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# Narrative practicing of the meaning of work:

## The gender we think and talk

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter shows how gender asymmetry is produced through narrative practices. By analyzing the work-life narratives of 14 men and 14 women working in a variety of occupations ranging from personal care to finance, from crafts to health, from creative and performing arts to sales and marketing, this chapter demonstrates the ways in which the narrators positioned themselves within the world of work, and the work within their personal lifeworld. The analysis brings about an order of gender in how work is approached, made sense of, experienced, and narrated. Recognizing these dynamics helps organizations and their members to be more aware that gender is not a natural attribute of people, but something we create and recreate in our everyday work narratives, which in turn shapes both the meaning we attribute to work and the meaning we get out of it.*

Keywords: Gender, Gender asymmetry, Meaning of work, Narrative research, Narrative identity, Social construction

### **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

In recent decades labor market participation by women has increased, with the alleviation of many material, social and psychological barriers that confined women to domestic responsibilities. However, women's continued disadvantage in the experiences of work persists (Lewis, Simpson & Sealy, 2010).

One of the reasons could be attributed to the lack of analysis of how narratively the meaning of work is gender-constructed. The way of experiencing work was addressed by the academic tradition enrooted in sociology and anthropology – from different perspectives, but always with the tendency of keeping

women invisible. Under these initial conceptions, the so-called *labor market* was socially influenced by how work is conceived, but keeping women obscured as social actors. As Victor Strazzeri (2015) suggested, seminal sociologists like Max Weber were interested more on worker's attitude towards labor (service, obedience, dependence) and workers' wages and their living conditions (Engels, 1892 [1844]). When examining these attitudes, this literature was inspired on the analysis of men's manual work, originally agrarian and later industrial. Similarly, the initial anthropological research on work in industrial settlements, was focused on how the construction of the meaning of work was central when defining cultural identities and establishing a sense of community independent of gender roles or adscriptions (Warner & Lunt, 1941). For example, Elton Mayo's work in the Western Electric Company, a subsidiary of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T), considered foundational of the disciplines of organization studies and anthropology of work, was based on 21,000 structured interviews mostly with women workers. However, a gender perspective of the construction of the meaning of work was invisible in Mayo's analysis. John Hassard (2012) has emphasized the central and crucial role of women in transforming the Hawthorne factory from a working place to a *social center* thanks to their understandings of work differently. However, a gender-based explanation of how work is understood still seems a sterile field for most of the academic tradition.

Indeed, many of contemporary explanations of the problem of segregating and discriminating women when analyzing working practices are not able to address the experience of gender asymmetry in the workplace sufficiently (Durbin, 2015). For example, the economic explanation would consider this phenomenon as the '*natural* product of differing investments' by men and women to the development of their human capital (i.e., education) (Becker, 1964). However, as Vinnicombe (2000) observes, young women who today seek to enter the world of work are just as well educated, or even more so, than men – an observation that questions the validity of the economic explanation. The structural explanation emphasizes the numerical composition of men and women in organization, arguing that the differing career opportunities of men and women can be explained by the fact that women are in the numerical minority (Kanter, 1977). The growing labor market presence of women which is unaccompanied by an equivalent redistribution of career opportunities nullifies this structural explanation.

The shortcomings of these explanations have promoted a search for new routes to understanding the complexities of gender issues in the labor market. Work-life literature focuses on the systemic elements inherent to women's continued disadvantage. For example, scholars like Brewis and Warren (2001), Greenberg, Ladge and Clair (2009) and Miller (2017) observe that contemporary narratives about intensive mothering pressure mothers to prioritize children above else with implications for experiences at work (Gatrell, 2013). Gatrell (2010) highlights that work-life *choices*' regarding job opportunities are not neutral and are heavily influenced by social position, that requires the individual to fit with the dominant norm of the labor market, a norm which tends to march with the experiences of men.

The dominant norm of what *choices* are realistically available to gender roles and how gender asymmetries are experienced in the workplace were also studied by analyzing supra-organizational cultures, like the nation state. It has been suggested that the national culture, a concept defined during the 1980's as 'the collective programming of the mind' (Hofstede, 1984), affects – among many things – the meaning attributed to work and how people talk about and do gender at work (Beham et al., 2000). Most recent literature has suggested that national cultures are strongly permeated with the role religion plays in the organization of the state (Dingley & Catterall, 2020). In the context of what some literature defines as Eastern national state organizing, for example, Dale (2005) shows that Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, even those who 'work hard and get educated', often feel closely bound to religion, in particular Islam, and related family customs, obliging them to seek parental and spousal blessings, including their in-laws' to pursue and continue in employment (p. 235). Similarly, Arifeen and Gatrell (2020), in their study of British Pakistani women professionals showed that women's perceptions of their professional selves are bound, metaphorically, to faith and family customs, which precludes them from accessing certain

workplace opportunities and acts a 'glass chain' when engaging in formal and informal networking events.

The aim of this chapter is to show how gender asymmetry is also produced through narrative practices, in addition to structural, motivational or cultural/ normative reasons. We demonstrate how men and women, through narratives, produce their sense of self at work and position themselves within the world of work. We use this exploration to gain further insights into the complexities of gender issues in the labor market to argue how gender asymmetry in organizations is evidenced when narratively representing practices of working. As Silvia Gherardi (1994) refers, 'the meaning of gender is constantly deferred and negotiated in discourse...The thought and language that separates the female from the male underpins a symbolic order of gender which expresses experiences unique to each gender' (p. 591).

