



Social construction of risk in the Uruguayan agricultural sector: challenges for union activity

Construcción social del riesgo en el agro uruguayo: desafíos a la actividad sindical

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ABSTRACT Since the end of the 1990s, as in other Latin American countries, Uruguay has experienced an “agricultural boom,” an advance in the agricultural sector and the introduction of new technologies as well as new ways of producing and working. In addition, since 2005, the country has seen a surge in rural unionization, associated with collective bargaining processes and the expansion of workers’ rights at the national level. However, this process has not yet been able to consolidate significant changes in the historical working conditions of rural labor. This paper analyzes the social construction of the risk of rural wage labor from the perspective of rural leaders, based on a qualitative approach. In the workers’ discourses appear elements of naturalization as well as persistent difficulties in their work to improve their working conditions, as a way of impacting their health and quality of life.

KEY WORDS Occupational Risks; Rural Workers; Labor Unions; Working Conditions; Uruguay.

RESUMEN Desde fines de la década de 1990, al igual que otros países de América Latina, Uruguay experimentó un “boom agrícola”, el avance del sector agropecuario y la introducción de nuevas tecnologías, así como nuevas formas de producir y trabajar. Asimismo, a partir del año 2005 se observa un impulso de la sindicalización rural, asociado a los procesos de negociaciones colectivas y a la expansión de los derechos de los trabajadores a nivel nacional. Sin embargo, este proceso aún no ha logrado consolidar cambios significativos en las históricas condiciones laborales del trabajo rural. El trabajo analiza la construcción social del riesgo del trabajo asalariado rural, desde la perspectiva de dirigentes rurales, a partir de una aproximación cualitativa. En sus discursos aparecen elementos de naturalización y las dificultades persistentes en su labor para poder mejorar sus condiciones laborales, de modo de impactar en su salud y calidad de vida.

PALABRAS CLAVES Riesgos Laborales; Trabajadores Rurales; Sindicatos; Condiciones de Trabajo; Uruguay.

WORKING CONDITIONS, RISK, AND HEALTH ACCORDING TO THE SOCIAL SCIENCES: A NECESSARY CONCEPTUAL IMMERSION

At present, the production activities are carried out in contexts of growing uncertainty and indeterminacy that show the existence of risks that are inherent to every process and task. The existence of attitudes and behaviors in relation to the work situation and work activity establishes *risk cultures and acceptable risk thresholds* which are specific to every person and socially constructed based on social values, beliefs, and norms. These values, beliefs, and norms are reconstructed over time.

In Uruguay, in particular, several studies highlight how actors, beyond the safety and prevention policies existing at the institutional level, establish and negotiate risk acceptability levels, while they develop skills for this uncertainty and indeterminacy.^(1,2,3)

These “negotiations” entail agreements that are established explicitly in settings that are formalized for those purposes, as well as implicitly in the work cultures and work routines that belong to a group or an organization. This implies a collective social construction that is implicitly established in the routines and everyday activities of the people and is mediated by processes – subjective immunity, selective attention, and naturalization – by means of which beliefs and mechanisms of “coexistence” along with risks are created.

Subjective immunity in the performance of very familiar activities implies the tendency to minimize the likelihood of bad results. This underestimation of risks is due to the fact that, on the one hand, these risks are considered to be under control as the situation is familiar and “*can be handled*” and, on the other hand, these risks are present in events that rarely occur. The concept of *selective attention* adds the idea that individuals tend to “reduce the perception” of risks in such a way that the immediate world in which they live results perceptibly safer than it actually is.⁽⁴⁾

With regard to occupational risk, there are *naturalization* processes of the working conditions on the part of the worker that imply not perceiving certain elements involved in their work as harmful, as a result of a widespread ideological imposition. This does not mean that workers consider their situation fair, they find it normal, taken for granted, or, to some extent “*unchangeable*.”⁽⁵⁾

Therefore, the acknowledgment of risk is historical, local and constantly questioned; its nature and control are socially subject to disputes. The sociocultural approach to the social construction of risk reveals the multidimensionality and the differences in risk assessment.⁽⁶⁾

