

“Fathers' Stories of Resistance and Hegemony in Organizational Cultures”, Annalisa Murgia and Barbara Poggio, published in *Gender, Work and Organization*, vol. 20, n. 4, 2013: 413-424.

Abstract

This article focuses on the practices of resistance and hegemony that oppose change in gender cultures in organizations. It suggests that analysis of the narratives produced by organizational actors is a fruitful method with which to deal with issues of this kind. In particular, the analysis concentrates on how resistance and hegemony practices may affect the implementation of changes promoted at a normative level — as in the case of the Italian law that has extended the right to take parental leave for childcare to men as well, in opposition to the dominant cultural models of gender. The analysis of the experiences reported by men belonging to different organizations, and having in common the use of parental leave to spend time with their children, allows us to reflect upon the fact that the symbolic orders of gender in organizations cannot be challenged at a normative level if the change does not affect the organizational culture, becoming embedded in everyday organizational practices.

Keywords: masculinities, resistance and hegemonic practices, organizational cultures, parental leaves, narratives

Introduction

The aim of this article is to highlight the role that the practices of resistance and hegemony can play in the processes whereby change takes place in gender cultures and orders in organizations, and to show how the analysis of the narratives produced by organizational actors may be a valid method with which to deal with these sorts of issues. In particular, through the analysis of stories told by fathers working in different organizations, we will try to highlight how resistance and hegemony practices may affect the implementation of cultural changes promoted at an institutional level — as in the case of the law enacted in Italy in 2000 that gave men as well as women the right to access parental leave and take time off work.¹

The relationship among the concepts of gender, hegemony and resistance has been explored by a variety of studies (Connell, 1987; Hearn, 1992; Martin, 2001), that have highlighted the existence, within a multiplicity of different types, of more legitimated ideal types of masculinity and femininity that impose themselves on the others, defining identities and suitable placements for men and women within a specific symbolic order (Connell, 1995). We, accordingly, conceptualize gender as a dynamic and relational construct

whose principal utility consists in exploring how female characteristics are attributed to women and masculine ones to men, and how ‘doing gender’ is a social practice that positions people in contexts of asymmetrical power relations. (Bruni *et al.* 2005, p. 3)

When analysing power asymmetries in construction of the dominant gender model, Connell uses the concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, described as a process ‘of configuring practices through time, which transform their starting-points in gender structures’ (Connell, 1995, p. 72). As happens with all hegemonic forms, this ideal type

of masculinity serves the purpose of legitimating and naturalizing the interests of the dominant group to the detriment of other groups (Gramsci, 1975) — in this case women, as well as those who recognize themselves in other types of masculinity constructed as ‘others’ — which are marginalized and relegated to a subordinate position. In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci wrote:

What does it mean to say that a certain action, a certain way of life, a certain attitude or custom are ‘natural’ or that they are instead ‘against nature’?... Meanwhile, it is necessary to establish that ‘nature’ cannot be spoken of as anything that is fixed, immutable and objective. One comes to realize that ‘natural’ almost always means ‘correct and normal’ according to our current historical consciousness, but that the many have no consciousness of this historically determined actuality and hold their way of thinking to be eternal and immutable. (Gramsci, 1975, pp. 1874–79)

Therefore, individuals can either align themselves with and conform to a ‘natural order’ — which makes partiality essential and tries to imprison women, as well as the subjectivities and practices exceeding the dual system, in the gender monoculture (Poidimani, 2006) — or engage in forms of resistance, thus contributing in their turn to the reproduction or the dismantlement of this order.

Narrative practices are particularly relevant instruments for studying processes of this kind: the processes of the production, legitimization and naturalization of symbolic orders, as well as those of unmasking and deconstruction, are often developed through organizational storytelling (Rhodes, 2001; Vaara, 2002). As has been pointed out by many studies, stories are important resources for studying and understanding organizational changes and the forms of resistance produced by it. Starting from this perspective, organizational studies have highlighted the role of stories as stimuli and vehicles for organizational change (Brown *et al.*, 2004; Czarniawska, 2000; Vaara, 2002), but also as instruments to prevent or hinder change through the enhancement of dominant values and behaviour (Martin *et al.*, 1983; Rhodes, 2001) in response to a push for change and innovation.

