

Deconstructing and challenging gender orders in organizations through narratives

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Introduction

This chapter seeks to show how narrative may represent a key resource for research and the promotion of change in equality and diversity fieldwork. In particular, I will consider the potential of using a narrative approach to analyse gender differences and asymmetries in organizations, and to activate transformation processes.

In the first part, I will discuss the growing importance of narratives in human sciences, and present the main methodological implications of narrative research, with particular regard to the collection of stories and the formulation of questions to guide their analysis. Then I will endeavour to argue why narrative analysis is particularly stimulating and useful for understanding aspects related to diversity within organizations, particularly with regard to gender.

In the second part of the chapter, I will go into more depth regarding the main aspects which make narratives an important research object and source in studies on gender differences in work and organizations. Indeed narratives can play a relevant role in processes of identity construction and gender positioning; they are able to reproduce and challenge the dominant gender order in organizations and can be used to bring hegemonic practices to light and deconstruct them; they support processes of change, resistance and empowerment, giving voice to marginalized people and groups, and promoting more inclusive contexts.

For each dimension I will present an example of application drawn from my research experience. The first case concerns a study on the stories of women and men working in typically male environments. It will allow us to show how gender identity is constructed and gendered selves are positioned through narratives. The second example concentrates on the stories of men who belong to different organizations but have the use of parental leave in common. Here analysis of the narratives focused on how

resistance and hegemony practices may affect the implementation of gender changes promoted at normative level. The third example regards the use of narratives as stimuli for reflexivity and experiential learning about gender in organisations. By referring to a narrative workshop on leadership conducted with groups of women working in managerial positions, I seek to show how narratives may be effective means to foster change by giving people a chance to conduct retrospective analysis of their past work experiences, and to generate different interpretative perspectives and new meaning configurations in order to face working life and organizational dynamics.

Collecting and analysing narratives in organizations

Over the last few decades, narratives have gained growing attention and significance in different fields of human sciences. Storytelling has been seen, from different disciplines, as a constituent element of the human experience (Fischer 1987, Bruner 1990), through which individuals understand reality and attribute meaning to what happens around them; build their identity; acquire and reproduce cultural values and norms.

Workplace and organizational studies are fields where narrative research has found a particularly wide dissemination . Organizational scholars have paid increasing attention to the multitude of stories present within every work setting, showing that storytelling and narratives are crucial practices within workplaces and organizations, in order to understand several phenomena and processes as organizational identity (Czarniawska 1997), organizational learning (Orr 1995), cultural socialization (Gabriel 1998; Trice and Beyer, 1993), decision-making (O'Connor, 1997; Wilkins, 1983), sense-making (Weick, 1995), change (Brown, Gabriel and Gherardi 2009; Vaara, Sonenshein and Boje, 2016).

At the origin of this 'narrative turn' is the belief that analysis of the various modes of narrating the organization can bring out the subjective interpretations and the representations that actors have of the organizations in which they work, as well as the ways in which they produce a shared and intersubjective understanding of reality.

Moreover, narratives are increasingly recognized not only as organizational artifacts but also as tools and processes of organization, as "stories that organize" (Czarniawska and

Gagliardi, 2003). Both narrating and organizing are, indeed, processes dealing with the same challenge, namely making sense of and giving order to raw and fragmented material.

Given the great body of literature that has focused on narratives from different perspectives, it is impossible to put forward a single definition of narrative. However, Salmon suggests that if we look for a commonality we can find it in the contingency. “Whatever the content, stories demand the consequential linking of events or ideas. Narrative shaping entails imposing a meaningful pattern on what would otherwise be random and disconnected” (Salmon 2008 cit. in Riessman, 2008, 5). Around this commonality there is a variability of definitions, ranging from the more restrictive ones used by social linguistics to the wider ones developed by social history and anthropology.

