Organizational wrongdoing: A theoretical essay on the malleability of the course of action of ethical decisions

Organizational wrongdoing: Um ensaio teórico sobre a maleabilidade do curso de ação das decisões éticas

Incumplimiento organizativo: Un ensayo teórico sobre la maleabilidad del curso de acción de las decisiones éticas

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ABSTRACT

In this theoretical essay, we present a reflection on organizational irregularities (wrongdoing), considering ethics and morality from a sociological perspective, and exploring the rules used to guide human behavior in organizational decision-making. To this end, we reviewed the dominant and emerging sociological perspectives for organizational wrongdoing; behavioral ethics; and the rationalization of unethical behavior in organizations. In this reflection, we move away from the implicit thought that the organization's participants are regulated only by external control agents and from the dichotomous view of ethical decisions and call the attention for a third alternative: that of socially justified choices, which are a new possibility of analyzing wrongdoing, still poorly understood and with implications for organizational theory.

Keywords: behavioral ethics; bureaucratic ethics; theory of social control; decision-making process; organizational wrongdoing.

RESUMO

Neste ensaio teórico, apresentamos uma reflexão sobre irregularidades organizacionais (*wrongdoing*), tratando ética e moralidade a partir de uma perspectiva sociológica, explorando as regras que atores constroem para orientar seu comportamento no ambiente organizacional. Teoricamente, nos baseamos em uma revisão não exaustiva sobre as perspectivas sociológicas dominantes e emergentes para *organizational wrongdoing*; ética comportamental; e a racionalização do comportamento antiético nas organizações. Nessa reflexão, nos afastamos do pensamento implícito de que os participantes da organização são regulados, apenas, por agentes de controle externos e da visão dicotômica das decisões éticas, concedendo um papel protagonista para uma terceira alternativa: a das escolhas justificáveis socialmente, que constitui uma nova possibilidade de análise do *wrongdoing,* ainda pouco compreendida e com implicações à teoria organizacional.

Palavras-chave: ética comportamental; ética burocrática; teoria do controle social; processo decisório; organizational wrongdoing.

RESUMEN

En este ensayo teórico, presentamos una reflexión sobre las irregularidades organizacionales (irregularidades), considerando la ética y la moral desde una perspectiva sociológica, y explorando las reglas utilizadas para guiar el comportamiento humano en la toma de decisiones organizacionales. Con este fin, revisamos las perspectivas sociológicas dominantes y emergentes para las irregularidades organizacionales; ética del comportamiento; y la racionalización del comportamiento poco ético en las organizaciones. En esta reflexión, nos alejamos del pensamiento implícito de que los participantes de la organización están regulados únicamente por agentes de control externos y de la visión dicotómica de las decisiones éticas, y llamamos la atención por una tercera alternativa: la de las elecciones socialmente justificadas, que son una nueva posibilidad de analizar las irregularidades, aún poco comprendidas y con implicaciones para la teoría organizacional.

Palabras clave: ética del comportamiento; ética burocrática; teoría del control social; proceso de toma de decisions; incumplimiento organizativo.

1 INTRODUCTION

In this theoretical essay, we present some questions regarding organizational irregularities (organizational wrongdoing), an increasingly common phenomenon that raises individual, organizational, and economic reflections, in the same way that it continually moves social relations. Organizational wrongdoing, also named organizational misconduct has received widespread attention from the traditional mass media, as well as from the digital media (Trevino, 1986; Greve, Palmer & Pozner, 2010; Palmer, Smith-Crowe & Greenwood, 2016a; Hersel et al., 2019), which contributed to the emergence of a multiplicity of political/ideological positions that, in a way, does not seem to contribute to the advancement of the sociological knowledge.

In this scenario, as a starting point, we suggest an exercise to the reader: (i) reflect on the last time, in an organizational context, that was necessary to decide between being ethical or surviving; or yet, between being ethical or having success. (ii) Then, reflect on the circumstances of the environment. Such circumstances conditioned and/or determined your action? Survival and success are at the heart of the concept of bureaucratic ethics and act as a moral code that guides actors through all organizational dilemmas (Jackall, 1988). When reflecting on unethical experiences in the organizational life, it is possible to establish, at some point, a sense of knowledge of cause, opening a dialogue with personal values and beliefs.

However, why is it important to reflect on business ethics? Jackall (1988, p. 6) states that "bureaucratic work makes people suspend, while they are at work, the moralities that they can maintain outside". In other words, they can follow the morals that prevail in their specific organizational situation. Conversely, Roulet (2019) notes that there are few studies on managers and unethical behavior because this type of research requires the cooperation of the organizations and their participants, which makes the comprehension of the disconcerting world on managerial decision-making a problematic task (Roulet, 2019).