There is no such thing as zero risk, but there are risk selection processes in our societies that define particular risk cultures.⁽⁷⁾ There are different acceptable and possible risk thresholds, which are of special interest in our subject matter, for example, depending on the part played in the occurrence of a risk, whether as a decision maker or as a person affected by risky decisions. The foregoing suggests that risk assessments have few chances of reaching absolute consensus and, therefore, the definition of a threshold responds more to explicit or implicit negotiations, as we have previously stated.⁽⁸⁾

In addition, this approach entails that the distribution of risks in society and among the social groups that are part of it is a reflection of the distribution of power and the prevailing social positions.⁽⁶⁾ Therefore, all research studies addressing this phenomenon must acknowledge the meanings that influence the selective attention practices,⁽⁴⁾ that is, the practices focusing on one risk and not perceiving the potential effects of another risk.⁽³⁾

The sociocultural approach stresses the fact that each culture, that is to say, each set of shared values, is biased toward minimizing many risks and/or highlighting others.⁽⁷⁾ It additionally implies that the actors’ culture has an impact on the way they perceive and define the risk derived from their activity. In the agricultural sector, in particular, as we will analyze in the following pages, there are certain work cultures that are re-legitimized

as valid as long as the action framework to structurally modify them is limited for the actors within that context (or for part of them).

In order to address the social construction of risk from the point of view of the actors involved, it is necessary to understand that risk is a social construction, full of evaluations that materialize into decisions (including assessments about the future carried out in the present), and that is subject to the context. Decisions about risk are linked to time, as they are decisions made in the present in terms of a calculation about events that would take place in the future. However, in order to make these decisions, it is not possible to know much about the future, not even about the future derived from those decisions. Therefore, the attitudes toward risk are embedded in a specific system of values, beliefs, and norms that combine particular risk cultures. The behaviors related to that type of risk are based on the knowledge shared in that culture and they are also shaped by contextual elements, where acceptable risk thresholds are negotiated and defined, as a product of the values within a particular structure of social power.

A complementary perspective to the medical or biological approach to risk and health must include the vision of individuals based on their own experience. Analyzing the reality of the world of the life of a population of interest leads us to the foundations of the knowledge that guides the everyday behavior of that group, and the objectification of subjective processes (and meanings) through which the intersubjective world of common sense is built.⁽⁹⁾

This research study intends to include the sociocultural perspective in the knowledge of the construction of risk, from the particular point of view of rural labor union leaders. This perspective entails the fact that risk is a social construction rooted in beliefs and values within a specific context of socioeconomic opportunities and restrictions. That is to say, the perspective of the social construction of risk is also part of the material context in which risks are constructed and reconstructed.

Different studies show that individuals' preventive behaviors are not explained by a unique set of reasons, but that they significantly depend on the perception that individuals have of the "threat" related to a disease or behavior and of the efficacy that the preventive action has over the reduction of that threat. In this sense, the beliefs, which derive from cultural systems of reference and belonging, play a very significant role in matters related to health and preventive behaviors.⁽¹⁰⁾ In addition, the adoption of preventive actions is also determined by the evaluation of the viability and efficacy of these actions — a subjective assessment of the potential benefits in terms of physical, social, and economic costs implied.⁽¹¹⁾

The negative conditions for health or the systemic risks associated with work processes are often considered to be inherent components of the economic and social activity undertaken by the individual, and workers must know how to address and adapt themselves to such conditions. When conceptualizing as systemic those risks related to societal models, in general, and to production, in particular, a debate on how to address the inherent risks of the productive models is opened; however, the implementation or development of the model is not questioned *per se*. In this sense, this article intends to classify risks into these large groups and attempt to understand how individuals, while not unaware of risks, prioritize certain risks over others in terms of their perception of their situation and scope of action, power, and opportunities, among others.

In order to contribute to this brief theoretical discussion about the social construction of health and occupational risks, Schmidt's⁽¹²⁾ research study will be revisited. This study relates the perception of occupational risks to the processes of "familiarity" and "habituation" to those risks. These are processes which are influenced by time (immediate effects or delays in the occurrence of risks or accidents) and uncertainty (knowledge of how risks or the agents that usually cause the accident behave) as factors that increase risk perception or accident naturalization.

