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Abstract

Purpose – Aim of the article is to overcome an endogenous view of work, as a category isolated from the other existential spheres, and to identify an alternative approach to understanding how (paid) work and other life domains interweave. Biographical transitions between work and non-work are analysed, paying specific attention to the processes of gender positioning.

Design/methodology/approach – The research is based on the analysis of 60 narrative interviews with men and women working in the Italian public sector (the civil service and the health service). The interviews were audiorecorded, transcribed, and then subjected to narrative analysis, focusing in particular on plots, biographical transitions and positioning processes.

Findings - The analysis has brought out the predominant plots, as well as the alternative ones, of the work stories narrated by men and women interviewed, highlighting the specific gender positioning that subtended different attributions between men and women in the inter-relations between work and the personal and familial sphere.

Practical implications – The results show the opportunity to focus next research on organizations that use managerial models innovative in terms of time organization and performance assessment, giving visibility and legitimacy to alternative narratives on the interweaving among people's different biographical trajectories.

Originality/value – The paper proposes the concept of 'biographical transition' as an interpretative category with which to study the different strategies and experiences of work/life balance and an heuristic tool able to give sense to the complex interweaving among different life trajectories in the contemporary society.

Keywords: *gender, organization, biographical transitions, narrative analysis*

Introduction

In the recent sociological debate, the traditional categories of the sociology of work have been much criticised for their inability to give account of the complexity of the experiences of social actors and to understand ongoing changes. It is widely argued, in fact, that new techniques should be developed to analyse contemporary forms of work; techniques which take account of a series of dimensions and aspects which sociological analysis has helped make explicit but are instead neglected or ignored by an interpretation that concentrates mainly on legislative, economic and productive conditions (Pettinger et al., 2005; Halford, Strangleman 2009). It is accordingly necessary to abandon the endogenous point of view which isolated work from the other existential spheres so that that the activities, needs, interests, and cultures of men and women were declined exclusively in terms of the figure of the worker, with the risk of losing the complexity of people's lives. Hence a notion of work which takes account of a plurality of dimensions able to reveal the numerous domains which intersect in an individual's life shifts the attention to beyond the market.

The aim of this article is to contribute to this debate by proposing the concept of 'biographical transition' as an alternative approach to understanding how (paid) work and other life domains interweave. The point of view adopted, in fact, starts from the assumption that analysis of work and working can only be conducted by uncovering the multiple articulations of the various spheres that make up people's lives, given that "the organization and distribution of work cannot be explained only in terms of what is intrinsic to work itself" (Glucksmann, 2005, p. 22). We shall examine in particular biographical transitions between work and non-work, seeking to understand the positionings (Gherardi, 1995) enacted by men and women in order to disentangle work conditions and the quality of private life.

By means of analysis of narrative interviews with men and women working in the Italian public sector (the civil service and the health service), we identify three different types of narrative, showing how each of them involves different gender positionings. Narratives, in fact, can be used to

examine the interweaving (at times made explicit, at others denied) between work and personal and familial spheres, and how people, women and men, position themselves in this relation.

1. Work/Life Transitions and Gender Positioning

During the last century, sociological studies on work endeavoured, both empirically and theoretically, to consider the concept of 'work' as synonymous with paid employment (Beechey, 1987; Pahl, 1988; Bradley, 1989; Tancred 1995). As a consequence, unpaid work was largely omitted from sociological definitions of work, and from empirical studies of the phenomenon. This reductionism can be viewed as a legacy from the changes that took place during industrialization, with progressive separation between the public and private spheres. The former was defined as the domain of economically productive industrial work, while the private domestic sphere was identified as non-economic – that is, as the realm of activities not recognized as 'work'. This dichotomy immediately assumed connotations to do with the patterning of gender relations. The public sphere of production was construed as being a male domain, while women were defined in relation to the private sphere of the family and reproduction (Martin 1990). This separation was legitimated and strengthened by the creation of disciplinary boundaries within the academic debate, which hijacked the notion of work by defining it as "paid employment, within the boundary of the economy, and represented in a monetarized and measurable manner" (Glucksmann 1995: 66). The separation also formed the ideological basis for the model of the male breadwinner, which not only located men in the public sphere of the production but gave them responsibility for the economic maintenance of the private sphere as 'heads of household', while women were positioned in a subordinate and economically dependent role.

