Annalisa Murgia
University of Trento, Italy

"Flexible narratives"
Discursive Positionings of Gender and Identity in Precarious Times

Abstract

Studies concerning the transformations of work have long stressed how flexible work has affected the lives and identity-setting processes of individuals. A salient aspect of the current changes consists of the gender issues concerning the reality of work and its representations. The aim of this paper is to stress gender-identitary positionings in the context of the stories of women and men in non-standard employment. The specific question that the article addresses is whether the increasing distance from the "standard" working model – concerning full-time long-term employment – is also being accompanied by a change in the prevailing gender models. In particular, the stories of women and men with non-standard and precarious jobs are presented, in order to show how, by means of narratives, gender models linked to precarious work are constructed.

Studies concerning the changes in contemporary work have long stressed the development of new forms of work and social organization in advanced capitalist countries. A salient aspect of the current changes consists of the gender issues concerning the reality of work and its representations. Contemporary transformations in work, linked in particular to expansion of the service industry, the loss of some characteristics of stability, the centrality of relational competences, and the diffusion of new technologies, are in fact described as resulting from a shift of demand from "masculine" manufacturing full-time jobs to "feminine" service-based part-time ones (Crompton 1999; Hobson 2000).

In the literature, the expression "feminization of the labour market" (Lash 1999; Adkins 1995) refers, on the one hand, to the increasingly high number of women with

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[1] Annalisa Murgia is member of the Research Unit on Communication, Organizational Learning and Aesthetics, and of the Centre of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies at the University of Trento (Italy), where she is lecturer for the Master in Gender Policies in the Labour World. Her researches focus on work trajectories, with special regard to workers with non-standard and precarious jobs, and on the social construction of gender in professional careers.
Contact: annalisa.murgia@unitn.it

jobs (a major trend of the last thirty years) and their growing presence in sectors traditionally pertaining to men. On the other, it stresses the importance acquired, in the new economy, by communicational and relational skills, these being competences assumed to belong "naturally" to women. Furthermore, the concept of feminization has often been used to explain the increasing instability and forced flexibility of contemporary work regardless of the worker's gender. Beck (1999), for instance, uses the expression "feminization of work" to describe the phenomenon of men doing precarious jobs, rather than the situation of women having jobs. This category therefore stresses that specific forms of masculinity continue to characterise professional relationships, maintaining predominance over other possible masculine or feminine forms (Collinson and Hearn 1994), so that the characteristics related to femininity are undervalued, denied or unrecognized (Acker 1990; Davies 1996).

Although the dynamics triggering gender discriminations have long been acknowledged in the analysis of men's and women's professional paths (Kanter 1977; Reskin 1984), the spread of non-standard jobs has emphasized some of their characteristics, sometime even in a paradoxical way. This paper is focused on how social and discursive practices construct the gender identities of men and women on temporary contracts.

Un/stable gender positioning in the flexible work

The proliferation of non-standard types of contract and work has further emphasized the persistence of old gender-related stereotypes concerning the distribution of domestic and care tasks (Poggio 2006) and the chances of access to a professional career and its development (Saraceno 2005). A particularly common rhetoric in regard to non-standard jobs, for instance, claims that the various forms of flexible work are advantageous to women. Its rationale is that, given the instability and adaptability constantly pertaining to feminine work (interruptions, periods of employment followed by periods of unemployment), women are readier than men to adapt to a different model of professional development and to gain more benefits from the current configuration of the labour market. This type of approach, however, starts from an essentialist perspective, automatically ascribing characteristics traditionally considered feminine to women, and those traditionally considered masculine to men. Moreover, it prevents understanding of how gender attributions are constructed in workplaces. In fact, this is not a matter of biological sex; rather, it concerns how people construct their own identities and apply certain discursive and relational practices so as to position themselves in contexts of asymmetric power (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio 2000).

