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Flexible Management, Subjectivity, and Paradoxical Work Experiences: The Case of Lean Management in Chilean Retail

Gestión flexible, subjetividad y experiencias paradójicas de trabajo: el caso de *Lean Management* en el retail chileno

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Abstract.

This article presents the findings of a study that seeks to explore how implementing Lean Management, a widely used form of flexible management, influences employees' subjective experiences at work. The study focuses on the changes and innovations by Lean Management in the technical and social aspects of work after its introduction in the Chilean retail industry. The study, which is both descriptive and analytical, is based on 26 interviews with industry consultants, managers, department heads, and union leaders. Using a work-clinic and socio-phenomenological framework, it illustrates how the industry's unique characteristics play a crucial role in understanding the process of work reorganization and the paradoxical realms of subjective experience it has created. The article also discusses how these contradictions are influenced by the broader social, labor, and business context of neoliberal modernization in Chilean society.

Resumen.

Se presenta un estudio que tuvo como objetivo comprender el modo en que la implementación en la industria del Retail en Chile de Lean management —una de las formas de gestión flexible más difundidas a nivel mundial y latinoamericano— fue reconfigurando las experiencias subjetivas de los/as trabajadores/as del sector, a partir de los cambios e innovaciones que introdujo a nivel de las demandas técnicas y sociales del trabajo. El estudio, de corte cualitativo y basado en el enfoque del análisis temático, contempló 26 entrevistas en profundidad a distintos consultores, gerentes, jefaturas y líderes sindicales de la industria. Desde el marco conceptual de la fenomenología social y de las clínicas del trabajo, los resultados del estudio dan cuenta del modo en que la implementación de tres técnicas específicas del modelo de gestión de Lean dio lugar a experiencias paradójicas de trabajo, las cuales se explican también a partir del contexto sociolaboral y empresarial más amplio que caracteriza la fase de modernización neoliberal en la sociedad chilena

Keywords.

Lean Management, Retail Industry, Phenomenology.

Palabras Clave.

Gestión ajustada, industria minorista, fenomenología.

1. Introduction

This article seeks to contribute to our understanding of how, with the introduction of different socio-technical innovations, new flexible management systems impact work scenarios and reconfigure various fields of subjective work experience. The findings are presented from an empirical study conducted in the Chilean retail industry and framed by the contributions of social phenomenology of work (Dejours et al., 2018; Deranty, 2011) and the clinics of work (Guerrero & de Gaulejac, 2017b; Orejuela, 2018). These approaches reveal the paradoxical nature of these forms of management and work organization (WO). The study's findings contribute to an understanding of the tensions and contradictions that the different actors in a work environment face in their work experiences as flexible management models are introduced.

Implementation of these flexible management models has been part of the historical process of capitalist restructuring witnessed in recent decades, which has involved, since the mid-1970s, a progressive transition from a Fordist-Keynesian development model to a new flexible, global, financialized, and networked model that combines with neoliberal forms of socio-political regulation (Castel, 2010; Castells, 2001). This transition tended toward a downgrade of the value of work, the loss of rights and social protection, and a weakening of workers' power and participation in companies (Deranty, 2011; Piketty, 2014). In the case of Chile, the early implementation of the neoliberal model during the Pinochet military dictatorship (1973–1990) involved powerful changes to the societal matrix which led, in turn, to a radical restructuring of companies and the world of work (Stecher & Sisto, 2019). Especially involving large companies in the formal sector of the economy, new principles and methods of flexible management and work organization were implemented progressively. When combined with the logic of privatization, flexibilization, commodification, entrepreneurship, and competition, intrinsic to the neoliberal modernization model, these principles and methods have increased the precarity of employment and work experiences (Guerrero & De Gaulejac, 2017a; Ramos, 2009).

These processes form the background of the present study, which analyses the implementation of Lean Management (LM) —the most widespread flexible management model in Latin America— in the setting of retail work in Chile. Retail is a strategic industry for the national economy and a poster child of the country's neoliberal modernization and business reorganization experience in recent decades (Stecher et al., 2020). The model's implementation is analyzed with attention to the broader sociocultural, political, and economic context of Chilean society and its business class, which also influences the relationship between subject, work, and organization (Orejuela et al., 2020). With its fo-

cus on a specific model (LM), in a particular industry (retail), and a delimited national context (Chile), the study highlights the importance of a situated analysis of the relationship between flexible management models and subjective experience, one that considers not only the processes of sociotechnical change within companies but also the broader sociocultural and socio-labor contexts of an economic and productive sector of the country (Garces & Stecher, 2023).

