



# Narrating career, positioning identity and constructing gender in an Italian adolescent's personal narratives

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores identity career narratives as a gendered and gendering discourse. The 'gender differences' approach to career development conceives of gender as a dichotomous and fixed variable influencing various aspects of career. In contrast to this mainstream approach, the paper adopts a post-structural view and reads identity and gender in terms of performativity, that is to say, constituted through the productive power of discourses. Through a detailed analysis of a text written by Giada, an adolescent involved in a career counseling project in Italy, we analyze how her career narratives implicate and constitute gender in their telling. In particular, we present the discourses that frame Giada's career narrative and we highlight how these discourses position Giada as a woman and as female. These discourses can be read as regulatory discourses: shaping and reflecting particular understandings of gender. However, we also highlight Giada's agency in questioning the regulatory practice of such discourses through linguistic acts. In the conclusions, we further explore the potential implications of these research findings for a rethinking of career counseling research and practice.

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## 1. Introduction

Socio-constructionism has made a significant contribution to the critical analysis of the dominant discourses in career theories that lay bare issues of power and ideology in the career field (Young & Collin, 2004). Nonetheless, the gender discourse that pervades the literature on career development and career construction remains, de facto, unchallenged. Even today almost all studies concerning the link between career development and gender are based on the "gender differences" approach. This approach conceptualizes gender as a variable expressed in dichotomous terms and one that remains fixed over time, that influences, whether directly or indirectly, different aspects of career development: expectations and aspirations, self-efficacy, parental support etc. (e.g. Hardin, Varghese, Tran, & Carlson, 2006; Inda, Rodríguez, & Peña, 2013; Perry, Przybysz, & Al-Sheikh, 2009). The literature on family influence on career development, for example, is largely based on this approach (Whiston & Keller, 2004).

What, however, is almost never illustrated clearly in these studies, even when they investigate gender differences as the express purpose of the research, is what is understood by "gender" – what is being discussed when the discussion is about "male" and "female", "women" or "men" – and what the underlying theory on gender is. Unfortunately, however, these studies, in omitting a theoretical definition of gender, or in taking one as read, tend to reify gender as a "real thing" and to reinforce the essentialist and biological discourse about gender. In contrast to the gender differences approach, our study assumes a post-structuralist theoretical stance in which gender is produced in and through the language and discourse practices that constitute it (Benozzo, Pizzorno, Bell, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2015; Butler, 1990, 1993; Ford, 2006; Pascoe, 2005; Rasmussen, 2006; Ringrose & Renold, 2010; Youdell, 2005).

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Another problem with “gender differences” studies in career development is their explanations. Gender differences in career outcomes – for example, the so-called educational and occupational gender gaps – are attributed to gender differences in career processes during childhood or adolescence (showing, for instance, how parental expectations differently affect males and females) and the phenomenon is sometimes explained as males and females being differently affected by “socialization” and “cultural beliefs about gender” (Ashby & Schoon, 2010; Gutman & Schoon, 2012).

Career gender differences are therefore explained through gender differences enacted in the past and in the broader social and cultural context without assuming a clear psychosocial theory such as social-role theory or stereotype theory (Diekman & Eagly, 2000; Eagly, 1987), or feminist and gender theory (Butler, 1990, 1993). Gender and post-structuralist theories have been used, in contrast, in the study of work settings and in studies that critically explore the nature and constitution of professional/occupational identities (Barry, Berg, & Chandler, 2006; Ford, 2006; Linstead & Thomas, 2002). The lack of research adopting a post-structuralist perspective in the field of career construction, highlights one of the innovative features of the present study.

Neglecting a strong conceptualization of gender, researchers in career construction, as discourse users, continue to reinforce the “gender differences” discourse and to construct evidence in favor of a deterministic thesis, according to which, “pre-existing” gender differences, in some measure, produce different careers. This dominant discourse hinders the emergence of alternative discourses: and what if gender differences were a sort of retroactive effect of career discourses? And what if, instead of reiterating that men and women choose different careers, we began to say that individuals repeat career discourses and practices that convince and reassure them in their differentness?