According to Ferrell, Fraedrich & Ferrell (2017), the ability to anticipate and deal with business ethics issues has received greater relevance in the 21st century. Theory and research on wrongdoing in and by organizations, for instance, was driven by the media's attention to corporate Treated by sociologists like Émile Durkheim as an omnipresent phenomenon, in view of the fact that, in its conception, society benefits by punishing those who engage in unacceptable behavior (Greve, Palmer & Pozner, 2010), the theme of business ethics has remained present in organizations in recent decades (Gabbioneta et al., 2019). In psychology, this presence has stimulated studies on how human cognition is structured in the face of ethical decisions (Palmer, Smith-Crowe & Greenwood, 2016a). In organization studies, discussions started on how unethical decisions become rationalized/normalized in organizations (Jackall, 1988; Palmer, 2013), and also on how rationality and ethical perfection are psychologically impossible (Simon, 1997; Chugh, Bazerman & Banaji, 2005; Chugh & Kern, 2016).

Smith-Crowe & Zhang (2016), in their studies on the recent memory of organizational ethics, using the terms ethics and morals interchangeably, claim that most studies in the field adopt the premise that ethical behavior is good (transparency, respect, values, integrity, safety) and unethical behavior is bad/onerous (corruption, fraud, bribery, privileged information, human rights violations, impunity) for organizations (Trevino & Youngblood, 1990; Arruda, 2005; Smith-Crowe & Zhang, 2016; Champoux, 2017). Thus, the moral terrain of organizational life is conceived, in this perspective, as divided by a line established by one or more agents of social control (Palmer, 2012) accommodating the right on one side and the wrong on the other (Palmer, 2012; Manning & Anteby, 2016). Such studies indicate that the decision between being ethical or not is understood as an organizational dilemma of an ambiguous nature (Manning & Anteby, 2016). In other words, a dilemma that presents two alternatives that occupy opposite dimensions (Chugh, Bazerman & Banaji, 2005; Manning & Anteby, 2016) and its own density.

Nonetheless, in this study, we reflect on the problem in another way. First, when we observe that the dominant theoretical approach is concentrated on administrative structures, governance systems, power structures (of unscrupulous leaders), perverse cultures of the incentive systems and/or influence of the environment (Greve, Palmer & Pozner, 2010; Palmer, 2013), we assume that wrongdoing acts are normalized in organizations (Palmer, 2012). Additionally, we admit that these aspects, in a certain way, contribute to the emergence of restricted explanations regarding why wrongdoing occurs. Second, we recall Robert Jackall's (1988) studies on bureaucratic ethics and reflect on the role of the third alternative of decisions of an ethical nature. The alternative of socially justified choices, among them, the choices that transit through the gray zone of legality (Jackall, 1988). In this sense, we assume the existence of an investigative angle that departs from the white and black dichotomous view, good or bad, ethical or unethical, admitting that there is a gray ground where wrongdoing acts are constituted. This gray terrain is still little explored in studies on the subject.

Therefore, we reflect on how social actors differentiate right and wrong, and how their interests and capacities shift, in a malleable way, the right line (antietic issues) versus the wrong line (business issues), constituting wrongdoing as a normal phenomenon in organizations (Palmer, 2012). For doing so, this research is structured around the following guiding question: how can organizational actors draw the line that separates right and wrong? Reflections on the malleability of what can be considered ethical or not aim to shed light on a dimension little understood and have implications for organizational

theory – the red line between right and wrong (Manning & Anteby, 2016).

This essay presents five sections from a reflective and interpretive bias, including this first one (introduction). In the second section, we present the analytical perspectives on organizational wrongdoing. In the third, we demonstrate the theoretical framework employed on behavioral ethics. The fourth section presents theoretical interlacing as an analytical alternative to wrongdoing. Lastly, we present our final remarks.

2 ORGANIZATIONAL WRONGDOING

The organizational wrongdoing or the organizational misconduct is a phenomenon that receives media focus and that of society in general (Trevino, 1986; Greve, Palmer & Pozner, 2010; Palmer, Smith-Crowe & Greenwood, 2016a; Hersil, et al., 2019). However, despite the volume of work on the theme, there is no univocal concept in the literature, which could harm progress in the field of scientific investigations (Greve, Palmer & Pozner, 2010). On the other hand, traditionally, theory and research on irregularities in and by organizations (wrongdoing), whether from a micro (predominant) point of view, meso or macro (still little explored from an empirical point of view), have been basically focused on its causes (Greve, Palmer & Pozner, 2010; Palmer, Smith-Crowe & Greenwood, 2016a). Nevertheless, most organizational irregularities are usually viewed from a micro perspective, reflecting an assumption that it is individuals and not organizations that are motivated to act inappropriately.