Whilst recent years have seen studies on how transformations of work have affected the lives and identity-setting processes of individuals (Giddens 1991; Sennett 1998; Beck Ibidem), little research has been conducted on the construction of gender identities within forms of intermittent work (Wajcman and Martin 2002). The aim of this paper is to stress identity-setting processes and gender-positioning processes in the context of the stories of women and men in precarious employment.

The concept of identity applied here does not refer to a static and individual dimension, "something someone is". It instead refers to a process-based and manifold dimension (Gergen 1991), "something someone does" with other people (Poggio 2004) in specific situations and specific places (Butler 1990). A relational concept of oneself, situated in performances and discursive practices, has produced a notion of *self-identity* as narrative (Giddens Ibidem), of oneself as *story-teller*

(Bruner 1990), of identity as performance made of autobiographical acts (Czarniawska-Joerges 1995). Whenever someone talks about their own life, through a discursive interaction, they perform a biographic practice that contributes to the construction, change and maintenance of their own self. Telling a story means giving a sequence and a sense to one's acting, creatively and dynamically creating not only the content of the story but also one's own discursive identity (Czarniawska 1997). Telling one's own story, most of all when asked about it, therefore makes an important contribution to the identity construction process (Gherardi 1995).

To the same extent, gender identity cannot be conceptualized as an essential entity or as a unitary and definitive product of the socialization process. It is built through social and discursive practices that characterise the relationship between social actors (Gherardi Ibidem). Just like the notion of individual identity, gender identity must be turned as a problem (Butler 1990; Davies and Harré 1990) and regarded as continually reconstructing and redefining itself. Accordingly, men and women's stories and narrative schemes cannot be automatically linked to sexual membership; rather, they represent the *medium* of the interaction through which gender is constructed (Gherardi and Poggio 2003). In this sense, biographic narratives can be interpreted as a rich source of gender identity negotiation (and maybe more) as they are assembled referring to public narratives (Somers and Gibson 1994) or cultural repertoires (Lamont 1992), that is, the prevailing normative discourses about men, women, employment, work, family and other life dimensions (Violi 1992). The life story told by an individual, in fact, allows the account of the individual experience to be linked with the analysis of specific cultural practices or their change.

The specific question that I address in what follows is whether the increasing distance from the "standard" working model – concerning full-time long-term employment – is also being accompanied by a change in the prevailing gender models. In particular, I will present the results of a qualitative research project that has been gathering the stories of women and men with temporary jobs, my purpose being to show how, by means of narratives, the prevailing gender models linked to precarious work are constructed. Most of all, I will stress how these models are disputed and alternative ones are proposed.

Research Design and Methodology

In order to illustrate the processes involved in gender-identity construction by temporary workers, I will present some findings from research carried out in the province of Trento (an area of north-eastern Italy) within the public administration and retail sectors. A major reason for selecting these working worlds for analysis is the rather widespread use in them of many forms of temporary labour, such as contract technicians, freelance workers, contract teachers and so on, in the case of the public administration, and apprentices, seasonal and contract workers etc., in the case of the retail sector. The type of employment relationship matters as well. Among the various contractual forms that give no guarantee of temporal continuity, I focus on employer-coordinate freelance work (in the public sector) and outsourced labour (in retail) – as examined by various studies on current changes in the Italian labour market – because they best represent the new forms of flexible work.

Another reason for this choice is the over-representation of women in these sectors, an aspect which highlights a marked form of discrimination in the Italian labour market: the large number of women in the most unstable and least protected

jobs (Istat 2010). The increasing use, within the public administration and the retail sector, of non-standard contracts – a phenomenon which mainly involves the feminine component of the labour force – has directed my attention to the striking polarization between workers who are protected and those, females and males, who are not.

Despite the substantial differences between employer-coordinate freelance workers and outsourced workers, in terms of legislative framework (independent workers v. employees) and from the point of view of the duties performed (the former are characterized, at least in the public sector, by high levels of skill and qualification, whilst the large majority of the latter only possess upper-secondary school diplomas), both categories are in temporary and precarious employment. The following analysis of work instability, in fact, is focused on the identitary positioning of persons on non-standard or atypical contracts, rather than on the content and form of their jobs. This stance is based on rejection of an automatic correspondence between atypical and disqualifying or professionally unsatisfying jobs, and on a specific interest in the increasing degree of existential insecurity linked to the new working configuration, regardless of the activity carried out and the type of contract.

