Hall, that's the truth, you know?" (E01).

One of the interviewees mentioned receiving only one training program during 26 years on the market. Interviewee E04 reports that he offers a 'minilecture' to explain 'the basics' and then 'leaves' Decree No. 39,094 with the employees when they start working on this activity. The same interviewee says that the company he/she is attached to prefers to hire people with little qualification, also so they can be willing to accept certain conditions

more easily, as well as that he had to learn the trade in practice. Considering the profile of the workers as described by the interviewee, one can conclude that there is a need for ongoing and wide-scope training about the activity, so that the employees may manage to carry out the work in a professional way and with less health risk. Also noteworthy is the fact that professionals in Rio de Janeiro do not receive the necessary qualifications to carry out body conservation techniques. Decreasing health risks would be a way to reduce precariousness (KALLEBERG; VALLAS, 2018; VARGAS, 2016; STANDING, 2013).

Subjective Precariousness: Situation Before The Pandemic

Throughout this research study, we sought to identify different types of pressure on the workers, as exercised by the companies, and expressions of feelings of isolation and solitude, which could be associated with subjective precariousness (LINHART, 2014). First, it is worth stressing that the lack of representation is an element that brings about the isolation of the worker. This is a characteristic of precarious work (STANDING, 2013). "Workers a lot, no one looks at these workers, no one looks at these company bosses, maybe nobody looks at improvement. No one focuses on helping that person over there, you know? It's a big market because everyone will pass through here, you know?" (E01).

We also noticed that companies make use of assessment instruments that lead to a feeling, among the workers, that their work is often 'monitored' and that there is constant pressure upon them, which is directly associated with subjective precariousness (VARGAS, 2016; LINHART, 2014). Work in this market is indeed permanently monitored, as there is the recording of images and sound, with these recordings being used to point to faults that occurred during the activity, a point mentioned by one of the interviewees. On the other hand, agents from the City Hall (through specific organizations) also make greater demands on the workers in this sector than they do on the companies, so much so that employees are often fined rather than the companies, which also brings costs for some professional people, as if these people were not representing the companies.

However, it is the stigma about the activity that has the greatest influence on workers' loneliness and subjective precariousness. According to Kovács et al. (2014), the performance of bad professionals/companies in the market helps to stigmatize professionals, who still deal with contempt for the activities they carry out. These findings are in line with the results found by Santos (2021). Kovács et al. (2014) believe that workers in this market can be psychologically vulnerable, and this can be aggravated when it comes to those who perform jobs considered dirty (BATISTA; CODO, 2018).

Throughout the research, all interviewed subjects reported perceiving society's resistance and prejudice about their profession. Some even mentioned that they have to deal with their prejudices towards the profession. It is noteworthy that the lack of training to deal with the pain of others only accentuates the precariousness experienced by them. All these findings make clear the relationship with subjective precariousness (LINHART, 2014), as well as that the work of these professionals entails mental suffering (VARGAS, 2016) that may have been even more aggravated in the Covid-19 pandemic, as pointed out by Santos (2021).

Job Insecurity And Lack Of Rights And Protection: Situation During The Pandemic

McNamara et al. (2021) and Matilla-Santander et al. (2021) highlight that workers in precarious employment/jobs were the hardest hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. By bringing the consequences for such subjects, Matilla-Santander et al. (2021) point out that precariousness will increase and that they will be exposed to serious stressors, which can lead to an increase in diseases. Therefore, this category is related to the same category created by Standing (2013) and Kreshpaj et al. (2020), before the pandemic. However, the pandemic has increased the risks for these workers.

As shown in the previous sections, workers in deathwork already suffer from a series of precarious conditions, which is why these workers, as the aforementioned authors put it, are more likely to suffer from the crisis generated by the pandemic. In the news articles, we noticed that most of them addressed the expansion of space devoted to burials in cemeteries, change of practices (like restriction of wakes, online wakes, greater time for issue of death

certificates, care that must be taken with the bodies of Covid-19 victims, and so on), and also on the increased demand in cemeteries. However, situations that show a collapse in deathwork, such as the use of containers for storing bodies, could also be found.