A further aspect that should not be underestimated is how far “gender discourses” also permeate individuals’ career narratives. The importance of discourses, including those of gender, in the shaping of identity and career narratives has been acknowledged by Kirsi LaPointe (2010): ‘Career narratives... also draw on professional discourses ... or other social discourses with associated identity positions and categorizations such as gender, family relations, and special interests’ (p. 3). Also Reid and West (2011a), on the subject of the stories that people tell, have asserted that these: ‘... can reflect dominant narratives in the wider culture rather than simply the “voice” of clients ... The stories we all tell about ourselves and our perception of the world cannot be separated from the powerful discourses that form the background to our lives’ (p. 176).

However, we wish to highlight the fact that many discourses have become “dominant” thanks to “science”: much power is conferred to discourses through the “scientificness” of academic lines of argument that, for instance, in relation to gender identity, have legitimated inequalities and pathologization. For these reasons our work accepts the challenge laid down by Young and Collin (2004) for an integration of strong conceptualization and data-based research in order to re-frame the canon of traditional gender discourses, in career theory and practice.

Taking our cue from these positions, the aim of this paper is twofold. In the first instance, we intend to offer a strong conceptualization of identity and gender from the post-structuralist perspective and to investigate, through a data-based research, what gender discourses were used by Giada, an adolescent involved in an intervention of narrative career counseling in Italy, in the construction of her career narratives. Secondly, we intend to question the traditional and dominant discourse of “gender differences” in explaining career constructions of young people, by offering an alternative way in which the career narratives of young people might be understood and reflected upon.

The paper is structured as follows. In the first part we set out our theoretical position on identity and gender – based on post-structural theory – through which we subsequently re-examine the role of career narratives in reinforcing particular understandings of gender. There follows a presentation of how we collected Giada’s texts with a description of the methodology and the data analysis using a critical discourse analytic approach (Parker, 2005, 2013). Giada’s written narratives reveal how in writing about her career choices, aspirations, interests and dreams she was simultaneously and significantly using discourses that enact gender: re-producing the seemingly gendered and gendering nature of careers and professional identities. In our conclusions we consider the most important contributions to emerge from the study and their implications for career counseling research and practice.

## 2. Theoretical framework: identity, gender and discourses

In what ways might the career narratives of adolescents simultaneously position broader questions of gender identity? Specifically, how was Giada gendered and doing gender in and through career narratives? These are the questions that have oriented our study, the starting point of which is a sound theorization of identity and gender from a post-structuralist perspective.

In the last few decades the psychological, human and social sciences have registered increasingly stronger attention toward identity, toward the project of the construction of self, toward the sense and meaning of the question: ‘Who am I? Who are we?’. These are questions and concepts that have a long tradition – think, for example, of the foundational works of Mead and Goffman on identity formation – and that have lately witnessed a proliferation of studies in many disciplines: philosophy, psychology, anthropology, social sciences and cultural studies.

In general terms, one can identify two main branches of studies on identity (Ford, 2006; Roseneil & Seumour, 1999): the constructivist one and, latterly, the post-structuralist one. In the first, identity is connected to the processes of constructing a sense and knowledge of self. It represents the construction of identity structures that can support the individual as s/he faces the difficulties of (social) life; a sort of anchorage providing safety that constructs and reconstructs itself – an ongoing process – through the narrative of individual biography. The self is a reflexive project – in Giddens’ (1991, p. 75) terms, ‘we are not what we are but what we make of ourselves’, a narrative process of self-making (Guichard, 2009).

In the sphere of studies on career construction (Guichard, 2005, 2009; Savickas, 2002, 2005) identity is conceptualized, in the light of these same constructivist theories, as narrative identity: an internalized and evolving life story (McAdams, 2011) or a collection of

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