“The forgotten of the land” since 2005

Starting in 2005, when the progressive government took office, rural wage workers began to gain ground in terms of their recognition as subjects of law when bargaining their working conditions, and rural leaders were granted *forced* legitimacy as representatives of that group, which had historically been left behind in their working and living conditions. From that moment onward, the reality of the collective action conducted by the wage workforce in the rural sector slowly began to change. Never before had labor unions in the rural productive sector had so many unionized workers or so much decision power. It was the beginning of a new period in which labor unionism, which had historical difficulties for its consolidation, was (re)built, consolidated, and expanded into new branches, while new organizations that reached more workers emerged.

In addition, the recognition of the rural wage workers' rights drew attention to specific issues. For this purpose, a set of public and social policies was developed, aimed at reaching out not only to these workers but also their homes and families. The foregoing implied a process of symbolic recognition of the rural population that addressed their historical lack of inclusion in State plans and assured institutional and operative mechanisms to guarantee access to these plans.⁽¹³⁾

One of the milestones of these changes is directly related to the reopening of Wage Councils, serving as mandatory tripartite negotiation spaces in 2005, which included the creation of new working groups within those spaces and the widespread implementation of regulations concerning working conditions in the rural sector, which was paradigmatically exemplified by the limitation of working hours. These measures former are indirectly related to more general regulations for all sectors, such as the laws regarding the protection of labor union activity and even those regulations concerning outsourcing operations. This open space for collective bargaining would bring about great changes in the rural sectors that urged employers to

acknowledge labor union organizations as legitimate interlocutors in the bargaining process, by catalyzing the formation and/or strengthening of the labor unions

Riella and Ramírez⁽¹⁴⁾ claim that the establishment of the Wage Councils for the rural sector opens up the debate about the necessary redistribution of benefits and encourages reflection upon the relationship between economic growth and social development in rural areas. The deep transformations, both in productive changes and in new ways of collective action insertion, constitute challenges to this new form of collective bargaining. According to Pucci *et al.*,⁽¹⁵⁾ these challenges imply overcoming the low levels of collective bargaining institutionalization, creating a bargaining culture, and balancing relations of power among parties, especially, in those sectors that have recently been included.

Labor Unionism in rural areas

Labor union organization and activity in rural areas are marked by a diversity of stories, trajectories and interests that range from the creation of the emblematic Union of Sugar-cane workers of Artigas (UTAA) [*Unión de Trabajadores Azucareros de Artigas*] to the most recently formed Unique Union of Farm Workers (SIPES) [*Sindicato Único de Peones de Estancia*] in 2012.⁽¹⁶⁾

Starting in 2005, in a context of changes, rural labor unions began to gain more activity and visibility after decades of being silenced. Since the restoration of democracy, the levels of activity of rural labor unionism have been falling to such a point that not a single rural labor union attended the 5th Inter-union Workers' Plenary – National Workers Convention (PIT-CNT) [*5º Congreso del Plenario Intersindical de Trabajadores – Convención Nacional de Trabajadores*], held in November 1993. This decline in rural labor unionism did not mean its extinction and, as a symbol of its revitalization, the National Union of Wage Rural and Related workers (UNATRA) [*Unión Nacional de Asalariados, Trabajadores Rurales y Afines*] was created

on December 6, 2004.⁽¹⁷⁾ However, this boost that the labor unionism in rural areas experienced in the last 10 years by being involved in the different groups and subgroups within the Wage Councils and in the Tripartite Commission of Rural Safety and Health (Executive order No. 321/009) did not counteract the persistent levels of precariousness or labor union repression in this sector. In addition, accident rates remain constant over time. Based on the data available at the State Insurance Bank (BSE) [*Banco de Seguros del Estado*], an institution that generates and officially registers statistics on accidents and diseases, livestock, agriculture, and related activities are among those with the highest levels of accident rates.⁽¹⁸⁾

Within the universe of rural labor unionism and for the purposes of this study, it is important to return to the idea of the existing *dualism* in the Uruguayan labor movement, based on shared (or non-shared) goals between leaders and the grassroots levels. This term was coined by Errandonea and Costáble⁽¹⁹⁾ and implies the existence of two levels within the same labor movement: on the one hand, a leadership with a prevalence of medium-term political goals and, on the other hand, the grassroots that primarily have immediate goals. This means that differences are to be expected between the labor union leaders' discourse and the interests of the rural wage workers, as well as differences between the goals of the labor union and the behavior and reality of wage workers.