The growing demand on the market, the need for expansion of space for burials, and the concern about using PPEs during the whole process relate to the precarious situation lived by these professionals. The installation of refrigerated containers for the corpses, in hospitals and cemeteries, and bodies piled up in hospital morgues, bodies of people both with and without Covid-19, show the risks that are presented to professional people who handle the bodies, and even for people who are close to these locations and for other patients (in the case of bodies kept in hospitals). Here, we must mention that the Brazilian National Health Surveillance Agency (Agência Nacional de Vigilância Sanitária - Anvisa) confirmed that the containers used to store the bodies were stored incorrectly and irregularly.

Another type of burial that was found in Rio de Janeiro cemeteries, as was the case in other states, was the opening of shallow graves. The Decree that forbids the use of this kind of burial has also opened some exceptions, cases where the practice can be used in state cemeteries, like cases of 'major epidemics or situations of public calamity', and at private cemeteries, in case of 'religious imperatives, when the cemetery is exclusively for the use of members of a religious association permitting the practice' (DECREE NO. 39,094/2014, p. 4-5). However, even though it was considered legal, it does not mean that this practice does not bring risks to professionals who work in cemeteries and funeral directors who need to visit these spaces frequently, as noted. In addition, it can pose important environmental risks that have not even been calculated. As mentioned, a job can be considered precarious when performed in conditions that place workers in situations of risk, vulnerability, or degradation.

Lack Of Training: Situation During The Pandemic

Standing (2013) highlights that the lack of training is a characteristic of precarious work, as previously pointed out, and this can be even worse when the lack of training poses health risks. The articles analyzed point to the occurrence of timely changes of protocol, but

without any suggestion of any workers' training to cater to them, which in turn brings about a deepening of precarious situations in this activity. The pandemic has changed the routine of wakes and burials in many countries. Apart from increasing dedicated spaces, or burials in shallow graves, among other measures, was that of changing the protocols that currently exist on the market. For example, in Brazil, the Ministry of Health decided on a new protocol for handling of corpses which, for example, did away with the need for necropsy examinations at the Brazilian Morgue (Instituto Médico Legal - IML) in the case of suspicious or violent death (NEXO JORNAL, 2020). A document released by Anvisa established a string of measures to be followed by funeral companies and cemeteries (O GLOBO, 2020a). Even though the rules are extensive, we were not able to find any reference to training for compliance with these rules, training that should be taken by the professionals involved.

It is quite understandable that the situation (especially at the beginning of the pandemic) requires quick measures; however, new protocols, rules, and changes of practice require new knowledge that may not be so easily absorbed by the workers. This perception intensifies with the information that the Prosecution Office of Rio de Janeiro (MP-RJ) received a denouncement of the fact that funeral companies and cemeteries in the State of Rio de Janeiro are not complying with the recommendations as proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) for the removal, preparation, wake, and burial, referring to deaths resulting from the pandemic. We also mention that, when there is no compliance with a protocol seeking to guarantee health and safety, the people who have the greatest exposure to the consequences of this non-compliance are the workers themselves. In this way, it can be said that the precariousness that already existed before the pandemic was reinforced and aggravated.

Increase In Work Volume/Work Intensity And Suffering At Work: Situation During The Pandemic

The increase in work volume/work intensity is a characteristic of work considered precarious (CAMPBELL; BURGESS, 2018), which can even put the worker's health at risk. Therefore, these points were observed in the materials found. In just one cemetery in Rio de

Janeiro, in April, cremations alone increased by 44% compared to March (O GLOBO, 2020b). A gravedigger at Cemitério do Caju says that the team is getting ready to work harder: "the current scale should be reduced" and "we are aware of a possible increase in the workflow", statements made at the beginning of the pandemic. In the following month: "today, we are trying to group burials of suspected or confirmed cases at close times, so that we use the same protective clothing and equipment, all at once" (O GLOBO, 2020c).

Given that classical funeral rituals like wakes were either prohibited or limited in the whole country, solitude in burials seems to be another reason for the emotional distress of people working in cemeteries. Workers in this sector are by no means insensitive to deaths, especially within an epidemic that makes the number of deaths even higher. 'All burials affect us' (CARVALHO, 2020, online). However, they are still required not to show feelings. 'We can't show our tears'. The workers interviewed by the newspaper showed physical fatigue, but mostly mental fatigue, faced with the heavy workload and the suffering incurred by seeing many dead people without their families being near, not to mention the fear of contamination with this disease. 'I find myself thinking about the graves that we need to open, and I have already seen myself thinking about how many bodies will arrive tomorrow' (CARVALHO, 2020, online).

