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Impact of gender relations on the narrative patterns of working identity construction: A case study with Brazilian urban workers

By means of a qualitative approach, this study aimed to understand the main narrative patterns of working identity construction and influences of gender relations in these processes through content analysis of the narratives generated by a purposive sample of 40 Brazilian urban workers. Five narrative patterns were found (organizational, professional/occupational, networking, hybrid, and de-identification). In the analysis of gender relations, men and women likewise constructed organizational and professional/occupational identities; men, however, were more likely to construct hybrid identities while women were more likely to construct flexible identities. In conclusion, traditional models of identity construction coexist with flexible and hybrid models, but with an important gender difference consisting in women's major tendency to change. The practical implications and limitations of these results for career counseling are discussed.

Keywords: identity; gender, labor market, social constructionism, career counseling

Introduction

The study of identities at work has a long tradition, both in psychology and the social sciences, and in the specific areas of work and organization psychology and career guidance and counseling (Duarte, 2009; Dubar, 1997; Guichard, 2009; Holland, 1997; Stecher, 2012; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

John Holland was one of the pioneers in discussing identity at work in the field of career guidance and counseling (Holland, 1997; Holland, Gottfredson, & Nafziger, 1975). Focusing on the vocational choice issues, the author defined

vocational identity in terms of individual perceptions of personality, that is, the person's values, goals and aspirations linked to vocational interests. Thus, identity refers to the degree to which one has a clear "picture of one's goals, interests, and talents" (Holland, 1997, p. 5) in the social, organizational, and working structure. Authors such as Gottfredson (1981) and Super (1985) continued to study the issue of identity. In the latest development, Guichard (2009) and Savickas et al. (2009) have drawn on a narrative approach to propose a shift from vocational choices to self-construction, and have reconstructed the concept of vocational identity, framing it as working identity. They define working identity as a system of subjective identity forms through which people design their lives in relation to social models (identity offers) by means of reflexivity. This article is underpinned by the narrative approach tenets.

The working world has changed and diversified over the past decades, mainly based on continuous processes of flexibility, fluidity, and fragmentation (Grote & Raeder, 2009; Kirpal 2004; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), which have been affecting various dimensions of male and female workers' lived experience, thus triggering a conjuncture both replete with opportunities and ridden with crisis (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). This has produced intersections between specialized fields of study and challenged professionals and scholars to revise their theories and concepts to understand the contemporary realities of the working world, such as working identity.

In line with Blustein (2006, 2011), we chose to speak of "working" instead of "work," because "working" represents the abstract concept of "work" in action as embodied in a human activity in a context. And, in line with Mark Savickas' proposal (personal communication, July 9, 2014), we also conceptualized "identity at work" as "working identity" for its dual meaning: an identity of those who work and the working of identity. Based on social constructionism (Gergen, 1991), we adopted a narrative approach to identity construction understood as a relational concept, that is, psychosocial processes of continuous construction of self, others and the world through narratives that need to be socially legitimated (Alvesson, 1998; Blustein, 2006).

Several key studies have identified some common patterns in the changing process of identity construction, and proposed typologies to describe these possible construction processes in our times. Summing up the studies carried out internationally in the last decade by Bardon, Josserand and Villesèche (2015), Beech (2011), Fenwick (2007), Grote and Raeder (2009), and Strangleman (2012) – and, more specifically, the Latin American studies, such as Stecher (2012), and Vera and Valenzuela (2012) – we can say that the main types of working identity construction today are predicated on three crucial factors: the social structure of organizations (organizational identity, Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), the embedment in professional and occupational communities of practice (professional and occupational identity, Dubar, 1997), and the flexibility and fluidity of social networks (new

modes of network identity defined by occupying in-between spaces, according to Fenwick, 2007).

The use of typologies is controversial and limited, because typologies tend to reduce complex reality to fixed types. Notwithstanding that, if the goal is not to adjust reality, but rather to portray it for analytical and exploratory purposes, a typology can offer an interesting strategy for understanding aspects of the working world and workers. Besides, a typology may convey an image that helps to schematically illustrate the complexity of the current working world through one of the dimensions generated in the working relationships, which is identity construction.