The research findings derive from 50 narrative interviews conducted with men and women aged between 25 and 45, temporary workers in the two sectors investigated. The place of the meeting was always selected by the interviewees, whose major concern was discretion and anonymity with regard to co-workers and employers. The interviews were therefore conducted in the workers' homes, in public places (a park or café), at the university and, very rarely, at the workplace (during the lunch break or at the end of the work shift). Conversations – audio-recorded and integrally transcribed – lasted about 90 minutes, with a few exceptions ranging from 40 minutes to 2 and a half hours.

Using narrative interviews as main research tool aims at covering life stories which not only beat the time and recompose the sense of the biographies, as they finally represent particularly effective instruments for the identitary construction (Poggio 2004). As Hannah Arendt suggests, in fact, thought based on experience is necessarily translated into stories (Young-Bruehl 1977). In this sense, life and life-stories are inextricably interconnected in the constant production of senses and meanings (Brockmeier and Harré 1997). In particular, the analysis of narrative interviews makes it possible to focus on identity construction by individuals, combining the dimension represented by a certain background life-experience with the relationships that the individual has established with his/her social network (Schütze 1987).

Moreover, narratives are powerful means with which to depart from the traditional paradigm and the manner in which work and workers are treated as objects of analysis and study rather than being allowed to talk directly. Therefore, the aim of the paper is not to account for the "facts" and ongoing changes in the labour market. It is instead to treat narrative as a practice that allows subjectivities to act and elaborate new representations of work and other aspects to date little considered, following the narrative process of interpretation and meaning attribution.

This methodological approach has stressed in particular the (narrative) *positioning analysis* by means of which it has been possible to analyze the identity construction of the subject narrator (Butler 1990; Davies and Harré 1990). This is a new standpoint of analysis because it focuses on the interviewees' positioning *vis-à-vis* the characters in their stories (Riessman 2001) and *vis-à-vis* the public narratives (Somers and Gibson 1994) and the prevailing cultural repertoires (Lamont 1992). Their identity construction appears to be either aligned or alternative, and yet

it cannot set aside from them. This paper will concentrate on analysis of gender positioning in discursive practices (Gherardi Ibidem; Riessman 2002), bearing in mind both the individual experience and the narrative practices of the reference culture. Focusing on personal stories, moreover, allows catching the break against the prevailing "male" discourse (Cigarini 2006) that has long characterised the labour studies based on the *male breadwinner* model, the separation of life spheres, and the phases characterising life trajectories

Precarious Workers' Stories: Discursive Positionings of Gender and Identity

Through analysis of the narratives of temporary workers in the public administration and the retail sector in the province of Trento, I have identified different types of identity and gender positionings. The purpose of the research reported in this paper, in fact, was to determine whether the decline of the traditional model of work has been accompanied by a similar decline in the dominant gender model on which it was founded. Numerous studies have sought to show the existence, among many possible, of a more legitimate ideal-type of masculinity and femininity. That is, an ideal-type that prevails over the others, defining identity and positioning in a manner appropriate for women and men within a specific symbolic order (Connell 1995). Individuals can therefore comply with and follow the "natural order" which makes something *partial* become *essence* and tries to lock women up in a *gender monoculture*, as well as subjectivities and practices exceeding the dual system (Poidimani 2006). Or they can perform forms of resistance and seek to redefine the dominant gender model, thus contributing to its demise.

In what follows, four different gender-identity positionings will be illustrated with the narratives provided by the workers on fixed-term contracts whom I interviewed. They range from the discursive construction of a traditional and stereotyped gender identity, to its questioning through narrative practices able to reconfigure both the traditional model of work and the social construction of gender that subtends it.