The figure of the "labor union leader" provides a particular way of analyzing the reality of the rural labor union movement if we think of the double role that this actor plays, as a worker, but also, as an individual having the reflexive and political capacity to analyze their situation. Precisely, one of the key elements when analyzing rural labor union leaders' discourses with regard to the topics related to working conditions and risks is this "from the inside out" double game, that is to say, their performance as actors within the work scenario, but also as sector analysts. This analysis is conducted from the labor union leaders' perception as workers and also from their political vision that does not

take into account the different realities of the group they represent. This last element may imply (or not) a greater reflection over those working conditions and risks.

At this point, it is necessary to highlight that one of the characteristics of Uruguay is the lack of other organizations or social movements that represent the interests of rural wage workers and rural workers in a collective, organized, and institutionalized way, in contrast with other Latin American countries where there are indigenous, peasants, and landless rural workers' movements, which also exist in Argentina and a few regions of Chile and Brazil.⁽²⁰⁾ In Uruguay, those who work in the rural area are mostly wage workers and thoroughly exceed the group of family producers. Even for this reason, the analysis focuses on those who represent these workers, on the understanding that this representation is influenced by the social, political, cultural, and economic characteristics of the sector under analysis.

Overview on the working conditions in the rural sector

In recent years, the field of research studies regarding wage workers' working conditions has notoriously increased in Uruguay and a great number of researchers address this topic from different perspectives. The general characterization of the wage workers' working conditions constitutes one of the starting points for contextualizing the social constructions of risk and the labor union representatives' working conditions, as well as for bringing us closer to the daily reality of the working group of the sector.

According to Castillo and Prieto,⁽²¹⁾ who are referential authors of the sociology of work, the different characteristics of working conditions must have certain specificities given by the logic of work in which the organization and the workers are included. That is to say, productive systems gradually shape workers. In this sense, the working situation constitutes a dynamic space in which the diverse aspects that workers live with

simultaneously interact: characteristics of the working process, sector, working conditions, and the position of workers in the hierarchical structure of the process, among others.

National and foreign authors describe the transformations that took place in the rural labor market as a consequence of the technical, social, and economic changes that occurred over the last decades in the Latin American agricultural sector.⁽²²⁾ Carámbula and Piñeiro,⁽²³⁾ in particular, place those transformations within the set of changes that have taken place in society in the last decades and are linked to the globalization process. This situation reflects the model of economic development that is oriented to a free market economy where the market is the main regulator. In this process, significant alterations to development and production patterns are made, which, in turn, cause changes in the organization and regulation of employment. An example of these changes is found in the generalized use of the term “flexible employment” that implies three types of flexibilities: employment flexibility, subcontracting flexibility, and income flexibility.⁽²²⁾ Or as proposed by De La Garza⁽²⁴⁾: numerical flexibility, functional flexibility, and wage flexibility.

Different Latin American researchers note that the precarious conditions of rural wage workers is fundamentally associated with annual occupational cycles with extended periods of unemployment and short-term labor relations that promote the absence of benefits and social contributions.⁽²⁵⁾ The main difference between urban and rural employments is the historical imbalance related to the levels of consolidation of the labor market: informal and precarious employment is a characteristic of rural employment. In addition, low levels of income, working conditions, the absence of minimum social benefits, and the seasonality of certain jobs have been a typical feature of rural employment. This market has been established and forged by the minimal involvement of the State, the poor labor union organization, and the predominance of relations of clientelism.⁽²⁵⁾

In this sense, rural work has four distinctive features: 1) the different tasks that are

performed during the seasons of the year create a variable job demand, 2) day/night shifts and the dependence on weather phenomena, 3) the difference between production time and working hours gains more visibility in the agricultural sector and 4) the fact that technological innovations have had an impact on the demand of workers, both in quantity as in quality, deepening labor market segmentation between qualified workers (few and permanent) and unqualified workers (many and temporary).⁽²³⁾

Finally, it is interesting to resume Piñeiro's⁽²⁶⁾ contributions that suggest that, in order to come up with a satisfactory definition of what is understood as precarious employment, a combination of objective and subjective factors is required. The notion of being a precarious worker should be a combination of feeling this precariousness and living precariously. From the subjective perspective, precarious labor depends on the (in) satisfaction of the worker with the product of his work, with the incomes he receives, and with the work environment.