The close connection between the public and private dimensions – little considered by the traditional categories of the sociology of work – has been brought to light by the feminist and gender theories (Pettinger et al., 2005) which contributed greatly to renewing the interpretative

categories used to study professional trajectories and the interweavings between work and other life domains (Nippert-Eng, 1995; Ashforth et al., 2000). Asserted in particular has been the need to innovate the lenses of analysis so that this focus is not on the labour market but on the world of work; that is, on the conditions of existence whose space and value are measured in a plurality of relationships and interweavings (Glucksmann, 1995). On these theoretical premises – also within the Italian sociology of work debate – the way in which the world of work is considered has grown complex, and it is now necessary to investigate the mobile threshold that has always separated activity from non-activity, work from non-work, the space of work from the domestic space, the public sphere from the private sphere (Borghi, Rizza, 2006; Nannicini, 2006; Salmieri, 2006).

In order to understand how the different trajectories and dimensions of life interweave and merge, in what follows we shall use the concept of 'biographical transition' as an interpretative category with which to study the different strategies and experiences of work/life balance, doing so from the points of view and the positionings of the subjects concerned. Transitions, in fact, do not have absolute meanings; rather, they have variable ones established by the actors who undergo them in first person, and by the space-time context in which they occur (Bullis, Bach, 1989).

From this perspective, the study of 'biographical transitions' can contribute to the debate on the interweavings between work and the rest of a person's life for three main reasons. Firstly, a transition concerns a specific and 'critical' moment in the life-course (Gotlib, Wheaton 1997): there are 'breakpoints' at which a person must (for both objective and subjective reasons) take a decision which leads to greater investment in just one of his/her various roles because these are incompatible. This is what happens in many organizational contexts, when the choice must be made between performing roles of responsibility and having time for oneself and one's family. Secondly, work/life transitions relate to a temporal perspective given by everyday reality, where by 'transition' is meant the passage among different commitments, responsibilities, and contexts: domestic, familial, professional, personal. In crossing the 'space' that separates (though not always) the workplace from the home and the family, a person transits among spheres which may be different, if

not in conflict with each other (Colombo, Piccardo 2008). Finally, it should be borne in mind that transitions of this kind have highly symbolic connotations tied to the cultural embeddedness of the public/private, work/ family, production/reproduction, male/female dichotomies.

Hence this perspective also allows one to adopt a gender perspective which highlights that the dominant models in organizations (based on a large investment of time in work, on the non-intrusion of private life, and the desire to conquer hegemonic positions) are constructed as masculine (and as such extraneous to women) and are seen as the only ones possible (for both men and women) to achieve success (Gherardi, Poggio, 2007). Examination of how men and women construct and cope with transitions between work and non-work enables one to grasp how different gender positionings are constructed, and how they relate to the dominant model.

We envisage gender as a dynamic and relational construct whose main usefulness consists in exploring how female characteristics are attributed to women and masculine ones to men (Connell, 1987). It serves as the point of departure for a deconstructive operation which highlights the historically situated and culturally constructed meanings of such characteristics, especially in terms of relational and discursive practices and of mutual positioning (Davies, Harré 1990). Focusing on gender positioning, therefore, also means paying attention to power relations, and to the construction of specific forms of masculinity hegemonic and dominant with respect to the others possible, masculine or feminine (Alvesson, Billing, 1992; Collinson, Hearn, 1994).

The use of this approach yields broader and deeper understanding of working lives, and in particular of the transitions and shifts among different biographical spheres that concern both professional and personal aspects. Nevertheless, when analysing inequalities in work settings, it is not enough to consider the organizational, cultural and power mechanisms that produce gender discrimination. One must also examine how other spheres obstruct people's working lives. The gender models implicit in the allocation of family roles, in fact, importantly influence male and female life-courses, as well as the way in which the labour market and business models are organized. They are in no way neutral in respect to gender expectations.

2. Methodology

To show how people recount the interweavings and interferences between their work and private lives, we shall present the results of research carried out in two large public organizations in the province of Trento, an area of north-east Italy. The focus of the survey was the working lives of men and women, paying particular attention to moments of transition, which ranged from interruptions due to professional turning-points, through the most significant family events (marriage, birth of children, separation, etc.), to everyday work/life transitions, with particular regard to gender differences.