In this article we seek to show how these interpretative frameworks can yield useful insights into whether and how the change in hegemonic models of gender — even when promoted by specific regulations, as in the research presented here — can be hindered in organizations through resistance practices performed by social actors and management. Moreover, we will show how narratives may be instruments for hegemonic reproduction and resistance to change, as well as instruments useful for bringing to light, challenging, and dismantling dominant models, thus supporting the change.

Gender, hegemonic masculinity and power

In this article we focus on the difficulty of changing the gender models dominant in organizations. Most of the studies conducted on the relationship between gender and organization concentrate on dynamics concerning the construction of the female, leaving masculinity an invisible and taken for granted category. Here we have decided to concentrate instead on the concept of masculinity, or better, of masculinities. The first implication of treating gender as practice and as a system of meaning (and power) attribution is that it supersedes an univocal idea of masculinity (Bruni *et al.*, 2005).

It is therefore possible to speak of a plurality of masculinity models (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) that can be practiced by both men and women (Halberstam, 1998). A concept of particular importance for our

purposes is that of hegemonic masculinity, as proposed by Robert Connell, and which denotes a configuration of practices ‘that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations’ (Connell, 1995, p. 76).

This hegemony is based on three main dimensions: power relationships (that is, women’s subordination to men), production relationships (that is, the gender-based division of labour and its economic consequences), and cathexis (which concerns the dominant model of desire). The outcome of the interweaving between the first two dimensions is evidenced in the dichotomy between the productive sphere (associated with the masculine) and reproductive sphere (associated with the feminine) and in the symbolic and material prevalence of the former over the latter. The separation between work and home is argued on the basis of the rational nature of the former, in contrast with the emotional nature of the latter (Martin, 1990).

The idea of hegemonic masculinity used by Connell (1987); which is based in its turn on the conception of hegemony as a form of covert and taken for granted ideological domination (Gramsci, 1975), is useful for analysing the dominant masculinity practices in organizations. Indeed, it is the model of hegemonic masculinity that produces the tendency to institutionalize relational attitudes and practices according to the positions of individuals in organizational structures (Hearn, 1992).

Still useful in this regard is the concept of the ‘patriarchate’, which concerns the hierarchical dimension of relationships, not only within the family but also in the broader public context. The processes by which this model of gender is constructed and consolidated in organizations have been well described by Joan Acker (1990), who identifies five stages: the creation of a hierarchy on the basis of gender profiles; the production of symbols that counterpose memberships; the forms of interaction that perpetuate dominance and subordination; the consequent positioning of gender by the same actors; and an organizational logic based on masculine times, bodies and expectations. Masculinity can therefore be seen as a subtext: that is, as a set of processes that covertly produce gender distinctions. The concept of subtext is connected to that of power, in that the purpose of these processes is to reproduce consensus or acceptance regarding the dominant order and hegemonic practices (Bendl, 2008; Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998). Moreover masculinities can be seen ‘as practices that are represented or interpreted by actors and/or observers as masculine within a system of gender relations that gives them meaning *as gendered ‘masculine’*” (Martin, 2001, p. 588).

In this study we are in particular interested in how masculinity is mobilized in stories that refer to a dimension traditionally associated with women (namely, childcare). In fact, we examine the stories of men who have used their entitlement to take parental leave from work. The magnitude of this change is shown by the fact that this entitlement was introduced by a law enacted only in 2000, with the aim of changing gender practices in organizations and families and driving change in organizational solutions related to the work–life balance by opening them to fathers. However, the actual application of the law and the take-up rates of parental leave have been very low. This is also due to organizational cultures which are loath to support this change. Our analysis of these stories will enable us to observe what dynamics may be at work in organizations, in particular at management level, to support or (more often) to counteract the spread of gender practices opposed to the hegemonic model of masculinity.

Legal framework

In order to understand how hegemonic masculinity is put into practice in organizations and what role it plays with regard to the introduction of a normative change that would challenge it, we shall consider three stories

recounted by men who have taken a period of parental leave after the birth of their children, in accordance with the current Italian law entitled ‘Provisions for the support of maternity and paternity, for the right to care and education, and for co-ordination of the pace of city life’.

