

EXPERIENCES RELATED TO WORK, FATIGUE, ANGUISH, AND MEANING OF LIFE IN MAINTENANCE STAFF AT UNIVERSIDAD METROPOLITANA: THE CONTEMPORARY SISYPHUS

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Abstract

Work is a multifactorial phenomenon that has a significant impact on people's lives. In a world of hyperproduction, dominated by absurdity, it is man alone who demands meaning, even though anxiety and fatigue can affect the individual's relationship with life itself. Occupational Burnout Syndrome emerged in response to the popularity of Burnout and to differentiate this condition from adaptive disorder. At the same time, one of the greatest concerns among Venezuelans is the economy, and more than 40% of workers in Venezuela live in poverty. That is why this research sought to investigate the experiences surrounding work, fatigue, anxiety, and meaning of life among maintenance staff at the Metropolitan University. Using a qualitative methodology, it seeks to characterize the psychosocial and intrapsychic factors that impact the perception of fatigue among the selected participants, from a non-probabilistic sample, through semi-structured interviews using a hermeneutic method. The results show that for

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the participants, the economic aspect is of great importance, as are their families, who are the purpose and meaning of their work, as well as their sense of life. Anxiety, on the other hand, is difficult to verbalize and is associated with the sphere of provisioning. It is addressed through spirituality and self-regulation. Fatigue manifests itself in physical pain and is addressed through normalization, denial, and self-medication.

Keywords: family, maintenance staff, fatigue, and work.

Sustainable Development Goal(s) (SDG) to which the research work is directed

This work explicitly aligns with three Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations 2030 Agenda:

SDG 3 - GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Raising awareness of the factors that influence the mental and physical health of a vulnerable population, such as maintenance personnel.

SDG 4 - QUALITY EDUCATION

The research provides psychoeducation on the importance of the philosophical, theoretical, and psychosocial aspects that influence people and how these relate to anxiety and fatigue.

SDG 8 - DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

SDG 10 - REDUCED INEQUALITIES

It allows us to understand the meaning that the selected population gives to their work and how they relate to it, and it makes visible the realities and experiences of low-wage workers in contexts of economic crisis such as the Venezuelan case.

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Introduction

When we talk about work, we are referring to an extremely complex phenomenon that has accompanied humans since the dawn of time. It is an activity that reflects the complex political, economic, social, and cultural reality of the individuals who perform it. At the same time, it cuts across people's daily lives, serving as a compass to guide the search for individual and family well-being, as well as a sense of meaning and transcendence. However, one of the most common consequences of daily work is fatigue, which has been studied from different disciplines, including psychology and philosophy.

This research seeks a transdisciplinary understanding of people's most intimate intrapsychic events, their concerns and hopes, and the influence that various areas of their lives, such as work, fatigue, and family relationships, have on them, as well as, from a philosophical perspective, the social and economic context in which these realities are immersed. Therefore, a literature review is presented below that informed and guided the field research with maintenance staff at the Metropolitan University, in order to facilitate understanding of the complex phenomenon that is the subject of study.

In turn, this study is linked to the challenges of the 2030 Agenda, specifically SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), by raising awareness of the elements that influence the mental, and physical health of a vulnerable population such as maintenance staff, as well as SDG 4 (Quality Education), since the research provides psychoeducation on the importance of the philosophical, theoretical, and psychosocial aspects that influence people and how they are linked to distress and fatigue. In turn, the text contributes to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) as it reveals the meaning that the chosen population gives to their work and how they relate to it, and it highlights the realities and experiences of low-paid workers in contexts of economic crisis, such as in Venezuela.

First, it is important to note that work fatigue was first conceptualized in the 1970s and termed "*burnout*," defined as: "falling, wearing out, or becoming exhausted from excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources, which occurs to the staff of an institution for any reason and renders them inoperative for all intents and purposes" (Freudenberger, 1974, pp.1-2).

The theoretical construct became so popular that the World Health Organization incorporated it into the International Classification of Diseases in its eleventh edition (ICD 11), giving it the name Occupational Burnout Syndrome, which is conceptualized as “the result of chronic stress in the workplace that has not been successfully managed (...) and refers specifically to phenomena in the work context” (World Health Organization, 2022, paragraph 1, Code: QD85).

This recognition was due to the growing interest and research on work fatigue during the 1980s and 1990s (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993), the increase in people reporting a loss of meaning, depersonalization, and reactivity around their work, as well as the need to be able to make a differential diagnosis between the symptoms of this disorder and those associated with stress, anxiety, and even depression (Ahola et al., 2005), in order to better adjust to the disturbance manifested by patients. The fundamental exclusion criterion is that occupational burnout syndrome refers only to phenomena in the work context (World Health Organization, 2022), and therefore should not be considered or applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.

However, beyond the statistical criteria established by any diagnostic manual, it is important to consider fatigue as both a universal and subjective experience, which transcends the physical to become a condition that affects an individual's thinking, language, and relationship with life itself (Espinoza, 2021). This is a consequence of hypermodernity, a phenomenon characterized by hyperindividualism, hyperconsumerism, and hypercapitalism (Lipovsky, 2008), which in turn leads individuals to become not only consumers but also producers, who, in their eagerness to achieve what hypermodern culture demands of them, reach a point where they experience a fatigue from which they cannot rest, where they can no longer slow down their daily work, but instead seek to work more, so that fatigue becomes an intolerable but endured reality (Blanchot, 2008).