Based on a narrative approach, instead of typologies, we used, in this study, narrative patterns understood as the core social discourses about working identity construction emerging from the workers' personal narratives to outline, explore and analyze a contextualized image of the working world.

Another major criticism of the use of typologies is that they seek to standardize the psychosocial reality into types, without taking into account their diversity, especially marked by the intersectionality of gender, race/ethnicity and social class, which has been discussed in the literature (Crenshaw, 1994; Ybema et al., 2009), including the disciplines of working studies (Acker, 2011; Alvesson, 1998; Corlett & Mavin, 2014) and career guidance and counseling (Bimrose et al., 2014; Bimrose, McMahan, & Watson, 2015; Blustein, 2006).

The notion of intersectionality assumes that people's respective identities, rather than single and unified, are multiple, interwoven and conflicting as they are shaped by history, social relations, and power structures. Thereby, the aim is to understand how individuals construct multiple and co-existing identities to constitute themselves and to be recognized in each social reality (Corlett & Mavin, 2014; Crenshaw, 1994). From this perspective, we can hypothesize that the processes of working identity construction are simultaneously affected by gender, race/ethnicity, and social class. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study and without neglecting the interrelatedness of race/ethnicity and social class, we aimed to understand how these processes are affected by gender issues.

In general, working identity studies have not paid attention to the gender issues, even though gender at work has been one of the most relevant issues of the current working world, becoming a political agenda for many countries and international organizations, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (e.g., Abramo, 2010; ILO, 2016; OECD, 2016). Based on the socioconstructionist perspective from Butler (1990) and Scott (2010), gender was understood as a psychosocial construction generated by everyday relations that are established between men and women in gender performances which create and recreate positions and identities through the narratives addressing others as sexual persons. Given this, women cannot be conceptualized, unless they are conceptualized in relation to men, and these relationships establish not only the relations of difference, but also power relations, in

a “two-sided dynamic of gendering practices and practicing of gender (...) that affects both women’s and men’s work experiences ... [and] impair[s] women workers’ identities” (Martin, 2003, p. 343).

Several classic and current studies worldwide have shown the working world to be profoundly gendered (Almeida Neves, 2013; Alvesson, 1998; Butler, 1990; Galvez, Garces, Lleidas, & Renteria, 2015; Godoy, Stecher, & Díaz, 2007; Kelan, 2010; Martin, 2003, 2006; Silva, Amazonas, & Vieira, 2010), that is, structured by the distinction between men and women forged in relations between them (Butler, 1990; Corlett & Mavin, 2014; Scott, 2010), and to challenge both men and women in constructing working identities (Bertrand, Pan, & Kamenica, 2013; Chies, 2010; Duberley & Carrigan, 2013; Dulini Anuvinda Fernando & Cohen, 2011; García & Welter, 2013; Gatrell, 2013; Gaunt & Scott, 2016; Godoy et al., 2007; Ibarra & Petri-glieri, 2016; Lester, 2008; Segnini, 2012; Silva et al., 2010).

However, little is known about how the interplay between gender identity and working identity occurs and affects both women and men in their processes of identity construction. Indeed, most studies so far have focused on how gendering practices at workplace impair female workers’ identities or shape parental and working identities (García & Welter, 2013; Gaunt & Scott, 2016; Martin, 2003, 2006), mainly by the female caregiver vs. the male breadwinner dynamics (Burnett, Gatrell, Cooper, & Sparrow, 2013; Godoy et al., 2007). Others have analyzed the interrelation between gender and professional identity in particular professions (Alvesson, 1998; Hatmaker, 2013; Ramarajan & Reid, 2013) or in specific working modes, such as entrepreneurship (Duberley & Carrigan, 2013).

In the field of career guidance and counseling, Gottfredson (1981) has proposed a cognitive map of occupations, indicating that all career choices occur based on stereotyped – primarily gendered – visions. Choice-making is a process of “progressive elimination of least favored vocational alternatives (*circumscription*), and recognition of and accommodation to external constraints on vocational choice (*compromise*)” (Gottfredson, 1996, p. 73).

The field of working has traditionally been a space in which gender relations induce gendering practices that are determined by gender stereotypes, which, in turn, have produced the dichotomy between the female caregiver and the male breadwinner, causing the “women often [to] face contradictory societal expectations with regard to career success and motherhood” (Duberley & Carrigan, 2013, p. 5), as they construct their identities.

