EXPECTATIONS AND REALITIES: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE FEMALE GENDER AND INSTITUTIONAL PRESSURES

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ABSTRACT

This paper is questioning about the hurdles and the opportunities to women's ascent to senior executive offices. To examine the women carriers' trajectory and their factor of success, we use a cross-disciplinary approach and a qualitative method. After conceptualizing the female gender as an institution and its reality as a social construction, we developed a multilevel discussion about the women's barriers, opportunities and choices during her carriers. The preposition is that female executives are exposed to institutional factors and institutional duality. After interviewing 46 women in Brazil we concluded that the social pressure could be a cause of the institutional duality and also lead women to become more isomorphic to male stereotypes. This study suggests that the relationship between women and their families, society and institutions changes with timLe. Among Phase I women the environment involves expectations and their families support them in their quest for their professional trajectories. Family and societal pressures are compounded for Phases II and III women. In both groups the pressure if applied upon professional success and by the self-actualization of women as wives and mothers. Phase IV women who opted for a better quality of living and feel less pressured by the institution. Despite the discontent with the condition of women within the organizations, none of the respondents seemed engaged to act as a male institutions change agent, making them better balanced and adequate to the professional growth of other women. We also concluded that this isomorphism is correlated with the female success achievement to higher hierarchical positions. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of this research.

Keywords: Gender, isomorphism, institutionalism, carrier, qualitative method

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the impact of the female gender upon the organizational environment has become of the essence as of the inception of women's growth as active economic agents. Notably, this environment is still predominantly dominated by men and their behavioral characteristics. Such issues are generally addressed under the circumstances of the male discourse or approached under the light of the feminist discourse, usually approaching facts such as prejudice and exclusion. Understanding the phenomenon of female ascent in the organizational environment through the female view and femininities becomes essential, mainly as this new process approaches new relationship modes between both cultures and supposedly female with supposedly male behaviors.

Such problematic prompts questioning the hurdles against women's ascent to senior executive offices. Moreover, understanding is sought as to how professional women's constructions along their life histories influence their advancement to higher hierarchical positions in an organization. For such, the authors opted for a neo-institutional approach to the issue, considering that the female gender is also an institution. This institution is socially constructed and imbued with socially constructed values, identities and behaviors over socially legitimated and crystallized behavioral bases – thus increasing the expectations harbored by other social institutions as concerns women's behavior vis-à-vis specific contexts (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). This article proposes a qualitative study based on multiple case analysis and on the Content Analysis Technique as the analytical method. Altogether, 46 women were interviewed during 2008 and 2009, in the Brazilian State of Minas Gerais. This study proposes to observe how professional women are constructed along their careers and how they address issues such as dreams, opportunities and barriers interposed along their trajectories. Basing on literature review, the authors specifically intend to understand women's relationships with these three latter variables when submitted to isomorphic pressures (DiMaggio and Powell, 2005) applied by social institutions as

family/society and their profession. This movement is known in literature as institutional duality (DiMaggio and Powell, 2005) and comprises the pressures created by each one of the above-described institutions upon the female institution, expecting a specific ensemble of socially consolidated actions and reactions from it.

Following exhaustive case analyses, the authors surmise that women who reach senior executive offices react to institutional duality by giving birth to the professional institution, acting in reacting suit to many of its stimuli. Nevertheless, notably the work and career institution is still substantially influenced by the male gender and its characteristics. Thus, the main observation of this effort is veered towards the isomorphism of women who reach senior positions to the supposedly male characteristics, values and behaviors in an organization.

This paper is segmented into four sections in addition to this introduction. Section 2 contains the theoretical framework based on gender in organizations theories and on neo-institutionalism. Section 3 presents the research methodology and is followed by Section 4 with data submission and analysis. Finally, the main investigation findings are discussed in Section 5.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The Feminine as an Institution

Since the female gender is "a building block of social relations founded upon perceived differences between the sexes, and the first manner of providing meaning to power relations" (Scott, 1990, p. 14) and considering that female development is different than male's mainly as concerns their individual needs (Gilligan, 1982) it should be regarded as a social construct, as a typification of sedimented, institutionalized society. The above-described approach is possible upon seeing sexes as social representations (Jodelet, 2001) sharing the knowledge and values of the same reality. Genders and their relations "should be analyzed as a structure within which society is mobile, as per cultural and historical characteristics and discourses based on such differences" (Souza, 2009, p. 43). Understanding genders percolates understanding them as a social organization, imbued with their institutional formations.