Enacted in Italy in 2000, Law 53 states that after the period of compulsory maternity leave has elapsed during the first 8 years of a child’s life both parents, if covered by a dependent employment contract, may be absent from work, even simultaneously, for a period of 6 months each (continuously or piecemeal) up to a maximum of 10 months. But if the father takes leave of absence for a continuous period amounting to more than 3 months, the 6-month limit is extended to 7, and the total amount of leave entitlement for the two parents becomes 11 months. During the period of parental leave, for 6 months and until the child’s third birthday, the law grants an allowance amounting to 30 per cent of the parent’s pay regardless of their income. Parental leave is unpaid if the child is aged 3–8 years old. The period is covered by national contributions. However, better leave conditions can be negotiated through collective agreements.²

The law is aimed to promote work–life balance policies and is not addressed — as often happens — exclusively to women, but instead is intended to recast the division of labour in the couple and the family, challenging the boundaries between masculine and feminine symbolic universes. Although the introduction of this law has contributed to promoting and legitimizing the idea of a more active fatherhood and a more equal sharing of parental responsibilities, current data show that the use of parental leave by men is well below expectations.³

The stories recounted by fathers who have recently taken parental leave highlight the difficulty of altering the hegemonic gender order in work and the family — so deeply rooted in time and in Italian culture — by means of normative changes alone. Although the right to take parental law is today enshrined in a law that has brought Italy closer to the rest of Europe in regard to balancing work and family life, the ways in which organizations have responded to this innovation are inevitably diverse and sometimes contradictory. They can in no way be explained solely as a linear consequence of the institutional change. As shown by neo-institutionalist studies ([Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996](#)) and ones that draw on the sociology of translation ([Callon, 1986](#)), the institutional context is only one of the factors that contribute to the translation into practice of a norm. On the one hand, regulatory intervention — in this case enactment of Law 53 of 2000 — is not the only logic that drives organizational actions; on the other, it generates a series of actions not specifically foreseen by the law ([Gherardi and Lippi, 2000](#)). As we shall see, changing the dominant gender model and the status given to paternity in workplaces depends above all on how organizational cultures are reconfigured.

Fieldwork and methodology

The three stories examined in this article have been selected from a large sample of interviews carried out in the Province of Trento, in the north-east of Italy, as part of two different research projects in which both authors have been involved. The first was an Equal project, which examined both the issue of vertical gender segregation in professional careers and the work–life balance through 40 interviews carried out in 2006 with men and women working for large employers in the province, among which were the provincial administration and the provincial health board. The second project was instead developed in a government research programme aimed at studying the career trajectories of men and women, and in particular their turning points, from the most important family events to possible interruptions due to horizontal or vertical career moves, and with particular regard to

differences of gender and generation. In this case, a total of 40 interviews were carried out in 2007 with employees — men and women — in the public and commerce sectors. In both research projects the research sectors were chosen according to their numerical significance in the reference area.⁴

What emerged with great clarity from most of the interviews carried out during these two projects was the existence of a malestream culture (Gherardi, 1995) where the dominant symbolic gender order seemed to be characterized by an asymmetrical division of roles and tasks between men and women (Gerstel and Gallagher, 2001). Out of a total of 80 interviews conducted during the two research projects just described, half were with men, the most of whom were fathers. Nevertheless, only eight of the almost 40 fathers interviewed — aged between 25 and 45 — had asked for a period of parental leave and only five of them had made non-sporadic (that is, limited to a few days) use of parental leave. In what follows, we focus on the stories of three of these interviewees because they seemed particularly interesting accounts of the experiences of men who had challenged, in different ways and more or less explicitly, hegemonic masculinity practices in the organizations where they worked.