An emphasis on the importance of the concept of biographical transition requires identification of methods of analysis able to grasp the specificity of the construct. We maintain that narrative analysis is a particularly effective instrument for this purpose (Denzin, 1989; Riessman, 2008). In fact, narrative is one of the main tools employed to describe and analyse how actors make sense of changes and restore the disrupted order (Todorov, 1971; McAdams, Bowman, 2001). It can be used to establish the meanings attributed to the events which punctuate everyday life and the experience of the narrating subjects. And it brings to light dynamics and processes with strong symbolic connotations (such as the construction of masculine and feminine), which are probably more difficult to grasp with other methods.

If transitions are viewed in light of the narratives of those who experience them, biographical paths can be conceptualized as being produced by the intersection of micro dynamics (individual actions) dynamics and macro ones (changes between life-stages and the meanings socially attributed to them). Whilst from a micro point of view the attention is directed to the specificities of individual stories, from a macro one biographical courses tell us about the amount of (in)efficiency and (in)coherence of a particular organizational and social model (Olagnero 2002). The consequences of an event can thus be understood as socially constructed precisely because of the characteristics of

the context in which it occurs (Bonica, Cardano 2008). The events that traverse the story of an individual rest, in fact, not only on the trajectories of his/her biography, but also on those of the institutions which that individual encounters along his/her life course (Olagnero 2008).

We used the narrative interview as our research instrument in order to understand how people interpret and make sense of their transitions within and without the organizations in which they work; how they transit between the private sphere and work, and how they piece together the patchwork of their lives. The main objective of the narrative interview, in fact, is to elicit narratives relating to the interviewee's experience, to stimulate people to tell stories, to recount meaningful episodes in their lives which illustrate how and why some events are salient in their biographies (Wagner, Vodak, 2006).

The research was based on 60 narrative interviews conducted during 2007 with employees of the provincial civil service and the provincial health board, the two largest public organizations in the area considered.[1] It was decided to focus on the public administration because it is one of the sectors with the largest amount of female workers. This is mainly due to the existence of greater rights and protections for employees, and to greater opportunities to reconcile working life with personal and family duties – often, however, at the expense of chances for professional advancement.

Thirty interviews were conducted in each of the two organizations, where we selected 15 "working couples", i.e. men and women occupying similar positions in the two public organizations and aged between 30 and 55. During the interviews, we initially asked the interviewees to recount their work narratives, starting from wherever they wanted. We then asked them to talk about the transitions and interweavings between work and their personal lives. The interviews were audiorecorded, transcribed, and then subjected to narrative analysis which examined not only 'what' was narrated but also 'how' and 'why' (Riessman, 1993).

Our analysis concentrated on the plots of the narratives collected, on how the interviewees reconstructed and interpreted events perceived as salient during their working lives, and on how

these interwove in the manifold spheres of their lives. In particular we considered the narrative positioning process, that is, the way in which each storyteller positioned him/herself and the other characters in the story (Davies, Harré, 1990; Bamberg, 2003), reproducing or redefining the gender models dominant in the organizations to which s/he belonged and in the social context of reference. We would stress that what we recount represents our narration of the narratives of the many actors inhabiting the research setting. Our story has been selected – among the several that could have been narrated (Rhodes, Brown, 2005) – because it highlights the gender sub-texts transmitted or obstructed by organizations. To be emphasised is that these excerpts are only fragments; hence they cannot be taken as representing the development of the story-line. Nevertheless, they are empirical materials which enable us to illustrate the rhetorics and arguments that organized the narratives dominant or marginal in the organizations examined.

3. Stories of transitions between work and non-work

When the interviews were analysed, specific attention was paid to how the respondents recounted their work stories, and to the space that they devoted in their narratives to other domains and spheres of life. The analysis also considered both the symbolic gender order which shapes conversational practices and the ability of the respondents to make choices with respect to those practices. Whilst the majority of the stories tended to describe the work setting distinctly from other spheres of life, there nevertheless emerged more 'syncopated' stories at odds with the dominant narrative model. In this regard, we can conceive a continuum along which the stories can be arranged. The two extremes of this continuum are, on the one hand, narrative construction with a linear structure – which uncontroversially reproduces a traditional view of the relationship between work and other spheres of life – and, on the other, the construction of composite and fragmented stories which recount interweavings and cross-influences, and in which transitions among different life domains are recurrent and made frequently explicit.