By adopting a psychosocial-phenomenological perspective (Deranty, 2011), the study understands subjective work experience as how subjects configure meanings around the technical and social demands that they face in a given work setting. Faced with these demands, subjects build relationships and forms of sociability, give shape to a certain idea or sense of themselves, and take action to contribute and address the challenges that the workplace presents. The technical demands of the job refer to the demands to which the subject is exposed given the prescription of the task and involve guiding one's effort and activities according to the different rules and processes established by the organization (Dejours et al., 2018). Social demands (relations with peers, managers, and clients, for example) refer to the relationships of interaction and coordination between individuals that are necessary, given the nature of all work as a social activity, to achieve the objectives of the production process. Among them, a sense of belonging and recognition are highly relevant dimensions of subjective experience in workspaces (Neffa, 2015).

Based on this conceptual framework and presentation of the study's empirical findings, the article seeks to contribute to debates on the new forms of flexible production and their socio-technical and subjective impact. From the approach used, it is assumed that flexible management models institute new ways of organizing work, thus directly affecting how power, responsibilities, the development of social ties, and recognition are distributed in an organization, all of which, in turn, are linked to particular dynamics of malaise, suffering, pleasure, and recognition in subjects (Dejours, et al., 2018).

More specifically, the article contributes to this area of debate by reconstructing the process by which LM was implemented in retail in Chile, and how it involved a reorganization of the technical and social dimensions of work and impacted the subjective experiences of different groups of workers. The article focuses on three lean Management's key principles/techniques that were part of the model's implementation in retail stores: (i) the democratizing principle based on transparency (visual management tools); (ii) the principle of excellence and continuous improvement (Kaizen tool: "do more with less", "zero errors", "zero losses and 100% quality"); and (iii) the promotion of participation, horizontality and worker inclusion (tools such as *Gemba*, quality circles and others that speak to operatives' empowerment).

The article analyzes the introduction of these management techniques in the broader socio-labor context of neoliberal Chile, the changes these techniques involved in the organization and technical/social demands of work and reveals their impact on workers' subjective experiences. As it will be discussed since it is one of the central findings of the study, a major dimension of this impact is how the Lean model's technical innovations opened new areas of subjective experience of a paradoxical nature for retail store actors.

With these purposes in mind, in the remainder of the article after this introduction, the main background of the study is presented, with a discussion of relevant concepts and Chile's retail sector. The methodology of the study is then described. The results of the research, based on the three Lean principles/techniques mentioned above, are presented next. The article closes with a brief discussion and conclusions.

1.1 Work, New Forms of Flexible Management and Subjectivity

From a psycho-social phenomenological and work-clinic perspective, work is understood as what a subject carries out to reach their assigned objectives and what they add personally to deal with the gap encountered between what has been "prescribed" for them and what happens when the task is performed (Dejours, 2012). According to Dejours and Deranty (2010), the encounter with real work turns the activity of working into an affective and bodily experience that challenges our know-how in the search for a solution to carry out our task. Here, living work as experience involves an effort to close the gap between organizational prescriptions and the contingent, unpredictable, dynamic situations that every task presupposes (Dejours, 2012).

Real work represents the sum of cognitive, emotional, and physical efforts that workers make to complete the task and achieve the result —despite or against— the prescriptions. The gap between the task as prescribed and the task as performed is of great importance for the subjective life of the worker, since it implies that their subjectivity must be mobilized not only by the effort, concentration, and physical strength necessary to perform a given task: an additional effort is required to close the gap between the procedure prescribed to execute a task and its actual effective completion, the closure of this gap between prescription and performance being the work of subjectivity (Dejours et al., 2018).

According to this paradigm, work is central to people's lives and their subjectivity, as it is an activity that organizes the human psyche (Orejuela, 2018) and is constitutive at a subjective, sociopolitical, epistemological level, as well as in terms of power and gender relations in human life (Dejours & Deranty, 2010). This is why every work experience affects our subjectivity in some way. In every task two mutually dependent demands are

encountered: one that is technical and another, social. Together they configure the space or field in which the subjective experience at work is felt. While the technical aspects relate to the norms, procedures, and prescriptions that govern the work, the social aspects relate to relations of coordination and cooperation, group dynamics, and recognition at work.