## METHODS

In keeping with Cochran's (1990) advice that narrative approaches are most appropriate for career research, we demonstrate the ways in which gender is *talked* at work by men and women. As social researchers, we are aware that we 'do not have direct access to another's experience' (Riessman, 1993, p. 8), however, we have access to the telling of these experiences. That has formed the focus of our methodological approach.

We take a symbolic-interpretive approach (Gherardi, 1995) inspired by Anthony Giddens' (1979) perspective of the articulation between practices and the discursive conscience of workers. This approach enables us to see how gender asymmetry at work is constructed and narratively justified through symbolic means, such as vocabularies expressing values, metaphors and images of the world of work. In this view, gender is not a simple property of people, but a social practice, something that we reproduce through talk in everyday reality as we give meaning to work through narratives. The importance of talk and language is crucial in this, through which stories are relayed about meanings individuals attach to their experiences. The role of narrative language, therefore, is crucial to the creation of meaning in the lived experiences of people in 'communal interchange' (Gergen 1985, p. 266) in the 'space between people' (Hoffman, 1992) throughout their lived social and personal experiences.

We engage in an inductive study grounded in narrative inquiry of personal stories of work and work lives, and within that, consider the influence of gendered narratives on organizational life experiences. We frame our study with narrative identity theory, which posits that a person's identity is internalized and is an evolving story they craft. We align ourselves with the 'linguistic turn' in social sciences (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000), to argue for the centrality of narratives in the lives of all of us, regardless of whether we are particularly self-conscious about it. According to Gergen (1999, p. 70) 'we identify ourselves through narration', through countless narratives we tell about our work, our career, our aspirations, our relations with and at work. By engaging with the multiplicity of possible meanings that might be attached to what our world is, what part we play in it, and what situations we found ourselves in, we actively (not necessarily consciously) construct and enact the story we want to tell the world about ourselves. Over time, these stories color our notion of self and the social identity that we present to the world, to the extent to which our sense of 'self is a perpetually rewritten story . . . in the end we become the autobiographical narratives that we tell about our lives' (Bruner, 1987, p. 15). Some of these will be internalized ("this is who I want to be"), but regardless how internalized they are, they will also play a part in the 'presentation of self' (Goffman, 1956), including how we actually behave in our work life and how we narrate, to others, the story of our lives and work.

Narratives, as such, 'connect the inner world to the outer world' – 'they bridge cultural history with personal biography' (Plummer, 2001, p. 395), and have the potential to bring into being everything from identities to organizations themselves (Grant et al., 2004). The use of narrative research involves focusing

towards the more relational and emergent aspects of work lives and of lives of workers outside of work to understand their orientation to work and consequent work behavior (Goldthorpe, Lockwood, Bechhofer & Platt, 1968). It draws emphasis to the manner in which meaning and concepts of what it means to be a worker, a professional, a male worker or a female professional are constructed and harmonized within the social relationships which exist between people and their specific context within and beyond work. This dynamic emphasizes the role of human agency and allows us to better appreciate the complexities of work and employee processes, as well as human lives and identities more generally. Therefore, we seek to understand how someone narrates their work and their worker selves to identify key elements of gendered differences in one's orientation to work, their interactions, relations and feeling at work.

### *Sample*

Narrative data can be collected through a variety of means, and can take many forms, including written, oral, and visual (Larty & Hamilton, 2011; Riessman, 2008). The source material to be examined here are narratives of work experiences of men and women published as an ethnographic appendix to Katrinli (ed., 2008)'s book titled *Real-Life Stories of How People Feel and Behave in Organizations*. The whole corpus of this rich ethnographic material was a compilation of 58 stories featuring the working narrations of men and women from a variety of occupations ranging from personal care to finance, from crafts to health, from creative and performing arts to sales and marketing. The 58 stories were collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews, from working people in Izmir (the third largest metropolitan city in Turkey located on the Western coast) identified by convenience sampling methodology. Despite all interviewees were working in the same city, as further elaborated below and in Table 1, they represent a diverse demographics with respect to gender, age, education, employment, household income, marital and family status, and socio-economic properties of the city they regard as their hometown.

As indicated in the preface of Katrinli (ed., 2008), Katrinli and her colleagues' main aim was to explicate organizational behavior issues with real-life stories. In line with this aim, the 58 real-life stories are used as examples to demonstrate how scholarly theories reflect themselves in practice, in chapters on work ethic, job involvement, organizational justice, stress, work and family balance, emotional labor, workplace bullying and success. Given Katrinli and colleagues' use of the stories as illustrative material, these stories were not analyzed qualitatively, nor they were approached from the perspective of gender, unlike we do in this chapter.