This scenario reveals not only an increase in the volume of work/work intensification, which is a characteristic of precarious work (CAMPBELL; BURGESS, 2018), but also a profound physical and mental exhaustion and suffering, which is related to the content of the work, which are also characteristics of precarious work (VARGAS, 2016).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The objective of this research was to discuss the worsening of the characteristics of precarious work in the activity of workers who work in the deathwork, as a result of the pandemic of the new coronavirus. In this sense, first, several characteristics of precarious work were presented, before the pandemic, which allows us to state that workers in the death market were surrounded by precarious conditions. That is the data points to precarious work

without the calamity scenario of a pandemic. In this sense, attention is drawn to the fact that precariousness is associated with all forms of activity, from working conditions that impose physical and psychological vulnerability, as well as objective and subjective aspects.

After analyzing the journalistic articles, it was verified that the pandemic accentuated the existing precariousness and imposed new precariousness, such as the high risk of contamination - in addition to the increase of other health risks -, the suffering of workers and the increase in the volume of work/work intensity (which also poses a health risk). The possible risks to the environment, incalculable, are highlighted, which were enhanced because of the burial processes used during the pandemic, which can pose health risks.

Therefore, the pandemic only accentuated precariousness, as McNamara et al. (2021) and Matilla-Santander et al. (2021) mentioned that it would occur, mainly because workers in precarious jobs are more vulnerable to crises. In this sense, some alternatives are proposed to mitigate existing precariousness: extension and creation of new protocols, considering that new epidemics could arise or pandemics; creation of permanent protocols to protect the physical health of the workers within a cemetery environment which brings many risks; creation and stepping up of inspection in cemeteries and funeral services companies, to make sure that rules, laws, regulations and the like are being followed and complied with; punish companies that break the rules; establish rules for disposal of mortal remains; bring solutions for the bodies that are being buried in shallow graves that do not comply with the health regulations; regulate the professions of the deathwork and establish parameters for these professions in this market; establish minimum training programs for funeral agents and cemetery workers, so they will be able to work in their chosen profession; look into the need for the creation of more cemeteries, that can cater to the number of deaths in general; and think of ways of restricting payment based on commission (in the many Government cemeteries), as such commissions could show low salaries and also place the consumers in a situation of vulnerability. These proposals, in addition to being addressed to the government, are also for public cemeteries, concessionaires, funeral homes, and insurance companies, among other market agents, who must pay special attention to the physical and mental health of workers.

The challenges are many, and certainly the proposals presented here will not be enough. For this reason, research should be dedicated to these subjects to reduce the precariousness that surrounds them, in addition to understanding how the pandemic is reflected on workers in this market, in objective and subjective aspects. Furthermore, we believe it is important for research to be aimed at understanding the environmental impact that the burial practices carried out during the pandemic, especially in view of the increased volume of bodies, may have caused, since the effects can be felt far beyond the workers of this market.

Our findings demonstrate that the precarities identified during the pandemic were not merely temporary disruptions, but rather manifestations of deeper structural vulnerabilities in the labor system. While these conditions were acutely aggravated by the health crisis, they persisted in the post-pandemic period, revealing systemic patterns of precarization that extend beyond the specific context of COVID-19. This persistence underscores their continued analytical relevance for understanding contemporary labor dynamics. To further illuminate these enduring inequalities, we recommend future research incorporating longitudinal post-pandemic data, which could refine policy interventions and assess whether institutional responses have effectively addressed these entrenched challenges.

The decision to write this article in English aligns with the goal of internationalizing the debate on the topic, enabling cross-context comparisons and fostering transnational collaborations. However, we recognize the importance of translating these findings into practical actions in Brazil, whether through subsequent Portuguese-language publications or direct engagement with policymakers. To address the critical limitation of language accessibility for the workers studied, we will produce a Technical-Technological Product (PTT) in the form of an experiential report published in Portuguese. This practical output, directly derived from our findings, will serve as both a diagnostic tool and an action framework for stakeholders seeking to improve labor conditions. While the academic article advances theoretical debates in English, the PTT ensures our research fulfills its social commitment by delivering actionable knowledge to workers and policymakers in an accessible format. Thus, we hope this study contributes not only to global theoretical

advancements but also to tangible social transformations in the environment where it was conducted.

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