Discourses concerning both organizational experience and family life help define gender attributions and competences that may conflict with or support the dominant gender practices. To recount their experiences, men and women produce narratives which are not 'gender-neutral'. Every narrative expresses a specific gender positioning, because telling a story also involves the positioning of the storyteller within the categorizations made available by the discursive and narrative practices of the reference culture, and among them the male/female dichotomy in particular (Gherardi, Poggio, 2007) . The construction of a gender model takes place, in fact, on the basis of rhetorics that are culturally available and normatively or stereotypically associated with one or the other sex: some practices are viewed as appropriate only for men, others only for women (although they are practicable for both) (Gherardi, 1995; Martin, 2006).

Our analysis identified, in the narratives collected, different types of gender positioning and biographical transitions – more or less linear or fragmented – between organizational and private life. In what follows we shall seek to show these differences by identifying three different ways of recounting the relation between the work trajectory and the other spheres of life, by both the male and the female interviewees. They can be located along a continuum ranging from full alignment with a traditional view of work experience, based on linearity, verticality and separation from other life-spheres, to a rejection of this view in favour of plots which highlighted the interweaving among different trajectories, or where the story unfolded along entirely alternative lines.

Our intention is to show what types of transitions between work and non-work could be performed by the employees of the two work contexts analysed, but above all what types of gender positionings and gender subtexts characterized the narrative rhetorics of the organizational actors involved in the research.

3.1. "Two parallel paths which don't really overlap"

The archetypical story that emerged from the interviews was based on a clear distinction between

the work and family trajectories. The interviewees who made this distinction tended to draw sharply-defined boundaries between work and life.

> The two things fit together well, because privately I'm fine, at work I'm fine as well, so the two things don't affect each other […] I wouldn't know how to give *uhm…* a point where I'd say 'that's right', I mean, 'I've had problems of some kind or other that have influenced the other sphere' (W36, CS).[2]

> They're two parallel paths which don't really overlap, they intersect, in the sense that I try to detach myself from the office when I get home in the evening and not bring work problems home with me, and vice versa, so I wouldn't say that there's interference between them (M45, HS).

Plots of this kind construct a representation of work as a self-contained domain which is not invaded by the private sphere, nor invades it in turn. These are narratives that embrace the dominant male discourse that long characterized the traditional approach on work centred on the male breadwinner and on separation of the life spheres. On this view, the decision to invest in work entailed marginalizing one's personal and private life in order to pursue a professional trajectory characterized by a series of promotions extending over the long period and involving gradually increased responsibility in the roles performed within an occupation. Accordingly predominant is linearity, as also evidenced by narratives about moments of transition and prospects for the future.

> As you get to know a job, you have more and more responsibility, and work is delegated to you, so it's a quite continuous thing […] in short, you learn and you naturally become independent, because at the beginning you have to do everything and you depend on a colleague with more experience than you, then you gradually learn. They are so many

small steps to follow (W36, CS).

In the words of this woman work was "naturally" configured as a series of small transitions that brought increasing economic and professional recognition. It is also significant that none of the stories belonging to this first group of narratives – which includes the majority of the stories which we collected – comprised anecdotes about work/life transitions, unless explicitly solicited by the interviewer. We find it significant that these two excerpts have been taken from stories recounted by a man with children and a housewife partner, and by a single woman without children. It is interesting that the stories of men with a traditional domestic division of labour and the stories of single women are often very similar, being characterized by strong investment in paid employment, which seems to predominate over the other spheres of life.

Besides alignment with an organizational model that requires employees to leave their private lives outside the office door, these plots exhibit alignment with a traditional gender model, with a positioning that attributes men and women roles and tasks viewed as alternative and complementary.

> Certainly, if there were children, things would change, but that's not my intention, so career advancement should only influence my work life. The private sphere up to a certain point, because there are no tasks so pressing that, *ehm*… I take time away the private sphere to put it into the work sphere (W36, CS).

> When I had a chance to progress in my career, on discussion with my wife, we decided that I should stay in full-time work and she should quit her job (M45, HS).

When recounting the decision taken jointly by the couple in regard to his career progression made possible by her dismissal, or when stating that "if there were children, things would change", the

interviewees aligned themselves with a symbolic gender order which implies that men are masculine and women are feminine, that the former are mostly involved in the public sphere and paid employment and the latter in the private sphere and (unpaid) care work (Martin, 1990); or that this would be the case if the couple had children.