As Katrinli and her colleagues did not aim to develop or test theories, they used convenience sampling in identifying the interviews, which is suitable to generate the richest and the most sensitive data from willing participants who feel comfortable 'opening up' (Brewis, 2014). However, we are aware that with convenience sampling, people with specific characteristics may have been more likely to take part in the interviews, which can lead to under coverage and, consequently, estimate bias in the reporting of the results (Robinson, 2014). As a result, we have downsampled the 58 interviews using purposive criteria. Among the 58 interviews, we selected a sub-corpus of 28 stories: 14 men and 14 women. Consideration was given to have a representation of different occupational groups as outlined in the International Standard Classification of Occupations published by ILO (2012). Where possible, we aimed for a matched pair design by having men and women representing the same occupational group (e.g., occupations in craft, health services occupations, personal and protective services workers, clerical occupations, elementary occupations business and administrative professionals and so on). The selected stories and the participants who narrate them can also be considered as reflecting 'strategic' or 'survivalist' drawing upon a categorization employed by McCrone (1994). The individuals categorized as 'strategic' had undergone a process of investing in labor market futures by utilizing their resources, ambitions, and experiences. By contrast, 'survivalists' focused upon getting by with their existing qualification and skills in a restricted and restrictive labor market with limited occupational flexibility. The resulting sample and the profile of narrators are presented in Table 1 below.

### *Table 1. Participant profiles*

As mentioned above, the participants were all working in Turkey, in the city of Izmir. The Turkish context is an interesting background to explore gender asymmetry. In the traditional analyses of practices of working in relation to national cultures, Turkey has been characterized as a society with strong in-group collectivism, uncertainty avoidance and power distance, but a lack of gender egalitarianism and long-term orientation (Hofstede, 1984). Gannon and Pillai (2013) described Turkish national culture through the metaphor of the coffee-house, which is highly distinctive in Turkey than their counterparts in other countries. Despite being open-to-public places suitable for passing time, genuine Turkish coffee-houses are men-only establishments, a hub of men's social life, a place where men of the neighborhood, town or village gather day and night to talk about current events and produce and disseminate the oral culture of the community. Therefore, the coffee-house metaphor reflects, according to Gannon and Pillai (2013), a male-dominant, hierarchical and relationship-oriented culture that could permeate how work is represented. In isolation, the image could suggest gender exclusion, segregation, and discrimination. Despite Turkish women, in comparison with other Eastern Arabic neighbors, have more open access, improved conditions and equal rights with men in the legal sense (Kabasakal & Bodur, 2002), the traditions underlying gender role differences are prevalent at work and in family life. This again adheres to the complexities of the coffee-house metaphor – a public space yet not quite. For example, in Turkey, men are perceived as the breadwinners and decision-makers in families (Gannon & Pillai, 2013), in rural and urban areas alike. Even in marital relationships, in which women are as well educated as men and contribute family income considerably, housework and childcare responsibilities are seen to belong to women. Turkey, geographically located in between East and West, a crossroad model of state (Pearce, 2012), allowed us to capture complex and nuanced insights in the ways gender is *talked* in relation to work and self at work.

### *Approaches to Narrative Inquiry*

Inherent in the narrative inquiry is an interpretive reflexive process called the double hermeneutic (Finlay, 2003). First, the participants try to make sense of their social and personal world when trying to decide what to include in their narration and what to exclude, and which words to use. Secondly, the researcher tries to make sense of the participants making sense of their worlds. This second reflexive process entails re-presenting the participant's narrative and then taking 'interpretive authority for going beyond, in carefully documented ways, its literal and conscious meanings' (Josselson, 2011, p. 227).

The re-presentation can be achieved using a diverse range of approaches (Larty & Hamilton, 2011), which mainly fall into two groups: those that focus on analyzing narrative structure, and those that focus on analyzing the content of narratives (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, 1998). We took the latter approach which encompassed 'what a narrative communicates rather than precisely how a narrative is structured' (Riessman, 2008, p. 730). This choice is significant for the scope of this research which is to understand what these narratives tell us about how people produce their sense of self at work and position themselves within the world of work – 'a position is what is created in and through conversations as speakers and hearers construct themselves as persons' (Gherardi & Poggio, 2001, p. 247).

Moving from the whole to the specific (Josselson, 2011), we began by reading each transcript in its entirety and capturing overarching themes and impressions from the transcript. These were then captured in a 'global impression' document (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 62) which is a combined commentary with extracts from the narrative by regularly referring back to the narrative itself.

The 28 unique global impressions for the 28 narratives were then reviewed to decide on themes to pursue further in the analysis. From this stage, data analysis consisted of two opposing strands of activities – fragmenting and connecting. The process of fragmenting involved capturing and ordering the themes in a

‘partially ordered meta-matrix’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We assembled all relevant data in a condensed format to a master spreadsheet, by placing themes in columns and individual narrators in rows. This forced us to think about individuals from different angles. Filling as many cells in the matrix as possible for all narratives allowed us to see new themes, new connections, overlaps and differences.

Once each narrative was considered thoroughly, we moved to the connecting stage. The main method employed for this stage was the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). By comparing individual narratives for each theme, and paying particular attention to gender, status and occupational differences, we induced tentative propositions. Each narrative was then revisited to see the degree of support. Data analysis oscillated between the processes of fragmenting and connecting, between inductively building concepts from the data, and deductively searching for the data that would support and further refine the nascent patterns.