In what follows, I shall refer to a rather broad definition of narrative as a form of discourse characterized mainly by the fact that it relates events. Its essential feature, as suggested by Herrnstein Smith (1984, 228), is that “someone tells someone else that something happened”, after which s/he provides an account ranging from fragmentary to more complex and structured. Some authors recommend focusing on the first part of the continuum – that is, on often undefined accounts of past events or experiences such as ‘antenarratives’ (Boje, 2001) – while others consider stories to be chronological accounts characterized by the existence of a plot (Czarniawska, 2004). It can also be useful to recall the distinction stressed by Riessman (2008) concerning three facets of narrative research: storytelling (the practice of producing and sharing stories); narrative data (the empirical materials object of analysis); narrative analysis (the scrutiny of narrative data). Moreover, a further important distinction is related to the researchers’ epistemological assumptions and in particular to the status attributed to the narrative: in a phenomenological perspective, narrative can indeed be seen as a mere representation of the reality and of the narrator’s experience. In a post-modern perspective, the assumption is that narrative represents the main fabric of the human experience and that individuals (and organizations) use it to construct and to perform their own identities. Although my positioning as researcher is closer to this second perspective, in this contribution I will endeavour to offer a broader view of the possible use of a narrative

approach in the field of diversity research, even if the provided examples will be more on line with a constructionist and post-modern stance.

There are several ways to access narratives in organisations. They can be collected as they spontaneously arise during an ethnographic observation, or in the already 'objectified' form of various types of documents (letters, diaries, publications, brochures, newspaper articles, visual material, etc.) (Cortazzi 2001, Manning and Cullum-Swan 1994, Riessman 2008). When stories are not directly accessible, the narrative interview (Mishler, 1986, Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Czarniawska, 2004) is the most widely used technique to elicit and collect narratives concerning the experience of individuals, and to bring out the ways in which the dominant social practices are constructed. In this case, it is important to use questions able to generate more composite narratives (such as work histories) or specific anecdotes. It is also important to consider the interaction between interviewer and interviewee, and to be aware that the narrative is the result of a joint construction of meaning (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011, Riessman 2008).

Narratives can be also gathered through action research methods, as in the case of narrative workshops, where the production of stories is stimulated through specific textual or visual stimuli, with the aim of generating multiple points of view in order to deconstruct the assumptions of canonical stories and encourage the creation of alternative ones (Abma, 2003).

Once narrative data has been collected, analysis can be realized using a variety of approaches, reflecting the multifaceted nature of narratives, as well as their use in diverse cultural and epistemological contexts. It is not possible to recall here the whole range of approaches, but it can be useful to identify three major research interrogatives which can be asked of a narrative text, i.e.: *What? How? Why?* Each of them could be associated to different analytical strategies (Poggio 2004).

The first strategy answers the question *what*. Here the analysis focuses on the narrative's content. Stories are treated as individual units in order to identify thematic and/or linguistic regularities in the text. The researcher analyses the stories by focusing on recurrent themes, keywords, metaphors, characters, and situations. S/he then transforms them into data and categories, with the ultimate purpose of producing theoretical generalizations.

Although almost all the narrative research is concerned with the content, what particularly distinguishes the narrative approach is the focus on narrative practice, and therefore in the *how* and the *why* (Riessman, 1993). The question *how* is aimed at focusing on the way the narrative is organized, namely its structure. This means first identifying the narrative sequence, determining the boundaries, and identifying the functions performed by the characters and the text (Gee, 1991; Labov, 1972). Narrative patterns and repertoires, plots and causal sequences of events, and the way that agency is attributed to the characters can be other objects of analysis.

The last question has to do with *why* the narrator develops his/her story in one particular way and not in another (Poggio, 2004). The researcher concentrates not only on the text itself but also on the circularity between the text and the context in which the story is produced and to which it must be adapted to be consistent and plausible. This requires paying attention to problematic cultural aspects, recognizing the polysemy and ambivalence inherent in every story. It can also mean adopting a deconstructionist approach which concentrates on contradictions, silences, and dissonant and marginal voices in order to unmask what is given as self-evident (Boje, 2001).