Winkel and Ragins (2008) argue that the organizational environment impose upon female professionals a greater number of barriers against their activity, a greater set of obligations and a stricter behavior standard, which factors compose the stereotype of the female executive being. These high demands, concurring with society's expectations as to what women are in the broadest meaning of the word (including being mothers, spouses, housewives, etc), preventing such women to play both roles effectively. Wilkel and Ragins (2008) sustain that women are never capable of performing these two social functions simultaneously and successfully. Eagly and Carli (2007) and Schein (2001) contend that the expectations harbored by society concerning the roles to be played by women executives often times conflict with the roles that women should play in their families.

This paper sustains that gender can be assessed as a social institution. Understanding how genders are constructed and replicated in society; how their values, identities and common objectives are constructed along history and how these values are influenced by their social milieu is possible only through this view (Selznick, 1957). Souza's (2009) arguments are based on the fact that sex is expressed in a homogenous discourse, used to ordain differences and that, overall, does not only refer to any individual's ideas, but also to "the institutions, structures, routine practices, rituals and everything that comprises social relationships" (Scott, 1990, p.115).

To understand gender as an institution, attention is called upon the social structure, policies and practices that support it. According to Wharton (2005), the gender social creation ensues dialogically between the individual and society, thus affording the understanding of the institution and, consequently, gender differences dynamically. Therefore, Wharton understands gender as "a system of social practice multimodels yielding distinctions between man and woman and organizing inequalities based on such distinctions. It is a principle of power in social life and visible throughout the social world". (Wharton, 2005, p. 119.)

The Social Construction of Gender Reality

Based on the writings of Berger and Luckmann (1967), gender presents itself as one element of routine life. A reality interpreted by humans as subjectively endowed with meaning to the extent it builds a coherent world. Moreover, the world, for these authors, is the coexistence of multiple realities routinely shared by all. This multiplicity of socio-cultural determinations to which individuals are submitted yield social processes that determine the constitution of the gender and particularly produce the self. The nature of the "male self" or of the "female self" as an initial construct is not limited to the particular configuration that the individual identifies as being himself, but is also influenced by the social equipment serving as the complement to this particular configuration of the self.

Still basing on Berger e Luckmann (1967), the "female self" and the "male self" can be understood as routine actions and institutionalized typifications conveyed among societal generations and accepted by their individuals as proper. Nevertheless, the authors caution that the institutional world demands legitimation, as do the typifications and roles created by it. Legitimation is indispensable such that the gender institution can be socially explained, justified and sedimented. (Berger and Luckmann, 1967)

Given the strong women insertion in the labor market and the entire feminist revolution, there is a strong social demand for a new meaning for women's role in this society; a new understanding of what women are as mothers, professionals, etc. This change in women's social role involves conflicts between the old, already institutionalized role and the construction of their new role. Such conflicts are well exemplified by the impasse between women's careers and their professional lives, as discussed in some academic writings. Notably, the challenge of understanding women in this new context involves a continual construction process where the professional and personal life roles do not seem to concur. The current construction cannot (as yet) promote the coexistence between actions and reactions that involve women in the personal field of their lives and the set of actions expected from the professional woman.

The current discussion as to how men and women are constructed as genders in organizations is still quite polemical and divergent. While some studies point towards similarities between the behavior of men and women, thus emphasizing the influence of gender stereotypes, (Duehr and Bono, 2006) others intensify distinctive behavioral patterns between the sexes (Ragins et al., 1998). Facing this duality, Silveira (2009) sustains that in modern organizational environments many "traits and attributes normally imputed to men, such as authoritarianism or task orientation, are common in a few women while other, such as affection, sensitivity and caring, regarded as traditionally female characteristics, can be found in many men".