Although organizational irregularities have existed at least since the beginning of the commerce, the first scholars who analysed the topic scientifically were organizational psychologists (Palmer, Smith-Crowe & Greenwood, 2016). In this context, studies developed by Trevino's (1986; 1990) and Jones (1991) were highlighted, even though they tended to assume the rationality of the organization's individuals, basically exploring the reasons why participants are involved in ethical or unethical behavior, in its attributes, and in the nature of ethical problems (Palmer, Smith-Crowe & Greenwood, 2016). Further works, such as Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011), have assumed the limited character of ethical rationality, but studies on organizational irregularities are still scarce and present imbalances and limitations (Palmer, Smith-Crowe & Greenwood, 2016)

The predominant use of the micro persepctive to understand the causes of misconduct, for instance, fails for not paying attention to the collective character of misconduct in and by organizations, i.e., it does not consider that many organizational irregularities involve multiple individuals interacting, located in a wider social context (Palmer, Smith-Crowe & Greenwood, 2016), and judged by different agents of social control. Conversely, according to this same group of researchers, the most advanced theories and research at the meso and macro levels have received greater attention and are better positioned to fill this gap

(Palmer, Smith-Crowe & Greenwood, 2016), although the studies on the causes of organizational errors are still scarce.

Research on organizational errors is basically restricted to two theoretical approaches: the first has a predominant focus on how incentives and opportunities motivate misconduct; and the second is more focused on cultural prescriptions and the performance tensions that endorse them. Both approaches are often presented together and cited as financial fraud (Palmer, Smith-Crowe & Greenwood, 2016), limiting the field's advancement. In order to identify examples of works that adopt these two approaches, Palmer, Smith-Crowe & Greenwood (2016) organized the compendium entitled "Organizational Wrongdoing. Key perspectives and New Directions". In this compendium, the authors presented, among others, the studies of (i) Prechel and Hou (2016), which used the lens of political economy to provide a chronological account of the complexity of legislative changes and regulatory changes resulting from the corporate lobby in the United States they originated the "structural holes"; (ii) Palmer aand Moore (2016), about the manners in which digital social networks can facilitate organizational misconduct; (iii) Muzio, Faulconbridge, Gabbioneta and Greenwood (2016) who used institutional theory applied to the professions to explore the causes of the lack of conduct in professional services companies; (iv) Vadera and Pratt (2016) who adopted the theory of roles to explore how the occupation of various roles can mitigate trends in involvement at organizational crime.

In this sense, to understand the causes of the phenomenon, most researchers, with the support of the mass media, approach wrongdoing as the transgression of the line between right and wrong, considering it as an abnormal phenomenon in organizations (Palmer, 2012). Such a view presupposes that the phenomenon is peripheral and/or rare and perceived, in a certain way, as an outrageous deviation from socially acceptable behavior (Palmer, 2013). Nevertheless, theorists are beginning to adopt the perspective of irregularity as a normal phenomenon (Palmer, 2013; Greve & Teh, 2016; Manning & Anteby, 2016; Palmer, Smith-Crowe & Greenwood, 2016b), thus expanding the range of explanations for organizational wrongdoing (Palmer, Smith-Crowe & Greenwood, 2016b).

According to this group of theorists, the normalized view of wrongdoing points to a gap regarding the phenomenon's causal explanations. The low sustained effort to theorize the phenomenon of misconduct and its relations with organizations also contributes to the standardization of wrongdoing acts, favoring an important omission in the production of empirical and theoretical knowledge (Gabbioneta et al., 2019). Moreover, these authors argue that in the empirical field, most wrongdoing cases involve acquiescence by specialized professionals; in the theoretical field, the phenomenon represents a challenge to traditional understandings of professionalism (Gabbioneta et al., 2019).

In an effort to contribute to the fulfillment of these gaps, Gabbioneta et al. (2019) recognize professional misconduct as a heterogeneous and complex phenomenon, as it can be manifested at the institutional level, acquiring the necessary moral justification to be perpetuated. They also assert that there are multiple dynamics in the "intraindividual processes", which includes not only intense relational connections but also weak ones that contribute to irregularities, whose linked ecologies and connections create epistemological challenges in the study of the boundaries between levels.

Therefore, this new normalized perspective, which predominant behavior would not be much different from what is correct, suggests that wrongdoing can be practiced by people considered to be honest, socially responsible, and who are immersed in structures, processes, and mechanisms considered essential for the efficient and effective functioning of organizations (Palmer, 2013). In this same direction, Chugh and Kern (2016) assert that organizational forces can lead the organization's participants to abandon their moral selves and behave inconsistently with their values.

In order to facilitate the understanding of the wrongdoing causes, we present in Table 1 the differences between the theoretical perspectives that consider wrongdoing as a normal or abnormal phenomenon, in the view of social control agents. One thing that calls the attention in this table is that the ethical decision can be understood as the only element in common between the abnormal and the standardized approaches.