Although the culture of hyperproductivity can be a driver of fatigue, concerns about caring for family and future generations must be taken into account. The concept of generativity has been rethought since it was first proposed by Erickson, where four types of generativity have been identified: biological (e.g., having children), parental (e.g., raising children), technical (e.g., passing on skills and knowledge), and cultural (e.g., passing on cultural ideas) (Kotre, 1984). Subsequently, a significant correlation has been found between concern for generativity and work exhaustion (Zacher et al., 2015), which means that concerns about providing for families, both materially and symbolically, also affect the way people interact with their work.

Now it is time to return to the beginning and key point of the research: work, one of the fundamental actions that constitute human existence. Among its many definitions, work can be understood as any human activity that results in the creation of a lasting world of artificial objects (products) that transcend the individual life from which they originate. It differs from those repetitive acts that are consumed immediately without leaving any lasting residue or traces and that are performed for the satisfaction of biological needs and subsistence, which

are referred to as labor (Arendt, 2009). For the purposes of this research, although the term “work” was used, the activity carried out by UNIMET maintenance staff corresponds to the second definition, due to the ephemeral nature of cleaning.

A repetitive task, which is performed without leaving a significant result or effect, a definition reminiscent of the Myth of Sisyphus, in which the protagonist was punished by the gods by having to climb a steep mountain pushing a rock. When he was about to place the stone on top of the hill, it fell down the slope, and Sisyphus had to start his task over again, repeatedly, for all eternity (Camus, 1995). This story is used to illustrate the absurd, a philosophical position that argues that existence has no purpose, like Sisyphus's starting over.

Understanding one's own and collective reality as absurd can generate enormous concern, leading each individual to question the meaning of their life, the most relevant question, but one that has been relegated by philosophy (Camus, 1995). Of all the meaninglessness that may exist in the world, it is man who is the only one (because of his faculties) who demands to have it (Camus, 2023). Human existence demands a reason to affirm one's life day after day, a reason to be able to resist the discouragement that absurdity can represent, and facing the search for vital references is a situation that can generate anxiety.

For the purposes of this research, anguish will be understood as “the reality of freedom as a possibility before possibility” (Kierkegaard pp.130), since the aim is to approach existential anguish, that is, the internal turmoil generated by multiple possibilities for proceeding to give meaning to life.

Once the theoretical elements that allow us to understand the phenomenon under study have been established, it is also necessary to understand the context in which the research participants operate on a daily basis. In Venezuela, there are various psychosocial risks that threaten people's quality of life and dignity at work, which have their origin in the adverse political and economic situation the country is going through. There is a complex reality, invisible to many, that affects the majority of the population: more than 80% of Venezuelans do not have the necessary income to meet their basic needs, and in turn, 24% of the workforce is made up of employees or workers in the private sector (ENCOVI, 2022). As a result, the biggest source of stress for Venezuelans is economic, with an average of 64.5%, compared to other problems such as health, personal, and political issues (Psicodata, 2023).

Among the empirical background for this work, qualitative research focusing on burnout was investigated. This research indicates that there are areas that go beyond work, such as economic and time pressures, isolation, lack of support in the workplace, and concern about disappointing others, oneself, or even one's family and friends (Hoffman, et al., 2019; Egea-Romero, & Galindo-Abadelo, 2022). The key factors considered to help prevent and/or reduce stress and exhaustion were family support, workplace support, feeling respected and valued, and a balanced work-life dynamic (Hoffman, et al., 2019). In addition to psychological factors, the literature highlights that there are physical consequences of fatigue, with participants

mentioning that they suffer from back pain, headaches, stomach aches, and skin reactions directly related to moments of stress (Egea-Romero and Galindo-Abadelo, 2022).

Other research focused on the same population was also explored: cleaning/maintenance staff, which could guide the present work. In the case of studies on low-wage workers, they are associated with jobs requiring little to no prior training and low-skilled manual labor (Lee and Sobock, 2012). It is noteworthy that cleaning, due to its servile nature and the handling of garbage—that which is disposable—is seen as the last option for people, but an option for many (Oliveira; Pérez-Nebra; & Antloga, 2016). It was also found that employees were dissatisfied with their salary level. These issues can lead to employee absenteeism, reduced work effort, and can negatively affect the organization's work environment (Marapacuto Verastegui & Rodríguez, 2022).

The research is located in the clinical, organizational, and social areas of psychology, since burnout is a phenomenon that describes a clinical disturbance based on occupational fatigue. The social perspective is considered in terms of the participants in this research and how the adverse Venezuelan context can influence their experiences of work fatigue. The contributions that this investigation will make to these areas of knowledge are based especially on the participants to be researched, since the empirical review found little information regarding maintenance personnel and low-paid employees, that is, it is a little-studied perspective compared to burnout in health personnel or university students.

The philosophical background that runs through the work provides a transdisciplinary and holistic view of the research, bringing together diverse aspects, from the “macro” a priori contemplation of certain phenomena by philosophers and the context in which the participants are located, to the “micro” of their own experiences and the meanings attributed to them.