Seen from this perspective, the technical and social dimensions of work are deeply entangled: the social link is inseparable from the activity of working and its technical dimension (Deranty, 2009). The technical has a specific social meaning, distinct from the general sociocultural determination, in that technique creates its form of sociability (Deranty, 2009) and with it, a particular and situated subjective experience. This is why no work consists solely of a mechanistic application of procedures to situations that are prescribed in advance. All the greater, therefore, is the importance of knowing and understanding in greater depth the productive paradigms and management systems that govern our work, and how changes and transformations in these systems have a crucial impact on subjective experiences of work.

On this topic, various authors have pointed out how contemporary transformations of work and changes in flexible management models have been promoting new normative, technical, and relational orientations in the world of work. Emphasis has been given to aspects such as individualized performance evaluation and total quality management, which have brought with them a downgraded view of work as a cultural value, the dismemberment of collectives, and a weakening of forms of recognition, professional knowledge, and collaboration at work (Begue & Dejours, 2010). According to Deranty (2011), this emergence and consolidation of the flexible neoliberal model is appreciated and consolidated in a key management model: Lean Management.

According to its creators, this form of management has a universal and aseptic character: it is solely a technique that can be implemented in any context. However, from critical psychosocial/phenomenological perspectives, Lean is analyzed as a managerial mechanism of social domination, which has significant subjective implications that transcend its technical nature and even the boundaries of work, by infiltrating the personal sphere and the representation of actors' own experience, and capturing the desires and the imaginary of the individual with an offer of symbolic adhesion that attracts the actor and at the same time traps them in a type of work experience that is characterized by its paradoxical nature (Deranty, 2011).

This character of the LM system as a generator of paradoxes is associated with the subjective challenge it poses to the workforce that arises out of a kind of "directed freedom" (de Gaulejac, 2005; Guerrero & de Gaulejac, 2017a) or "paradoxical consent" (Boyer & Freis-

senet, 2003), from which it is difficult to distance oneself or think and act collectively. As their creators indicate, the LM principles and tools propose: “[...] a superior way of doing things” (Womack et al., 2017, p. 253), amounting to a “management philosophy” that promotes the development of a mindset (a new mentality) based on the values that Lean promotes, such as a culture of merit, entrepreneurship, and competitiveness. These are presented via the use of rhetoric about progress, modernity, quality, participation, and innovation, whose deployment challenges workers with a promise and offer of meaning while eroding and weakening collective ties, as well as other symbolic references to work typical of occupational, union or class cultures (Garcés & Stecher, 2020).

In mainstream thinking, LM is promoted as a virtuous system, which apart from eliminating “obstacles” in the production flow and increasing quality using “continuous improvement”, represents a participatory and democratic management style that involves employees as “agents of change”, by offering them the means to participate more actively in the work process (Womack et al., 2017). However, research from more critical viewpoints has shown that LM has important negative effects on work experience in terms of the health and well-being of workers: due to increasing work demands and the resulting exhaustion they generate; its effect on social relations, with increasing harassment behaviours and authoritarian expressions of power; loss of autonomy in work processes; subjective experiences related to malaise, ethical suffering, and the loss of boundaries between personal life and work; and finally, an enhanced asymmetry between capital and workers, the weakening of unions and work collectives (Garcés & Stecher, 2020).

Our studies reveal that this paradoxical nature of LM with its multiple promises and its various negative implications has been little studied empirically in Latin America, and the research is generally concentrated in the manufacturing sector (Garcés & Stecher, 2020). There is a notable lack of studies in the retail industry, which has become emblematic of business modernization in the services sector, as it is one of the largest employers in the private sector and has been a model for various processes of technological innovation and strategies for implementing organizational flexibility, both in Chile and Latin America, as well as globally.

1.2 The Chilean Retail Industry and the Implementation of Lean Management

The Chilean retail industry consists of eight major business holdings that own and operate chains of supermarkets, department stores, home improvement stores, and similar establishments. This sector—in line with the global development of this industry—has experienced radical modernization since the late 1980s, with expansion, the opening of new stores, capital invest-

ment, and high market concentration in a few players (Calderón, 2006). Holdings such as Falabella, Cencosud, and Walmart-Chile have been listed among the largest private employers in Chile, generating around 280000 direct jobs (América Economía, 2019). In general, it is a mainly young, female, low-skilled workforce, positioned in salesrooms where neo-Taylorized work processes predominate with strict standardization, surveillance, and restricted autonomy. There is a high turnover of workers and contractual heterogeneity due to the intensive use of part-time contracts and flexible working hours (Garcés & Stecher, 2023; Stecher et al., 2020; Stecher & Martinic, 2018). In terms of labor relations, the unionization rate in this sector is around 70% in the largest holdings, one of the highest at the national level (Stecher et al., 2020). However, this is a unionism with significant degrees of fragmentation that is pitted against business groups of large national capital with enormous economic power (Stecher et al., 2020).