In today's world corporate environment, the factors "professional choices" and "experience" no longer suffice to explain the reasons why women do not reach senior executive positions in an organization (Kulish et al., 2009). More recent studies indicate that factors that prevent women from ascending professionally may be associated to the fact that senior management roles and functions are still linked to the male image, and are set up basing on stereotyped competences and abilities (Eagly and Carli, 2003; Schein, 2001). This prompts female characteristics to be less perceived and valued by the corporate world (Eagly et al.,1992); consequently, women are unable of joining what some authors call the "leadership romance" (Kulish et al, 2009; Meindl et al.,1985).

Many of the studies developed into this theme point towards family responsibilities and the lack of incentives and characteristics as justifications (Goldberg, 1993) for women not reaching senior management offices. Eagle e Karau (2005) argue that the social function designed for executives is stereotyped and demands certain attributes from individuals which by turn are basic requirements to succeed in a specific social function. It is precisely within this social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1967) that women often times are unable to reach high office. In this sense, to participate in this social logic and join the executive body of a specific organization, women seek backgrounds that will enable them to accrue these stereotyped, masculinized characteristics and attributes.

Eagle e Karau (2005) argue that even in situations in which women reach high office and are reviewed as successful by their social group, they are not as well reviewed concerning the performance of their activities as men are. These authors also state that the same successful executives present many male

managerial characteristics and are adequate to the male management stereotype. Eagle e Karau (2005) sustain that, for this reason precisely, many of them are poorly reviewed as concerns their managerial performance.

Veering attention to the female perspective of similarities existing in modern production organizations, Ragins, et al. (1998) conclude in their writings that one of the main strategies crafted by women to rise in their professional careers is the constant quest for women's adaptation to a male environment, modifying their work style and becoming similar to men to factor themselves into the organizational context. Menezes and Bertucci (2009) still contend that the incorporation of specific, supposedly male characteristics is, in most cases, socially imposed upon the female institution. Therefore, many of the characteristics found in women inserted in the "business world" are, according to these authors, coherent with legitimate manners of acting, dressing and speaking as relates to what is socially acceptable, legitimate and desirable – that is, congruent with the values and identities as legitimated by working organizations and which are still quite germane to the male identity and behavior.

The attempt to legitimize itself in the organizational social context in which it operates prompts female intuition and each of its attitudes, decisions and behaviors to become nothing more than reflections of pressures for socialization (Lorber, 1994). Therefore, the common characteristic is usually determined by the dominant gender institution – in this case, the male gender institution. According to Silveira (2009), notably gender behaviors vary according to social context and different life periods … [In fact,] the development of the gender identity is a process negotiated throughout life, which involves both cognitive and affective and motivational aspects (Silveira, 2009).

Basing on DiMaggio and Powell (2005), the belief is that the main forces that the gender institution should consider are the other institutions present in the social field (ALDRICH, 1979). Such perspective corroborates the fact that gender institutions do not compete for resources only, but mainly for political power, institutional legitimacy, and social and economic adequacy. According to DiMaggio and Powel (2005), "organizations tend to adopt as their role models other organizations that they perceive as being more legitimate or successful" (DiMaggio and Powell, 2005, p. 79).*Ergo*, the female gender institution in the organizational model would tend to adopt as a model the characteristics, behavior and values of the dominant institution (the male) as a mode to become more competitive and successful.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Multiple Case Studies

The quest for a possible response to the issue pursued in this article includes the proposition of a qualitative research structure, in which interviews were held with 46 Brazilian women distributed over 4 analytical generations – and the constitution of each one of these generations is factored into working women's active age intervals. All respondents work or study in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais and are associated to organizations (either professional or teaching) of national repute. The quest for understanding women's career ascent or, otherwise, the motivations and causes prompting them to veer away from their careers should be observed a long time. As sustained by Giddens (1996), time is an important variable from the moment it influences the object under study both individually and in "longer run, persistent institutional time experiences" (Giddens, 1996)