After this brief review of the various disciplines that converge in the research, the following questions arise: Can we currently consider that there are people who live their lives as described by Camus' Sisyphus? What meaning do the participants attribute to their lives? What are the elements that cause distress to the interviewees? How do Unimet maintenance staff experience work and fatigue?

To answer these questions, the general objective was to learn about the experiences of the maintenance staff at the Metropolitan University in relation to work, fatigue, anxiety, and meaning of life. In turn, the following specific objectives were considered: to explore the participants' concerns about their work and the socioeconomic context of the country; to discover the meanings of cleaning work for the participants; and to understand the reasons and motivations for the participants' “life.”

Method

This research is qualitative in nature. As Hernández et al. (2014) state, “reality” is defined through the interpretations of the research participants with regard to their own realities. Thus, several “realities” converge: that of the participants, that of the researcher, and that which is produced through the interaction of all the actors.

In turn, the socioconstructivist paradigm was used. According to Kenneth Gergen (1985), this paradigm “basically aims to elucidate the processes through which people manage to describe, explain, and ultimately account for the world in which they live” (pp. 3). This study aims to understand that some phenomena cannot be reduced to a simple or linear explanation, but rather require a holistic analysis of the aspects involved in the phenomenon and the need to approach it from an interdisciplinary scientific perspective (Martínez, 2015), taking into account that to explain it, we not only resort to a psychological perspective, but also a philosophical and socioeconomic one.

It was carried out within the framework of the hermeneutic method, whose use is fundamental in qualitative research, especially when the aim is to understand human experiences, actions, and behavior from different perspectives (Martínez, 2015). In this way, the experiences and meanings expressed by the participants with respect to the topic around which this study will be developed will be taken into account, in combination with the researcher’s preconceptions, given that they influence the dynamics of dialectical interaction that arises between the two.

The research was carried out by approaching participants between the ages of 18 and 55 who perform maintenance work at the Metropolitan University. The selection was made using non-probabilistic sampling, specifically convenience sampling, defined by Otzen and Manterola (2017) as the selection of subjects for study based on specific characteristics and criteria. This type of sampling is not based on randomness, but on the researcher’s personal judgment in selecting participants who meet certain criteria and are accessible for the study (Vázquez, 2017).

The selection criteria were: being maintenance staff at the Metropolitan University hired by Roda Service and being of working age, regardless of gender. Furthermore, the people interviewed hold similar positions and perform similar tasks, so for the purposes of the research, they constituted a homogeneous sample (Hernández et al., 2014) as they were representative of the maintenance workers at Roda Service, a company subcontracted by the educational institution.

- **Techniques and instruments for collecting information:**

The information was collected through semi-structured interviews, to give participants flexibility and make them feel free to answer the questions asked. As Freire (1986) states, “the origin of knowledge lies in the question, or in the questions, or in the very act of questioning” (p.5),

establishing a climate of trust and following a format similar to a spontaneous conversation, while allowing the researcher to explore emerging topics, delve deeper into the answers, inquire about relevant details, and better understand the individual perceptions of each participant.

The interviews were conducted during the employees' working hours to ensure that they did not interfere with their work breaks. They will be recorded and saved in MP4 format and transcribed in order to provide a legible written record of each participant's testimony.

- Data Management Technique:

The data was analyzed using grounded theory, employing a systematic approach to categorization with three levels of coding. Initially, the information gathered in the interviews was explored in search of meanings, grouping similar experiences and perceptions to associate them into categories and subcategories, i.e., performing open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 2002). Next, relationships were sought between these categories, subcategories, and their dimensions.

Next, axial coding was performed, in which a series of category axes were constructed from which the relevant relationships between them were established, taking into account the dimensions present in the phenomenon (Strauss and Corbin, 2002). In this way, an axial map was constructed to visually determine the relationships between the various categories and dimensions, seeking to integrate and select the phenomenon and see which of the categories emerges as the central category of the research.

Finally, selective coding was performed, in which information was refined in order to better approach the phenomenon to be understood and obtain the emerging categories of the research (Strauss and Corbin, 2002).

- The procedure for carrying out the study was as follows:

- The research began with an initial theoretical immersion, after reading the philosophical essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" by Algerian author Albert Camus. It was decided to select participants who were maintenance personnel, due to the limited existing bibliography and the novelty of the meanings that could emerge in the dialogue with these participants.

- The research was divided into four themes: work as the central axis, fatigue as a result of work, added to themes of anxiety and meaning of life, which were used to create the semi-structured script of XX questions (see Appendix A).
- In order to access the participants, authorization was requested from the Physical Plant Management of the Metropolitan University. Once participation was accepted by that body, as well as by the supervisors of Roda Service, the company that hires the maintenance staff working at Unimet, the participants selected by both bodies began to be interviewed one by one on a weekly basis.
- The interviews were conducted with participants selected at random by Roda Service managers.
- With the information provided by these interviews, they were transcribed and subjected to the open coding process mentioned above, using in vivo codes that allow examples of the most significant elements of the information obtained to be given and enable the researcher to delve into it.
- Once each interview was completed, it was transcribed and open coded. Subsequently, the dimensions, categories, and subcategories that would form part of the diagram to make up the axial coding were determined. This diagram is the guide to understanding the relationships between the meanings and themes that emerged in the interviews.
- Finally, a selective coding approach was used, in which information was refined in order to better understand the phenomenon and identify the core category.