Narratives and Diversity in Organizations

One of the areas of organizational studies in which narrative approaches could prove most promising today, is without doubt the study of equality, diversity and inclusion. There are several reasons for this. The first is that storytelling can offer a richer and more articulated picture about diversity and discrimination issues in organizations. On the one hand, in fact, narratives afford privileged access to the multiplicity of experiences and perspectives of the different members of organizations, giving voice to those who are traditionally invisible and neglected (Hendry, 2007) and breaking the “culture of silence” that often blocks marginalized groups (French and Swain 2006). On the other hand, narratives make it possible to go beyond the rhetoric of neutrality and non-differentiation often conveyed by mainstream organizational discourses, bringing to light the relations and power imbalances that underlie them (Gabriel and Willman, 2005).

Syed and Boje (2007) reprise Ricoeur's (1991) categorization of narratives into three different levels connoting the relational experience of subjects (worldviews, interaction and communication, and personal level) to describe the various ways in which narratives concern the dimension of diversity in organizations. At the level of worldview, narratives mediate the experience of workers with the work environment, defining their prospects of inclusion or discrimination. At the intermediate level, narratives are shaped by everyday interactions and conversations and can generate feelings of exclusion, for example through sexual or racial jokes. Finally, at the level of identity – that of self-perception – individual narratives are influenced by the workplace diversity climate on the basis of which possible courses of action are defined.

The second reason concerns the role that narratives can perform not only in the analysis and interpretation of the diversities present in workplaces but also in the understanding and management of cultural diversity. Besides studies on the application of storytelling to diversity management from the “business case” perspective (Barker and Gower, 2010), several authors have stressed that narrative analysis makes it possible to bring out the various discourses (implicit and explicit) and discursive positioning (alignment or resistance) on diversity present in organizations, as well as the emotions and experiences related to them (Gabriel, 2000). For example, in research involving professional and public servants engaged in projects and activities related to diversity and equality in the UK, Ozbilgin and Tatli have analysed stories of diversity management. They highlight that these stories are relationally constructed and shaped by the subfield in which they are located (academic, cultural, institutional, business, and professional), as well as by the hegemony of the mainstream narratives (Ozbilgin and Tatli, 2006).

Finally, many studies have found diversity to be an intrinsic quality of narratives and organizational storytelling. The literature on the use of narrative refers to a “diversity principle” which should guide the design of narrative research by “acknowledging one's complexity and sensitivity to others and environments” (Daiute, 2014, 25). In organizational studies, the reference to diversity as a constitutive dimension of storytelling is especially evident in regard to fragmentation and polyphony. In organizations, in fact, stories often take the form of ongoing, incomplete and non-linear texts marked by numerous interruptions; texts not produced by individuals but

collectively through the contribution of several organizational actors; as situated texts understandable only in light of situated negotiated performances between tellers and listeners (Boje, 2001; Barge, 2004).

Gender is indubitably one of the dimensions of diversity that has most stimulated reflections and studies tied to storytelling and use of the tools and methodologies of narrative analysis. In what follows, I will try to reconstruct the reasons for this interest and to describe some of the most significant contributions.

Dealing with gender diversity through narratives

Gender studies are particularly fertile ground for the narrative approach in its various forms. In fact, interest in narratives is already a central and distinctive feature of the feminist literature and women's studies, even before gender studies; and within these fields of study several significant contributions have been made to the debate on narrative knowledge. At the origins of this debate is the critique brought by various feminist scholars against the rational knowledge and epistemological models based on the paradigm of objectivity, and which maintains that the experiential dimension risks being cancelled (Stivers, 1993). Feminist methodologies have problematized knowledge-gathering processes and the conduct of scientific research, highlighting their dimension of social construction and therefore their inevitably gendered nature (Harding, 1987). The claim that the object and subject of research are separate entities has been interpreted in light of the dichotomic order that distinguishes between public and private and between male and female, and according to which personal experiences are not scientific because they are associated with the private sphere, and therefore, historically, also with women. The use of narratives has accordingly been considered an opportunity to challenge these models, stimulating the dynamics of knowledge production and generating alternative views able to overcome old prejudices and dichotomies (Stivers, 1993). Narratives are regarded as particularly efficacious means to shed light on some fundamental aspects relating to gender relations, such as the construction of a gendered self-identity; the relationship between individuals and society in the production and reproduction of gender norms; and the power relations between men and women.