"A breadwinner... must have a secure income"

The first type of positioning identified in the interviews analysed relates to the predominant gender model, that of the "*male breadwinner*"; a model which takes it for granted that the man's role in the family is to deal with economic matters, while the woman's income, when there is one, is considered merely as support. This type of positioning is performed with no particular differences between men and women, who cooperate in the construction of a traditional-like gender model.

> For instance, a major concern that has always worried me is being unable to support my family, which I don't actually have, precisely because it has always worried me, this thing. That is to say, as time goes by I admire my father more and more – my mother is a housewife – so how the hell did he make it? Four children and I feel so stressed to find myself in a situation that won't actually happen at this point, as either I marry a 20-year-old girl, since I'm already 38. I mean, if I marry someone who is 38 years old, surely not 4 kids, because if I have one, that's already luck, isn't it? Honestly,

we've got to face reality. But I've always been worried about being unable to support a family. [*M, 38, PA*[2]]

> It's obvious that this type of contract... that is, in simple words, luckily I am a married woman, I have a husband I can count on, so there's already an income in the family. Clearly, if this is about the family's breadwinner, things are a bit more complicated, for in my opinion he must have a secure income. Once again, in my opinion, this role, these contracts, for a married woman, who has however other goals in life, are already fine, otherwise it is a bit dangerous. [W, 39, RS]

By stating that a man must provide for his family, these interviewees constructed their own identities, as well as those of their partners (real or hypothetical), thus complying with the traditional social attribution of gender. This follows a cultural model legitimating the role of the man as having a stable job with a secure income. In the narratives that reproduced this type of gender construction, men felt the obligation to have a job that guaranteed the family's well-being, as their fathers – usually presented as a model to emulate – did before them. Women, instead, accepted their work instability, for there was a "husband to count on". There thus emerges a prevailing symbolic order of gender which assumes that women behave in a feminine way and men in a masculine one (Martin 1990). That is, women are supposed to be involved mainly in the private sphere and in (unpaid) care-giving, while men work and deal with the public sphere. In this type of discursive positioning, therefore, non-standard work is translated, on the one hand, into an identitarian threat to men – for whom the figure of the 'household head' is still the main model of masculinity – and on the other, into reaffirmation of a model of femininity which attributes women an ancillary role in the labour market based on a lack of real economic independence and almost exclusive involvement in unpaid work. Moreover, it is interesting that the model of the 'male breadwinner' is still the dominant repertoire in stories of temporary workers in both the public administration and the retail sector.

"It would have been impossible if my wife hadn't had a stable job"

Some of the stories recounted by my interviewees comprised aspects relative to gender-identity positioning which specifically concerned the public sector. These were stories in a certain sense the reverse of those described in the previous sector, in which it was the man who was depicted as the principal source of income. In this case, by contrast, the discursive practices constructed a gender-identity positioning in which women enjoy income security. The following excerpts comprise stories of men who have had the chance to fulfil their professional passions and have a family owing to the stability ensured by their partners' long-term contract jobs.

> I got married in September 1992. I've had three children and in a way this has been a home experience characterised by this instability, although, well, my wife is a teacher – she works part-time, for family reasons – therefore at home there's always been certainty. This work path (as a historian and archive researcher on a fixed-term contract) would have been impossible if my wife hadn't had a stable job from the beginning. Of

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[2] The codes at the end of the interview excerpts stand for sex (W = woman and M = man), the age of the interviewees and the occupational sector (PA= public administration and RS= retail sector).

course, if she'd had an unstable job as well, or if she hadn't had any job at all, something like this wouldn't have been feasible at all, I would have needed to find some other job. [M, 40, PA]

I have never considered seriously, if not very briefly, the idea of switching careers. This has been understood, because, in order to keep doing this job (biologist on a fixed-term contract at a research centre), sorry to say, we had to make certain choices, hard choices unfortunately. My wife has found a long-term job, and we've struck a balance in this sense. I've always perceived the greatest sympathy, and this has certainly been important. Even during certain crises I've always perceived encouragement. [M, 38, PA]

In these cases, the women furnished work stability, while the men had unstable jobs, in an equilibrium which was nonetheless based on the male's involvement in the professional sphere and the female's disinvestment in work satisfaction in exchange for a more stable and protected position in the labour market although one not corresponding to her aspirations.