In Uruguay, with respect to the risks in this sector, 73% of the total number of accidents suffered by rural workers that are formally registered at BSE take place in the group of Livestock, Agriculture, and Related Activities (data from the first semester of 2014). This is also described by Amador and Armelin⁽²⁰⁾ who, based on the occupational accident data provided by the International Labor Organization (ILO), observe that agriculture is one of the activities which has higher accident rates in Latin America and the world. In these agricultural activities, in particular, there have been productive revolutions in which new and old methods coexist in the rural area. The types of accidents these authors register as the most frequent in their analysis are machine accidents, chemical accidents, and injuries caused by a physical over demand. In spite of the advances in productive processes and regulations, agricultural and livestock workers are vulnerable due to their low qualifications, their dependence on this type of employment for survival purposes, their inability to assert their

rights, the types of contract and payment, among other factors.^(20,27,28)

OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

This research study intends to delve into the understanding of the social construction of the risk of rural labor union leaders and contextualize their discourse in the particular situation of the sector, its history, and current reality, within the framework of concrete power structures of society.

The empirical basis of this research study is the field work conducted in 2013 by Valentina Pereyra⁽²⁹⁾ who, based on a qualitative approach, conducted semi-structured interviews to ten rural labor union leaders who gave their consent after the objective of the research study and the use of information were explicitly explained to them. The analysis of that material was based on the conceptual framework of working conditions and the social construction of risk, from the point of view of the labor union leaders representing rural wage workers.

The leaders are part of the following organizations: Rural Workers Union Organization (OSDOR) [*Organización Sindical de Obreros Rurales*]; Union of Farm, Livestock and Non-farming Activities Workers (SIPES) [*Sindicato de Peones de Estancia, Ganadería y Actividades no Agropecuarias*]; Unions of Citrus Workers and Related Sectors (SITRACITA) [*Sindicatos de Trabajadores Citrícolas y Afines*]; Union of Timber Industrial Workers and Related Sectors (SOIMA) [*Sindicato de Obreros Industriales de la Madera y Afines*]; Union of Horticultural Workers (STH) [*Sindicato de Trabajadores Hortícolas*]; Unique Union of Rural Workers and Agro-industrial Workers (SUDORA) [*Sindicato Único de Obreros Rurales y Agroindustriales*]; Unique Union of Rice Workers and Related Sectors (SUTAA) [*Sindicato Único de Trabajadores del Arroz y Afines*]; Unique Union of Dairy Farm Workers and Related Sectors (SUTTA) [*Sindicato Único de Trabajadores de Tambo y Afines*]; Union of Sugarcane workers of

Artigas (UTAA) [*Unión de Trabajadores Azucareros de Artigas*]; Union of Rural Wage Workers from the South of the Country (UTRASURPA) [*Unión de Trabajadores Rurales Asalariados del Sur del País*].

The qualitative approach shortens the distance between the researchers and the conceptions and opinions of the subjects and enables a better understanding of their points of view and of their own concepts of health, labor union organizations, resistances, and disputes. This point is essential, given that the primary research study⁽²⁹⁾ was aimed at investigating the social constructions of occupational health and occupational risk phenomena, by understanding them as phenomena in a constant process of construction and reconstruction. Along with the analysis performed in this article, the research study conducted by Pereyra⁽²⁹⁾ considered that the social constructions of health and risk are influenced by relationships of power, abilities, fields of possibility, the type of social relationships developed by subjects, and the place they occupy in the labor market, among others.

RESULTS: CONSTRUCTION OF OCCUPATIONAL RISK FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF RURAL LABOR UNION LEADERS

As stated in the introduction, this research study starts from the idea that risk cultures in the workplace are constructed based upon risk assessments performed by individuals. Therefore, risk cultures are social constructions implicitly present in work routines. Each risk situation that interferes with the worker's health shows a multiplicity of actors that weave a complex fabric which manifests different degrees of "risk acceptability." The concept of social construction of risk implies an approach to the assessment of the situation by each subject and, therefore, entails the existence and interaction of a multiplicity of interests, assessments, and beliefs.⁽³⁾ Acceptability risk thresholds imply precarious and

changing negotiations which are under the influence of the actors' power resources, values, everyday experiences, relations of communication, and trust.⁽³⁰⁾ They also include a diversity of representations on the part of the subjects, in which institutions and organizations responsible for the management and prevention of risks are involved.