Phase I includes individuals in the initial stages of their professional lives; women who have some sort of higher education and are between 17 and 22 years of age. In this phase 16 women were interviewed who were enrolled in undergraduate programs directly related to management activities, such as economics, business administration, international relations and communications, among others. Phase II included women who had already completed their undergraduate studies and were in the initial steps of their professional careers, such as looking for a job. The average age of these women respondents was between 23 and 29 years and 10 women were interviewed whose characteristics are the first impacts that professional experience wields upon the social self. Phase III includes already-stabilized women in the work market and who somehow already outlined the professional niches where they have already worked or become specialists in. Ten women were interviewed during this phase, whose

ages were between 30 and 40 years. Phase IV included mature professional women who have achieved stability both in the professional and in the personal fields. These women are older than 40 years and most of them have experienced the myriad pressures imposed by the environment upon the female institution. Again, ten women were interviewed in this phase.

Interviews were carried out in attendance, according to a pre-structured script. This technique is justified by the research intention to capture the peculiarities of each one of these women and, moreover, broach space such that the discourse could disclose items not contemplated by literature so far. The main issue beaconing the interview inquired about the career trajectory of this woman and the authors sought to capture elements identifying the dreams, hurdles and opportunities found in their trajectories and unveiled in the discourse. The perspective was that these items be identified via content analysis, understanding how women construct themselves along their career and how they act and react to pressure from other institutions.

To enable this, and according to Wharton (2005), gender studies will only be complete when they comprise the family and work factors together. According to Souza (2009), these orbits directly affect women's daily routines and belong to "historically intertwined social life areas". Therefore, the two institutions promoting the above-mentioned pressures upon the female institutions are Family/Society and Organizations/Corporate Environment.

The Family and Society institution applies myriad pressures upon the female institution. During the first few stages of professional life, family and society play the important role of driving modern women towards reaching higher schooling levels, demanding greater financial, professional and sentimental independence from them. In more advanced stages of women's careers, family and society are expected to play the additional role of demanding from women another behavior with the families they may establish with their spouses. In this phase, family/society apply pressures upon women for much more attention to their children and husbands, their homes and to supposedly female obligations in the family environment – besides, evidently, continuing to exercise the same functions previously required by these contexts.

The organization and the corporate environment appear as the result of a typification existing in organizations still dominated by the male institutions and its characteristics. Certain stability is expected from this second factor as concerns the profile of pressure exerted upon the female institution throughout their careers, such women being demanded for objectiveness, individualism, authoritarianism, task and results orientation, an almost exclusive dedication to work, and perseverance. The idea conveyed is that only a professional having this set of characteristics (normally attributed to the male gender) will reach higher office and prestige positions within the organizational environment. It is at this time that women, being rather isomorphic to these characteristics, will reach hierarchically higher managerial offices.

Notably, the hypothesis sustained in this article is neither majority nor deterministic for the ascent of women in their professional careers. But the authors of this paper believe that this fact indeed collaborated to such ascent. Besides issues purely involving the organization, women's decision as regards the degree of isomorphism to which they will be submitted is also strongly influenced by the role and intensity of the pressure that the family/society institution will exert upon them.

Analytical Method: Content Analysis

This investigation effort is qualitative in nature and, by way of interpreting discourse, seeks to understand how women construct their own realities and deal with the pressures exerted by the family and career institutions. Moreover, the authors intend to capture how these same women understand such pressures and make their choices along their histories. As a framework, the authors resorted to the qualitative approach which, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2006) implies the emphasis upon "entity qualities and upon processes and meanings not experimentally examined or measured in terms of quantity, volume, intensity or frequency". The multifaceted, hard to measure characteristics of the object under analysis in this effort also hinders any attempt at the quantitative exploration of same. In addition, this article delves upon the quest for a better and deeper understanding of a given fact, which characterizes it as exploratory.

The research strategy used is the multiple case study (Eisenhardt, 1989). This research strategy, according to Eisenhardt (1989) is valid when the focus rests upon contemporary phenomena inserted into some real life context. Specifically, the case study method consists in the intensive examination of one or more study objects, to provide the deepest and most thorough understanding of such object (Eisenhardt, 1989; Goode and Hatt, 1973; Greenwood, 1973; Soy, 1997). Given such understanding, different analytical procedures were employed (Greenwood, 1973), aiming at a detailed understanding of the investigated object, be they groups, situations, people, organizations, circumstances in which these individuals are or the nature of the phenomena that comprise it (Eisenhardt, 1989). Ensuing data are ordained in such a fashion that the nature of unity is preserved, to finally obtain a complete understanding of the phenomenon as a whole (Greenwood, 1973).