Table 1
Approaches for the comprehension of the Organizational Wrongdoing causes

	ORGANIZATIONAL WRONGDOING	
	Abnormal	**Normal**
Theoretical Approach	- Dominant	- Emerging
Phenomenon frequency	- Rare/Peripheral/Random/Exception	- Omnipresent
Rules and behavioral standards	- Clear distance	- Implicit distance
Transgressors' profile	- Unusual people who have socially despicable traits (such as excessive ambition and greed); - Sociopaths; - Seen as abominable/rare ("Rotten apples"); - Conscious and rational deliberation; - Make discreet decisions to engage in illicit behavior; - Develop a positive inclination to engage in the behavior in question; - Mindfulness and vigilance.	- Common people who display socially acceptable behaviors; - Can be religious and morally legitimate, pleasant, empathetic; - Usually embarks on organizational transgressions without engaging in conscious and rational deliberation - Are influenced by their immediate social context (structures and processes which organizations would not be able to work without them); - Generally, embarks on organizational evil in increasingly prolonged periods; - Do not have premeditated inclination/Inattention and limited rationality.
Structures and processes	- Defective or distorted, sometimes characterized as "bad barrels"; - Misaligned organizational incentive systems that motivate people to pursue illicit goals; - Perverse organizational cultures that conditionate people to think and act in deviant manners.	- Transgression can be the product of the entire range of structures and processes; - Such structures can give rise to irregularities in a way that is sometimes incidental to the production of the correct; - Routine structures and processes can facilitate irregularities (including administrative systems, situational social influence, power structures, technological processes, etc.).
Common element	Line's transgression between right and wrong / Ethical Decision	

Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on Palmer (2012).

According to Palmer (2012), four main aspects support the standard vision of organizational wrongdoing: i) errors are dominant, also due to the research and the media do not capture the least impact irregularities and only cover the disclosed instances; ii) the practice of transgression is not very different from the correct action; iii) irregularities are committed by common and/or morally dignified and socially accepted people and companies; iv) organizational wrongdoing can be generated by the same organizational structures, systems and processes that are widespread in organizations and that are generally responsible for correct conduct. Thereby, these last two aspects together explain "why wrong actions are so widespread and why ordinary people are likely to perpetrate them" (Palmer, 2012, p. 9).

3 BEHAVIORAL ETHICS

One of the first ethical concerns known in the field of business was revealed in the 1950s. Although Harvard Business School introduced the theme in 1908 (Barros & Passos, 2000; Arruda, 2008; Nunes & Nunes, 2016), the debate gains intensity in the field of social sciences due to the mechanization of workers' production processes and the alienation that arose from the repetitive movements of

industrial production (Arruda, 2008; Dias, 2014; Antunes, 2018). The 1960s, for its turn, were marked by the discussions that took place in countries of German origin, which elevated workers to the status of participants on the boards of directors of organizations (Arruda, 2008; Dias, 2014; Antunes, 2018), as well as by aggressiveness disproportionate US military forces compared to a country like Vietnam, judging by its small military and economic relevance. The disproportionality of forces in the international expansion policies of some American companies sparked an ethical debate in the field of organizational sciences in the period under review. On this occasion, the cultural shocks in the ways of doing business that, at times, conflicted with the ethical standards of American headquarters, encouraged the creation and application of corporate codes of ethics (Dias, 2014; Antunes, 2018).

At the beginning of the 1970s, scientist Raymond Baumhart (1968) carried out the first empirical research that is known on the subject of business ethics in the United States (Arruda, 2008), which focused on ethics' professional conduct and dehumanization of dominant technocracy. In this period, interculturality and client relationships begin to be debated in parallel with discussions about the moral capacity of individuals and issues of illicit enrichment (Antunes, 2018). In the early 1980s, Thomas Donaldson (1989) deals with the issue systematically further, addressing issues arising from multinational corporate activities, considering that these often result from conflicts among cultural attitudes between the host country and the host. In other words, the researcher discussed the decision making of multinationals in the face of dilemmas such as pollution, discrimination, and wage patterns in the host country of a multinational and the country of origin.

In parallel, isolated efforts by academics dedicated to research this subject were intensified in the United States and Europe and lead to the creation of the Journal of Business Ethics. Hence, in the early '90s, rise the Society for Business Ethics in the USA and EBEN – European Business Ethics Network – originating other specialized journals such as the Business Ethics Quarterly and Business Ethics: A European Review (Arruda, 2008; Nunes & Nunes, 2016). At this rate, the 1990s were characterized by the universalization and expansion of the concept of organizational ethics, discussed in a forum organized by ISBEE – International Society for Business, Economics, and Ethics, whose first survey (globally), led by Georges Enderle, was presented in Japan in 1996. This survey shown three interrelated modes of approaching business ethics: semantics (speaking about ethics), theory (thinking about ethics) and practice (acting ethically) (Arruda, 2008).