In the interviews under analysis, the different rural labor union leaders tended to identify common problems in health and working conditions in their respective production areas. First, the use and management of agrochemicals were acknowledged as a few of the main causes of occupational accidents which are associated with one of the factors having more consequences on the health of workers in this sector.

Second, the following accidents were described: falling down stairs, machine or hand tool accidents, falling down hills or on the farm, among others. These accidents were referred to as "common" or "expectable," they did not cause surprise in the group and they were naturalized, even in the leaders' discourse. In accordance with the consulted investigations and sources already mentioned, these are also the most frequent types of accidents in the sector.

In relation to occupational diseases, many leaders identified problems of physical "wear and tear," such as waist and hip pain, and tendonitis, as well as cases of cancer (to the best of their knowledge related to the use of agrochemicals and crop-spraying).

In addition to mentioning these problems, Uruguayan labor union leaders described "systemic" problems by specifically referring to the form of work organization. In this sense, they related work organization matters to culture (values, beliefs, and regulatory components that are reconstructed through time and particular experiences) or the rural worker's "personality," as well as certain intrinsic characteristics of work in the Uruguayan rural area. According to the interviewees, these factors are the causes or facilitators of occupational accidents and are naturalized in their discourses as part of their working conditions. The interviewees

especially perceive all the risk consequences which may arise in the short term.

Particularly in relation to the form of work organization, the interviewees have perceived an advance in work health regulations as well as a reduction in the physical effort required in certain types of rural work in the last years: less weight load, more safety tools, less traveling time, and tools in better conditions. Nevertheless, interviewees acknowledge the persistence and creation of new logics that directly affect working conditions and continue to subject workers to precarious labor, for example, flexible remuneration methods, productive rhythms, and commitments that create greater demands on the employees' performance, without taking into consideration the compliance with regulations regarding the working day duration. The worker's incomes and rehiring are ensured if he or she "meets" The needs of the contractor or "boss." This results in long working hours, physical overexertion, accelerated work rhythms, and alterations in the procedures.

In this sense, it may be understood that the main forms on which rural work is organized lead workers to take certain risks. These ideas are summarized in a phrase that is often used by leaders: "*to exchange health for money.*"

New technologies and the use of machinery are included among recent changes. Although the interviewed leaders identified advances regarding the incorporation of hard technology that reduces high-effort tasks, they also observed that the way in which technology is introduced ends up replacing the workforce (thus, generating uncertainty about the source of employment), forcing workers to raise their work rhythms due to the shortening of the *zafra*s or harvesting season (or even stopping the use of machines until finding a solution to the displacement of the labor force that machines tend to create).

Work organization and market dynamics (forms of employment, low remuneration, flexibility, and labor seasonality) are regarded as elements related to productivity that expose the workers to adopt ways of performing work

that are exactly opposite to the development of their abilities and full health. In these ways of daily constructing their working hours, several practices related to risk assumption or naturalization of situations are identified. These practices may be understood as *survival strategies* or mechanisms to overcome precariousness, especially, economic precariousness. Risk is somehow viewed as a “human error” by individualizing the reasons for altering and decontextualizing the practices.

On a different note, different leaders mentioned the failure to comply with work regulations both by the employers and the workers themselves. As part of this failure, they described factors that were identified as inherent to the rural area: lack of information, communication deficiency, workers’ isolation in certain sectors, and ignorance of collective bargaining agreements, among others. However, they also mentioned a certain tendency to develop individual strategies in order to face the characteristics of their working situation (for instance, the temporary nature of the work, particular features of the agreement, and methods of payment), without taking into account the working regulations and the negotiated collective bargaining agreements, thus exposing themselves to situations of greater vulnerability.