- **Validity Criteria:**

For any qualitative study to be valid, several criteria must be met to ensure that the results fully, clearly, and representatively reflect the reality or situation being studied. In terms of reliability, this will be achieved by constructing the results intersubjectively and validating the participants, clarifying in a second interview with each participant, confirming what they wanted to express. In terms of transferability or generalization, a study can provide a general picture of a phenomenon in similar environments. In terms of verifiability, the accuracy, integrity, and objectivity of the participants' dialogue and analysis are guaranteed. Finally, this work aims at confirmation or neutrality (controlling for bias) to ensure the internal consistency of the study through external guidance and expert review (Guba, 1981).

Results

The results are presented below, organized according to categories and subcategories:

1. Daily Life: “Things are tough right now”

1.1. Economic situation

When participants were asked, “*What do you think about the situation in the country?*”, without referring to the economic sphere, it was observed that most of the responses were initially related to this aspect.

Participants describe the economic situation they are experiencing as complex, explaining how they manage to survive “day to day,” although when describing the national economy, the language becomes more concrete, highlighting that the dominant words in the narrative refer to the harshness or difficulty of the conditions they are experiencing.

“The economy, the economy, things are tough here, sometimes you don’t even have enough money for transportation.”

In turn, participants express how the macroeconomic situation facing the country directly affects their way of life, stating that it is not possible for them to live a life with the dignity they deserve, in which they must take equally difficult actions in order to “*survive.*”

“Because it’s difficult, because we practically don’t have the quality of life we deserve, you understand, because one survives by performing miracles.”

Also noteworthy is the participants’ awareness of the cross-cutting nature of the economic situation, which, according to them, affects “everyone,” meaning the Venezuelan population as a whole. However, they also emphasize the differences that exist within this population, describing how people on minimum wage are coping with the economic crisis. According to what they say, they live “day to day,” a constant present, which is already beginning to show signs of fatigue.

“I say that we are all the same because this situation is very difficult. For example, people on minimum wage, let’s put it that way, wake up every day thinking about what we are going to eat. Every day we are short at home. And that is exhausting.”

This result sheds light on several aspects of the Venezuelan reality. The economy, while an extremely relevant factor for any country, in the case of this research, is an aspect that seems to constitute the backdrop against which the daily drama of the participants unfolds. In this representation, the protagonists find themselves in a hostile context, which in turn requires them to take almost heroic actions in order to guarantee their survival, one day at a time.

1.2. Country Situation

When participants were asked about the situation in the country, excluding the economic sphere, their responses became more ambiguous, without explicitly stating whether they were referring to the political or social situation, or both.

The responses refer to the national situation as complex (as well as the economic situation), which seems to represent a risk for some participants and is experienced as adverse. The failures of a system, which is not named, present shortcomings, and they also express that these have an impact on the Venezuelan population as a whole. However, *“despite everything,”* which again omits any reference to the situation itself, participants believe that they have the possibility of being able to work, while longing for a better future.

“The situation for me right now is too... too... very dangerous. There are many deficiencies.”

“Oh dear, well, it’s complicated, it’s tough, it’s tough because it affects us all, you know, but thank God that despite everything we can work and that’s good... I, for example, always think that we are all human, because justice is justice. Justice is justice and justice will prevail.”

At the same time, another attitude that emerges in the responses is distancing oneself from the country’s situation. The current circumstances are seen as something that is “beyond the control” of the participants.

“I don’t think it’s worth worrying about something we can’t control [the country’s situation].”

The lack of specificity of the participants when expressing themselves about the situation in the country suggests various elements. Considering the current political climate and even emphasizing confidentiality, a certain mistrust and even a subtle fear can be seen in the participants when talking about politics. They renounce political agency, denying it, in order to focus on subsistence. In this way, the sociopolitical situation is a latent subplot of this staging.

2. Homo creatus ut operaretur: “And I would like to continue working so I don’t feel empty.”

2.1. Family: “Running a household is also a job.”

The family plays a leading role in the category of work. For the participants, their work exists for the sake of their family, and their family is an extension of their work.

“My two kids are my life, they are my concern, because they are what I live for.”

“I keep saying: my family. My meaning, my family completely.”

The participants’ verbatim statements about family stand out, linking the meaning of life to the family group, in which they reaffirm that the logic of their existence is defined by their desire to care for their relatives.

“And that allows me to raise my children, because if I don’t raise them, no one else will.”

The family subcategory, in turn, permeates other categories. It becomes an important aspect of the discourse, where family relationships, especially those of dependency, i.e., children, grandchildren, and older adults, are the driving force that pushes the protagonists to continue working every day to ensure the subsistence of the family group, while this dynamic triggers constant concerns among the interviewees.

2.1.1. Matriarchalism

In the Venezuelan social context, the role of the mother has been found to be fundamental in families, thus generating a latent sense of responsibility that influences how mothers relate to duty, their families, and the jobs they do.

“I can’t wait for others to solve things. I have to come myself. I am there for everyone.”

