



## Economic changes and the meanings of work and money



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### ABSTRACT

The literature has shed light on the influence of macro-social contexts on the meanings of work and money. Bearing in mind the impact of changes in the economic cycles in the construction sector in Brazil, our aim is to compare the meanings of work and money, as understood by building construction workers in 2011 and 2015. The sample was composed of two groups, being 302 participants in 2011, and 125 in 2015. We used structured surveys specific to each issue studied, and carried out descriptive and inferential analyses. The results outline differences in the concept of work and money, providing evidence of the negative effects of the economic crisis on workers' lives. Limitations and suggestions for further research are pointed out.

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### Los cambios económicos y el significado del trabajo y del dinero

#### RESUMEN

Estudios previos han señalado la influencia de los contextos macro-sociales en la producción de los significados del trabajo y del dinero. Considerando el impacto de los cambios económicos en el sector de la construcción en Brasil, nuestro objetivo fue analizar dichos significados desde el punto de vista del trabajador, comparando dos períodos económicos del sector. Contamos con dos muestras diferentes, una realizada en 2011, que consta de 302 participantes, y otra en 2015, que consta de 125 participantes. Aplicamos cuestionarios estructurados específicos para cada fenómeno estudiado y realizamos análisis descriptivos e inferenciales. Los resultados mostraron diferencias en la percepción de los significados del trabajo y del dinero, así como los efectos negativos de la crisis económica en la vida de los trabajadores. Se describen las limitaciones del estudio y sugerencias para futuras investigaciones.

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The construction sector is traditionally known for following the country's economic cycles (Gonçalves, 2015). According to the *Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Socioeconômicos* (DIEESE, 2010), during the prior decade, especially after 2004, this sector in Brazil experienced a period of recovery in its activities, partially due to government incentives in infrastructure projects and in reduced taxes on industrial products. In 2010, for example, this sector showed 11.6% growth in Gross Domestic Product

(GDP), above the national value of 7.5% (DIEESE, 2010). Such growth had an immediate impact on the increase of formal work posts. To illustrate this, the Employment and Unemployment Survey Data (PED, 2012), for the year 2011, indicated the highest relative growth (5.2%) in the generation of formal jobs in the civil construction sector, for the second consecutive year, compared to the industrial, commerce, and services sectors. At that time, Mello and Amorim (2009) pointed out the lack of specialized workers to meet the growing needs in the sector. In addition, the construction industry is widely known for being one of the principal means of access to formal employment for a considerable portion of the Brazilian population, mainly due to its capacity to employ a workforce with a low degree of formal education and/or specific training (Santos, 2010;

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Sousa, 1983; Takahashi, Silva, Lacorte, Ceverny, & Vilela, 2012). In the building sub-sector, the focus of this research, this fact is more evident since manual activities play a central role in the work process, requiring a larger workforce from the organizations (Cockell, 2008; Oliveira & Iriart, 2008).

The economic growth in this period turned this sector into something promising and attractive, though there was no significant impact on working conditions, which did not get the same attention. This situation was characterized by precarious working conditions, such as long working hours, high risk of accidents (Silva & Borges, 2015), insalubrious environments, and intense physical efforts (Cattani, 2001), as well as low salaries and a high level of staff turnover in the sector (Borges & Peixoto, 2011; Oliveira & Iriart, 2008). To add insult to injury, workers were stigmatized as doing peon jobs (*'peão'*); not only is this term derogatively connected to being just a 'pawn' on the economic chessboard, but above all to a capacity which requires strenuous physical effort and very little recognition (Santos, 2010; Sousa, 1983).

More recently, the construction industry has been facing a cooling period in its activities, affecting the number of formal jobs. In 2015, this sector took the lead in job losses (DIEESE, 2016). Pochmann (2015) noted in the same year a 54.3% increase in unemployment. This fact has directly affected the lives of workers, either by making it difficult to find suitable work in other sectors of the economy, or by increasing financial instability and the fragility of labor rights found in the informality and subcontracting to which the workers are subjected (Cockell & Perticarrari, 2010).

Taking into account that the production of meanings of work (e.g., Barros & Borges, 2016; Borges, 1997; Brief & Nord, 1990) and of money (e.g., Barros, Borges, & Álvaro, in press; Furnham & Argyle, 2000; Moreira, 2002) reflect the social inclusion of people in the different economic, historical, and social contexts, it is relevant to analyze such meanings based on the periods of economic growth (Barros, 2012; Barros & Borges, 2016) and retraction in the sector. Thus, we aim to compare the meanings of work and money as understood by construction workers in 2011 and 2015.