At this point in the essay, a question that naturally arises is: what is ethics? Research on behavioral ethics in organizations has evolved from a small niche area to an independent and expanding field, gaining not only in the number of articles but also the legitimacy of the topic and the field of organizational studies (Tenbrunsel & Smith-

Crowe, 2014). In order to review the literature on ethical decision-making in organizations, these same researchers focused specifically on behavioral ethics. From a qualitative meta-analysis, Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe (2014) assert that of all the criticisms observed in their studies, the most crucial is the lack of definitions for the term ethics. According to these scholars, without a universal understanding, the research will remain inconsistent, incoherent, and untheoretical (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2014), an idea shared by Moore and Gino (2015). These authors' criticism presupposes an appeal to build a bridge between the normative and descriptive fields on business ethics.

Except for some social scientists who valued an accurate description of the term (Rest, 1986; Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; Jones, 1991), organizational sociologists are interested in knowing how moral versus immoral are classified and/or how social actors differentiate right from wrong (Manning & Anteby, 2016). On that note, Greve, Palmer and Pozner (2010) – based on works such as those of the sociologists (i) Black (1976, 1998) on the prevalence of legal rules in society (ii) Coser (1967) and Collins (1975) on the conflict theory, which assumes that the location of the line that separates right from wrong and the vigor with which this distinction is imposed are objects of conflict between social groups – rescue the popular expression: "it takes two to dance the tango" (2010, p. 78). Thus, according to Berger and Luckmann (2014), they offer a metaphorical resource that helps to clarify wrongdoing as a socially constructed phenomenon. In these terms, this means that individuals and organizations cannot engage in wrongdoing unless a social control agent draws a line who will delimit what is right or wrong, ethical or unethical, moral and immoral (Greve, Palmer & Pozner, 2010; Palmer, 2012; Manning & Anteby, 2016; Palmer, Smith-Crowe & Greenwood, 2016a). Consequently, organizational behavior manifests itself as a phenomenon that will always be judged by a social control agent (Palmer, 2012).

However, the historical, temporal, and conceptual approach of morality and ethics are too broad (Greve, Palmer & Pozner, 2010). Even in philosophy and theologys, which also offer a wide range regarding the understanding of morality and ethics, do not present a single concept (Greve, Palmer & Pozner, 2010). For Smith-Crowe and Zhang (2016), scholars of decision making, it is possible to define what is ethical and what is unethical. Conversely, the lack of conceptual clarity of unethical behavior supports the studies on the predictive side of behavior predominance, which weakens the theoretical understanding of the nature of causes (Smith-Crowe & Zhang, 2016). Studies in this field are essentially designed to predict when people will cross the immorality line and when they will refrain from doing so. Nonetheless, there are difficulties in identifying where that line is. (Smith-Crowe & Zhang, 2016). In the language of science, this question makes the construct definition of the ethical variable a thorny issue without any consensus for centuries (Smith-Crowe & Zhang, 2016).

On the other hand, ethics is not necessarily a specific decision criterion, according to Champoux (2017). Although

ethical concerns can permeate social actors' decisions and actions, ethical criteria, or the choices between right and wrong are not always explicit or obvious during the decision-making process (Greve, Palmer & Pozner, 2010; Champoux, 2017). Thus, reinforcing the view of ethical ambiguity in management decisions (Manning & Anteby, 2016; Champoux, 2017).

This thinking confirms the normal approach (see table 1) on the causes of organizational wrongdoing. In Palmer's (2012) view, the organization's participants face cognitive and behavioral challenges and can initiate wrong actions irrationally. In other words, organization's participants may behave wrongly without premeditated thought/intention and/or mindfulness. Furthermore, Langer and Moldoveanu (2000), cited by Palmer (2012, p. 14), affirm that when we behave without thinking "we trust distinctions and categories drawn in the past (e) rules and routines are more likely to govern our behavior, regardless of current circumstances".

Palmer (2012) attempts to gather consensus on what is unethical and what is not, assumes the assumptions of the social control theory, affirming that social control agents are the actors designated to monitor and control the unethical behavior. In other words, the agents of social control are the ones who define where is the line of right and wrong (Palmer, 2012). In the same direction, Greve et al. (2010) argue that these agents represent a collective and impose sanctions due to the collective itself's maintenance. That said, the authors argue that "judgment by a social control agent is the crucial link in this definition because it allows us to examine when a line that separates right from wrong is invoked and how the transgression of that line is judged to occur" (Strike et al., 2010, p. 56).

Nevertheless, Manning and Anteby (2016), interested in knowing how the offenders justify crossing the "red" line between right and wrong, warns that there are situations in which the agents of social control, due to the intention of protecting their own interests, do not draw the line clearly. In this sense, there is a greater variety of social control agents than the dominant perspective of organizational wrongdoing foresees (Pollock, Mishina & Seo, 2016).

That said, we emphasize that the perspective adopted in this essay does not appeal to the dominant explanations in the field, as it assumes that the organization's actors are not fully aware and that the wrong course of action can be initiated in an unintended (unintentional) way (Palmer, 2012). Besides, in this essay, it is assumed that the line that separates right from wrong is normally surrounded by a gray area (Palmer, 2012) or the gray area of legality (Jackall, 1988). This means that in this zone, the processes, structures, and rules can be the same as conditions for proper conduct and that their offenders can use bureaucracy –the socially predominant organizational form (Jackall, 1988) – as a moral justification for wrongdoing.