Both of the research projects just described employed the narrative interview technique, aimed to encourage and stimulate interviewees to tell stories about their work experiences (Poggio, 2004; Riessman, 2008; Wagner and Wodak, 2006). Narrative interviews with organizational actors make it possible to highlight the ways in which dominant social practices and organizational models are constructed by comparing different interlocutors and the ways in which, through their interactions, they contribute to or oppose hegemonic practices (Bamberg, 2004). A narrative analysis of stories recounted by the organizational actors enable us to understand how change is supported or hindered (Brown and Humphreys, 2003; Czarniawska, 2000) and who can reinforce or rebel against dominant scripts (Martin *et al.*, 1983; Rhodes, 2001). The relationship between narrative and change depends on the fact that both constructs are located on a temporal dimension and refer to the existence of a before-and-after the occurrence of some event that changed the initial condition. Every story is based on the occurrence of a change: the structure of stories, in fact, always has to do with breakdown in an equilibrium caused by the appearance of an obstacle and the establishment of a new equilibrium (Todorov, 1971), with a transition from a state of disorder to a new order which usually passes through various stages (Greimas, 1970). The problem can be seen as an event that does not meet expectations, an event that violates perceptual structures (Starbuck and Milliken, 1988).

In particular, considering the relationship between narrative and organizational change may prove fruitful when the analysis is enriched with a further dimension; that of gender. Many studies have pointed out the significance of narratives in both reproducing and challenging dominant gender orders in organizations (Gherardi and Poggio, 2007; Hanappi-Egger and Hofmann, 2005) and as instruments of analysis with which to bring to light and deconstruct hegemonic practices (Martin, 2001).

We have decided to report these three stories — among many others that could have been narrated — with the purpose of highlighting the position of alternative or marginal voices often hidden behind an organization's presumed neutrality, uniformity and homogeneity. For reasons of space we report only some excerpts of the stories, chosen for their evocative qualities to illustrate the marginal or rebellious narratives in the organizations examined. Through the analysis of the experiences recounted by men who have challenged, at least in part, the dominant model of masculinity in the organizations where they work, we will try to give an account of the relationships between hegemonic practices and various forms of resistance following a normative change.

Unmasking hegemonic practices: fathers' stories at work

After about ten years since the enactment of the law on parental leave in Italy, as described above, the proportion of men taking advantage of their entitlement to parental leave to take care of their children in the early stages of their lives is still very low, certainly well below the expectations of those who promoted the law. The lack of success of a law encouraging the sharing of caring work between partners raises questions as to the gender models embedded in social practices and organizational cultures which seemingly hinder the application of this measure and obstruct the use of instruments to balance work and life. Using these instruments, or pointing out the need for the reconciliation of paid and unpaid work, are in fact openly in conflict with the dominant gender practices in organizations (Cooper, 2000). Organizational structures, cultures and practices are still permeated by a model of hegemonic masculinity constructed around the figure of the male breadwinner, an adult male head of household, usually with a full-time employment contract, and whose principal sources of identity are self-fulfillment in the public sphere, paid work and access to organizational resources of power and status (Collinson and Hearn, 1994).

In what follows we focus on stories recounted by men who have applied for periods of parental leave. Our purpose is to understand how, after the introduction of the new law on maternity and paternity, the hegemonic gender culture and masculinity model have been reproduced and challenged in organizations. For our analysis we have selected the stories of three men — who will be referred to as Atlas, Epimetheus and Prometheus⁵ — which have allowed us to give an account of the organizational (non)change.

As noted above, storytelling is a useful instrument with which to analyse how organizational change can be favoured or hindered. Several studies have stressed how, within organizations, dominant narratives can support asymmetrical power relations by marginalizing some interests in favour of others (Humphreys and Brown, 2002). Conversely, narratives proposing plots alternative to the dominant ones may be powerful devices to induce change (Kaye, 1995), but just for this reason they may be perceived as threats and therefore silenced. The three stories discussed in what follows recount the experiences of three fathers who have exercised their right to a period of parental leave following the birth of a child. They shed light on the different forms of resistance or acceptance that the fathers encountered on the part of their organizations.