While paid working continues to be the key element in male identities, imposing the provider role on men, the role of father has grown more important indeed (Godoy et al., 2007), although it is generally ignored and not valued in working contexts (Gaunt & Scott, 2016). As fathers are breadwinners rather than simply fathers, men tend to feel appreciated as employees, but feel invisible in their paternal role at work (Burnett et al., 2013).

At the same time, some the women regard both paid working and housework as key components of female identities, although identity balancing processes are fraught with tensions and contradictions between paid and unpaid working, and mother and worker roles (Almeida Neves, 2013). Women need to negotiate the lines between the public context of paid working and the private world of reproduction (Gatrell, 2013). The management of the working-living balance is still a problem for women (Burnett et al., 2013). In general, flexible models, such as part-time working and entrepreneurship, have been offered to women as a solution for dealing with simultaneous working and domestic responsibilities (Salladarré & Hlaimi, 2014), with some studies have showing that, socially, it is better to be an entrepreneur than to have a part-time working arrangement (Burnett et al., 2013; Duberley & Carrigan, 2013).

In working contexts, stereotypical gender relations have often afforded men greater opportunities, promotions, employment, valued jobs, and stability at work (Lester, 2008; Martin, 2003; Probert, 2001), whereas women have lived in a permanent state of transition, in which working has always seemed to be temporary (Probert, 2001). As such, it has offered possibilities of constructing multiple – paradoxical and nomadic – identities, in various spaces and working arrangements through the experience of multiple roles (Alexiou, 2005; Gaunt & Scott, 2016; Godoy et al., 2007; Silva et al., 2010).

In short, the processes of working identity construction are shaped by gendering practices/practicing of gender, and when using typologies researchers should address this issue instead of proposing generic types. Moreover, gender identity depends on the discursive domain in which it is performed due to intersectionality (Corlett & Mavin, 2014; Ybema et al., 2009).

Brockmeier and Harré (2003) have defined the narrative as a multiplicity of ways in which people try to make sense of their life experiences through constructing a personal story developed in time to organize the experience of the world and of themselves. In this study, we built on this definition to conceive of both working identity and gender identity as narrative identities that are daily produced in relational contexts and turn into true autobiographical narratives, which provide an important methodological strategy to understand the social and working reality as experienced by individuals, and analyze the different forms of cultural discourses about gender and working identity. Crucial to this process is narratability, that is, the individual's ability to narrate a meaningful story for her/himself and the others, as proposed by Savickas et al. (2009).

Thus, drawing on identity theory and using gender as a lens, this study aimed to identify, describe, and analyze the main narrative patterns of working identity construction undertaken by female and male urban workers in Brazil, the impact of gender relations on identity construction processes, and the main differences between women's and men's narrative patterns of working identity construction. The research examined autobiographical narratives about working life trajectories of

a sample of urban workers in São Paulo (Brazil). It aimed to technically and theoretically contribute to the field of career guidance and counseling, and discuss the implications of practices of gender and gendered contexts for working identity construction, considered one of the core concepts for analyzing the contemporary career construction (Guichard, 2009; Savickas et al., 2009). Thus, this article seeks to discuss the following research questions: In which ways do (a sample of) male and female urban workers from the Global South construct their working identities, and how may these processes be affected by gender issues? This article is a continuation of the studies reported in Ribeiro (2012) and Ribeiro (2015).

Method

In this research, the *qualitative narrative approach* (Polkinghorne, 1988) was used as an investigative strategy to co-construct stories with the researchers, followed by analytical procedures to develop taxonomies based on categories grouping the common elements across the database. The resulting taxonomy was based on the core social discourses in the participants' personal narratives about their working identity construction. As already stated, working identity construction processes can be identified in personal narratives as a function of the properties of narratability. For Alvesson and Willmott (2002), the study of individual narratives helps us to understand the ways in which each person is shaped by intersecting social discourses and navigates them. The reliability of a personal narrative is thus asserted once it is constructed through collective agreements co-constructed within a community that shares core social discourses (Denzin, 1989).