It is noteworthy that the majority of the interview participants (5 out of 8) are women, who, coincidentally, are all mothers. Among the experiences they recount, the above verbatim can be summarized as the mother being the center of the family, the axis around which the nucleus revolves, and often the extended family, so the absence of the mother represents a fundamental failure in the system.

2.2. Work

With regard to this category, reference will be made to the participants' work within the Metropolitan University, as several reported having another job in addition to their maintenance work, which they sought in order to increase their income, as their first job alone could not provide a sufficient source of financial support.

2.2.1. Enjoyment

According to the participants, one of the things they enjoy most about their work is the friendly relationships they have developed in their work environment.

"My coworkers. They are very nice. Yes, there is camaraderie, the whole word."

"Well, the affection is reserved for the bosses, because they are the leaders, the leaders, the bosses."

It is interesting to note that emotional bonds are formed both horizontally (among coworkers) and vertically (between employees and supervisors). This positive work environment can be considered a protective factor within the Roda Service maintenance company, where participants feel "more comfortable" with their work because of the bonds they have formed.

"And I like it, I like cleaning, wiping things down, making things look nice, cleaning the bathroom and stuff, it's something that, as I explain, is like cleaning my house."

At the same time, there is also a particular fondness for cleaning, which can be interpreted as a defense mechanism in which the feeling of caring for one's own home is transferred to the workplace, since, in this way, it seems that participants identify with spaces that do not belong to them in order to make their work more bearable.

2.2.2. Displeasure

With regard to dislike, saturation in this category was more difficult to achieve, as participants often denied that there were unpleasant situations in their work environment, and those mentioned are extremely heterogeneous. Aspects such as reprimands from supervisors, work distractions, and physical spaces at the university, such as the presence of multiple staircases and the absence of elevators in most spaces, were mentioned.

“Men are very messy (...) And I say that, well, this is a very good university, so all the kids who come here are not, how can I explain it? They are not badly behaved; they should be better behaved than those in a public school. And they are the complete opposite. (...) Today, a funny guy came and did his business and stuck it on the bathroom wall and everything.”

However, we would like to highlight an episode recounted by one of the participants, in which she comments on her particular experience cleaning men’s bathrooms at the university, where traces of feces were left on the toilet walls. This event subtly represents some other aspects that the participants may not have wanted to mention, such as the fact that UNIMET users and students disrespect the work that maintenance staff do, and how this changes the perception that workers may have of UNIMET students.

2.2.3. Purpose

With regard to the subcategory: Purpose, a pattern is repeated in all the interviews in this line of discourse. Taking into account the economic situation the country is going through, work is clearly seen as a tool for day-to-day survival. On the other hand, the importance of work as the basis for supporting the family is evident, as is the role of those who perform this work on a daily basis.

“Having the money to have things, to keep going.”

“Right now, well, I have a purpose, yes: my house.”

“To keep fighting to raise my children until they grow up.”

It is striking how, in the participants’ language, the word “home” does not necessarily refer to the physical space they inhabit, but also alludes to the family, thus revealing once again the interaction between the subcategories, in which the family is the reason for working.

Although there is also the teleology of work, the purpose of work lies in being a means of support for the family unit. The responses do not reveal any transcendental meanings that do not involve money as a means of subsistence or the self-imposed pressure of the participants to create a better future for their offspring.

2.2.4. Meaning

Understanding meaning as the value attributed to something in particular, in the case of UNIMET maintenance staff, we return once again to understanding work as a means of survival in the adverse economic context of Venezuela.

“For me, it means working because we have to work, we have to do it to be able to eat, because we depend on ourselves, no one is going to come and give us anything, so we have to work to be able to have our things.”

“For me, it means working, it means working for food, to have food.”

“For me, working means having an income, not depending on a man or anyone else. I like to have my own things, I like to have them without having to ask anyone for them, without anyone controlling what I have.”

The meanings expressed by the participants are objective, governed by the logic of “if I work, then how” and “if I work, then I have an income.” In turn, they recognize their individual responsibility for their own existence and survival, so work is perceived as a means of satisfying basic needs and achieving independence from other people, as they recognize the individual and group commitment required to “get ahead” in life.

3. The Fatigue of Eternal Return: “And that’s exhausting... all day long you live in a state of resolution.”

3.1 Coping Measures

3.1.1. Spirituality

The popular Venezuelan context is strongly marked by a mystical and religious atmosphere, which is present in the participants’ narratives when asked about their life concerns.

“Beauty and faith are like consolations.”

“When I have worries, I meditate, I meditate, and I pray. I like to talk to God because it feels pretty good. And nothing happens.”

Spirituality, manifested in different ways, is present as a way to make everyday life easier. Elements of the sublime comfort and support participants in their daily lives, especially in times of distress, when they resort to practices of communication with the divine, which generate a sense of well-being and relief, an impulse to move forward.

3.1.2. Self-regulation

When asked how they cope with distress, participants said they resort to self-regulation techniques such as breathing to calm themselves in stressful or distressing situations. They also resort to taking action when faced with problems.