Facing this issue, in the next section, we present the rationality of the unethical behavior perspective. This view, offered by Robert Jackall (1988), who analyzed some situations and experiences of a social order found in the universe of corporate managers, clarifies how bureaucratic ethics shapes the organizational participants' moral conscience.

4 MALLEABILITY OF THE COURSE OF ACTION OF ETHICAL DECISIONS

Understanding that business environments work as a social and moral terrain, Jackall (1988) reveals how complex social and organizational contexts and the search for success and survival are used as socially accepted justifications, guiding individual and organizational behavior. Jackall's intensive fieldwork shed light on morality in organizations, based on decades of studies involving interviews with employees of the banking system, corporate managers of large corporations, whistleblowers in thirteen different organizations, executives, art directors, and copywriters, going through the university system, congress and American counterterrorism teams. However, it does begin, in fact, with an understanding of Weber's Protestant ethics – the intellectual construction of an unceasing work ethic that supports the economic and moral foundations of modern capitalism. In fact, they underlie the bureaucratization of the occupational structure that affects the whole class structure and the social rhythm – and organizes it as a system of power, privileges, and domination. "The bureaucratization of the occupational structure therefore profoundly affects the whole class and status structure, the whole tone and tempo of our society". (Jackall, 1988, p. 10).

Likewise, responsibilities can be delegated. In these cases, the practice paradigm prevails. According to Jackall (2010, p. 220), US political administrations have promoted "the practice of blaming others to an art". This strategy success transits in the gray terrain of legality and depends on factors extraneous to the performance in the position. Along the same lines, Jackall (2010) highlights the bureaucracy that separates transgressors and the consequences of their actions, judging that managers never need to find unemployed workers due to decisions of changing factories abroad; sales directors who never need to find people harmed by the forced sales of their products. At the same time that the law's requirements, regulation, and public expectations demand the rhetoric of correct moral probity, the ability to adapt communication to different audiences, and to create multiple explanations for acting following the requirements, "going backwards" becomes an essential occupational virtue in large organizations, explaining the bureaucratic ethics.

Examining, therefore, the work of organizational managers at its different levels, the author reveals how the complex social contexts of their organizations and the search for success and survival as socially accepted justifications guide the mental model and individual behavior of organizational actors. In effect, bureaucratic work shapes individuals' conscience decisively and involves them in rational actions, socially approved, leading them to a state

of subordination to authority. On the other hand, this same dynamic creates subtle prestige measures such as hierarchies and status, which lead them to support the corporation's morals. In this sense, what matters in the corporate daily life are the moral, contextual, and situational rules molded within the organization's personal and structural restrictions (Jackall, 1988; 2010).

This author's studies point out that the hierarchical structure of authority is the main point of the bureaucracy that dominates how managers think about their world and themselves. Thereby, the main mechanism of operation of this structure would be its "reporting system", which work as a "management by objectives" system, located in environments where subordinates cannot, for example, compromise their bosses, reinforcing a symbolic condition of their subordination and their voluntary acceptance of loyalty obligations. Promoting, even, protection, to a certain extent, against eventual mistakes made (Jackall, 1988, 2010).

Conceptually, most research on wrongdoing occurs in the intuitive context of common sense, whose acts are labeled as harmful or morally objectionable (Greve, Palmer & Pozner, 2010). Therefore, this dominant approach to studies considers that transgressors are not influenced in their deliberation by their immediate social context and make discrete decisions to engage in illicit behavior. Nevertheless, counterintuitive discoveries are developed using an emerging theoretical lens, directly opposed to the dominant perspective, which avoids treating wrongdoing only "as a direct implication of a set of laws, ethical principles and/or social norms" (Greve, Palmer & Pozner, 2010, p. 55).