During the last five years, since the rise of electronic commerce and the entry of new global players like Amazon into the business, the industry has faced greater competition and a reduction in profits. In addition, the change in consumer purchasing habits, with a shift to electronic sales much accentuated by the COVID pandemic, weakened the importance of the stores as sales channels. Given these developments, the industry has focused on the incorporation of new technologies, the automation and robotization of its processes, and the strengthening of its logistics and distribution areas, thus seeking to reduce labor costs and adapt to the industry’s new competitive scenario. In this automation process, LM initially had crucial importance, given the advantages it offers for the standardization and process mapping that are key to installing a continuous flow system (Garcés & Stecher, 2023).

Our previous findings (Garcés & Stecher, 2023), concerning the implementation of LM in this industry in Chile, refer to its origin in a tight circle of engineers and consultants in this field who, based on their role in academic managerial training, initially implemented it only in multinational manufacturing industries. However, it was not long before the model reached the services sector, specifically retail, where companies, with an eye on the automation that the industry was deemed likely to face in the medium term, were attracted by the possibility of reducing their staff and promoting greater standardization of their processes. LM was introduced promptly, starting in 2011, in one of the largest corporate holdings, including its Latin American subsidiaries. The other retail holdings implemented the model through the creation of Excellence Management that carried out continuous improvement projects in the remaining areas, or operations, logistics, and distribution.

Implementation was typically reactive rather than reflective, driven by the fashionableness of the model

in business and consulting circles, with the participation of holding company owners or senior managers in some cases. It began with an extreme idealization of the model and a stake in its more philosophical versions, but then gave way to more instrumental approaches and finally to its relative disappearance in recent years (Garcés & Stecher, 2023). A situated analysis of this process shows how certain features of the Chilean sociocultural and socio-labor framework played their part in how the model was adopted and adapted in retail (Araujo & Martucelli, 2012): the high levels of individualism, social segmentation and exclusion in Chilean society; the tendency to idealize and copy what is foreign (Larrain, 2014); the predominance of typically authoritarian, hierarchical and despotic symbolic patterns and matrices of sociability, which in recent years have come into tension with the desire and demand of individuals for more horizontal forms of relationship (Araujo, 2016); and the tendency of national business groups to generate profitability through cost reduction and erosion of job security, rather than through social investment and innovation (Montero, 1990; Ramos, 2009). The effects of these broader socio-cultural traits were heightened by some features of the retail companies' business model itself, such as the pressure for short-term profitability; its insertion in a volatile, dynamic, highly competitive, and changing market; elitist and endogamous business power circles; and a marked hierarchy and power asymmetry in labor relations within stores (Garcés & Stecher, 2023).

2. Methodology

Concerning its theoretical and methodological approach, the study adopted a psychosocial-phenomenological perspective, aimed at reconstructing subjective experiences and dynamics in work settings from the actors' perspective and relating these psychosocial dimensions to the defining institutional and structural elements of each work setting.

In terms of design, the study was exploratory and descriptive-analytical. It used a qualitative methodology that allowed a thick description of the configurations of meaning regarding the links, self-definition, and action strategies of the different actors involved in LM implementation processes in retail. This design was appropriate to the objectives of the research, in that it allowed access to the meanings associated with the phenomenon of interest. Given the design's nature, it did not build on theoretically pre-defined hypotheses; instead, the study was mainly inductive in its approach, setting the emerging findings sequentially against the study's conceptual frameworks.

The study included 26 participants, of whom 23 were men and three were women¹. All, in different ways, had

played a part in the implementation of LM in Chilean retail. The distribution of the participants is shown in Table 1.

Participants were selected using the snowball strategy (Glesne, 2011), by which new participants were sought from the contacts already made—mainly through the LinkedIn platform—. As an inclusion criterion, it was established that participants must belong to retail companies that had a corporate program or area projects that had been operational for at least one year and whose name and objectives referred explicitly to LM and/or, failing that, to LM's main management tools and techniques. Participants had to have worked between one and three years in the direction, management, and/or execution of projects in which the LM methodology was used and a minimum of six months specifically in the retail industry. Their work journal needed to be more than 32 hours. The purpose of these last criteria was to ensure that people were familiar with LM practices and tools and that these were part of their everyday working lives.