*"Calmly. Breathing and thinking about how we are going to solve it. I can't
drown in that question."*

*"I have to deal with my anxiety by solving the problem, because I feel that if I
just freeze in anxiety, we'll fail."*

This result suggests that participants have some resources that allow them to adapt to the adverse environment in which they find themselves, in order to respond to the challenges they face, which in turn is an indicator of resilience on the part of the maintenance staff at the Metropolitan University, reflecting this quality that Venezuelans attribute to themselves.

3.2. Response to Fatigue

3.2.1. Denial

Denial is one of the two possible responses of participants when fatigue is evoked.

"I feel fine, I don't feel that exhausted."

*"Well, I don't give it any importance or value. Because you have to keep going,
even if you're exhausted or stressed, nothing else matters."*

Fatigue is either flatly denied or neutralized by downplaying its importance, but it later comes to light, as participants feel they need to move forward "despite" their exhaustion.

3.2.2. Normalization

Fatigue is also like a habit for the participants, something that is part of their daily work. Experiences of fatigue are normalized, considered something to be expected, and they push through it throughout the day.

"And I stay, you know? And I'm exhausted. But that's normal."

"And I feel normal, it drains me, it tires me, but it's normal."

"Well, a little exhausted sometimes, but nothing out of the ordinary, I just keep going."

3.2.3. Medication

Fatigue, as will be explained later, is experienced mainly on a physical level, so taking medication when feeling tired is a response that combines denial and normalization of exhaustion.

"You take a pill and it goes away. But it doesn't stop you from doing your job."

"I take a pill, sit down, and carry on."

"And you, well, you keep going and take your pill, if you're taking medication, you take your pill, your joke, rest for a while, in an hour they give you a break and you rest until halfway through. And that's it, and you continue through your day."

The participants expressed self-medication as if it were commonplace when feeling physical discomfort due to fatigue, so that it would not prevent them from continuing with their workday.

3.3. Money Management

When talking to participants about their financial management, they said that their income was what they could afford to spend and that even in the absence of material goods, this issue was handled calmly.

"I manage with what I have, calmly, because right now I don't have anything."

"What you earn is what you spend."

"On food, things for the house, and little things for myself, a meal out, cologne, and so on."

They refer to food as the main item on which money is spent, as the main element for subsistence and the family home, and only later is money invested in something for themselves.

4. Structural Impossibility: “Generate something, generate something better”

4.1. Anxiety

When talking to the interviewees about distress, they mainly express the experience on a physical level and then psychologically. They understand it as a “negative” feeling and are able to explain the origin of their distress, whether it be family circumstances or the inability to provide materially or emotionally, and it even “keeps them awake at night.”

“A desperation that makes you feel distressed, which first affects your body and then your mind.”

“Oh, the anguish. A very bad feeling, a very bad thing that takes hold of your body.”

“I tell you, I don’t know, a feeling of despair that comes over me because I don’t have something, because I can’t help you with something. That makes me anxious, it keeps me awake at night.”

4.2. Fatigue

In the responses regarding fatigue, this category can be seen in a heterogeneous way with respect to the responses received. Fatigue is perceived as absorbing; once energy is consumed, it proceeds to generate discomfort in the body, an obvious result of the work done daily.

“Like, exhausted, drained.”

“You arrive exhausted, so your body hurts when you work too hard all day.”

“Well, the truth is that tired, what I understand by tired, is when you don’t want anything else, when you are tired of living.”

However, it also reaches a new dimension: tiredness with regard to life. This verbatim opens the door to questioning those elements that affect the existence of each participant, and returning to one of the most pressing questions: judging whether life is worth living or not.

4.2.1. Physical discomfort

For most participants, fatigue manifests itself in physical ways, with bodily ailments.

“My legs, arms, and waist hurt, and sometimes here at the university, in places where there is no elevator, you have to go up and down stairs, and it hurts.”

“The pain, the fever, the pain, my hip more than anything. But five minutes and I’m as good as new.”

Thus, fatigue is a result of the physical work performed by the interviewees. However, a “solution” quickly emerges that makes the pain disappear, overcoming this discomfort and allowing them to start working again.

4.3. Denied possibility

When participants are asked, *“What kind of job would you like to have in the future?”*, answers emerge that present two scenarios: the first is one of desire and the second is one of impossibility. The narrative intertwines frustrated aspirations with the barriers present in their lives and highlights the limitations that exist in their lives: time and family.

“Because right now, there are a lot of things, as you say... Like obstacles. That’s it. Like obstacles that don’t allow me to take the time to do that. To devote myself to sports, but... I’ve never been given the opportunity.”

“At least, I hope they do a great job for me in the future too. I love music, I don’t have anything else, but I can’t devote all the time I need to it.”

“So, it was my turn. I had to give up my studies because, well, it’s either me or the kids.”

The participants’ lives revolve around their own subsistence and that of those who depend on them, which is why the possibility of pursuing their desires is frustrated, lacking the freedom to choose different options due to structural barriers, where they accept the circumstances of life that “happened” to them.

4.4. Future Projections

As the conversation about the future continues, this aspect generates uncertainty among the participants, which shows the difficulties they may have in visualizing different possibilities, as if they were living in an eternal present.

I don’t know, really, I don’t know. Who knows? The future is unknown.

It's my dream to stay in that job [manicurist]. Because you work from home (...) I don't miss... How do you say it? When my children grow up. I don't miss it. I'm already missing out on living that.