The socio-occupational context of the participants

The city of São Paulo forms the socio-occupational context of the participants. It can be characterized as a globalized and multicultural big city with 12 million inhabitants and a large immigrant population. A wealthy city, São Paulo is responsible for 71.8% of Brazil's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and serves as the main financial and corporate center of South America, based on industries and services, with plenty of working opportunities, mainly for professional degree holders, such as most of our participants. According to the ILO (2015), in terms of education, 17.6% of the population are college graduates; and, in labor market terms, 7.4% of the population are unemployed, 64.9% are formally engaged in the job market, and 27.7% are informal workers. In terms of career development, careers of college degree-holders primarily involve employment and entrepreneurship, and, as a rule, follow a stable and continuous working pathway. According to the ILO (2016), in Brazil, in terms of working-related gender issues, the participation rate for males is higher than for females (male – 80.8%, and female – 59.4%); women have a 56.7-hours working

week with 21.2 hours devoted to household chores, which is 25% higher than for men; 90.7% of employed women perform household chores and caregiving; women are paid 75% of what men earn; and the double shifts of working prevent women's investment in career and career advancement.

The participants

The participants were recruited from three different social locations in order to include differentiated profiles. They were: human resources consultancy workers with university degrees seeking management positions; university degree-holders from a public employment service who sought professional integration; and self-employed or university career guidance service workers in career transition. All the participants were either employed or performed working activities at the time of the research. The eligible candidates for inclusion in the study had to have an at least 18-years history of working to make it possible to evaluate changes, continuities, and crises. Moreover, in view of the impact of the intersectionality of gender, race/ethnicity, and social class, the inclusion criteria standardized the race/ethnicity and social class factors to have only white middle-class people in the sample, but they kept the gender distinction to analyze gender relations.

The number of participants had not been fixed in advance, but selection was made during the data collection, based on the participants' respective representativeness as relevant informants on the studied issue, and saturation, when narratives started to repeat (Bardin, 1977). The database from Ribeiro (2015) was used to compose the sample for this study, aiming however to explore another research problem. Ultimately, the sample included 40 Brazilian workers from the city of São Paulo, with a balanced number of men and women (57.5% men and 42.5% women), between 40 and 50 years of age (50%), with a college degree (82.5%) and 18-to-30 years of working history. The majority were married with children (72.5%), and employed in private or public companies (52.5%) or with mixed careers (30%) in which employment alternated with self-employment.

Instruments and procedures

In line with the narrative approach that underpinned our research, we conducted 40 face-to-face narrative interviews (the *narrative interview method* as described in Polkinghorne, 1988), and asked each participant to build a free self-narrative of his/her working career. Whenever needed, the narrative was interrupted by the researcher for explanations, additional information and unexplored issues (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1993) in a movement of narrative co-construction, in which the participant was telling his/her story (autobiography) that was being rebuilt through research interventions (heterobiography). The narrative interview was defined as

an open-ended report on the participant's working life history, and the main reason for its use was that it can capture the construction of working life over time. Having obtained the institutions' approval and the participants' consent, we conducted the interviews at the location of recruitment. Lasting 85 minutes on the average, the interviews started with a trigger phrase: "Tell me about your working history," to elicit self-narratives in context. The interviews were then submitted to content analysis of the autobiographical narratives.

Analysis of narratives

Based on the *qualitative narrative approach* (Polkinghorne, 1988), content analysis of the narratives was carried out. The analysis was divided into four stages, aiming to detect common elements of the narratives and to construct a taxonomy of working identity constructions supported by the participants' common narrative patterns. In other words, the personal narratives served as instruments to identify common narrative patterns (social discourses) of contemporary working identity construction (Bardin 1977; Van Langenhove & Harre, 1993). The stages were:

- a) Pre-analysis – fluctuating reading of each autobiographical narrative to systematize their contents, and operationalizing them in terms of understanding the processes of working identity construction.
- b) Vertical analysis – identifying key indicators of the participants' narratives as well as the recording units of their narratives that represented these indicators to organize a personal "set of meanings and strategies" regarding working identity construction. The coding was performed by all three authors in an inter-subjective process in which each author's understandings were compared and honed to make sense of the empirical material.
- c) Horizontal analysis – grouping the narratives by their common content (indicators and recording units), based on the *constant comparative method* described by Strauss and Corbin (1990), and systematizing the core social discourses that represented the main types of working identity construction, referred to as narrative patterns in this study, to produce a taxonomy. This taxonomy is a conceptual construct serving to arrange the data in an operational way in order to identify a typology of patterns of discourse organized by the systems of categories and their interaction with the data creating structured theoretical narratives about the participants' narratives.
- d) Presentation, discussion and analysis of the taxonomy in terms of gender relations, based on the similarities and differences between men and women.