Additionally, we paid particular attention to our own phenomenological world, as researchers and as the ‘interpretive authorities’ (Josselson, 2011). This is of clear relevance to this study because in the authorship team we have a working mother, a working father and a childless working woman. We were cognizant of our role in reflective processes, during and throughout the research process, shaping our reactions to and interpretations of the data. This required us to ask ourselves not only “what do these narratives mean” but also “how do I interpret what these narratives mean”. As Guillemin & Gillam (2004, p. 275) state:

Reflexivity involves critical reflection of how the researcher constructs knowledge from the research process—what sorts of factors influence the researcher’s construction of knowledge and how these influences are revealed in the planning, conduct, and writing up of the research. A reflexive researcher is one who is aware of all these potential influences and is able to step back and take a critical look at his or her own role in the research process. The goal of being reflexive in this sense has to do with improving the quality and validity of the research and recognizing the limitations of the knowledge that is produced, thus leading to more rigorous research.

To achieve reflexivity, traditionally aimed at bracketing biases, we utilized a reflective diary during the analysis process. This helped us to raise our own self-awareness of the specific issues that would require bracketing, as well as to capture our reactions to them. We also used peer debriefing during data analysis where we met at regular fortnightly intervals to compare progress in coding and analysis, challenge assumptions, probe deeper understanding, consider alternative interpretations, and manage subjectivities and to explore ‘aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308).

In many ways this description of the analysis process is too straightforward and linear. In practice the analysis was complex, slow, and characterized by uncertainty. Whilst moving through the data and making sense of it, the common practices and key themes only tentatively became more tangible. The peer debriefing meetings played a key role in this. During these meetings, we exchanged anecdotes from coded interviews, shared data segments, codes and meanings attached to them. There were no conflicting interpretations and this deliberation resulted in a richer pool of codes that sensitized us into alternative ways of seeing and thinking about what the participants narrated about their works and work lives. For example, the third author (male) was the first one to note the use of qualifiers as “serious”, “proper” by participants when narratively constructing their workplaces and their jobs, which then sensitized the other two authors to similarities and differences in other interviews. Similarly, the second author (female with children), in one of the meetings, shared the contrasting patterns she noticed of how “serving” was constructed by different participants. This made the author team to pay attention to the demographic construction of “serving” during coding and analysis. After some trial and error, further reflection and scrutinization in our peer debriefing meetings and writing drafts of analysis and findings, a point was

reached where categorization and consideration of the themes and data appeared to have been adequately carried out. It is the results of this process to which we now turn.

## **FINDINGS**

The data analysis established two contrasting patterns – sameness and difference, each discussed in turn below. As the data analysis progressed, more depth and complexity were uncovered. This complexity is captured in the following sub-sections.

### **Configurations of sameness**

The analysis of the work and career narratives of men and women suggested a degree of sameness. Pursuing dreams and aspirations in career choices, the work orientations, the range of feelings felt towards the work, especially in the face of (perceived) challenges and the coping mechanisms used to work with these feelings, showed little variation across genders.

#### *Orientations towards work*

Women, as much as men, suggested they pursued their dreams and aspirations in their career choices, and they shape their life choices (past and present) to serve their career dreams. Both genders, when feeling strong identification towards their work, talked about how they arrange the rest of their lives based on the job demands, and somehow with pride. This is more prevalent in narratives of people who attach a sentimental or altruistic value to their jobs. The uses of metaphors to refer to work indicate how work is considered by men and women.

Both my work life and family life are channeled into my work. **(Advertiser, F)**

I never consider being separated from my work, because they each have a sentimental value to me. **(Artist, M)**

I consider my job sacred... Our job has a very intense tempo, is very stressful yet very exciting. I never know what I will face next. **(Firefighter, M)**

This is my first job, and I hope it's the last. This is what I wanted to do ever since I was a child. **(Babysitter, F)**

My work is a second spouse. I have worked non-stop for 33 years, and want to go on until I die. **(Tailor, M)**

The opposite is also correct; when people referred to their jobs as an obligation that they have to do because of financial need, women and men equally emphasized the negative implications of working. They declared their unhappiness clearly, and if positive sides of work were mentioned, they were followed by "but ..." to justify their dissatisfaction to themselves and to the interviewer.

Banking is still a very respectable profession. People perceive us as respectable people since the bank hires us after a couple of interviews and then trust us with their money. That's what I used to think before I was hired, too. Now I understand that this is not the kind of job for woman. I cannot get out of here before seven. **(Banker, F)**

Job satisfaction depended much on the extent the job was perceived to supply the things valued by the jobholder. The value attributed to the job, whether positive or negative, and the way its characteristics and demands were narrated, reflected those things that participants consciously or subconsciously want to seek or avoid.

I like religion, and I have a fear of God. I get really disturbed for doing what I do each day... I'm seriously planning to quit because of this. The job is all about feelings and interpreting people's future by looking at shapes... It is wrong to say that such and such will happen. We are not God. **(Fortune Teller, F)**

I can work here, in my office with the projects I choose, during the hours that I set for myself. Even though I have to work really late and travel occasionally, I can still come to work wearing shorts, and leave early on my motorcycle to go camping. Having such independence is sometimes more important than making more money. **(Consultant, M)**

### *Work as a challenge*

The most common challenge prevalent in narratives was unrealistic demands or capricious behaviors of customers. Both genders from a variety of occupations, whether high or low status, perceived that doing the job would be much easier if customers would not be that much capricious.

There are many patients who are ignorant and that made my job stressful. **(Dentist, M)**

I deal with the two most difficult things to handle in the world: people and money... I get really fed up with the ignorance of people. **(Banker, F)**

This was observed more prevalently amongst the participants who can be classified as 'survivalists' holding low-status jobs. These participants more commonly, vocally, and strongly expressed the feelings of anger and weariness as a result of customers' behaviors.