Atlas: a story of offensive resistance

Atlas is a hospital surgeon aged 38 years and has two daughters. His wife does the same work in the same hospital. His story began two years before the time of writing, when his wife suggested that he should take parental leave so that he could spend time with his first daughter. In fact, he had an extremely heavy workload, and in the first 4 years of his daughter's life he had spent little time with her. Atlas decided to take up his wife's suggestion and applied to his chief consultant for a month's leave. He did so well in advance and he asked to be away in a period that was not of crucial importance for the hospital so as not to cause any major disruption. Nevertheless, his application provoked a harsh reaction from the chief consultant and severely damaged their professional relationship. Given the situation, and thinking that by now he had little to lose, the following year, on the occasion of the birth of his second daughter, Atlas decided to take the remaining 2 months of leave to which he was legally entitled. This time the consequence was that, upon his return, he was excluded from the operating theatre, with evident implications for his career. Thereafter, Atlas consulted his trade union and applied

to the labour tribunal, and then decided to move to another hospital. An excerpt from the interview enables us to follow Atlas' experience when he applied for parental leave and when he returned to work:

I knew it would be a very tough choice, I was aware of that. By now my career has finished in certain respects for this reason. My chief consultant hasn't spoken to me for two years.... He told me: 'it's a personal affront, don't do it, because it's a bad example to a child if his father stays at home', this I'll always remember, and then he said, 'a child must understand that you have to work hard to earn money'. Then I went back to work and he started doing so that I was only able to work in day surgery, and then I wasn't in the operating theatre for 5 months, and for us surgeons not operating is a big problem. So I went to the union, and now he lets me operate 1 day a week: the minimum. Clearly when situations like these arise in the ward, everyone is very nice, everyone loves you. But in reality you come in, you find there's a wall, because he's managed to stir things up.... They all belong to the same world, even if I know of a couple of colleagues who, following my example, asked for parental leave and got it, but not with my chief consultant.

What clearly emerges from the story of Atlas is the importance of the managerial role, which allows us to analyse hegemony and gender as forms of organizational power and control embedded in organizational practices of assessment and interaction. The fact that Atlas decided to take temporary leave of absence from work and devote himself to care-work, and in particular to childcare, immediately relegated him to a marginal position in the organization. The purpose of the managerial discursive practices of the kind observed is to marginalize men who do not reproduce practices of hegemonic masculinity by being too engaged in the domestic sphere; to the detriment of their careers. What is taken for granted is a sharp separation between home and work, with value set on the 'sole' and 'rational' nature of work and its priority over the private sphere (Martin, 1990).

In this case, the narrator challenged the dominant organizational models by refusing to follow the practices of hegemonic masculinity and by engaging in practices of resistance in response to the lack of consideration given by the organization through the manager. Such consideration is of great importance in consolidating or challenging hegemonic practices. One notes, in fact, conflicts with organizational reference models caused both by the fact that a right that should have been guaranteed was not granted, as in the case of the request for parental leave, and by the constraints imposed on the professional career. This prompts reflection on the fact that, as reported by several qualitative studies (Brandth and Kvande, 2002; Kvande, 2009; Murgia and Poggio, 2009), just as maternity has always found it difficult to acquire citizenship in work organizations (Poggio, 2002), so paternity — albeit in different forms and with persistent asymmetries between men and women (Halrynjo, 2009)

— may jeopardize a man's career prospects when it is no longer an indicator of breadwinner status but it is used to claim entitlement to take leave of absence to be with one's children.

However, hegemonic masculinity is not only conveyed through discourses concerning the professional sphere and the lack of commitment by a man who decides to take parental leave; it also pervades a more personal sphere. Atlas's chief consultant, in fact, apart from stopping his professional career, questioned his identity as a father and a man by accusing him of committing a personal offense and being a bad example to his children with his decision to stay at home for a while. In this regard, our analysis suggests that the hegemonic masculinity performed by the male managers described in this account reproduces, both on a professional and personal level, the dominance of men who comply with this model. Those who do not agree with it — both men and women —

are instead considered less valuable and not worthy of status, power and career opportunities. Moreover, in Atlas's case, it is interesting to note the position not only of the management but also of colleagues. Atlas says he found 'a wall' on his return. Once again we encounter a story in which (non)change is used as an instrument for social control, to prescribe and reinforce managerial actions and values (McConkie and Boss, 1994). It is not by chance that the interviewee says that 'they all belong to the same world', as if to highlight the compliance of his own colleagues with the dominant organizational culture. Organizations are, in fact, mainly managed through the same cultural practices and models that are at the base of hegemonic masculinity (Martin, 1990).