Once again, desire stands out, where aspirations are molded to the reality of life and revolve around the family, where there is a longing to be present in the growth of one's children, something that work currently prevents.

Discussion of results

To move forward with the discussion of results, it is necessary to reconsider the main objective of the research, which is to learn about the experiences of the maintenance staff at the Metropolitan University in relation to work, fatigue, anxiety, and meaning in life. Thus, we explored the participants' experiences related to their work at UNIMET, how fatigue manifests itself during their workday, their concerns and anxieties about the country's economic situation, and what gives meaning to their lives.

The results of this research reveal that the participants, who are men and women between the ages of 18 and 55 currently working for Roda Service, a cleaning services *outsourcing company* subcontracted by the Metropolitan University, live in extremely precarious economic conditions, a situation that is one of the two factors that causes them the most concern. This is consistent with the findings of the Psicodata study (UCAB, 2023), which found that the problem that causes the most stress among the poor (68% compared to others) is economic. The other factor, also related to the economy, is providing their families with the minimum necessary to survive, but this will be explored further below.

Regarding the country's political situation, respondents report that, although the situation is complicated and dangerous, it is not really "worth" worrying about something that cannot be controlled. This is countered by the findings of Psicodata, which states that it is low-income populations who express a greater desire to participate in social or political initiatives (UCAB, 2023). This change in perspective is influenced by the events of 2024, which may have affected the way participants perceive their ability to have an impact on their environment. , meanwhile, highlights a reluctance to talk about politics, which again fits with the findings of Psicodata: 81% of respondents say that most people cannot be trusted (UCAB, 2023). They also state that high levels of mistrust are associated with a tendency to accept authoritarian government practices and low quality of social capital (UCAB, 2023).

A relevant finding of the research is the role that family relationships play for participants, which determine the course of action of those interviewed, are the motive and goal of their work, are their greatest concern and cause of distress, as well as the meaning of their lives. This is in line with the findings of the Catholic University team (2023), who highlight that Venezuelans'

main source of support is their family, with 67% turning to their relatives when they have a problem. Likewise, traits of matricentrism were found in the interviewees' discourse, which is consistent with the sociological and anthropological research of Father Moreno, who describes the Venezuelan family as different from the traditional Western family, where the figure of the father is absent or blurred and family life revolves around the mother as the central element (Campos-Redondo, Andrade & Andrade, 2007 and Moreno Olmedo, 2007).

The discourse of the participants, mostly women, revolves around the constant search for income to cover their families' basic needs; the meaning and purpose of work is subsistence. This differs from the findings of multiple studies (Jalil, Tariq, & Ali, 2023; Perez de León, 2021; Garcia, 2023; and Mamani, 2024), which refer to meaningful work as a space for professional development and personal fulfillment for employees. However, it coincides with Maslow's theory of motivation (1991), which explains different needs as "ascending," meaning that the most primitive needs (physiological and safety) must be met in order to aspire to achieve other "higher" needs (affiliation, esteem, and self-actualization).

Despite the above, participants find enjoyment in their work, which stems especially from the working relationships they establish there. This is far from the application of McClelland's theory of motivation in Venezuela, where research concluded that of the three motivations (power, achievement, and affiliation), Venezuelans mostly aspired to power (Colmenares & Delgado, 2008).

With regard to aspects considered negative by the participants, they verbalized few, and associated them with spaces in the university or reprimands from their supervisors. However, one incident was reported in which a student or user placed excrement on the walls of a men's bathroom, which can be considered a type of abuse towards maintenance staff. The literature states that cleaning staff face marginalization, exclusion, symbolic violence, and dehumanizing treatment, which negatively influences their perspective on their work (Capagrossi, 2020; Caamaño, & Dinartes, 2022).

In order to respond to the adverse environment they face, participants resort to spirituality through faith, prayer, meditation, and contemplation of beauty, which coincides with Psicodata (UCAB, 2023), which states that 80% of its sample prays to face their problems. Venezuelans also have characteristics of resilience such as good humor, creativity, and adaptation to change (Gonzalez and Garcia, 2018).

As for coping with fatigue, this consists of denying it, normalizing it, and even silencing it through self-medication with painkillers, since it is mostly physical. This dynamic resembles a dialectic of the denial of denial, described by Chul Han as the exercise of a small amount of self-violence to protect oneself from even greater violence (in this case, fatigue), where what is considered "negative" in human nature, such as vulnerability, fallibility, and fatigue, is denied (2010, pp. 12-16).

The participants describe their anxiety in concrete terms, as an unpleasant sensation that begins in the body and then moves to “the head.” This definition coincides with the anxiety described by Lacan (1963) in Seminar X, where the author explains that it cannot be completely translated into words because, unlike other emotions, it does not lie and, in its bodily manifestation, it presents itself as exceeding the capacity of language to signify.

The type of fatigue manifested by the participants is characterized by physical discomfort, and although it is a consequence of their work, it does not come close to the criteria established by the World Health Organization (WHO) for occupational burnout syndrome, which is characterized by exhaustion or lack of energy, increased mental distance or cynicism towards work, and a feeling of ineffectiveness or low professional fulfillment (WHO, 2022). It is also striking how fatigue can be related to exhaustion or a diminished desire to live for other participants, which seems like passive suicidal ideation, which falls under the characteristics of adjustment disorders, which are associated with an increased risk of suicide attempts and completed suicides (APA, 2015, pp. 287).