When I think to myself that I am a nobody here, I no longer feel enthusiastic. Sometimes, I reach a point when I want to say to hell with it all, whatever is going to happen, just let it happen. I am sick and tired of being a second-class citizen. **(Security Guard, M)**

As time went on, I grew colder towards people... I began to see the true nature of people and felt that I was getting tired of receiving their negative energy... This is really exhausting... No one would love doing this job. **(Fortune Teller, F)**

Although both genders complained about the unrealistic demands or capricious behaviors of customers, only men in our sample specified the gender of the difficult customer, noting that they found women customers more difficult to handle. Below we hear from two male skilled workers singling out female for not being stable, not knowing what they want or sticking on tiny details:

What is difficult about it is not the styling of the hair, but dealing with women... women have more ups and downs in their life, and whenever they feel down, they want to forget about it all by changing their hairstyle... when I tell people about what I do for a living, they pity me, saying that it's not easy to deal with women. **(Hairdresser, M)**

It is especially difficult to please women as they are suspicious about every detail. They find tiny faults through minute observation. Men, on the other hand, are more superficial about such things. They don't even notice that most of the time. **(Photographer, M)**

After the customers, another commonly mentioned challenge by both genders was the behavior of their managers. Managers' interventions to the routine, day-to-day operations were perceived as unnecessarily rude. These again resulted in feelings of anger, exhaustion, and weariness. The way to cope with these



negative feelings was to hold onto the feeling of (financial) security, perceived prestige and status of the work/ workplace or the feeling of being useful. Aspects of security and safety, such as having a steady income and social security premiums paid, perhaps unsurprisingly, was voiced more frequently by workers classified as ‘survivalists’:

The boss is no good, not the kind of the man to work for, but here, even if we get no business, we still get a wage. **(Belly Dancer, F)**

However, this is not as linearly mapped to economic and social status. Highly skilled workers too emphasized job security and financial safety as aspects of the work that keeps them going in the face of challenges and difficulties. For example, the Artist (male) in our sample considered himself lucky to have a job by referring to his teaching position at a university, as if being an artist is not a “proper job” in itself. The Actor (male) also felt the need to justify his professional standing saying, “I work for a serious company, doing a serious job”. Attaching high level of significance to income security is perhaps unsurprising given the business and economic context our participants inhabit, since the Turkish economy is recurrently being hit by deep financial crises once a decade.

I am lucky I have a job; this provides me with some kind of security. **(Artist, M)**

Prestige appears as the second most mentioned factor that keeps people at work despite negative feelings and difficulties. When it was referred as a high-status job, job holders were proud of the title or the impact they created. Deprived of occupational prestige, holders of lower ranking jobs, focused on the prestige of the workplace in their accounts. If work was performed in a well-known, reputable workplace in their sector, they would mention it by naming there “serious”. They seemed to get a higher status than their counterparts, which is essential in a high-power distance culture, like Turkey (Hofstede, 1984).

We maintain a serious appearance. **(Aesthetician, F)**

... the parlor, which is of good quality, has been in business for 20 years, and we are never subject to such abuse. I am proud to tell people where I work. **(Masseur, M)**

Holding onto altruistic feelings emerged as a coping strategy towards the challenges of the job. It was mentioned by job holders who believe they can create positive impact on the lives of people by caregiving, helping out or just being responsive to their concerns and questions. As the quotes below suggest, holding onto care for and connection to people was shared by a variety of participants regardless of the true nature of their job and the scope the job holds for caring.

Assisting people and helping them become better informed are very nice things... I find night shifts more enjoyable than the daytime ones. **(Pharmacy Employee, F)**

I sometimes think about doing something else, like becoming a vendor in a marketplace. But when an old client calls and makes an offer, I forget about everything. I want to do the same thing since I like my job. **(Construction Worker, M)**

## Configurations of differences

The analysis of the narratives revealed nuances. The more we paid attention to the way the work was talked about, the more depth and complexity we unearthed around the gendered differences of people's relations to their jobs and at their workplaces. We now turn our attention to how differences were configured.

### *“Serving”*

In the previous section, we argued that there are no gendered differences across people's orientation towards their jobs. Men and women equally phrased their jobs in terms of financial obligation (belly dancer, housekeeper, security guard) or something for the social good (actor, firefighter, radio presenter, pharmacist, pharmacy employee) or something entirely altruistic and selfless (caregiver, masseur). However, it is interesting to note that, for the latter, as soon as the job became something more than the money, men narrated the nature of their jobs, and their role in it, as a kind of a heroic tale. They talked about how they serve “the public”, what impact they have on “the people” – an anonymized, generalized, faceless crowd.

We work for the public.... I have to be selfless. If a person is selfish and not courageous, he should quit this job. **(Firefighter, M)**

We provide public service. **(Radio Presenter, M)**

In contrast, women enriched their accounts with stories of real people they have helped. The other party, in women's narratives, was as human and as fragile as the narrator. Women told stories about the mutual relationship they have formed with the other party, mentioned their names, and reflected on how they touched each other's lives. The mutualism in these stories is striking, they helped out the other party, but they are enriched in return too.