However, the fact that organizations comprise stories proposing scripts alternative to the mainstreaming plots represents a form of resistance that, as in this case, can be collectivized and embraced, even if slowly, by other organizational actors.

Epimetheus: a story of emergency resistance

Epimetheus is 38-years old and works as an official in the provincial administration. He is married to a woman who manages a shop, and for 2 years he has been the father of twins. As a commuter, on weekdays he spends around 12 hours a day away from home. The birth of the twins disrupted the couple's routine and also required action by Epimetheus. His wife took unpaid leave for a year, and he immediately took the first month of his parental leave. This he subsequently decreased to 3 days a week, then 2, and currently 1 — on the day when his wife works full time. His superior accepted this arrangement without raising too much resistance, unlike what had previously happened with Epimetheus's other colleagues. He considered the birth of twins as an emergency that had to be dealt with. Nevertheless, during the summer Epimetheus wanted to take another month off so that he could help his wife with running the shop, but his superior was reluctant to grant the leave, so that in the end they negotiated a minimum weekly schedule for Epimetheus.

Whereas in the case of Atlas the narrator places himself in explicit opposition to the dominant models, the story recounted by Epimetheus is instead characterized by greater heterogeneity and a closer intertwining between practices of resistance and those of hegemony. His account, in fact, does not show any clear-cut attempts to distance himself from the company, nor the development of rebellious positions opposed to the hegemonic one. There are instead contingent practices of resistance performed on the basis of a temporary emergency situation. Epimetheus states that if he had had just one child, instead of twins, he probably would not have asked for parental leave. Besides, in his account, neither the organization of labour nor the division of care-work among the couple is questioned:

I take parental leave 1 day a week, usually on Wednesday, which is the day that my wife works all day. I also stay at home on Saturday, because she works on Saturday too. Last year I wanted to take the whole of August off, because in August my wife had to work full-time, instead of part-time, but my boss was not so keen on letting me take it and that was it. I must say, though, that since he heard that there are two babies, my boss has understood the emergency.... For example, it sometimes happens that I work some hours overtime, and so on Friday I manage to take half a day off and stay at home, because I work a little longer the other days of the week. However, in spite of everything, I still keep everything under control because, between holidays and leave, I've been away for less than 2 months. If I took a whole year off, probably on my return I'd find that one thing has been given to a colleague, another thing to another one, a little here and there. Anyway, it

is unlikely that something like this will happen to a man, because it is the mother who bears the brunt of the family but when you have twins.

Even in cases where parental leave is not experienced as an exception or a contingent necessity, it is nevertheless adapted to the dominant culture based on organizational models that reward physical presence in the workplace and time availability (Gherardi and Poggio, 2007).

Epimetheus made use of this instrument of work–life balance without hampering his professional career, since this was not an attempt to challenge either the management of organizational time or the distribution of workloads during his absence. Hence, taking leave does not necessarily mean performing practices of resistance in opposition to hegemonic organizational practices. In Epimetheus’s case this is an emergency solution that will soon be superseded, with a return to the normal order. Apparent in his story is a view of work founded on the company’s expectations of total availability and the model of ‘face-time’ (Fuchs Epstein, 1998; Gherardi and Poggio, 2007): in fact he has reduced his absence during the week and over his entire working life to the minimum. This is a symbolic bond that is part of a widespread culture which, especially in Italy, still privileges face-time over a more careful assessment of performance (Bombelli, 2004).

Moreover, this account does not even question the dominant models of gender in the organization and in the couple, which remain in the background and continue to be the practice in use, especially when specific life phases and transitions, such as the birth of twins, are over. By stating that ‘it is the mother that bears the brunt’, Epimetheus complies with a cultural model that legitimizes the figure of the male breadwinner; the man with a full-time job involved in the care-work as a helper rather than being in a symmetrical position with his female partner. In this respect, the second story that we have reported supports a dominant symbolic order of gender based on the assumption that women are feminine and men are masculine, and in which the former are more engaged in the private sphere and (unpaid) care-work and the latter are engaged in the public sphere and paid work (Martin, 1990). In some way, Epimetheus’s words exhibit a shift of agency away from his responsibility, since he grants a status of objectivity to situations and asserts a non-choice with regard to the request for parental leave, as if he had to justify the violation of an order (Bruner, 1990).