In that sense, they claim that, even when workers know the safety-related clauses in the collective bargaining agreements, they do not respect them because of the discomfort of wearing protective garments and complying with the protective measures, because they are “not interested in them” and do not see their “benefit,” among other reasons. Labor union leaders recognize that wide sectors of the workers they represent seem to be uninterested in knowing about and/or complying with executive orders and collective bargaining agreements. It could be noted that, despite the fact that the leader’s work demands a critical reflection about the situation of their sector and the most structural conditions, on many occasions they reproduce the discourse that is rooted in the culture of individualizing alterations in the processes and blaming the worker for the violation of rules.

In short, it is essential to bring to the discussion the elements or phenomena related to the Uruguayan rural area that, according to labor union leaders, impact the management of occupational health and risks. Based on the testimony of the interviewees, those elements are related to the non-compliance with regulatory frameworks, work organization, and the worker’s culture. Labor union leaders highlighted the importance of labor union organizations in enforcing the workers’ rights, the need for inspections conducted by the Uruguayan Office of Labor and Social Security that reports to the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, the difficulties of the State in enforcing collective bargaining agreements and the strong historical repression exerted by the employers’ organizations on the rural area.

In addition to identifying recurring problems arising from the activity performed (namely, handling of products, physical over demands, workplace settings, technology), the analysis of the interviews shows that labor union leaders reflect upon the way work organization and several characteristics of the culture prevailing in the sector limit, to a great extent, the subjects’ ability to choose and decide by both fostering situations of objective and subjective precariousness as well as the process of risk naturalization.

Intrinsic factors and potentiating factors: rethinking the “inherent” characteristics of rural work

Risk assessment is influenced by social, economic, and cultural factors that guide the selection of collective risk, which is the result of a negotiation where the subjects’ perspectives and resources of power are at stake. The collective definition of acceptable risk threshold is somewhat stable and consistent based on a framework where the actors guide their behavior in their daily work.^(15,30)

The use of an intrinsic and potentiating risk approach, which has been mentioned in previous research studies,^(3,30) is interesting for the analysis of the perceptions and reflections

upon health and occupational risks of rural labor union leaders. This approach is expected to open the debate about the potentiating or intrinsic character of specific peculiarities of rural work. These features are often accepted — *naturalized* — as inherent characteristics of the rural activity.

The discussion between intrinsic and potentiating risks is complex and may be influenced, in turn, by the assessments and beliefs of the subjects classifying the risks. These assessments and beliefs may be even based on technical knowledge or the course of research proceedings. The classification of factors in one category or another are based on what we, as authors, consider the “inherent” or “non-inherent” characteristics of rural work and will guide our subsequent analysis. In this sense, these categories must be carefully thought out in order not to *naturalize the naturalized* by categorizing them as intrinsic.

For analytical purposes, the intrinsic factors are defined as those that are almost an essential and “unavoidable” part of the tasks that workers perform, for example, working with tools, working in the open air, handling of chemical products, among other tasks. There is an open discussion regarding this issue, as there are factors that are intrinsic to a specific production method. This is the case of the production that requires the use of agrochemical products, which is not the only alternative, despite being the prevailing form in Uruguay and around the world.

As for the potentiating risks, not only do they act by themselves, but they also aggravate the possible consequences or increase the likelihood of damage occurrences related to the intrinsic risks or other potentiating risks.

This reflection then leads to the following question: *What is the intrinsic nature of rural work?* Based on the labor union workers’ discourses, the intrinsic risks are those that result from weather conditions and that are related to the use of hard technology and tools, the handling of potentially toxic chemical products, specific physical over demands and repetitive movements, contact with animals, the characteristics of the terrain where the work is performed, and so on.

Within the potentiating factors of these intrinsic risks, which also create new risks, a division among *systemic, cultural, and institutional factors* may be established. Systemic factors may be related to working conditions, low and/or variable remunerations, work instability, work rhythms, outsourcing, and seasonality, among others. The cultural factors may include those related to cultural and informational aspects that are typical of rural work, such as lack of knowledge of regulations and agreements, labor union repression, and the conceptualization of the “good worker” as the one who “is a high performer” and “does not cause trouble.” Finally, the institutional factors may include all the actions and non-actions of the State in order to ensure the enforcement of labor regulation and health care of this group.

The classification between potentiating and intrinsic factors enables a more complex analysis about risks and the related selection processes, in which individuals construct acceptable risk thresholds anchored in their immediate scope of action, in the deployment of strategies to face those specific risks and working (and living) conditions.