Being able to go deep into elderly's inner world is a very good feeling. **(Caregiver, F)**

I used to be an introvert before I started working here and since then I have overcome myself. Just by telling patients “Welcome, come on in”, I have become a different person. I have learned to treat everyone equitably in this place. Since I have listened about peoples struggles all day long, I have learned to talk about my own problems. **(Pharmacy Employee, F)**

I witness the happiest occasions in people's lives.... which is the part of my job that I like the most... I have the perfect job. **(Fashion Designer, F)**

The contrast between the Fashion Designer and the Photographer is perhaps the best illustration of this difference. Despite both are operating in the same industry, wedding, the Fashion Designer focused on sharing happy moments with her clients in her narrative while the Photographer narrated how difficult it is to work with brides and how perfect the shots should be. There was no human in his accounts, and this is something we will elaborate more later, when discussing the constructions of professionalism and the ideal worker.

Paradoxically, men first and foremost, were serving the self, whilst serving the social good:

When I give a massage, my soul is relaxed which is really incredible... I discover myself in this job. **(Masseur, M)**

For the self is absolutely silenced and made invisible in women's stories. The "I" in their accounts was only used in relation to care, help, relation, connection, feelings. For example:

The elderly and I share quite a lot... I listen to them all with genuine curiosity.... It is very important that they are pleased with you and say thank you.... Would get happy if I felt that I made them happy. I would care everything about them... I find even some of the things they do out of spite beautiful. When they get into a stubborn contest with me, I hug and kiss them. **(Caregiver, F)**

The "social" is such a strong theme in women's stories that they admitted they lie to protect their customers or correct the systemic crookedness, and align their actions and its impact with their inner value system. For example, the pharmacist admitted lying to customers for their own (or the social) good:

Poor old man has people read his prescription in the coffee house, and they tell him it's for cancer. Who is going to cover it up for him? Of course, I will. I have to tell him it is for something else, I offered him tea and we talked for hours... I don't sell over the counter medicine, which might cause addiction, to young people. If an old man asks for the same medicine for, say insomnia, I give it to him. However, if a young person asks for it, I don't even consider whether I should sell it or not... Some people wearing golden bracelets up to their elbows, come here with green cards in hands. They drive their cars here, holding their green cards which are meant for the really poor and needy... I tell them those drugs are unavailable in the market... This is not a supermarket. **(Pharmacist, F)**

Similarly, the caregiver admitted breaching the boundaries of her job role and contract by helping the other elderly patients in the same hospital ward as her patient.

Men lie, too. However, this had a more self-serving nature, as seen below in the narratives of the clinical secretary and the masseur.

Yes, I do a little bit of favoritism here and there. If the patient is going to be finished that day anyhow, I give the appointment for the same day. However, if it will be a while for them anyway, I give appointments for later... If I treat people according to as they wish, things could not be done. **(Clinical Secretary, M)**

[Customers] come in wearing tennis shoes, then they take them off: all of a sudden, a terrible odor permeates the room. What's really amazing is that they are not even bothered by it. I sometimes make different excuses, telling them to take a shower first in order to accelerate their blood circulation. **(Masseur, M)**

### *Relations with and at work*

As seen in the quotes above, the relational aspect is highly visible in women's stories that they seemed to perceive their responsibility as making the people they serve happy. They expressed empathy more, with phrases such as "what if he was my husband/child", "what if I was in the same situation" used frequently. Such reflection and evaluation allowed them to go the extra mile for the customers or employees by helping them or listening to their problems.

Before my husband had back problems himself, I would just give the patients with back pain their pain medicine, corsets, etc. And I would be done. After my husband's illness, however, I began to give them a little more attention, being even more careful. It is as if I can feel their pain now. **(Pharmacy Employee, F)**

Women put an emphasis on the personal bond that exists between them and their customers or managers. While men used a more professional language in talking about relations at work emphasizing how they are learning from each other, mentoring each other, managing or being managed; the language that women used when talking about relations revolved around trust, friendship, confidence and sharing. It is interesting to note that such language was more prevalent with low status job holders, arguably using good relations with superiors as a status marker in the absence of occupational prestige. Alternatively, this can be explained through the internalization of masculine values by men and women as they climb up the career ladder, through the tactics of normalization, micro-disciplining and self-disciplining through social structures and institutions. Especially, when their opinions about job-related issues were acknowledged and took on board by others at work, women recounted these incidents with genuine feelings of pride.

Now I feel like a member of the family... (being one from the family is mentioned several times)...These days [the employer] has some problems at work... She pours her heart to me... when the owner of the house is opening up to me as such, it feels hypocritical of me not to do the same. **(Babysitter, F)**

They ask for my opinion even in the smallest decision concerning the elderly. **(Caregiver, F)**

In contrast with the relation-focused language in women, men, on the other hand, used process- and control-driven language more.

Everything that is processed in this place is under my responsibility... I process about 300 patients each day...My job is to get appointments in order here...I abide by the rules strictly. If I say “no” that means no, and a “yes” is a yes. **(Clinical Secretary, M)**

If my employees have taken some shots which are less than satisfactory, I hold another shooting session. I have to check everything constantly. When we are doing artistic shots, if the tables’ measurements are taken wrong, I go crazy.... Next year, I want to open up two more studios: one in Manisa, another in Aydın. I’m already working on the cost analysis. We have a total of 9 studios in Izmir and Istanbul, my goal is to establish a large company organizing events, rather than to open up new studios. This is a must for me to advance in my profession. **(Photographer, M)**

These observations point towards gendered differences in how success is semantically constructed in relation to work. Men’s meaning of success when working is narratively justified by appealing to control (“Everything... is under my responsibility...”) and ambition (“300 patients”, “9 studios”), while women are inclined to refer to the wider aspect of stakeholder satisfaction (the owner, the employer, customers).