Prometheus: a story of tolerated resistance

Prometheus is 35-years old and works for a small commercial firm. For work and family reasons his wife lives in another region, together with their 3-month-old son. Prometheus was told that he was entitled to parental leave by a colleague who had already taken it. He consequently applied for it himself so that he could spend more time with his son. Although he expected a great deal of resistance, his application was approved without particular problems, he thinks, because it was an isolated case. He took leave of absence for the first 3 weeks after his son’s birth and subsequently for 2 days a week, trying to avoid the more critical periods of work for the firm and always keeping in contact with the organization.

One aspect that caught our interest was that Prometheus’s story, as well as most of the stories we have analysed, describes an organization that is not supportive of the new regulation and where parental leave for men is still largely unknown, even though it is almost ten years since the enactment of the law. Hence the story of parental leave enters the organization through the back door, by word of mouth, by hearsay and mainly through stories told by the first employee fathers who had applied for it. Narratives therefore seem to represent an

important vehicle for organizational change, being able to alter the dominant plots conveying the stereotype that reconciling work and family is exclusively a female issue:

There isn't a standard procedure. I heard about this possibility from a colleague of mine who'd done it. Let's say he gave me the push. When I learned that he'd taken parental leave, I said, 'Right then, I'll find out about it', so I knew it was possible. My superiors were supportive and tolerated it. For example, I used to work on Friday and Monday, and I stayed home the other days, but even when I was at home I called on the phone to see if there were any problems, so there was continuity. It was me who wanted to do it like that, partly to make it easier for them, partly to make it easier for myself when the time came to go back to work. Well, I don't know how many other companies would have looked favourably on this thing. In our company there wasn't any problem. Obviously I asked my boss first and he said it was okay. Of course, he wouldn't be so happy if everybody did the same.

Even if this is a story that does not fall within the ambit of dominant plots, which consider men as having no bearing on the reconciliation of paid and unpaid work, Prometheus describes parental leave for fathers as a privilege tolerated by the organization and which, if not excessively extended, can turn into a sort of pride for the organizational identity. Staying home from work to take care of children is regarded as an unusual practice that is viewed favourably provided that it remains an isolated case and, above all, does not entail the redefinition of a model of work based on constant availability and physical presence. It is as if the employer supported the existence of a right for employees, but at the same time tried to keep the lid on it, to avoid rumours, so that it remained an extraordinary event rather than a routine practice.

The story reported by Prometheus clearly highlights how the practices of resistance are often indissolubly intertwined with hegemonic practices. In this case, the narrator places himself outside the hegemonic model of masculinity because he is aware of having made an uncommon choice and has therefore challenged the dominant order but he is also inside it, as a co-producer of the same model of masculinity that he accepts: neither the management of organizational time nor the organization of labour has, in fact, been subverted.

Conclusions

In a review of gender subtexts that reflect the current reproduction of gender in organizational discourse, Regine Bendl has recently argued that the various subtexts considered are all characterized by the supremacy of the Lacanian 'Law of the Father', which constructs the masculine as the norm and the feminine as 'other' (Bendl, 2008; Lacan, 1977). What emerges from all the texts examined in Bendl's study is, in fact, a binary order characterized by the hegemony of masculine terms over feminine ones and reproduced through specific patterns of language. In light of the large body of literature on masculinity developed in recent years, we can state that what is regarded as the norm is actually not masculinity in general but a specific form of masculinity, which is the one defined by Connell (1995) as hegemonic, since it is more appropriate to the socially dominant conceptions and values.