In this direction, the reference used in this essay highlights how the line between right and wrong can be drawn and how interests and capacities can shift the line in a malleable way. In figure 1, we represent the action course of this line that separates right and wrong from two different positions: the first considers the course of the line starting from the perspective of the social control agent (representative of a community); the second considers the course of the line starting from the participant's view of the organization.
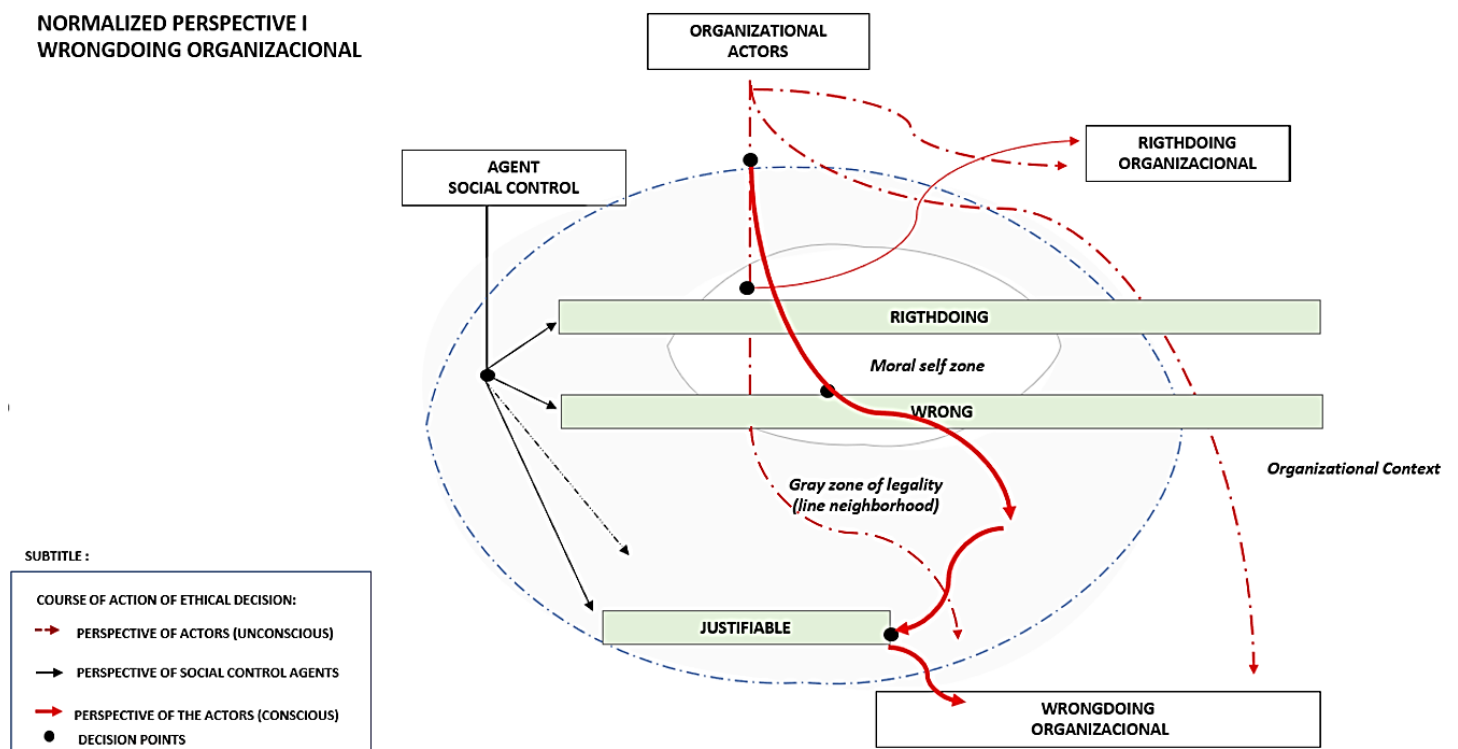

Figure 1. Course of action of ethical choices – a normalized perspective of wrongdoing.
Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on Palmer (2012).

Our first proposition starts from the social control agent's view, where the itinerary of the course of the line, represented by the solid black line, passes through the zones of legality; illegality; and/or the gray areas of legality (Jackall, 1988; Greve, Palmer & Pozner, 2010; Palmer, 2012). In the figure, these zones correspond to the social control agent's alternatives, emphasizing the gray zone that borders the line (Jackall, 1988). Pollock, Mishina and Seo (2016) postulate that social control agents also move through the gray zone of legality, as they are committed to protecting their interests. Thus, they do not always draw the line clearly. In other words, the authors assert that social control agents can determine not only what is right or wrong but also what is justifiable (Pollock, Mishina & Seo, 2016), making the line that separates right from wrong shown in the figure in a less rigid and more malleable way to the organization's participants. This course of the line favors the third alternative's protagonism – the alternative of socially justifiable acts.

On the other hand, our second proposition realizes that in the organizational participants' view, the course of the line runs through the same zones mentioned above;

however, for both wrongdoing and rightdoing acts, the itinerary, represented by the red dotted line, can be traveled unconsciously (Manning & Anteby, 2016). In this same direction, Palmer (2012) notes, recapitulating the works of Langer and Moldoveanu (2000), that when the organizational actor is devoid of mindfulness (rationalized), he ends up trusting in distinctions and categories drawn in the past (and) it is rules and routines are more likely to govern it, regardless of the circumstances of its context. In this sense, even considering that all human behavior is, fundamentally, social action, human experience largely consists of exposure to socially constructed inputs. Palmer (2012) argues that the organization's participants are also more immediately influenced by their social context. Specifically, it focuses on administrative structures (for example, standard operating rules and procedures); and situational processes of social influence (e.g., small group dynamics).