An interesting example is given by the multidisciplinary work published by The Personal Narrative Group (1989) where diaries, letters and orally narrated accounts about women's experience are analysed and discussed, showing how narrative can be seen as a channel for the exercise of reflexivity. This is a central dimension of feminist epistemology because of its capacity to stimulate retrospection and facilitate work by the memory. With the term 'retrospection' I refer to the mode of thought whereby signs and traces of the past are recomposed and acquire meaning when experiences are described with hindsight. Through narrative, thought becomes reflexive and makes it possible to give form to what was indistinct, thus reappropriating its history (Gherardi and Poggio, 2007). Several authors have shown that narrative has historically been an area of freedom and self-assertion for women, especially in settings where their asymmetry in terms of power was more evident. Women have therefore sought in narrative "the reality of a subjectivity otherwise denied" (Jedlowski, 2000, 100), an opportunity to negotiate the "exceptionality" of their gender status (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). In recent years, attention to the interweaving between gender and narratives has grown also in organizational studies and research, as well as in managerial practice. Several studies have used narratives to analyse organizational change or also to stimulate reflexivity at theoretical level (Gherardi and Poggio, 2006; Tomendal and Boyoglu, 2014).

In what follows, I shall concentrate on three main lines of inquiry, which I consider particularly significant and on which, over the years, I had the opportunity to focus my research, starting from a perspective that looks at narratives not as a mere representation of reality and experience, but as processes of identities' construction and positioning, as well as of resistance, deconstruction and change. First, studies that have focused on narratives as processes of identity construction and gender positioning; second, studies that have used narratives as tools to reproduce or deconstruct the dominant gender orders; third, studies that have sought to highlight the role of narratives in supporting processes of change, resistance, and empowerment to promote more inclusive workplaces. For each lines I will furnish an example of application drawn from research projects in which I have taken part.

The first case concerns research on narratives of women and men working in typically male environments, where it is possible to see how, through narratives, specific and

different identity configurations are produced and how gender positionings are accomplished. The second example concentrates on the stories of men working in different organizations who made use of parental leave. Here analysis of the narratives focused on how resistance and hegemony practices may affect the implementation of gender changes promoted at regulatory level. The third case refers to a situation in which narratives were used as stimuli for reflexivity and experiential learning in organisations to foster gender change.

Identity construction and gender positioning

The first contribution of narrative approaches to the study of gender differences in organizational contexts concerns analysis of the processes of identity construction and gender positioning. Narratives can be regarded as privileged places and processes of identity production and reproduction (Griffiths, 1995). The importance of narrative in identity construction increases the more we have to do with decentralized and multiple selves. Through narrative we struggle with the heterogeneity of experience in order to produce a unitary and coherent story of ourselves (Davies and Harré, 1990). Narrative is the instrument that gives continuity to our experience of ourselves. In fact, the only way to conceive our existence in a unified manner is to regard it as an expression of a single story that develops over time (Polkinghorne, 1988). In recounting ourselves and others, we take part in a process of creating and maintaining our own and the others' sense of self. We are required to locate the narrating ego within the categorizations made available by the discursive and narrative practices of the reference culture.

Particularly useful in this regard is the concept of 'positioning', understood as the process which relates narrating and identity construction. When telling a story, the narrator positions him/herself with respect to both the events recounted and the others/the actants in a process that unfolds in a manner such to enable the narrator to legitimize him/herself (Davies and Harré, 1990). Moreover s/he positions her/himself vis-à-vis the range of identity that are available in the dominant discourse (Bamberg 1987). It is important to note that the various positions assumed are not static or unchangeable: identity emerges from narratives as a medley of selves which prevail over others in a constant switch of positionings. It is an open, multiple identity which

allows for contradictions, rather being than a linear design of the self. Rather than isolating the diverse variables involved, the narrative approach makes it possible to highlight their co-presence and interweaving (Ludvig 2006, Prins 2006). The concept of positioning therefore proves particularly efficacious for analysis of how the gender self is constructed, also from an intersectional perspective (Cole 2009), because it enables reconstruction of the different identity positionings of social actors, highlighting their overlaps but also their contrasts. When narrating, individuals perform gender identities that may or may not align with the gender patterns predominant in the socio-cultural context of reference (Riessman, 2000).