The identity and gender positioning of these narratives differs from the previous ones in two main respects. Firstly, I never found the same type of account – of support in pursuit of one's professional passions by a partner with a stable job – in the stories of the women that I interviewed. Secondly, these were stories told by men working in only one of the two sectors investigated, i.e. the public administration (not retail). Whilst from the point of view of identity positioning, in regard to both work and gender, this seems to show a decline of the male breadwinner model, it nevertheless reaffirms a masculine identitarian construct founded on fulfilment in paid work, regardless of the stability of the employment relationship. Moreover, numerous studies have reported that, in Italy, highly-qualified jobseekers are willing to accept non-standard contracts if this enables them to enter high-status jobs which match their qualifications (Fullin 2004; Bertolini 2006), whereas those with lower qualifications regard income continuity and contractual stability as more important than the contents of the job (Bertolini, Berton and Pacelli 2009). Social class and education are therefore important resources mobilized in discursive practices in regard to the construction of both gender and occupational identity. This is probably one of the reasons why I found no interviewee working in the retail sector who adopted this type of narrative positioning.

"We are both forced to work"

Whilst in the first two types of gender identity positionings, the subject narrators welcomed and contributed to reproducing the prevailing gender order, in this case the gender construction that stems from the temporary workers' narratives appears to overturn the traditional model, which is however immediately recomposed by means of various repair practices (Gherardi 1995). This is consequently a process of identity and gender role construction characterised by a greater heterogeneity and a closer intertwining of practices that reaffirm the dominant order and practices in breach of it.

The fact that I'm moving instead of my girlfriend is clearly a consequence of our work situations, in the sense that as my girlfriend has a long-term job in a bank, I said "I'm not going to make her move. I will". If I'd had a long-term job here in Trento, things would have been different.

She would have come. That was certainly a major factor. One has to face reality. [M, 30, PA]

> We're both forced to work at home, so there's not enough time even to prepare and cook. Although I like cooking, I don't have time to do it. I used to be the cook at home, but now... We had to buy a *Bimby*, because we had a baby, to be quicker, in other words, pay this, pay that... We are both forced to work. [*W, 45, RS*]

In these excerpts, the interviewees question, at least partially, the prevailing gender order that assumes men are more involved in the public sphere and women in the private one. Yet, despite a higher degree of heterogeneity, these narratives stress that the conditions described have been an obligatory choice. By stating that «one has to face reality» or that «we are both forced to work», the narrators enact discursive practices which put agency completely beyond their own responsibility, assigning objectivity to the situations that they experience, as though they had to justify a broken order.

In this case, the narratives are mobilized not so much to describe the events experienced as to justify them and recompose them in harmonious manner, thereby producing a coherent sense of self (Bruner Ibidem). The interview excerpts describe, in fact, contingent resistance practices constructed in response to changes in the labour market, rather than to a cultural change in the social expectations tied to traditional gender roles. The latter therefore persist in the background to these stories as options which would be taken if the work situation allowed it.

Hence, the identity positionings that emerge from the stories grouped in this category do not consist in a clean break with the traditional model, nor in the construction of biographies which rebel against the dominant pattern. Nevertheless, the work instability and precariousness experienced by the narrating subjects acquire the force to disrupt the rules of the game. In fact, in both the interview excerpts, the temporary and insecure nature of work legitimates change with respect to the traditional type of positioning. On the other hand, although the male breadwinner model is transgressed, the identity of the narrating subjects is discursively recomposed, given that the respondents emphasise that they have accepted a model of work and gender which entails, in the first story, that the man should follow his partner in her change of job locations and, in the second, that both members of the couple should work, and that the woman should be less involved in (unpaid) work in the home.