Results

In this section, through content analysis, we first present the narrative patterns of working identity construction we derived from the personal narratives collected from our research participants with their main indicators and recording units to exemplify each narrative pattern, corroborating the findings from Ribeiro (2012) and Ribeiro (2015). Afterwards, we analyze the main constructions of gender. In conformity to ethical standards, the participants are identified with a code name to keep their real names secret and protect their anonymity. The interviewees are identified in parentheses following relevant excerpts from their narratives (e.g., Mary, female, 41, single).

Narrative patterns of working identity construction

Basically, the participants constructed their identities by means of narrative patterns described in the literature as organizational identity, professional and occupational identity, and network identity. In the following, they are referred to as *organizational identity narrative patterns*, *professional/occupational identity narrative patterns*, and *networking identity narrative patterns*. However, the analysis rendered also two other patterns unaddressed in the literature, namely de-identification and hybrid forms, which were named, respectively, *transitory identity narrative patterns* and *hybrid identity narrative patterns*. All narrative patterns are given in the plural form to indicate that, despite the presence of strong and common structural narrative elements, they did not form a perfectly homogeneous unit, and that flaws and contradictions emerged in the participants' narratives. As already stated, the narrative patterns only served to present a contextualized image of the working world for exploration and analysis.

The main indicators of each narrative pattern (core social discourses) were: *organizational identity narrative patterns* (security, stability, routine, standardization, continuity, recognition, and control), *professional/occupational identity narrative patterns* (specialized activity, profession, vocation, and professional recognition), *networking identity narrative patterns* (constant change, novelty, competence, unpredictability, multi-functionality, flexibility, challenge, networking, and freedom), and *transitory identity narrative patterns* (lack of a plan and random choices). The *hybrid identity narrative patterns* did not form a new narrative pattern as they were composed of elements of the described narrative patterns, affected or supported by another pattern, or else, by the articulation of two distinct narrative patterns.

In *organizational identity narrative patterns*, 10 participants sought security and stability in their working lives, and preferred “a guarantee of a life without risks” (John, male, 39, married), because “instability is frightening” (Herbert, male, 49, married) while “the routine [is] very important” (Anna, female, 46, single), which

opinion was reinforced by the “expectation to stay long” (Arthur, male, 42, married) in the same workplace and by the feeling that there is someone in control of people’s career, as pointed out by Sherry (female, 30, single): “The company is the manager, the company shall be responsible for our career.”

In *professional/occupational identity narrative patterns*, 5 participants reported the need to be professionally recognized which lay at the core of their identities, as Richard (male, 40, married) said: “I have to practice my trained trade, no matter whether employed or as a self-employed worker”; thus “vocation is the career axis” (George, male, 52, married) because “I did not feel complete; I wanted a profession,” and only then the job “made sense to me” (Jane, female, 50, married).

In *networking identity narrative patterns*, 10 participants sought constant changes and novelty, because “stability is a synonym of stagnation” (Susan, female, 36, married) and “each project is a different process; it is a new thing” (Carl, male, 42, married), which puts the person in a situation of intense flexibility, where “a worker must be prepared to do everything [and whether] I had to be working on anything, I had no other option” (Alice, female, 55, married). Although it is a desired situation, the participants voiced such sentiments as “I don’t think I have a career, actually, I have multiple careers” (Nancy, female, 36, single). Unpredictability is part of the process as Robert (male, 49, married) said: “Live from day to day without wanting to predict the future.”

The *transitory identity narrative patterns* were the predominant feature in the narrative of one participant only, surfacing in the narrative of many others as a transitional crisis, which implies that identity diffusion is a hardly permanent situation of contingency and transition. In the only identified case, Tom (male, 41, married) suggested a history of lack of projects and random decisions, because “when you don’t know where you want to go, any way will do,” and, therefore, “you’re driven by chance.”