It is noteworthy that participants subtly describe their lack of opportunities for personal fulfillment, where their desires are thwarted because they are expected to assume the role of providers in their households. This result is consistent with what Rosas & Sanchez (2019) propose, namely that there are different types of vulnerabilities associated with poverty, such as low expected utility, i.e., the limited opportunities for improvement available to these individuals.

In terms of future projections, there are two realities among the participants: on the one hand, uncertainty and a lack of long-term vision, which is a vulnerability that can affect their quality of life, since according to the theory of future time perspective (FTP) this is the degree and manner in which the future is anticipated and integrated into an individual's psychological present (Lewis, 1942). It is also a motivational process that influences current goals, decisions, and behaviors with respect to the future (Herrera, 2019). Therefore, the lack of future prospects can negatively affect the way participants understand their current situation. Also noteworthy is the narrative in which they aspire to reach spaces where they can spend more time with their families (where their happiness lies), which points to the vision of Julián Marias, who describes human beings as futuristic beings, just like their happiness; both are prospective, and the greatest source of happiness is people, since personality, for the author, is built through coexistence (Rodríguez Alcalá, 2019).

Conclusion

The results of the research offer a varied picture of the experiences of the maintenance staff at the Metropolitan University in terms of work, fatigue, anxiety, and meaning, but they converge on three points: the economic situation, family as a meaning in life, and fatigue as an inseparable element of work.

For the interviewees, the economic situation is the arduous backdrop against which the drama of their daily lives unfolds, affecting their family ties, their concerns, and their multiple jobs.

For the participants, the political situation in the country takes a back seat, but they recognize how it affects the former. In turn, work is seen primarily as a means of supporting the family and acquiring basic resources. For them, family is the driving force, purpose, meaning, and sense of their lives. They highlight traits of matricentrism in their discourse and emotional motivation with their coworkers, as well as latent denigrating acts on the part of university users.

However, fatigue manifests itself in participants mainly in a physical way, and its symptoms do not seem to coincide with those of Occupational Burnout Syndrome, but are more consistent with an adaptive disorder. At the same time, it is observed that these individuals downplay their fatigue, deny it, and silence it through self-medication. Meanwhile, moments of worry and distress are responded to with spirituality and coping measures.

Anxiety is identified and associated with not being able to provide materially for their families. Narratives emerged related to truncated possibilities, such as aspirations that could not be realized because they are responsible for providing financially for their households. The future, on the other hand, is uncertain for them, although they again aspire to have spaces that allow them to share with their families.

While there are people who seem to live their lives like the Sisyphus described by Camus, there are also two ways of understanding this. On the one hand, by imagining Sisyphus as happy, we can see how in the lives of these people, severely affected by the economic context of Venezuela, there are spaces for joy, desires, and happiness. On the other hand, by understanding their lives as a form of rebellion, which refuses to succumb to exhaustion, and day after day, despite this, they get up for the love of their families, they rebel against the despair generated by the current adverse situation the country is going through, of invisible mistreatment, of exhaustion that reaches their bones, of truncated possibilities, and every day, despite everything, they say yes to life.

Limitations and Recommendations

Studies related to topics such as work and fatigue, as well as *burnout*, tend to focus on healthcare personnel, which is why there is very little research aimed at understanding the experiences of maintenance personnel, and even less in the Venezuelan context.

The following limitations are acknowledged:

- Selection of participants: the participants were not selected by the researcher herself, but were assigned in some cases by the Unimet Physical Plant team and in others by Roda Service supervisors.
- Biases on the part of participants: it is possible that participants may have limited their responses because they were influenced by social desirability or mistrust of the interviewer.

With these considerations in mind, the following recommendations are made for future research:

- Investigate other research on the assessments that university users and students have of maintenance staff.
- Address the meaning of work and fatigue from the perspective of administrative workers, so that it is possible to understand the variety of experiences and contrast the similarities and differences in work experiences.
- Investigate the experiences of women who work in “family homes” to learn how they experience their work, as well as the interactions between their own families and the families they care for.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide:

Interview

How long have you been working at UNIMET?

How long have you been working at UNIMET?

How did you come to work at UNIMET?

How did you start working? Tell me a little about your other jobs.

At what age did you start working?

How would you rate your experience working at the Metropolitan University?

Some people feel exhausted after their workday, while others feel fulfilled after finishing their day's work. How do you feel?

What does feeling tired mean to you?

How do you identify that tiredness?

How do you experience tiredness?

How do you think this affects your daily life?

What type of transportation do you use to get to work?

What does working mean to you?

What do you like most about your job?

What do you like least about your job?

What are your daily concerns?

Are there specific moments when your anxiety becomes overwhelming? If you answer yes, how do you deal with them? If not, move on to the next question.

What do you think about the current situation in the country?

Do you have any concerns related to the current situation in the country?

How do you manage your expenses to cover your basic needs?

How do you think your quality of life is related to your current income?

What motivates you to keep coming to work?

What is the purpose of your work?

What kind of job would you like to have in the future?

APPENDIX B: Axial Coding