Box 1: Gender narratives in male-dominated environments

In this first example the attention focused on narratives concerning the professional and organizational experiences of women and men working in male-dominated environments (Gherardi and Poggio, 2007a). Here narratives were collected by interviews conducted with several women working in male-dominated jobs or economic sectors, and with as many male colleagues in the same position, or with equivalent rankings in the same organization, who were already present in that organization when woman interviewed joined it.

The interviews were conducted using questions which prompted the interviewee to recount his/her experiences in the form of a story or a narrative. The interviewers invited the subjects to concentrate on their work histories, including the moment they first joined the organization (ex. *I would like to know your career path until now, could you tell me how you assumed your current position?*). Men were also asked to recount the moment when the female colleague began working with them.

The aim of analysis was to determine how gender cultures had been discursively constructed and negotiated in organizational contexts historically characterized by male predominance and latterly by the entry of women pioneers. Analysis focused on narrative's contents (*what*), structures (*how*) and contextual dimensions (*why*).

Various lines of analysis were pursued. In particular here I will refer to two interpretive pathways, more focused on identity construction and positioning processes.

In the first, career narratives were analysed in order to see how storytelling can contribute to producing specific and different identity configurations. The focus was on the formal characteristics of the narratives, highlighting the rhetorical forms and devices used by men and women to construct their professional identities in narratives: in particular we considered the incipit, the characters, the organization of the story, the attribution of agency. We found some basic differences between the women's and men's narratives: the men we interviewed told linear stories in which they themselves were the protagonists, while the women recounted more complex and ramified ones, often attributing agency to others. The following excerpts, drawn respectively from the interviews with a man and a woman working in the same organization, a bank, offer an illustration:

Man: "After I graduated in economics and business studies from Milan I started working in a large national bank. I moved through the various stages of the bank's career structure according to the standard sequence, starting in the front office until I qualified as an executive".

Woman: "Lucky coincidences: there was a colleague who was working in this area and she needed help. So a form of collaboration started between us. She asked me if I felt like coming in, I tried it out and it worked, with a series of coincidences (...) I was lucky enough to have a managing director who believed in me, who gave me support, who helped me. And he acted as a barrier in so many situations that I grew as a person".

These differences were interpreted in light of differing cultural expectations. The presence of different narrative patterns – and in particular the tendency of men to make the ordinary obligatory and of women to depict the extraordinary as due to coincidence – suggested the existence of a discursive gender order which shapes people's discursive and narrative practices.

The second focus of analysis was on the meaning attributed to the careers of women in traditionally male roles and positions, and on the gender positioning accomplished through the stories recounted by both the female and male interviewees. In the narratives of men and women about their professional lives and about "what happened when she came in", it was possible to observe how gender identities are produced interactively through the reciprocal positioning of individuals – women and men – in organizations. The main interpretative category that emerged from this part of the

analysis was the concept of ‘challenge’: all the stories collected about women intruders were accounts of challenges, albeit with different levels of awareness and intentionality. They told that women entrants in traditionally male organizations or roles invade a male domain, and in doing so they represent a threat to the symbolic gender order. The concept of ‘challenge’ arose repeatedly when analysing the positionings realized through the narratives. Particularly evident was the fact that these women raised a double challenge against the symbolic gender order: they were women who had invested time and resources in their work, and therefore had belied the traditional norms for women. The analysis shed light on the ambivalence inherent in the types of positioning that the women and men constructed through their narratives: on the one hand, the women interviewees stressed their affinities with the male colleagues, in order to distinguish themselves from those whom they called “the other women”, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

Woman: “I’m talking about a certain kind of woman who wants to achieve something in the world of work, because for example I have lots of colleagues who don’t want to follow a schedule from morning to evening, they finish at four o’clock and think no more about it”.

On the other hand, the men tended to regard their women colleagues as exceptions in their narratives.

Man: “Imagine my wife, who has two children. She could never have done what [my colleague] has done. Not even if she had twice the intelligence, ambition, etc. Having two children at the age of twenty-five, she devoted five years of her life to them. A woman who wants to have this sort of success, if we can call it that, certainly can’t afford motherhood. It’s an obvious drawback. If all women had careers, humanity wouldn’t exist”.