The investigators resorted to the content analysis (Bardin, 2002) interpretation technique to analyze the data. This is understood as the procedure that seeks to analyze textual materials stemming from myriad sources, from media products through images to interview data. Its main purpose is to reduce and synthesize the analyzed material using categories (Bardin, 2002). Interview transcriptions and field notes represented analytical inputs, whose content was submitted to a qualitative data treatment using the NVivo 8 software. An exhaustive generation of mutually exclusive categories was sought with the help of this software, as represented by a set of codes referring to multiple impressions, critiques and factors converging upon the investigation propositions. This process is called open coding. Thereafter, in axial coding and resorting to the set of codes described as being of the first order, proximity, cause and effect relationships were established, enabling the identification of second order categories, basing upon more comprehensive descriptions (Bardin, 2002). Finally, during the third state of this analysis, with selective coding (Bardin, 2002; Flick, 2009) the histories of the observed cases were developed, including their overall panorama and the core phenomena. Notably, throughout the discourse of their career trajectories all interviewed women indicated two main categories of this study as being core, to wit: career and family.

Data Analysis

Phase I included young women aged between 17 and 22 years, still pursuing their undergraduate degree; the prominence they gave to their careers is notable. The discourse at this phase is rife with dreams and expectations. There is a belief that their academic pursuits will assure them a position in the work market. Notably, pressures applied by Family/Society are very subtle and do not yield any anxiety or uncertainty vis-à-vis their own futures. In this phase, society/family became a major driver of professional dreams. For these women, as far as gender issues are concerned, there are no tangible differences between the male and the female institutions, nor is how belonging to the female gender institution may impact their career development perceptible.

Explicitly and clearly presenting this analysis and basing upon the speeches delivered by the women themselves, family and societal pressures appear at this phase in the sense of driving women to capacity-build and insert themselves in the labor market. Mother support is especially noted. Mothers encouraged their daughters to study and work for two main reasons: either because the mothers themselves were accomplished professionals or because they did not have a satisfactorily developed professional life.

"My parents have always told me, since I was a kid: '- *You're going to study and earn your own money*." M(1.1)

"Life at home is really difficult, everything at home is different. Of course, I'm thick with my mother. Then I tended to follow this path of submission also […] But I've been pushed and shoved, and I've been shown that – '*No, you don't have to be like that.'*"M(1.2)

Social demand upon women to adopt their new position in society begins at this phase in life. It is at this then that professional choices are made and decision-making pressures for successful, financially meaningful careers appear. On the other hand, once higher education and professional life have started through internships, scientific initiation projects, etc., these youngsters stated they have not perceived or felt differences in professional treatment due to gender.

"I think there's nothing women can't do or that men can't do" M(1.3)

"I don't see prejudice in my workplace towards female and male genders. Prejudice is more age-related." M(1.4)

Overall, Phase I women are not aware of gender preferences in the organization. Some of the outstanding reasons are, firstly, the fact that these women have little or no experience in internship and work and, therefore, have not been effectively submitted to organizational routine and environment. Secondly, Phase I youngsters are inserted in an academic context where gender distinctions are veiled and, overall, prompt women to acquire a view of inequality of conditions between the genders. Higher education school environment, which as social institutions are also dominated by supposedly male characteristics (in the sense that boys do engineering and girls do humanities) enable women to contemplate qualification as enough to compete against man in the market on an equal footing.

Phase II is represented by newly-graduated women, neophytes regarding their activities in the work market. In this state, pressures applied by the family and career institutions begin to change their behavior pattern. On the one hand, Family/Society begins to demand from these newly-graduated women their *de facto* entry into adulthood, which includes financial independence, a stable job and being successful in the work market. On the other hand, organizations and the corporate environment also begin to apply pressure upon women. Lexically represented by the word 'prejudice', Phase II women notice it, explicitly and for the first time in their professional lives. Besides, most respondents reported doubts concerning their option made during their higher education programs, the sufficiency of their studies to enter the work market and their conditions for being accepted by this society/organization. This phase is strongly characterized by uncertainty and by the impact brought about by gender differences.