In the texts collected by our research, the Law of the Father seems to be challenged by behaviour brought about by the introduction of a new law that encourages fathers to experience fatherhood more thoroughly. This law has in fact been introduced with the purpose of contributing to dismantlement of the gender asymmetries still

characterizing the interweaving of work and family life, by attributing specific time off from work for both men and women. Enacted at the beginning of 2000, this law entitled fathers for the first time to take parental leave in order to look after their children. However, even after ten years, this entitlement is little used. This under-use of the law on parental leave in Italy is a problematic and interesting phenomenon that raises new issues and new spaces for reflection on how organizational change, specifically change in gendered organizational cultures, may be hindered by practices of hegemony and resistance that tend to reproduce traditional subtexts and cultures. By focusing on three different stories of fathers who have taken parental leave in different organizations, we have tried to show how, besides the presence of a common cultural trait related to the model of hegemonic masculinity, the practices of hegemony and resistance are always situated and understandable in light of the specific contexts in which they are embedded and of their social practices. The focus on narratives has enabled us to analyse the processes by which dominant symbolic gender orders are reconstructed, showing how managerial power and control relations are permeated by practices of hegemonic masculinity that have a strong influence in subjugating organizational members to the dominant culture.

Our analysis highlights the role that narratives can play in the study of organizational change and of the practices of resistance that oppose it (Brown *et al.*, 2009). In fact, on the one hand, narratives afford privileged access to material practices and the way in which these are interpreted by organizational actors; while on the other they represent specific practices in the production of meaning. In this sense, narratives are significant instruments for the reproduction and establishment of hegemonic practices and, at the same time, they can prove to be effective instruments for deconstructing and dismantling dominant gender subtexts. Although marginalized and in a position of subordination, the various voices represent different pieces of a larger narrative mosaic: an ever-changing mosaic that provides us with a non-static and non-conventional representation of the way in which the symbolic order of gender can be maintained, challenged and re-established, yet always negotiated within organizations.

The attention paid to discordant and opposing voices, and to how they are intertwined with hegemonic voices, has allowed us to analyse the processes by which dominant symbolic gender orders are produced. In every organization there are different, and sometimes conflicting, forces of resistance and hegemony, emancipation and subjection, control and rebellion. These are closely intertwined dimensions that are difficult to disentangle. By observing their interweaving and how they incorporate or hinder the push for change originating from outside, which can challenge the dominant model of gender, we have been able to shed light on the various components in play, highlighting their complexity and ambivalence and showing once again how, through exceptional stories, it is possible to understand the dominant plots better.

Notes

1. article The present is a totally collaborative effort by the two authors, whose names appear in alphabetical order. If, however, for academic reasons individual responsibility is to be assigned, Annalisa Murgia wrote sections 2, 3 and 4 and Barbara Poggio wrote Section 1, the introduction and the conclusions.
2. Before this law came into effect a father could take leave of absence only during the first year of the child's life and then only if the mother was a dependent employee who had waived her own right to maternity leave. The new regulation ratifies a change from protecting women to encouraging care-work by both parents.

3. In 2005, among dependent employees aged 15–64 with at least one child aged 8 and under, parental leave had been taken in the 12 months prior to the interview by 7.5 per cent of men and 24.2 per cent of women (National Institute for Statistics, 2008).
4. In the Autonomous Province of Trento, with its 4784 employees, there is a substantial balance between male and female staff (47.7 versus 52.3%). Nevertheless, women are mainly concentrated in middle-to-low job categories (around 70% of employees). The provincial health board has 7336 employees with a marked preponderance of female personnel (67.8%). Analysis by type of employment shows that women are concentrated in non-managerial jobs (92.5%), while they form the distinct minority in management (7.5%). Finally, 13.5% of workers are found in the commerce sector, and in particular the 13.1% of men (17,200) and 14.1% of women (13,100) in the Province of Trento. These data have been obtained directly from the administrations concerned and refer to 2007.
5. Atlas, Prometheus and Epimetheus were Greek divinities. They were three Titan brothers who rebelled against the order of Zeus. However, the Titans were defeated and confined in the underworld kingdom of Tartarus. Atlas, as leader of the Titans who had fought against Zeus, was condemned to hold the sky on his shoulders. Prometheus, while belonging to the rebel Titans, took the side of Zeus, inducing Epimetheus, his brother, to do the same.

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