Therefore, it does not seem possible to identify the line's transit in any zone, simply because the decision between right and wrong does not exist (Manning & Anteby, 2016; Smith-Crowe & Zhang, 2016). In unconscious circumstances, organizational actors can be attracted by reasons such as competitive pressures or by mistake (when they do not recognize what they are doing as having ethical implications) (Bazerman & Sezer, 2016; Smith-Crowe & Zhang, 2016).

Yet, in the view of organizational actors, analyzing the course of the action of conscious decisions, represented by the continuous red line, the line action course's itinerary seeks bureaucratic ethics (Jackall, 1988; 2010), socially accepted justifications for the acts of wrongdoing. In this sense, Jackall also offers the notion of the institutional logic that governs social functioning, in which corporate managers, imbued with this ethos, take their world as they find it and try to make it work according to their own institutional logic, helping to create and recreate a society which morality becomes indistinguishable from the search for its own survival and advantage. In other words, an objective set of rules (rules, sanctions, awards), experimentally constructed in which men and women, in a specific context, create and recreate in such a way that their behavior becomes regularized and predictable (Jackall, 1988; 2010). According to Manning & Anteby (2016), the line can be clear and explicit but contingent on its social context. This means that the crime in a moral order is defined by crossing the line and breaking the rules written and imposed by the control agents; however, the same actions can be considered correct in other orders, reinforcing, in turn, the third alternative's protagonism interpreted in our first proposition.

Hence, the line course in all circumstances of this decision type runs through the "moral selves" zone (Chugh & Kern, 2016). In order to facilitate the understanding of this reasoning, the illustrative abstraction locates the border and/or overlapping points of the course of the lines positioned as a bifurcation in the course of conscious choices (see legend as decision points). This interpretation of the sociological texts suggests that the "moral self" plays the same role in literature as the social control agent, our third proposition.

We observe, at this moment, that the most obvious agents of social control are representatives of the state, however our proposal is consistent in the sociological literature that sees all individuals as potential agents of social control (Manning & Anteby, 2016). For instance, the authors review how British and German lawyers operate under strict moral orders, nonetheless, distinct. The British taught to use the law to serve their clients' interests; Germans focused on serving justice in a more neutral way (Manning & Anteby, 2016). In another context, these authors note that the existence of multiple moral orders requires that actors choose between systems or exercise discretion when applying for the order properly. In this direction, they highlight the studies that analyzed the behavior of doctors who, in poor African countries, at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, chose to violate laws that prohibit the importation of cheap generic drugs to treat the disease. In this scenario, the acts cross the line to the domain of error according to an order, however, it finds justification according to the principles that govern the individual's own moral search, in this case, saving lives.

As we have seen so far, the choice between what is considered "right" or "wrong" seems, in fact, to be a constant in the daily life of organizations and can be understood as a deviation from the rationality when survival is at stake, in the organizational jungle. Conversely, it can be seen as a very well thought out and rational decision. In this sense, we adopt the perspective that rationality and ethical perfection are psychologically impossible (Dolly & Kern, 2016), therefore, limited. From this investigative angle, we consider the third alternative's protagonism – socially justified choices (Jackall, 1988; 2010), overcoming the dominant idea in studies on the field that alternatives would be exclusively dichotomous (right / wrong, moral / immoral, ethical / unethical). Therefore, two aspects are highlighted: i) the alternative of socially justifiable choices have the same role as dichotomous alternatives; ii) the line course of the conscious choices (or not) necessarily passes through the zone of the "moral self". In this way, the social control agent can share the space of judgment with the "moral self". These intertwined theoretical aspects, represented in figure 1, seem to escape from the dominant format of studies on business ethics, adjusting to the emerging view of organizational wrongdoing as normal.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This theoretical essay seeks to reflect on how social actors differentiate right (antietic issues) and wrong (business issues). We present a discussion on organizational irregularities (wrongdoing), treating ethics and morality from a sociological perspective, and we explore the rules that social actors use and/or build to guide their

behavior in the business environment. The process of drawing a line between right and wrong is a dimension little understood and have implications for managerial and organizational theory. For such a reflective exercise, the Bureaucratic Ethics and Theory of Social Control assumptions were adopted, moving away from the dominant view of wrongdoing as an abnormal phenomenon.

The study notes that the "moral selves" zone seems to position itself as a dialogical nucleus of conscious decisions type, present in the legality and illegality zones and in the "gray zone" of legality. In other words, the nucleus of the "moral self" would be in constant dialogue with the decision-maker, possibly assuming the role of a second controlling agent of ethical behavior. This alternative view would depart from the implicit thought that the organization's participants are regulated only by external control agents, hence offering a new possibility for analyzing wrongdoing. Furthermore, still within the spectrum of conscious decisions, this alternative would move away from the dichotomous view of ethical decisions, granting a leading role to the third alternative: the alternative of morally justified choices.

As a proposed agenda for future research, we suggest the development of empirical research capable of exemplifying and elucidate how the red line between right and wrong is defined in the organizational context and how the flexibility of this line can influence the definition of organizational wrongdoing.

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