Regarding data production techniques, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted, aimed at exploring the meanings that the study participants give to their everyday reality in retail, and specifically to their experience with the implementation of LM tools and the technical and social demands they impose. To this end, a topic checklist was created, which broadly included a) the meaning and definition of LM, b) perception of the use of its management tools and changes, considering both benefits and challenges, c) daily work and changes related to LM, and d) specificities of the Chilean retail context (worker participation in decisions, cultural dynamics, leadership styles, etc.). The interviews were conducted between July 2020 and October 2021 on the Zoom platform.

For the analysis, we followed the thematic content analysis guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006), a methodology suitable for the theoretical approach guiding the research, as it captures the richness and complexity of subjective experiences. It achieves this by breaking them down into themes and subthemes. This approach enables a dynamic and open exploration of the wide range of meanings and experiences, emphasizing the richness of interpretation and how the themes represent the diversity of experiences and meanings within the data. The thematic content analysis aimed to answer the question: How did the technical and social changes introduced by LM reconfigure subjective work experience from the perspective of these different actors? Following the six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke, the analysis included the following stages: 1) familiarization with the data, which involved a systematic and iterative review of the material; 2) initial coding after an inductive analysis of the

present. Moreover, a majority of the interviews were conducted with individuals in high-ranking and management roles, where women are less represented.

¹The initial expectation was to have a gender-balanced sample. However, as the fieldwork progressed, it became evident that due to LM's dominance in operational areas, there were fewer women

Table 1

Study Participants

Category	Positions	Number
Experts	Academics or expert consultants in Lean	6
Directors and managers	Managers and assistant managers	8
Professionals	Project managers	6
Operators, middle management and union leaders	Shift managers	6
Total		26

material; 3) analysis of the codes in search of topics; 4) checking coherence between the question, the topics and the previous process that led to the outline of a thematic analysis map. In this case, the map made it possible to establish the fields of paradoxical experience that emerge from the changes in the technical and social dynamics, considering the social and labor culture of retail and the central ideas of the model. 5) An interpretive and refined analysis of the themes that lead to choosing names, in this case of the subheadings of the results. 6) Preparation of the report, in which the analysis and coherence of the data are iterated using the social psychophenomenology and work-clinic perspective, thus allowing greater analytical depth and density for each of the topics and their relationship to the research question.

Before the interviews, the participants were informed about the study’s objectives and potential impact. They were then asked for their informed consent after being briefed on how their privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality would be safeguarded.

3. Findings

3.1 The Chilean Lean Way and the Dilemma of Visual Management (VM) KPIs

[...] a manager was chosen for each region, so this manager was a bit like a priest making a sign of the cross over the stores: he went about preaching what continuous improvement was and reinforced it with marketing. For example, posters that were put up in the store, images of before and after, and information was also published about who the managers were in charge of Lean at the management level and also the stores. (Shift manager, home improvement store chain)

As the interviewees described it, at a technical level VM was one of the best known and easily identifiable Lean tools. It involved installing a series of artifacts in the stores and warehouse areas of the retail companies that began to fill the walls with standardized procedures and control panels that provided visible results to monitor the KPI (key performance indicators). The standardization of procedures and the breakdown of objectives have led to individualization and an exaggerated responsibility for results. This has generated a feeling of vul-

nerability and threat, especially for senior management and leadership cadres unused to demonstrating results.

That is the negative aspect. In Chile everyone wants to be well evaluated, no one wants to get a bad grade, so they dress up what is wrong so that they come out well evaluated [...]. (Lean Consultant)

Concealing data to avoid seeming to fail to meet goals strains relationships within work teams, as they may feel compelled to tailor the figures to support their bosses. This creates a paradox where the standardization and visibility of results, promising justice, meritocracy, and equity, are welcomed by workers who see them as a way to ensure fair compensation and recognition. On the other hand, the openness and visibility given to results lead to an increase in the pressure for goal attainment, which heightens tension and competition within work teams, the distortion of figures, and the concealment of reality.