Also to be noted is that the setting processes of gender relationships, whether these re-propose a traditional gender model (as shown in the first type of identity positioning) or partially question it (as in this last case), are similar in the two sectors surveyed – public administration and the retail sector – notwithstanding the different types of work (self-employment in the former case, dependent employment in the latter), the different levels of education, and the different professional paths.

"The only thing I can do is show men they are wrong"

In the previous section I showed the identity positionings in narratives which disputed the dominant gender order through negotiations imposed by the instability of the employment relationship. In this section I shall instead describe some cases – even if they represent a small proportion of the total of interviews – in which the

narrator seems to oppose the dominant gender order explicitly. A first interesting aspect concerns the absence of this type of stories by men, whilst those by women are some cases antagonistic to social and cultural expectations concerning gender.

> I admit that at work I'm quite tough, I mean tough in the sense of professional... so I'll make you forget I'm a woman. But with my colleagues I'm sometimes a category apart, though we're all precarious, I have to show more than they do. They (supermarket supervisors) have always told me that at * * * (supermarket) women will never get ahead! At * * * (supermarket) only men get ahead. Once they said that to me! And I told them: "That's what you think, I'll make you forget I'm a woman!". [W, 32, RS]

> Right now I feel fine because I'm single, but in the past I've had issues. People don't understand that sometimes I work late, that a woman can work late. In the sense that sometimes some guys, some men find it odd that a woman could be an independent professional, in terms of commitment and organization. And because it's not a steady job, I can't refuse, because you must be always available, but in any case it doesn't bother me to work late, I like my job, I just don't want to have my contract always expiring. [W, 33, PA]

The first excerpt exemplifies an identity positioning which rebels against the gender order that discriminates among people because they have differently sexed bodies. However, the discursive strategy enacted is the one that embraces practices traditionally regarded as male. The interviewee therefore contests the belief that women are less competent at work, but at the same time reproduces the stereotype that men are 'tougher', given that professionalism is achieved by "making them (male colleagues) forget I'm woman". In this regard, also to be emphasized is that, among dissonant voices seeking to destabilize the dominant cultural repertoire, the stories that I collected from female outsourced workers were much fewer in number than those of employer-coordinate freelance workers in the public sector.

The second excerpt instead exemplifies a particular type of identity positioning enacted by the majority of the single women that I interviewed in the public administration. These are stories in which the narrator positions herself in sharp contrast to the traditional gender model, but nevertheless encounters difficulties in constructing gender practices different from the traditional ones. In fact, the difficulty of positioning oneself within a couple if significant investment is made in one's work was mentioned by many of the interviewees working in the public sector. As has already been stressed by other studies (e.g. Crespi 2005), for a number of young women the priority is to safeguard – alongside, or better on top of, work time and private time – time on their own when they can express themselves, their passions, their need for self-fulfilment (Leccardi 2007). This time devoted to themselves, although built around their work, represents a key change in identity construction which rejects one's story as "life for others" and claims "a life for oneself" (Beck-Gernsheim 2002), out of any supporting function. Working thus becomes a means of emancipation. It was especially so for the interviewees who put it on top of their passions. And turning out singles again becomes a chance to focus on their career without upsetting their private lives.

The various forms of identity construction by workers on non-standard contracts therefore exhibit positionings which are highly diverse but nevertheless consist of narratives that are not gender-neutral. Every story, in fact, expresses a gender identity precisely because narrating also involves a positioning of the narrating self

within the categorizations that the discursive and narrative practices of the reference culture make available, among which is also the male/female dichotomy (Poggio 2004). The next and concluding section will assess the identitary construction processes emphasised in the narratives of men and women on non-standard contracts in the fields analysed, and how specific gender positionings were performed.