## Meanings of Work

The studies on the meaning of work are already consolidated in Work and Organizational Psychology. Its founding reference in the literature (Álvaro, Bègere, Crespo, Torregrosa, & Garrido, 1995; Ardichvili, 2005; Dakduk, González, & Montilla, 2008; Harpaz & Meshoulam, 2010) is the research carried out by the Meaning of Work – International Research Team (MOW, 1987), which contributed to the phenomenon's comprehension from a cognitive viewpoint (Bendassolli & Gondim, 2014). In addition, the cited MOW group showed empirically the importance of work in people's lives, introducing the concept of work centrality (Borges, Tamayo, & Alves-Filho, 2005). Despite its relevance and diffusion in the research, different social scientists have pointed out divergences when identifying the phenomena proposed by the MOW Team (e.g., how to contemplate the drawbacks of work, the differences between ideal and real work?), a fact that has stimulated the construction of models aimed at improving prior ones and adapting them to the realities being investigated (Bendassolli, Alves, & Torres, 2014; Borges, 1997; Fernandes, Gonçalves, & Oliveira, 2012; Kubo & Gouvêa, 2012).

In this study, we have adopted the Borges and Tamayo's (2001) model, that comprises four facets: centrality of work (the importance of work when compared to other areas of life), the value attributes (what work should be), descriptive attributes (what work is), and the hierarchy of such attributes (how they are organized in order of importance). Even though the attributes are distinct, they

influence one another, indicating the dynamism of the meanings of work (Borges, 1997; Varella & Borges, 2012).

Researchers such as Tette, Carvalho-Freitas, and Oliveira (2014), who have used this model, found out that workers who are physically impaired not only value work that contributes to their dignity (financial independence and well-deserved economic return) but also perceive it as a positive load (taking on and fulfilling responsibilities), as well as a way to guarantee personal and family survival. Silva, Kemp, Carvalho-Freitas, and Brighenti (2015) have identified similarities between the types of value and descriptive attributes when it comes to voluntary work, especially concerning achievement, working conditions, and fairness. Varella and Borges (2012), in a study with bank employees between 1999 and 2005, identified the importance attached to economic aspects and a wider perception of their work as a source of social status, financial rewards, responsibility, and working conditions.

In the construction industry, different studies carried out with workers indicate similar results for the value and descriptive attribute types. In Pinheiro (2014), within the value attribute types, the notable ones were personal and economic growth, and respect and assistance, nearly matching Barros and Borges' (2016) results, which contain respect and acceptance expressions, followed by source of achievement and economic independence. As for the descriptive attribute types, in the first study the highlights were work as a means to responsibility, and occupation, as well as to personal and economic growth; in the second study, work was seen as an occupation, followed by a feeling of responsibility, self-challenge, and economic growth. Borges and Barros (2015) compared the results with previous samples from workers in 1995 and 2011, and found a weakness in the notion that work should be dehumanizing, exhausting, and hard-work recognition, a fact equally observed in the studies by Pinheiro and by Barros and Borges.

The results of the studies showed that Borges and Tamayo's (2001) model is sensitive to the characteristics of the contexts and to the changes that have taken place in a single occupation. At the same time, they corroborate the literature about the influence of social contexts on the meanings of work and the importance of including broader levels of analysis in order to better understand them. As indicated by Brief and Nord (1990), the changes at a macro level, such as the economic cycles, can have an impact on the production of meanings of work. In the period of growth, people would tend to focus on opportunities and negative aspects at work. In the case of economic retraction, people would express less dissatisfaction with their jobs, regardless of the working conditions. Bearing in mind the results obtained in previous studies and the aforementioned changes in the sector, this particular study will focus on the following hypotheses: (H1) in the period of economic retraction, the construction workers are likely to present lower scores for the value attributes such as source of achievement and economic independence (TV1), expressions of respect and acceptance (TV2), source of challenge and occupation (TV3), and auto-affirmative (TV4), when compared to the growth period, suggesting lower ideals about work in those aspects; (H2) in the period of economic retraction, the construction workers are likely to present higher scores for the descriptive attributes such as physical effort and dehumanization (TD1), when compared to the growth period, suggesting a greater acceptance of the way work is perceived and carried out.

## Meanings of Money

The literature converges in considering the 1980s decade as an important period for the development of studies on the meanings of money. The investigative models developed from this

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