It is accordingly possible to associate a traditional type of gender positioning and construction with an unproblematic perception of transitions between work and non-work, given that the two life-spheres are experienced as being sharply distinct. There is, in fact, in these stories no conflict between the professional role and non-work times and spaces, because the narrator feels mostly involved with the organization for which s/he works, rather than with his/her own family and time for him/herself. Areas of life external work are thus positioned in a shadow area by the narrators; or they are postponed – especially by women – with respect to the achievement of professional goals

3.2. "We are convinced about this choice! The problem is the administration"

Whereas the stories discussed in the previous section were constructed by keeping the private and work spheres separate, those that we now consider consist of more composite narratives characterized by diverse interweavings among the different spheres of life. The story-tellers dispute, at least to some extent, the dominant organizational models, opposing the organization's scarce consideration of the need to reconcile work and family responsibilities. It therefore seems that the traditional model is subverted, to be then reassembled by means of various repair practices (Gherardi, 1995).

> When the child was born, I stayed at home for the whole of the first month; then, because you're allowed to take days off, I took advantage first by taking three days a week, then usually two, and now I'm taking one day off a week [...] Last year I wanted to take the whole of August off because my wife works more in August, and my boss

responded to my request for a month's leave by asking if I could only take some days off, and to guarantee my presence two days a week, and so in the end I did it that way (M38, CS).

Another major difficulty of reconciliation, at least, which costs me a great deal is during the summer, reconciling work time and family time in the summer, when the schools are closed. [...] Deciding that we could both (wife and husband) take this choice of part-time work has been extremely useful… it's always a difficult choice. We are convinced about this choice! The problem is the administration, that won't help from this point of view (W41, HS).

These work/life transitions are much more composite and less linear than those previously described, and conflicts and criticisms regarding organizational models are apparent. The criticisms mainly concern the organization's reluctance to recognize the rights of its members, as in the case of application for a period of parental leave; or the organization's resistance to an 'alternative' management of working time, for instance by not facilitating assignment to a part-time position. For this reason, detachment from the current organizational model is a temporary situation which will return to 'normality' when the emergency subsides. These stories recount, in fact, an organizational view of time inextricably bound up with the corporate expectation of availability and the organizational importance of 'face time' (Gherardi, Poggio, 2007), which requires employees to be absent as little as possible and to spend long hours in the office.

Also frequent are narratives of significant events in the professional trajectory, among which maternity is one of the most salient.

I've had two very significant moments in my working life, which coincided with my return to work after my pregnancies. They've been terrible moments […] because of the

difficulty of re-starting work. [...] For me it was only an interruption, it didn't seem to me that the things had gone so far ahead that I couldn't pick up on them again… in reality, things I found myself in a completely changed situation … of … starting from square one… I had to start from scratch when I didn't feel … in that respect (W41, HS).

The concept of "work/life transition" can serve as a useful lens with which to interpret the narratives and the experiences described by the interviewees, because it makes it possible to capture the multiple set of diverse trajectories that make up the biographies of people who may or may not synchronize with each other according to contexts and events, and to the reflexive activity of subjects. Considering biographical transitions in light of factors that not only have to do with working life, but also with personal dimensions, yielded understanding of how transitions between work and non-work influenced the professional outcomes of the interviewees and of how, in turn, their working lives were shaped by an organizational model which rewarded physical presence in the workplace, thereby fuelling inequalities in terms of opportunities for professional development.

It is also of interest to note that, when the interviewees mentioned their private lives, their narratives described not only transitions occurring in everyday life – in the shuttling among tasks, contexts and relations (formative, domestic, family, professional, personal) – but also real "turning points" (McAdams, Bowman, 2001). The events described in the interview excerpts, in fact, were perceived by the narrating subjects as moments of breakdown at the basis of unwanted transitions or as situations different from those expected, to which a solution had to be found which reduced the conflict with the organizations to which the interviewees belonged.

The stories belonging in this group represent examples of 'work/life transitions' characterized by an 'unstable balance'. This is firstly because of the difficulty apparent from the narratives of achieving satisfactory coherence between private life and work; and secondly because these are balances reached after particular events (expected or unexpected) and which may again be upset by further changes. The interviewees said that they were willing to take 'a step back' if the situation changed.

This was the case, for instance, of a man who maintained that if he had had only one child, rather than twins, he would probably not have asked for a long period of parental leave; or of an interviewee, member of a couple in which both partners have part-time jobs in the same organization and who, when the organization required one of them to quit, decided that it should be her to continue.