### *The professional, the personal and the ideal worker*

Both scholarly literature and popular accounts suggest that modern organizations have blurred the boundary between personal and professional domains of life due to work intensification. As such, the pressures shaping the boundary between life domains is likely to be experienced similarly by men and women alike. However, when work intensification is talked about, women were more attuned to the impact the work demands have on their personal life. While men equally complained about the busyness of their jobs, no men in our sample recognized or at least verbally acknowledged how work impacted their personal life.

Both my work life and family life are channeled into my work. **(Advertiser, F)**

I will not be able to get married because of my job. **(Babysitter, F)**

I would have liked to do this many years ago, but I wanted to wait until my children grew up.  
**(Caregiver, F)**

Women reflected on how work demands interfered with their social lives, hindered their marriage prospects or eaten into the time they can spend with their children. “Inadequate performance” in the private life domain was recognized only in the stories of women with young kids, and only toward their kids. This is perhaps unsurprising as motherhood in the Turkish culture, but in other cultures too, has been embraced both by traditional and contemporary educational, social and religious discourses. The traditional *sacred* role of being a mother, which suggested motherhood as the sole and worthwhile career for women, has been morphed into a different yet similar discourse. The contemporary discourses of ‘intensive mothering’ (Gatrell, 2013) permeate through popular and social media selling the idea(l) of the *supermom* who dedicates their whole self to her children’s physical, behavioral and cognitive development.

My own children are also very small, and I constantly worry about whether they are doing OK on their own or whether they made it home safely... Of course, I love the children of the family I work for, too; still when I think that I can’t do for my own children what I do for them, I get sad... My children are still very young, and it is very difficult for them to come to terms with the loss of their father. I need to be both their mother and their father, but under these circumstances, I can’t even be a proper mother. **(Housekeeper, F)**

As mentioned before, although women complained about not taking care of themselves properly, they did not feel guilty. This is probably because self-care is a novel concept for the Turkish people as this requires seeing the self as an individual rather than a part of a collective entity. Interestingly, women who are self-employed did not express any guilt for not taking care of their kids properly. When evaluated in conjunction with the earlier findings around personal development and self-betterment discussed in the previous section, we can postulate that this maybe because prioritizing the professional domain over the personal is seen as a mean for serving their own welfare and wellbeing, and through that their families’.

When I am here, I don’t think much about home, but when I’m at home, my mind is always at store. I don’t feel relaxed if I’m not at the store. **(Pharmacist, F)**

I can’t get any sleep until I’m done, and I guide [the team] to be the same way. I sometimes wear them out. They suggest going to the neighboring village for lunch, but I turn them down and tell them to get a quick bite to eat and be ready to shoot again in half an hour. **(Film Director, F)**

Women expressed that work demands influence marital relationship too. When women perceived they can work without the interference of their husband or when they are “let” to manage their own money by the husband, they talked about feelings of appreciation and gratefulness. The husband was then labelled as a “good husband”:

I like best about my husband is that he has never interfered with my business or the money I make... I guess this is lucky of me if he were the kind to meddle in my business, what would I do? Get a divorce after a child? **(Pharmacist, F)**

This also came with assumed helplessness when the husbands demanded the opposite as the divorce was not seen as an option after having had children. Such reflection on the marital relationship when talking about the personal and the professional domains was only visible in women’s stories; no men in our sample mention feeling grateful to their wives for being able to manage their professional life domain as they wish. The professional life domain was assumed to have dominance in men’s stories, as men

societally were expected to make a living when they come to the age. No women in our sample mentioned such societal, normative pressures. For instance, the masseur explained his motivation begin as he was expected to make money by his family when he came to the age. Would he have felt the same way if he was a woman? Especially, among the ‘survivalists’, both women and men in their narratives imply that the responsibility of making money for the family belonged first to men; if they cannot make enough, women had to work to support.

I am thankful that my husband is not like those of my friends, even though he needs me to work. At least, he doesn’t go through my purse; he doesn’t ask me how much I earn; rather, he gives me money from his earnings. **(Belly Dancer, F)**

Although my husband is always here in the store as a male figure, I am actually the one running the business. **(Jeweller, F)**