They were thus able to protect the dominant symbolic gender order: if career women were the ‘exceptions’, normality was represented by those women who, as the men’s wives, concerned themselves with family responsibilities and had priorities other than work.

Reproducing and challenging the dominant gender orders

A second important dimension of storytelling has to do with its role in reproducing the dominant gender order in organizations, but also in challenging them. Stories are never individual and isolated products; rather, they reflect power relations within broader social contexts and may represent sites of resistance and subversion of the dominant discourse (Reid and West, 2015).

Narratives may in fact be seen as artifacts that reflect the cultural background of reference, but also as tools to challenge specific power relations and cultural and relational models. In this regard, narrative analysis is a useful method to bring hegemonic practices to light and deconstruct them: through the analysis of stories it is possible to uncover hegemonic models and cultures, and to show the plurality of voices within organizations (Boje, 1995; Fournier, 1998).

Several studies have highlighted the importance of stories for both reproducing and challenging the gender orders dominant in organizations (Hanappi-Egger and Hofmann, 2005, Gherardi and Poggio, 2007a, Martin, 2001). In a study on women managers in New Zealand, for example, Olsson shows how storytelling, which traditionally supported hegemonic male norms, may make it possible to “break the silence” and overcome the constraints of male executive cultures (Olsson, 2000, 302).

The narrative approach has been used to analyse situations of change and resistance in multiple contexts ranging from stories of activism of community health workers in Mexico (Ramirez-Valles, 1999) to the resistance of female Swedish public-administration workers to processes of digitalization and organizational change perceived as deskilling and downgrading their work (Giritli Nygren, 2012). In a study collecting the narratives of women working in hotels in several countries (Adib and Guerrier, 2010), the authors show that the concept of resistance is particularly useful for analysing how workers give sense to their positions within the organization. They highlight the “transformative power” of narratives, showing how narratives of resistance may in fact have a dual purpose: to reproduce or to transform dominant gender orders. Research on challenges to symbolic gender orders sometimes focuses on exceptional situations (Gherardi and Poggio, 2007a, Murgia and Poggio, 2009). Considering stories about unconventional situations within specific contexts (e.g. the stories of women in

traditionally male jobs and organizations or, conversely, of men who devote themselves to child care) makes it possible to show the existence of specific symbolic orders and hegemonic models of masculinity and femininity conveyed by dominant narratives, but also the existence of unorthodox practices. Moreover, considering atypical stories makes it possible to analyse how exceptionality is negotiated and to construe subjectivity as a state where the person is the intersection of multiple subject positions (Bloom and Munro, 1995).

If narratives are seen as devices to produce scenarios “in the subjunctive” mood (Bruner, 1990), they undoubtedly have emancipatory value because they enable the identification of plots and alternative scripts. In describing research conducted by collecting the work narratives of women school superintendents, Chase emphasises that their experiences are particularly interesting because “they bring together divergent strands of culture in a new way and promise to elicit new stories” (Chase, 1995, 33).

Box 2: Stories of men challenging dominant gender orders

This second example refers to research based on the stories of men who had used their entitlement to take parental leave from work, collected through narrative interviews (Murgia and Poggio, 2009, 2013). Aim of the research was to show how a change promoted at normative level – extension of the right to take parental leave to men as well – and intended to counteract imbalances in gender practices dominant in organizations and in society at large, was then difficult to put into practice in different organizational contexts. In fact, the stories collected recounted attempts – some successful, others not – by men to enact gender practices not expected and legitimated by their organizations even though they concerned a legally recognized right.

The analysis of the narratives focused on how the interviewees reconstructed and interpreted events perceived as salient in their personal and professional lives in relation to the dominant gender models. When conducting the analysis, we focused on the sub-text of gender and on the models of hegemonic masculinity conveyed by the stories. We were particularly interested in understanding how the interviewed men, in telling stories about the use of parental leave, reproduced or challenged the practices of hegemonic masculinity within their organizations.