> However, at times, with hindsight I think that if there had been just one baby, I'd have taken a few days off at the beginning, so, here and there, er, I wouldn't have taken all the leave that I did (M38, CS).

> There'll surely be a time … it won't be next year but the year after that, when I'll go back on twenty-four hours and *** (*interviewee's husband*) will go back to full time … why? Because ***, the oldest child, will be in fifth grade and we must get ready for it, we've already thought about this (W41, HS).

These types of transition between work and private life are characterized by specific forms of gender positioning which help construct and enact particular types of maleness and femaleness. They reveal a critical attitude to paid employment and gender models that want women confined to a 'safe' job and the family sphere, and the men to have success in the work. The interview extracts concern a woman in a senior position and a man seeking, with his partner, to distribute family tasks symmetrically. However, it seems that these positionings, both at work and in the family, do not entirely question the dominant gender models, which remain in the background; and they continue to be practicable options, perhaps when specific life phases and transitions have been superseded, or anyway when the organization imposes its will, as in the case when only one member of the couple could continue to work part-time.

3.3. *"We can't really separate work, the family, private life"*

This group instead comprises narratives in which the interviewees position themselves in explicit opposition to the dominant models, both of the organization and private life. They are narratives marginal to the corpus of interviews which construct gender positionings distant from those conveyed by the traditional master narratives. These are plots in which transitions between the private sphere and the work sphere co-exist from the incipit onwards, without any explicit question by the interviewer.

> First with one job, then with another, then I passed a public examination, so since then I've always worked as a radiology technician. I got married in 1984. and we realized that *** *(interviewees' wife)* would work fifty hours a week for life […] she obviously couldn't quit, we found ourselves with loads of money, no children, and lots of work. Then I said: 'Okay, I can quit, so I'll quit'. Understand? (M52, HS)

> For us, we can't really separate work, the family, private life, because for us it's all of a piece, it's a system, let's say, absolutely interconnected, right! A series of small interconnected systems, so that ... there's reconciliation on this as well, and a lot of, I must say [...]. And therefore it's really a continuous exchange, er, an united mass that moves along a path, also maintaining individualities (W39, CS).

These fragments describe non-acceptance of a work organization based on long hours (Burke, Cooper, 2008) and on complete availability to the employer. Two different types of plot emerge from these stories: the first concerns a couple who have 'reversed traditional roles', in regard both to the organization and family management; the second narrates the organization of a couple who, though setting value on work, have instead chosen a model of managing the work/family balance

tipped towards the latter. In the former case, we have the story of a man who has decided to restrict his work commitments so that he can focus on care activities, particularly child-raising, also to compensate for the heavy extra-domestic workloads of his partner. This is therefore a life-course in which the situation that assigns production to men and reproduction to women is reversed, but which does not necessarily dispute the division of labour and the allocation of tasks within the couple. In the latter case, we instead have a story of 'extreme reconciliation', in which choices are functional to balancing work and personal life, not for the man or the woman, but for both members of the couple.

Concretely, in 1994 I applied for part-time work, 'what's this impossible stuff?'. There were practically no women who applied, and me as a male, I was able to get the work. Even if I didn't have children [...] Now I am very happy to have it, though concretely I don't know how we're going to live but ... having some time off, I sort things out, I do the shopping, I don't know. If not, we'd always be on the run and stressed. (M52, HS).

When they asked me to work whole days, I checked whether on those days *** (*interviewee's husband*) was on twenty-four-hour duty at the newspaper, so I gave them my limited availability and I said I could work in the morning, but in the afternoon I had to look after the children, *** (*interviewee's husband*)'s not at home. If instead *** (*interviewee's husband*)'s at home, then I book those days, so if you're at our house, we have a calendar, I don't know if you've seen it. There are the bookings for the days: 'I booked first.' Whoever books first wins! Also in order of importance... But that's the way we work! This is the bargain between us... very calm (W39, CS).

Whilst the first story recounted a life turning-point, and the second instead referred to transitions between work and non-work in everyday life, both challenged the dominant models, professional

and otherwise, and opposed the implicit power relations that those models represented.