Analysis of the narratives demonstrates how narratively the participants positioned themselves within the world of work, and the work within their personal lifeworld. The analysis brings about an order of gender in how work is approached, made sense of, experienced, and narrated. Recognizing these dynamics helps organizations and their members to be more aware that gender is not a natural attribute of people, but something we create and recreate in our everyday work narratives, which in turn shapes both the meaning we attribute to work and the meaning we get out of it. We now turn our attention to discussing implications of this analysis for theory and practice.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Our analysis shows a similar but ambivalent construction of the meaning of work. Both women and men considered work as a way of pursuing their personal and professional aspirations, and how there is always a dependable relation between working life (paid job) and personal or family life. However, the way work is integrated to life is narratively constructed differently depending on gender practices. Specifically, the uses of organizational metaphors to refer to work like “family” and “second spouse” epitomize how working is considered a more collective experience *involving* others for women, in contrast to an individual experience *impacting* others for men. The intention of helping themselves but also others and at the same time being useful, contributes to women representation of a different working ethos than men. Doing gender differently in the context of working by creating community, resonates with Hassard’s (2012) explanation of how transcendental could be to work for women in comparison to men in certain conditions. Carey (1967) has suggested that this is the case of ethnic contexts where the meaning of work is constructed in relation to family and community values, not only in relation to status or class. In contrast, men cannot escape to a “*do ut des*” (I give, so that you may give) rhetoric, even when doing something for others. This is expressed in the need to be retributed in any way, like to be considered “heroes” because of serving. As Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter (1969[1956]) have suggested, in their ethnography of working communities, pre- and post-industrial capitalism constructed the relation between men and work always around the figure of a wage-worker that has to be always retributed for everything he does.

Retribution and compensation have always been central to the discussion of how work is constructed, as they are embedded in the conception of freedom. As the anthropologist Olivia Harris (2007) has referred, ‘the opposition between freedom and coercion plays a foundational role in Western ideas about work’ (p. 158). Reactions to work demands is equally addressed by both women and men. Unrealistic demands or capricious behaviors of customers and managers have however been narratively negotiated differently, invariably resulting in feelings of alienation (Blauner, 1964). Both genders from a variety of occupations whether high or low status referred that doing the job would be much easier if customers would not be that much capricious and the behavior of their managers been different. Managers’ interventions to the

routine, day-to-day operations, were perceived as unnecessarily rude. Such management malpractice, in the form of patronization, was a source of burnout. Literature on management malpractice signposted that favoritism and patronization were a source of burnout and turnover of working women from the moment official statistics started to consider women as workers as men (Benson, 1929).

Why women stay at work? As Andrew Clark (1997) referred 30 years ago, by any standards, women's jobs are always worse than men, but women, particularly young, have more positive job expectations. The argumentation by our participants was constructed around topics like expected financial security, perceived prestige and status of the work/ workplace or the feeling of being useful. Aspects of security and safety, such as having steady income and social security premiums paid, perhaps unsurprisingly, was voiced more frequently by workers we classified as "survivalists", even when addressing the conflicting agendas of work and life.

This conflict between life and work domains is accompanied by a feeling of guilt, when the women interviewed had young children. This has been the case with industrial and post-industrial working women across all sectors. Care responsibilities of children have been constructed solely around a women-mother actor that could be socialized and culturally penalized if they do not put these responsibilities at the center of their life (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016). Women professional success could in fact suggest that a woman is not taking seriously her duties as mother (Blau, Ferber & Winkler, 2002; Brindley, 2005).

We noticed in our analysis that success is indeed constructed quite differently. When women talk about growth, it is more about bettering themselves and developing personally and socially. This stands in contrast to men's narratives which is more about climbing the metaphorical ladder, such as opening more stores (the Photographer), expanding networks and customer base (the Consultant), drawing up contracts with prestigious galleries who would support the production of the work (the Artist). As we referred above, women produce the meaning of success differently, as a more social and holistic space in need of construction.

Doing gender while working is intrinsically related with the presentation of the self in dynamic and ambivalent scenarios in permanent negotiation that do not follow the binary gender roles of working women - working men anymore (Rumens, 2017). Perhaps our analysis could serve to illuminate new ways of understanding this negotiation, that not only could conduce to construct working women at work as empowered and autonomous subjects whose lives are shaped by individual choice, but also help working men to reimage different kinds of masculinities than what is traditionally ascribed to them.

Table 1. Participant profiles

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Marital status</b>	<b>Employment status</b>
Actor	M	50-59	High school	Married with children	Freelance
Advertiser	F	NA	University	NA	Employed
Aesthetician	F	20-29	NA	Single	Employed
Artist	M	30-39	University	Single	Freelance
Baby-sitter	F	30-39	NA	Single	Freelance
Banker	F	20-29	University	Single	Employed
Belly dancer	F	20-29	NA	Married with children	Employed
Caregiver	F	20-29	NA	Married with children	Freelance
Clinic secretary	M	40-49	NA	Married with children	Employed
Construction worker	M	NA	NA	Married with children	Freelance
Consultant	M	30-39	University	Married with children	Freelance
Dentist	M	30-39	University	Married	Employed
Fashion designer	F	30-39	Vocational School	Married with children	Shop owner
Film director	F	60-69	University	Married with children	Freelance
Firefighter	M	30-39	High school	Married	Employed
Fortune teller	F	20-29	NA	NA	Employed
Hairdresser	M	20-29	Secondary School	Married with children	Shopowner
Housekeeper	F	30-39	Elementary School	Widowed with children	Employed by a family
Jeweller	F	40-49	Vocational School	Married with children	Shop owner
Lobby attendant	M	20-29	High school	Single	Employed
Masseur	M	NA	NA	Married	Employed
Pharmacist	F	40-49	University	Married with children	Shop owner
Pharmacy technician	F	30-39	Secondary school	Married with children	Employed
Photographer	M	30-39	High school	Married with children	Shopowner
Radio presenter	M	40-49	NA	Married with children	Employed
Security guard	M	20-29	University	Single	Employed
Tailor	M	50-59	NA	Married	Shop owner
Teacher	F	30-39	University	Married with children	Employed



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