There is a kind of complicity between little groups. There is a lot of concealment of what is going on. So, for example, if someone in the line or lower down raises an important issue, that issue will probably “die” with a supervisor or sub-manager, but it will never reach the top [...] It has to be hidden. Although everyone down there knows what is happening, at the top they have no idea. (Former Excellence Manager, Large store and supermarket chain)

The authoritarian and hierarchical nature of this work environment, along with its elitist and exclusive power structures, perceives this type of tool as a threat to their privileges. As a result, workers increasingly distrust the system due to the fear of being fired. These fears compel them to prioritize pleasing their bosses over adhering to the Lean mandate, leading to the manipulation of performance indicators. As a result, the model’s promise of transparency and democratization is undermined, creating unmet expectations of mobility, meritocracy, and recognition among those who were hoping for shared responsibility, success, and failure in their work.

Lean follows a standardized Japanese process that is implemented uniformly everywhere. What sets it apart in Chile, is the human interaction during these changes. The problem is the way we are the boss who is

a jerk... is the boss of the other boss and so on. No one will let another person see what he's doing, showing his process and not being afraid to defend his numbers. (Former Excellence Manager, large store and super-market chain)

The Visual Management principle and tool brought about a technical shift in the retail industry. It made processes, results, and responsibilities visible, and also changed the dynamics of social relationships due to the tension, pressure, and competitiveness it introduced. This reorganization of work, especially in an industry with more authoritarian leadership, creates a paradoxical situation for workers. They are required to make their results visible, but they also feel compelled to conceal them, leaving them feeling exposed and vulnerable.

3.2 The Paradox of Achieving Excellence with Minimal Investment: Doing more with Less

In [large store] a management team was set up that was charged with evangelizing Lean to everyone, and at every level, Lean was applied in the store, different specific processes and Lean workshops, which was like an evangelization. I don't know... training, talking about the 5S's, training on waste, training on different things [...] (Project manager, chain of large home improvement stores)

In the realm of technology, the pursuit of continuous improvement and overall quality is demonstrated through a set of success and quality measures, ultimately aiming for "zero errors, zero losses, and 100% quality". Encouraging individuals to fully embrace and commit to these objectives necessitates the cultivation of a mindset that internalizes and appreciates them. To accomplish this, an extensive training program was implemented for employees, with no expense spared from the outset. For instance, the workshops could range from weeks to months in duration and could even involve interaction with Lean experts or training overseas. This serves as a significant motivator, particularly for middle management—such as line managers and supervisors—, who view this approach as an opportunity for career progression and mobility. Additionally, it also benefits operational-level employees who are unaccustomed to training in this field and seek to enhance their skill set.

Employers in Chile have long held the belief that they must only train their employees in what is necessary for the specific job they want them to do. They fear that if employees learn more than that, they may be able to leverage their knowledge to get a better job or salary elsewhere, potentially increasing competition for the employer. (Union leader)

In terms of the social aspect, employees with more seniority and were present at the start of the project

tend to show greater commitment and adherence to LM. This is especially true for those who value aspects such as order, systematicity, and perfectionism. For many individuals, LM represents an opportunity for personal as well as professional development. As a result, they become advocates of the LM model, highlighting its benefits and showing a high level of personal involvement.

I fell in love with Kaizen's concept and philosophy, because it just made sense to me in life. (Lean consultant and academic)

On the other hand, lower-skilled operational levels within the stores, have a different perception due to the lack of major investment in training and improvements in working conditions. There was a strong intensification of work and its toll due to the continuous improvement and pursuit of excellence. The call to commit to excellence, in a context in which wages are low and labor turnover high, had little resonance in this segment. Employees in operational roles, particularly those working in supermarkets with the most challenging working conditions, had the lowest level of compliance with, and understanding of, the model. Dealing directly with customers in a high-stress, hostile, physically and mentally exhausting work environment meant that Lean's improvement requirements were initially resisted, then quickly boycotted, and eventually forgotten and denied.

There is something like social fatigue that has to do with "stop taking me out and squeezing me for as much as you can for as little as possible". (former Continuous Improvement boss, department store chain)

Soon, the pressure for immediate profitability and the highly competitive business environment leads to budget cuts for LM consultants and managers. As a result, they need to find low-cost alternatives to engage their teams and maintain high standards of performance and quality within the required timeframe. This further strains the need for involvement from operational positions.