The plots of the stories recounted by the men were at odds with the cultural models typical of the organizations to which the narrators belonged, where expectations regarding male careers did not contemplate the possibility of time off work to look after children, despite the existence of a law encouraging and protecting that practice. Intertwined in these stories, therefore, were different and even conflicting dimensions like change and resistance, emancipation and subjugation, control and disobedience. The unexpected emergence of innovative gender practices represents a challenge and a breakdown in the dominant symbolic order of organizations which may provoke reactions ranging from denial to sanctions or legitimation as an exceptional occurrence. One of the lines of interpretation pursued during the analysis was identification of three main archetypes associated with three mythological figures, the Titan brothers Atlas, Epimetheus and Prometheus, chosen for their role as rebels against the order of their father, Zeus. Through these three different narratives it is possible to highlight the presence of a common cultural pattern linked to the construct of hegemonic masculinity; but it is also possible to show how practices of hegemony and resistance are always situated and can therefore only be understood in relation to the specific contexts and practices in which they are embedded. The three stories, in fact, differ according to the combination in which these dimensions are present: whilst in the story of Atlas one observes an explicit opposition between the protagonist and the hegemonic managerial practices of the organization, in the others the boundaries are more fluid and ambiguous. Here is an excerpt from the Atlas' experience when he applied for parental leave:

“I knew it would be a very tough choice, I was aware of that. By now my career has finished in certain respects for this reason. My chief consultant hasn't spoken to me for two years... He told me: 'it's a personal affront, don't do it, because it's a bad example to a child if his father stays home', this I'll always remember, and then he said 'a child must understand that you have to work hard to earn money'”.

The story told by Atlas allows us to observe a case of challenge to the dominant organizational model and to the hegemonic masculinity practices. More in general the research made it possible to evidence the role that organizational storytelling can play as an instrument of both change (through accounts of successful actions which may challenge and dismantle the narrative dominant in organizations) and of reproduction and resistance to change (through narratives of alignment with dominant gender orders

which sanction and marginalize those who deviate from them) (Brown, Gabriel and Gherardi, 2009).

Narratives for change

A third strand of studies on the interplay between gender differences and narratives focuses more specifically on the role of narratives in supporting processes of resistance, change and empowerment, giving voice to marginalized people and groups, and promoting more inclusive contexts (Rappaport, 1995; Munro, 1998).

As said, narratives do not only serve to reinforce the prevailing gender order; they are also important resources with which to promote change and empowerment both individual and collective (Hanappi-Egger and Hofmann, 2005, Estrada and Botero, 2000). This may come about through participative experiences of memory sharing or more explicitly training processes.

An example of the use of autobiographical narratives with a view to change and emancipation is provided by the method employed by a group of German women in the 1980s called “Memory-work”. This involved the reconstruction of women’s socialization processes from individual experiences (Haug *et al.*, 1987). The aim was to reconstruct the links between the historical-cultural self and social relations by treating the self as a historical, social and cultural product, in the belief that if a change is to be produced in the present, one must start from a careful analysis of the past. Narrating was therefore seen as a way to re-appropriate experience, to ‘re-member’ in the sense of reconstructing a ‘dismembered’ body and acquiring new awareness with a view to empowerment and transformation (Myerhoff, 1982; Brady, 1990).

This opportunity is also present within organizational contexts, where narratives are sometimes used as training and learning tools, within a framework similar to that of Participatory (Action) Research. Proposing alternative scripts or telling provocative stories are both effective strategies with which to activate change in structures and gender relations (Hanappi-Egger and Hofmann, 2005). Writing stories can be seen as a form of inquiry (Richardson, 1994) and a situated practice of collective reflexivity (Cozza, Gherardi and Poggio, 2018 forthcoming). Storytelling workshops (Abma, 2003), in which participants are asked to swap stories and create new meanings

collaboratively, or to respond to ‘counter-stories’, can represent particularly stimulating settings for change and organizational learning.

Box 3: Narratives for experiential learning regarding gender in organisations

The third case considers a narrative workshop on leadership conducted with groups of women working in managerial positions. Here narratives were used as stimuli to focus specifically on reflexivity, as well as experiential learning: the workshop was indeed aimed at instigating organizational change in a gender perspective, by offering the participants a chance to conduct retrospective analysis of their past work experiences (individual and organizational), and to generate different interpretative perspectives and new meaning configurations in order to face gendered organizational dynamics (Gherardi and Poggio, 2006).