During content analysis this phase was characterized by the clash between what was envisioned during higher education and reality seen in the labor market itself. The difficulties to obtain a position in the market, mainly when the professional area sought is heavily dominated by males; the first contact with the "glass roof" between genders; and the high professional demands adopted by organizations strongly shaped by supposedly male characteristics are but a few of the factors reported by women as 'difficulties' in the path of their professional ascent.

"The area manager told me my CV was pretty good and that she'd recommend me to any other area, but since she only worked with men, she'd opt for D. It's ludicrous. I wasn't selected just because I'm a woman". M(2.1)

"...when the last interview came, with the partner, he told me I was great. But there was a hitch: they didn't hire women." M(2.2)

"...I joined this selection process and was approved and during the final interview the professor told me I wouldn't be chosen because I am a woman. He said, "Women either aren't up to the program, or return [from abroad] before program ends because of their families or boyfriends or because they get hitched up to some husband and don't come back". M(2.3)

Another remarkable point in the content analysis of the Phase II interviews is the manner by which these women expound the situations experienced in organizational environments of predominantly supposedly male characteristics. It is at this point in the discussion that the female gender isomorphism begins to gather strength. Pressed by the family institution and by society to achieve professional and financial success, these women intensely seek legitimacy in the organizational environment. The main manner found by these women to legitimate themselves was the search for similarities between their own behaviors and supposedly male characteristics. The understanding is that attempting to hide their female selves and exalting their male characteristics could, somehow, render them acceptable by the organizational environments.

"Once a manager at a company I was working for looked at me and said, "You're so pretty… why don't you dress up? Then I stopped and thought that I was forcing myself to be ugly, and was dressing like a man". M(2.3)

"You can't yield an inch. I always tell the assistants this… if you want to cry, do it in the restroom, and don't let anybody see. Then plaster up with a pound of makeup and head back to work as though nothing happened". M(2.4)

In Phase II, the quest for professional and financial stability, for "a place under the sun", is still in the agenda of family pressures. However, differently from the Phase I discourse in which the family is the core agenda, Phase II predominantly highlights the professional issue. Sentence arrangement, intonation and insistence upon specific theme parts translate women's change from Phase I to Phase II, the latter phase being much more concerned (pressed by issues relating to work market insertion.

Phase III presented itself as the most sensitive of the entire analytical process. Changes entailed by the wish to establish a family and the increase of female fertile age transposed issues related to family, husband and children onto this new generation. Most Phase III respondents are involved in a stable relationship, in which the dreams of family establishment are mostly at their inception. Relationships with fewer than 10 years and small children are common characteristics to some of the women in this phase. Women who have not yet acquired these family conditions demonstrated some anxiety for this moment to come as soon as possible upon their lives.

"For the future... I want little children..... M(3.1).

"Oh, I want to marry and have my own home, my family, and evidently this is not all. I must find a way to support myself. I know that my fiancé can be the family's breadwinner, the financial base of our home, but I don't want this to be forever. I want to earn my own money too". M(3.2)

Phase III is quite sensitive insofar as women's professional trajectory is concerned, a fact perceived by the intensity with which they voice their disgust, their feelings, and their anguish.

"I felt like dying..." M(3.3)

"I left the meeting crying..." M(3.4)

This phase proved to be a moment of inflexion for women. The institutional pressure for extreme dedication to work and the pressure exerted by family/society for this same woman to exercise her mother/wife roles loom high. In this clash, the respondents indicated two possible trajectory pathways. The first, chosen by some of the respondents, prompts them to abandon their professional ideal to reserve more time for themselves and their families. On the other hand, the pressures exerted by organizations drive women towards isomorphism vis-à-vis prevailing organizational characteristics – still founded upon male institutions. This entails waiving family concerns in favor of profession self-actualization, and there are cases of non-conscious masculinization of these women, even.