Yes, it's very difficult, because they would like to receive their bonus. What we did was to say: "When we reach a certain level of service on the shelf"—making the requirement more modest—"and we reach 75%, we will have a barbecue". And that, for example, motivated them a lot. So, we tried to make it much more linked to that, rather than promising something difficult to fulfill, because, in the end, it is really difficult. Raising a wage is not so easy, giving a bonus is not so easy [...]. (Former Lean corporate manager, home improvement store chain)

This means the end of extended training and education—the workers' main motivation—, generating frustration in all those who saw LM as a philosophy able to do justice and change the reality of retail by recog-

nizing the potential and professional development of its workforce. Committing simultaneously to quality and short-term profitability which undermines long-term development is a source of frustration, especially when it involves making demands on others who are ultimately offered “less for more”.

Therefore, in summary, this principle and tool necessitated a change at a technical level in retail. Achieving the desired excellence and overall quality required workers to undergo intensive training. The tool fostered commitment, involvement, and motivation in certain ranks that benefited from the training, but for others, it only resulted in increased work intensity and took a toll on their physical and mental well-being. This reorganization of work within an industry unaccustomed to social and long-term investment creates a paradox for workers. They are required to ensure profitability and quality with minimal resources, leading to a continuous improvement cycle that strives for excellence but with limited funding. This situation causes demotivation, frustration, and exhaustion, especially for lower-ranking employees. It also creates unease for management, which feels that it demands too much from its workers in exchange for too little.

3.3 The Paradox of Limited and Subordinate Participation

The idea was for the workers themselves to introduce their boss, the store manager, and some people from the support office. Some experiences were memorable: for example, a worker told his wife the night before and rehearsed with her because he was going to introduce his ideas to his boss. It was the first time in his life that he would speak with his boss. These personal experiences turned out to be more powerful turning points than the actual changes being made in the store. (head of Continuous Improvement projects, home improvement store chain)

Together with the promise of training, the implementation of Lean involves a discourse that promotes the participation and inclusion of all ranks in the work process. At a technical level, this means introducing tools such as *genba* (a strategy aimed at getting managers to immerse themselves in what is happening and going into the field), quality circles (spaces in which workers propose improvements to their tasks) and performance dialogues based on Kanban boards, on which workers communicate their goals and daily tasks, as well as the obstacles they will have to face and possible solutions. These are accompanied by a heady discourse that calls for worker’s autonomy and empowerment through participation in the redefinition of processes and decision-making.

And based on that, we started going to stores, to the *genba*: the place where the events occur, and to interview the workers, but it was

only to interview them, to listen to what they had to say; the big decisions we made with the “enlightened ones”, sorry to put it like that, but it’s also to note the differences somewhat. (Continuous Improvement manager, home improvement store chain)

At a social level, for lower-ranking workers, this kind of tool involved spaces for recognition that were unprecedented in this business, where little value is attached to worker’s knowledge and talent and there are no major ways to give visibility and listen, to their needs, difficulties, and achievements. However, given the stores’ hierarchical culture compared to the inclusive and participatory LM discourse, a kind of “hierarchical horizontality” prevails. Despite the offer of spaces for greater participation, there is a tendency to inhibit and restrict opinion and participation to its minimal expression.

[Referring to the manager] And he told me: “Listen, they are wasting their time, they are meeting up. What for? No! Tell these guys what they must do and that’s it”. That is a very deep-rooted notion of ours, the leadership style, “I’m here to give orders and tell you what you must do. You are here only to listen” [...]. (Academic consultant, Lean expert)

Workers respond out of fear and inhibition. Although they are motivated by the recognition the model gives them, their participation is frustrating if they are asked to limit it. This hierarchical logic is reinforced by fear and the threat of being fired, which tends to inhibit their participation and leads them to maintain an attitude of subordination, contradicting the encouragement the model aims to provide.

But in Chile, compared to other countries like Peru, Colombia, Brazil, and Argentina, people tend to have a stronger focus on hierarchical levels. Not everyone, but many stay silent during workshops. I’ve noticed this, so what I did was encourage people to participate and extend the workshops a little longer. (Former operations manager, a chain of large home improvement stores)

The paradoxical nature of this restricted and subordinate participation is reinforced by the fact that the invitation to commit to organizing and participating in the implementation of LM occurred at the very time companies were advancing in staff reduction plans, which in part were one of the expected objectives of the standardization and process automation that were expected from LM techniques.

In the context of the Chilean retail industry, it is notable that, contrary to the situation in the international manufacturing literature, unions had minimal involvement or influence in the introduction of Lean practices. Consequently, there were no discussions or agreements

regarding the allocation of costs and benefits resulting from these innovations.