In *hybrid identity narrative patterns*, 14 participants combined two distinct narrative patterns, such as: (a) *organizational identity narrative patterns* interwoven with *networking identity narrative patterns* in the narrative of Philip (male, 52, married), who “likes to combine permanent jobs with temporary projects” (the reference was stability achieved through flexibility and multifunctionality); (b) *networking identity narrative patterns* intertwined with *organizational identity narrative patterns*, such as Oswald (male, 42, married), who pointed out that “the networking of contacts is what affords employability and stability,” and Donald (male, 42, single) who stated that “in companies, nowadays, you have to be adaptable to keep the job that is highly valued” (the reference was networking and challenge, but with the security of a job); and (c) *professional/occupational identity narrative patterns* combined with *organizational identity narrative patterns*, in the narrative of Anthony (male, 42, single), who stated that “employment in the public sector gives you stability, but this is only good enough if it comes with what allows you

to develop professionally” (the reference was specialized activity associated with stable employment).

Impacts of gender relations on the narrative patterns of working identity construction

In general, the decisions of the female participants were conditioned by the choices of their husbands, as exemplified by Cindy (female, 39, married): “I do not take part in public tenders nor accept promotions that would make me work in another city or another country.” Moreover, women often gave up their careers to take care of children, as pointed out by Joyce (female, 48, married), “When I had my sons, I had to stop investing in my career to take care of them”; or they realized that “if you want a career, you need be single” (Sherry, female, 30, single).

The working world discriminates against mothers, as Joyce (female, 48, married) stated: “I worked in that company when I got pregnant, and, when I came back from my maternity leave, I was fired because of personnel cuts. But I knew it was because I had a child.” Mary (female, 41, single) said: “At some point of your career you have to choose between being a mother and being a successful professional, as I have done.” This does not seem to be an issue for men, who consider their disengagement from child care a natural situation, as Stephen (male, 43, married) admitted: “I have never been a present father, because my main duty has always been to give support to my wife, so she can take care of our children.”

In summary, as already established in the literature, career development opportunities and prevailing gender identities determined by the gender stereotypes of the male breadwinner and the female caregiver seemed to still define the working identity construction of almost the entire sample in our study even though it consisted of white middle-class people, who historically have had better career prospects and conditions for vocational choice-making.

Analyzed in terms of gender, the results on working identity narrative patterns were similar to the results for the sample studied as a whole regarding *organizational identity narrative patterns*, *professional/occupational identity narrative patterns*, and *transitory identity narrative patterns*. Relevant differences, however, were observed for *networking identity narrative patterns* and *hybrid identity narrative patterns*. While *networking identity narrative patterns* were much more often reported by women than by men, *hybrid identity narrative patterns* were much more often reported by men than by women.

In general, the main indicators of each narrative pattern were men’s chief reasons for constructing each specific narrative pattern, whereas women needed to rearrange their lives to sustain them, confirming that the working world has remained profoundly gendered, as the literature assumed.

The group of participants that sought security and stability in their working lives, and had constructed *organizational identity narrative patterns* was composed equally of women and men, the main reason for that being security offered by a job. Still, strict standards of job description and working hours posed a problem for women, because “I am not able to control my working hours, and I have difficulty accommodating them to my family duties” (Joyce, female, 48, married). Also, the group of participants who needed a profession and constructed *professional/occupational identity narrative patterns* was composed equally of women and men, although women tended to quit their profession easier than men and tried to find new ways of practicing their professions, as Cindy (female, 39, married) described, “I stopped working as a lawyer, because I could not reconcile schedules and I had to travel a lot. Today, I have an online legal advice business, because I can work at home.”

Thus, it can be said that, in our sample, men’s and women’s working identity narrative patterns were similar regarding the search for stability, security, and identity standardization, although with some gender-related difficulties. They were generated by both external patterns (working organizations and professions/occupations) by means of reproducing models appearing in *organizational identity narrative patterns* and *professional/occupational identity narrative patterns*. Half of the participants were anchored in more traditional patterns of relations with the world, but women were more challenged in it. However, there was a significant difference: the movements of flexibility, constant change, and unpredictability of *networking identity narrative patterns* were more often reported by women. A difference was also perceived in that the combination of structured modes of identity construction in *hybrid identity narrative patterns* (which did not form new models, but rearranged existing models through a mix of processes) was reported chiefly by men.