Considering discordant voices, even if in the minority, such as those characterizing the two last stories, enable us to show experiences more composite than the traditional division between work and private life and which upset the traditional symbolic order of gender. Analysis of the different forms of transition among life-spheres also highlights a gender positioning at odds with the hegemonic model that allocates men to productive work and women to the domestic and private sphere. As evinced by the above interview extracts, people do not simply follow the dominant cultural models, they may also resist them, sometimes going beyond the organizational model and the hegemonic gender order (Calás, Smircich, 1991; Boje, 1995). Examining marginal and peripheral voices therefore highlights the emergence, albeit with difficulty, of alternative stories – within the organization and the couple – and the construction of a gender positioning that opposes a sharp division of tasks to the script in which it is written, and which is functional both to the couple and the organization. Thus proposed is a model that unhinges at least to some extent the traditional constructs of maleness and femaleness.

Concluding remarks

In this article we have discussed some findings from research conducted in Italy and based on narrative interviews with women and men working in two public-sector organizations, in order to investigate the interweaving between people's work and their personal and family lives. Our main purpose was to evidence the need to supersede a view of work as distinct from other life spheres, identifying heuristic tools such as the concept of 'biographical transition' which are better able to give sense to the complex interweaving among different life trajectories. This may enhance understanding of certain aspects which the traditional approaches to the study of work have long neglected but which we believe are increasingly central in the social configuration: on the one hand, situations of breakdown and the need to cope with changes (in work or personal/familial relations)

that entail significant redefinitions for individuals (and also for organizations); on the other, quotidian experience, with the daily routine of shuttling among different roles, situations and relational contexts. The concept of transition, with its emphasis on movement between different conditions and positions, appears particularly useful in bringing out and deconstructing certain dimensions culturally rooted in the public/private, work/family, production/reproduction dichotomies on which the division of gender has been historically based.

In the belief that people's narratives about their work are particularly effective means to study biographical transitions, we have paid specific attention to how the interviewees narratively reconstructed their professional experiences, and in particular on how they recalled or disregarded interweavings and transitions among different life-spheres. We have done so starting from the assumption that, when people recount their experiences, they tend to draw on the plots available in their social and organizational contexts, and to position themselves *vis-à-vis* the dominant discourses. The analysis has brought out the predominant plots, as well as the alternative ones, connoting the narratives we collected. Whilst in many cases the interviewees, when recounting their work stories, tended to adopt a sort of paradigmatic narrative where work was a dimension clearly distinct from other spheres of life, we nevertheless collected stories of 'defiance' against the dominant model in which the different spheres and trajectories of life were represented as more closely entangled with each other. All these narratives were bound up with specific gender positionings that subtended different attributions between men and women in the inter-relations between work and the personal and familial sphere.

Whilst a traditional gender order was apparent in the narratives based on the separation between the different spheres of life, unconventional positionings which resisted and challenged the dominant models were instead observed when the boundaries became more blurred.

However, narratives of the latter kind were in the minority, even in an organizational context like the public administration, which is characterized by a higher female presence and by the greater availability, in comparison to other contexts, of work/life balance measures and opportunities. If

stories recounting alternative transitions among different life spheres are not to remain exceptions, it is of prime importance that they find cultural legitimation within organizations, becoming part of the narrative repertoires available to workers.

In regard to future research, therefore, we believe it necessary to reflect on the social construction and the rhetorical dimension of work models and on the ideological content, also in gender terms, of a conception of work as a separate trajectory. The studies on work conducted in the last century were largely responsible for the legitimation and diffusion of the separatedness between work and private life, between production and reproduction, between paid and unpaid work, and between male and female. The major changes now ongoing in the labour market make it increasingly urgent to deconstruct the rhetorics fuelling that separatedness and to deliver a more composite image of the work experience. In the meantime it would useful to undertake research which concentrates on organizations that use managerial models innovative in terms of time organization and performance assessment. Such models grant citizenship to all spheres of life in the experience of workers and thus disrupt the gender asymmetries related to traditional work organization. Research of this kind would demonstrate the positive implications of virtuous initiatives in terms of work/life balance for both organizations and workers, women and men. Moreover, it would contribute to giving visibility and legitimacy to alternative narratives on the interweaving among people's different biographical trajectories.

Notes

[1] In the provincial administration (4,784 employees) among the 215 executives in the administration there are 163 men and 52 women (24.2%); among the 106 managers there are 87 men and 19 women (17.9%). In the provincial health board (7,336 employees) women are concentrated in non-managerial personnel (92.5%). The data have been obtained directly from the administrations concerned and refer to 31.12.2005.

[2] The codes accompanying the interview extracts denote the sex (W=woman and M=man), the age

of the interviewees and the organization to which they belong (CS=Civil Service and HS=Health Service).

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