The workshops were designed in order to promote learning and reflection about gender and leadership with women managers working in a large public organization. The idea was inspired by feminist practice and theory, with particular regard to the emphasis that they place on the centrality of reflexive thought and memory. The experiential learning path was based on enhancing, collection, analysis and restitution of narratives about leadership.

Four cycles of the workshop were held, each of them organized into five daylong sessions centred around issues traditionally representing core components of leadership: rationality, control, decision-making, strategic thinking, and their opposites. The days were organized into three main parts:

- a) a short literary narrative about each issue was read to the participants in order to stimulate their memories of similar experiences and their recall of situations connected with the day’s theme;
- b) on the basis of the narrative stimulus, each participant was invited to compose a short story centred on the topic and relating to her professional experience;
- c) narratives were exchanged and discussed in smaller groups. Afterwards they were presented in a plenary session in order to identify shared and divergent experiences in organization, and the underlying cultural and gender models.

At the end of each cycle all the narrative materials were shared with the participants to stimulate a reflection on the learning process. At the conclusion of the workshop we reconsidered all the narrative texts and the feedbacks from the participants in order to draw some general considerations on the experience.

We observed that experiential learning had been based on the interaction between two different and interwoven processes: narrating and listening. The collective analysis of common experiences elicited during the workshop stimulated the participants to reconsider their individual, professional and organizational practices, generating transformative processes (Gherardi and Poggio 2007b). The use of a narrative methodology gave participants an opportunity to conduct retrospective analysis of their work experience (at both the individual and organizational levels), and to generate, also through dialogue and interaction with other stories, new interpretations with which to read and face working life and organizational dynamics. It also enabled – through the narrative stimuli furnished both by the stories provided and those elicited – the participants to consider the relationship between gender and power from different standpoints, providing perspectives alternative to those of the dominant patterns.

Concluding remarks

Transformations that have characterized the society and the labour market in the last decades, including, in particular, globalization, demographic change, the emergence of new productive and organizational logics, have generated a process of progressive diversification of the workforce in terms of gender, age, culture, skills and motivations. These are phenomena destined to become increasingly important in the future scenarios, as it is evident in the case of the refugee crisis in Europe, which poses new and difficult challenges to society, in terms of handling of diversity in all its aspects.

Research and actions that intend effectively to address diversity issues within social contexts, in particular workplaces, while avoiding the risk of in turn reproducing stereotypes and inequalities, should rely on methods and techniques able to highlight the complexity and richness of experience through recognition of a plurality of voices and identities, especially those that are marginalized and silenced. Narratives are formidable tools in this regard.

This contribution has argued that a narrative approach may help researchers to uncover and understand the hegemonic practices which characterize the experiences of individuals and groups within organizations in relation to the different types of diversity. At the same time, a narrative approach can stimulate reflexivity by both individuals and organizations, and also at the level of research and theorizing.

The chapter has also sought to show the dual role played by narratives and storytelling in regard to the dominant symbolic gender orders: on the one hand, as instruments of reproduction, reinforcement and maintenance; on the other, as practices of resistance, challenge, and change. It should also be borne in mind that narrative research itself is subject to this ambivalence. Its more critical and emancipatory significance is flanked by the implicit risk of confining the narrator to his/her story, unwittingly consolidating marginalization and ‘othering’ (Cole, 2009). This therefore requires careful consideration of how to implement the instruments and techniques of elicitation, collection, analysis, and presentation of narrative texts within organizations and workplaces.

Finally, looking forward towards the further development of narrative approaches to issues of equality and diversity, we can see that among the main techniques now emerging in narrative analysis – in combination with new technologies as well as more general new research practices – there are the use of visual tools, the spread of forms of digital storytelling, and the development of participative research techniques. Common to these diverse research strategies is the endeavour to promote collaborative practices of co-construction of stories starting from the meanings elicited by the subjects, thus giving further voice to the existing plurality of narratives, in a still more attuned perspective with that of studies and research on workplace equality and diversity.

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