[...] but I would say that it was nothing dramatic, nothing that involved the unions much, nothing like that (Former operations manager, home improvement department store chain)

The implementation of greater worker participation and voice in the retail industry involved opening up spaces for worker opinion and involvement at a technical level. However, senior management's reluctance to engage with lower-ranking workers and a hierarchical and non-inclusive culture hindered the full realization of worker participation at a social level. This reorganization of work in an industry dominated by a vertical culture and a business model prioritizing short-term profitability created a paradox for workers. While they were invited to participate and be recognized in projects, they found themselves heavily regulated and subordinate in these spaces of participation. Simultaneously, they were also aware that the project was aimed at reducing labor costs, potentially leading to their termination from the companies.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Based on these findings, it is important to highlight the contradictory and paradoxical nature of the experiences with the implementation of LM in the Chilean retail work environment. The unique characteristics of this environment influence how the model is adopted and how people engage with it. Therefore, by examining how certain common and intrinsic elements of LM intersect with specific features of the Chilean retail industry and its business culture, we can comprehend the mechanisms that give rise to the described paradoxes and contradictions. These contradictions can be viewed as a product of this combination of elements and are important to understand in context.

Our findings demonstrate how LM's restructuring of the technical and social demands of work gives rise to three paradoxical experiences. Each experience relates to a different principle and management tool promoted by LM and varies depending on the role of the different actors involved.

The first paradoxical experience concerns visual management, and the tensions faced by workers when the promise of transparency and democratization conflicts with the need to simultaneously reveal and conceal their results due to the specific nature of retail culture.

The second paradox relates to the conflicts arising from the principle of "doing more with less" and adhering to LM's cost reduction directives. While efforts to improve and undergo further training are motivating, they also put a greater strain on workers and make them more susceptible to dismissal as achieving excellence can lead to a decrease in the need for workers.

The third field of paradoxical experience concerns the invitation to participate and be recognized. Given the hierarchical and non-inclusive culture of this industry, such participation is narrowly circumscribed and limited to a relation of subordinacy, while the same tool aims to drastically reduce the number of workers: "I invite you, but it is to later get rid of you".

Emphasis is given to the contribution that social phenomenology and the clinics of work can make to an understanding of new forms of flexible management and their impact on the formation of particular fields of experience. This article seeks to contribute to these approaches by insisting on the non-neutral character of management models in work reorganization, by showing their impact on subjective experiences and thereby how the models affect worker's malaise or well-being. In this regard, we should draw attention to how work experiences impact relationships, self-perception, and behaviours, as suggested by theories on the centrality of work (Dejours et al., 2018). Even though this study is not conclusive on the issue, it can be postulated that in this reorganized work process and in the crucible of the paradoxes described here, a subjective experience of work emerges in which forms of connection are characterized by mistrust, fear, and lack of mutual support; subjects are represented as actors trapped in the ambivalence between what they want to become (via promises of inclusion and participation) and everything that prevents this from materializing (power asymmetries, hierarchies, short-term business logic, etc.); and forms of action prevail such as concealment, boycott, extreme attributions of responsibility and harassment, that can reveal to the base collective defence strategies that allow workers to face their tasks on a daily basis. As Dejours (2012) emphasizes, work involves more than just production; it is about personal transformation through shared experiences and the creation of a society. Therefore, it is important to view the work environment and activities as going beyond mere employment. Our research shows that the organization and management of work have a significant impact on individuals' thoughts, emotions, and actions, not only within the workplace but also in broader social interactions.

The article explains how the contradictions in flexible management models vary depending on the industry, business culture, and work practices within a country and economic sector. This presents an important analytical challenge for ongoing research, particularly in Latin America. The work environments and cultures in Latin America have unique nuances and characteristics that differ from the experiences studied in Anglo-Saxon research on these issues (Garcés & Stecher, 2020).

The text emphasizes the importance of advancing research to deepen our knowledge about flexible management models such as LM. It raises questions about the specific mechanisms that make these fields of experience

paradoxical and how the reorganization of work affects interpersonal relationships and self-perception. The text also highlights the significance of management systems in shaping work organization and its impact on the well-being of individuals. Finally, it is possible to point out that the development of this study, by illuminating the paradoxical character of work experiences in Lean Management settings, leaves open the question of the subjective experiences of researchers—including our own experience as authors of this study—in contemporary academic work settings, where flexible management principles have also been strongly implemented.

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