Susan (female, 36, married) offered an interesting explanation of this difference and the preference for *networking identity construction* declaring: “I’d rather have jobs where I can set my schedule, tasks and deadlines, instead of more traditional jobs, where I would have little autonomy to do this. I am a flexible woman, and I think that is what women should be.” On a slightly different note, Alice (female, 55, married) pointed out that “I am a little bit confused as a self-employed worker, because I have been employed all my life, and I still have an organizational identity. However, the negative aspects of this type of identity for women have made me shift to a more flexible kind of job that best meets my needs. The main problem is: it leaves me a bit befuddled.” And Joyce (female, 48, married) said: “I don’t want to change my life completely, so I need security and stability in my working life; however, I use networking to maintain my stability.”

This implies that men are more likely to construct hybrid identities, and women are more likely to build flexible identities, that is, men tend to reproduce the existing possibilities and rearrange them while women are forced to reconstruct

working identities, adjusting these identities to their needs and creating new ways to construct themselves in the working world.

Discussion

Basically, participants constructed their identities by means of narrative patterns described in the literature as organizational identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Bardon et al., 2015; Strangleman, 2012), professional and occupational identity (Dubar, 1997; Stecher, 2012), and network identity (Fenwick, 2007; Grote & Raeder, 2009). However, the analysis rendered also two other patterns barely addressed in the literature: de-identification (Beech, 2011; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Touraine, 2007) and hybrid forms (Carruthers & Uzzi, 2000; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009).

Consistent with other studies (Bardon et al., 2015; Dubar, 1997; Grote & Raeder, 2009; Stecher, 2012), flexibility of the working world has generated a diversification of identity construction strategies, though these strategies have clearly retained certain characteristics of more traditional patterns, such as stability, little change, and a trend towards standardization. In other words, we have been experiencing a transitional situation in which old models coexist with new ways of being in working contexts (Blustein, 2011; Grote & Raeder, 2009).

Our findings largely corroborate this insight, as the identity narrative patterns identified in the sample showed two narrative movements which, though opposite, are equally significant in the world today: the search for stability and the search for flexibility, as Alvesson and Willmott (2002), Strangleman (2012), and Sullivan and Baruch (2009) have observed. In the face of ongoing changes of the working world, the search for stability was represented by narrative patterns of organizational, professional and occupational identities; and the search for flexibility was represented by narrative patterns of networking and hybrid identities.

The latter is a Do-It-Yourself model (Carruthers & Uzzi, 2000) or a model of the human as a hybrid (Latour, 1993), because the person is constructed in a field of heterogeneous tensions in which any unity or uniformity is not possible.

Associated with this central movement were also: the selectiveness of life individualization discourses, as a considerable part of the sample looked for external and generic patterns of identity construction in the world; the growing importance of social networks as psychosocial bases for identity construction established in the in-between spaces, according to Fenwick (2007); and the incidence of more frequent moments of breakdown marked by de-identifications (Beech, 2011; Touraine, 2007).

Consequently, it should be emphasized that there indeed are identifiable working identity construction patterns, but they display some heterogeneity which is of interest to scholars and practitioners in the field of working studies and career guidance and counseling. Moreover, these patterns can be understood through personal

narratives, because personal narratives have a potential to present the core social discourses that underpin working identity constructions. In this sense, we wish to highlight the practical and theoretical relevance of narratability for constructing careers and for career counseling interventions.

Finally, when analyzing the impact of gender relations on working identity constructions of male and female workers in São Paulo (Brazil), two movements were found which, though different, were both impacted by gender stereotypes, as stated by Gottfredson (1981, 1996). According to Abramo (2010), Almeida Neves (2013), Galvez et al. (2015), and Lester (2008), gender issues continue to be distinctive features for defining the working contexts.