Conclusions

The excerpts presented above reveal a situation characterised – at different levels – by persisting dynamics of occupational segregation based on gender. These accounts represent, above all, different models of identity construction and gender positioning pursued by subjects who experience situations of professional instability on a daily basis. By assuming a certain stance towards work instability, people present narratives that are not neutral to gender issues. In fact, all narratives are told through the discursive practices available in the reference culture, and normatively or stereotypically associated with either sex. Some practices are conceived as being appropriate only to men, some others only to women (although available to both) (Gherardi 1995; Martin 2006).

The stories presented here accordingly contribute to building and performing a particular type of masculinity and femininity. In the first two types of gender positioning identified by the interview analysis, the accounts of men and women jointly built a gender model that ascribed characteristics and diversities on the basis of the different sexes, keeping women subordinate to the role of men, who were allowed to make considerably larger investments in their work. Whilst the first type comprised accounts that fully acknowledged the prevailing gender order, even in the second type, in which there were cases of men with discontinuous incomes supported by partners with permanent jobs, what was disputed concerns economic stability, not traditional gender relationships. Although the proliferation of non-standard jobs has reset the forms taken by the division of labour, major gender differences still remain. Hence, increasing precariousness has reduced the differences between men and women, but it has done so downwards (Beck Ibidem), and it has created new forms of patriarchy (Walby 1989) because women, who finally have the chance to work, still have to deal with their work-related and private duties, especially amid the progressive crisis of the welfare state (McDowell 1991).

The other two types are instead characterised by a (somewhat apparent) destabilization of the prevailing gender culture. In the first case, the dominant models were disputed, but as a reaction to precarious work conditions perceived as imposed, not for the purpose of reconfiguring gender relations. The second type comprised stories by women in which there emerged voices opposing the prevailing gender order. However, whilst on the one hand we can observe a process undermining the hegemonic dynamics, on the other, the narrators tell us about the difficulties involved in performing fragmentary work – as to when and where – in their private lives, and in their relationship with their partners.

A particularly important aspect concerns the differences between the interviewees working in the public administration and those in the retail sector. For those working in supermarkets on temporary contracts, gender positioning, no matter how composite or heterogeneous, more closely followed the template that legitimates the attribution of different roles and duties on the basis of biological sex. The *male breadwinner* model, though revisited, was still the narrative plot that made sense and

in which to recognize oneself. Conversely, adherence to alternative gender models was seen as imposed and "atypical", as well as "atypical" is defined their working position. Similar positions were to be found among male and female fixed-term workers in the public administration. Here, however, alternative forms of gender positioning appear to be more frequent, and not necessarily subordinated to the prevailing gender model. Especially among the women on non-standard contracts in the public sector, in fact, the difficulty of sense-giving was not due to the impossibility of enacting a gender positioning able to challenge the hegemonic model. Rather, it was due to the lack of social legitimacy associated with these forms of gender positioning and identity construction.

The types of gender positioning presented in this paper legitimate specific cultural models which define the gender characteristics that people have, or should have, in order to be considered skilled members of a specific culture (Gherardi and Poggio Ibidem). Many of the stories collected lead the transformation of gender models back to contingent situations usually linked with structural and economic factors, rather than with the overturning of the cultural dimension within which gender stereotypes are rooted and dynamics of power between men and women are negotiated. And for those who stand away from the prevailing gender scripts, it appears very difficult to propose different solutions without necessarily disinvesting in their careers and/or emotional lives, or without reproducing somewhat asymmetrical models.

Whatever the case may be, and regardless of the identity positioning enacted, although the changes due to work insecurity are recounted as imposed on the narrating subjects, they can also engender changes in gender positionings and in relationships between men and women. Still to be understood, therefore, is whether and how the erosion of the standard model of work will continue to represent – as evidenced by this study – precariousness and work insecurity, besides reinforcing the traditional gender model and the asymmetrical power relations between men and women; or whether, instead, work constraints and the imposition of discontinuous employment relationships with scant rights will at least give rise to new narrative plots of resistance against the monologue of the dominant gender culture. It would therefore be interesting to investigate not only how people position their identities and legitimate a symbolic gender order in and through narratives, but above all how these models are disputed and how people seek to construct alternative ones.

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