For example, in order to overcome the effects of a fixed-term contract with a relatively low remuneration (compared to the remuneration of wage employees in the industrial sectors), that is, to address specific socioeconomic risks, workers take maximum advantage of their current context of work, by increasing the pace of their work, extending the working hours and decreasing breaks, while simultaneously proving to be “high performance employees,” so as to increase the opportunities of being immediately rehired as part of a team for performing other tasks.

CHALLENGES FOR THE SECTOR AND LABOR UNION WORK: A FEW FINAL REFLECTIONS

The information presented so far offers the possibility of observing the complex interweaving of risks that the worker has to face

(or not) in order to “control” its effects. This point of view shows that the construction of acceptable risk thresholds and risk itself are related to conceptualizations in the present, while taking into account the future, within the framework of different structures of power, where the processes of habituation and naturalization reflect the vulnerability experienced by certain groups of people, in this case, rural wage workers.

The discourse of labor union leaders reveals how they perceive factors of habituation in the working conditions and of the recognized vulnerability in this group of workers. In addition, in terms of their performance as leaders, the interviewees face challenges related to improving the communication on regulations and bargaining agreements with the workers that they represent. However, there are specific aspects that they clearly perceive as being beyond their sphere of control, which are especially related to the institutional potentiating risks. With respect to the intrinsic factors, the leaders’ future attention to these factors is partially influenced by their possibility of having an impact (or not) on the models of productive development, on the regulations that govern work relationships in Uruguay and on the contents of the collective bargaining.

In this framework, labor union leaders are required to become labor and political actors capable of *making themselves heard*. The possibilities of consolidating their power as labor union organizations and even coordinating collective actions among organizations is part of the challenges faced by these groups.

At present, we observe a reconfiguration of the capitalist system and class relationships where global processes such as globalization may not be simply regarded as “external consequences,” “impacts,” or “collateral effects”

over States, companies, or social subjects. Therefore, according to Ghiotto’s research study,⁽³¹⁾ we observe that these views tend to immobilize subjects because “*nobody is responsible for the market or for what happens on it,*” thus, there is nothing that can be done to change reality. Based on this perspective where changes are understood as impacts or external factors, the vacuity of labor union power is completely understandable. In this context, the different strategies adopted by labor unions will not only face the power resources and opportunity structures, but also a different political interpretation about a new configuration of relationships among classes.

However, the debate about intrinsic or potentiating risks should be extended by questioning the intrinsic nature of the production method itself at a certain historical time. Although the intensive use of agrochemicals, the advances in machinery, the systems of outsourcing, and seasonal hiring do not constitute inherent characteristics of rural work, they are a consequence of the choice of a production method adopted by Uruguay within a “developmental strategy.” This makes up the framework that later establishes the forms of work organization and the characteristics of production relationships, which are considered to be potentiating factors of risks.

In other words, we should understand occupational risks as part of a specific yet not unique historical context (productive model and production methods), which leads to the necessity of rethinking what is often accepted as “the inherent characteristics of rural work,” understanding the supremacy of a model of production but without forgetting that this model is one of the alternatives of production, and not the intrinsic alternative. Therefore, the resulting forms of rural work organization are not intrinsic either.

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CITATION

Nión Celio S, Pereyra V. Social construction of risk in the Uruguayan agricultural sector: challenges for union activity. *Salud Colectiva*. 2018;14(4):743-755. doi: 10.18294/sc.2018.1385.

Received: 31 Mar 2017 | Modified: 14 Nov 2017 | Approved: 15 Dic 2017



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<https://doi.org/10.18294/sc.2018.1385>

The translation of this article is part of an inter-departmental and inter-institutional collaboration including the Undergraduate Program in Sworn Translation Studies (English < > Spanish) and the Institute of Collective Health at the Universidad Nacional de Lanús and the Health Disparities Research Laboratory at the University of Denver. This article was translated by Florencia Guevara and Natalia López Correa under the guidance of María Victoria Illas, reviewed by Orphea Wright under the guidance of Julia Roncoroni, and prepared for publication by Lucas Moccia under the guidance of Vanessa Di Cecco. The final version was approved by the article author(s).