In the search for stability, both men and women constructed their working identities based on organizations, professions, and occupations. However, in the search for flexibility, the genders followed divergent paths. Men sought to combine preexisting reference frameworks and construct hybrid identities based on establishments, whereas women sought to foster opportunities through relationships. It foregrounded the continuous constructing experience of women, whose experiences were usually marked by transience of working and relationships, attributable to women's dual – working and domestic – responsibilities, which led to more multiple and nomadic paths and strategies, as Probert (2001) emphasized. Thus, men were more likely to construct hybrid identities, and women were more likely to construct flexible identities, even though their approaches to handling contexts that require constant changes were different. Namely, women generated possibilities through relationships, and men rearranged the existing options. This corroborated the idea that multiple identities and the experience of multiple roles are a distinct strategy women rely on to deal with the constantly changing working world, as stated in the literature (Alexiou, 2005; Bimrose et al., 2015; Chies, 2010; Silva et al., 2010).

Given gendered practices and contexts, women were more likely to construct their working identities in more conflicting processes than men because of a strong association between female identity and domestic duties, as well as women's double working load continuously forcing them to manage the balance between paid working and houseworking. This permanent situation led women to develop alternative strategies regarding the mainstream working world, which may explain constructing flexible identities as indicated by our findings.

Conclusion and limitations

This paper aimed to identify and analyze the main working identity narrative patterns of urban male and female workers who live in the city of São Paulo (Brazil) and the influences of gender relations on the construction of these processes.

Firstly, the study identified five narrative patterns of working identity construction: (1) *Organizational identity narrative patterns*, marked by stability and security and based on external patterns; (2) *Professional/occupational identity narrative patterns*, defined by specialized activity and by the experience of being a professional, also based on external patterns of the communities of practice; (3) *Networking identity narrative patterns*, characterized by flexibility, constant change, unpredictability and networking, based on relational patterns; (4) *Hybrid identity narrative patterns* merging the existing modalities to form a predominant way of self-construction; and (5) *Transitory identity narrative patterns*, understood as a transitional crisis situation.

These five typologies have already been discussed in the literature (Bardon et al., 2015, Grote & Raeder, 2009; Stecher, 2012; Vera & Valenzuela, 2012), although the latter two are rarely addressed, as stated above. The novelty was to think about them as narrative patterns, not fixed types, which helped enhance their analytical potential and avoid reducing complex realities to fixed types, as proposed in Ribeiro (2015) regarding to careers. Thus, these narrative patterns of working identity construction should be a valuable theoretical resource for understanding the working world and a relevant basis for planning career counseling interventions.

Besides, as regards gender relations, our study's most important original contribution seems to be the finding that gender stereotypes were retained to inform strategies built to deal with changes in the working world, as first stated for career guidance and counseling by Gottfredson (1981, 1996) and recently discussed by Bimrose et al. (2014), Bimrose, McMahon and Watson (2015) and Blustein (2006). Firstly, we found that men and women alike sought stability and security, relying on external patterns of organizational, professional, and occupational identity construction. Secondly, we identified gender-specific movements of identity construction, in which men sought to combine the preexisting patterns in *hybrid identity narrative patterns*, whereas women opted for *networking identity narrative patterns*. In other words, men tended to need predefined bases for identity construction in relation to the working world, and, at most, combined them, while women were either more willing or forced to change and to be flexible.

In short, as pointed out in the literature, our times call for integrating different narrative patterns of identity construction in the world (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Fenwick, 2007; Gergen, 1991; Strangleman, 2013; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Therefore, it is important to understand working identity construction patterns through the lens of intersectionality, which in this study focused on gender relations. Although the working world is becoming increasingly open to women, the traditional gender structures, representations and relations that favor men over women still persist. This continues mainly because of women's double working load (Abramo, 2010; Chies, 2010), resulting from the construction of stereotypical gender relations (Butler, 1990).

Although the implications of our study are highly relevant, our research had its limitations as our sample included only individuals from one specific context. Nevertheless it still had a considerable potential of affording insight into ways in which men and women construct their working identities, and into possible gender-related differences amongst them.

Finally, the implications for career counseling can be briefly expressed as the exigency of greater openness to gender issues and inclusion of gender discussion into counselling practices. This will help avoid standardizing the concerns that are strongly diversified and involve different positions, performances and career opportunities in the working world, in accordance with Bimrose et al. (2014), and Bimrose et al. (2015). Another implication is the great relevance of narratability for career counseling interventions, which has been emphatically discussed by Savickas et al. (2009).

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