"She had to incorporate a lot more … how can I put it… of the male spirit to remain where she was." M(4.1)

For the women in this phase who already have an established family and opted for career continuity, the dilemmas seem compounded. The Corporate Environment institution continues to exert strong pressures upon the female gender and often times drive women to moments of suffering, doubt and uncertainties concerning their family lives and their new demands.

"...I sat at his desk and he said, "I just have one question for you. I called you over here because there's one thing I have to ask you: how are you going to reconcile work with your 10-month old son?" I said I expected any sort of question, except this, because this is my problem... "M(3.4)

"Besides it all, women should be lean, pretty and have their fingernails polished..." M(3.7)

"So I decided to have a baby. After I'd been a manager for some three years.Then everything changes, and a lot. Then I hit the wall. A little kid… and I was very concerned. And there's no escaping, your yield plummets. And I wasn't promoted. The competition to see who worked longer hours raged on and I couldn't compete any more. I was much unmotivated because I wasn't promoted any more. I always had a relatively fast track career, and suddenly you see yourself mothballed." M(3.8)

On the other side of the coin, these women – regarded as successful and with some level of professional stability – bring several theme and semantic elements to their discourse highlighting women's relative detachment from family; the need for a career as a happiness factor; the extreme dedication to their work routines; objectivism as a differentiating factor in their career development. Extrapolating, the organization as already stated seems to effectively and intensely inculcate supposedly male values, norms and behaviors upon these women.

"And my boss said, "For you to come here you got to be better than your male colleagues, because if you're equal to them you won't remain here." And it was true. I found evidence of it. And when [my son] was born I only took two months' maternity leave. I wanted to come back; it wasn't because they forced me. It was because I wanted to, and the company also wanted me to". M(3.4)

"My husband, then my fiancé, looked at me and said, "Swee'pea, I wanna give you a gift. Some jewelry." Then I looked at him and said, "You really want to please me? Take this cash and buy some Petrobras stock with it." M(3.7)

"I can't be happy without my work. I must work to be happy. And he [the husband] will have to understand this." M(3.7)

This process of the female institution isomorphing into the male institution becomes even more evident when, in their discourse, many women stated not having some of the essential, already legitimized and institutionalized characteristics by society of what being a woman means, such as sensitivity or frailty. Quite the opposite, these isomorphic women state that this profile imbued with femininities is incoherent with a professional's profile.

"Women had one variable, one frailty of women that I didn't have… So I think sometimes women overdo this frailty thing, and I think this is a hurdle, a limiting factor." M(3.10)

"When I came in it was half and half… but women kept leaving. Boyfriend pressures, family pressures, no gym time, that female stuff. And there were women who cried and that killed me." M(3.4)

The family versus career conflict is exalted at this phase. Social and family demands, overall, begin to demand the existence of women who are not only professionally and financially successful, but also begin to demand (and applying pressure upon) these women such that they develop their professional lives and establish their own families.

"In a word, things didn't happen, and at that time there was that stuff of being left behind to become an old maid. And I really was, it was awful." M(4.2)

"The committee chair began so: 'And this is your CV? It doesn't show your marital status. It doesn't even show your age. How am I going to assess your professional capability when I don't even know whether you are married or have children?' She massacred me. Then she looked at me and asked, "You were abroad for 10 years. Were you alone or was there anybody with you?" M(3.3)

"One day I was at a meeting and my mobile rings. It was the pediatrician. And I didn't even know my son was at the pediatrician's. And she said: you've got to come back home in a hurry because your son has pneumonia. And he needs his mother. That almost killed me." M(3.4)

Notwithstanding the conflict and distress ensued by this context upon being a woman, they all recognize that the wishes to abandon everything, of fully dedicating to their children or also to curb their careers in favor of a deeper family involvement is a fleeting feeling.

"So I'll try to reconcile things (the profession and children] and have both things move along together. Sometimes, when the pressure is excessive, I feel like dropping everything… but it passes. The few times it happened, it happened very quickly." M(3.8)

"Feel like dropping everything? Yes. A thousand times. But it's all very fleeting. It passes quick. When the going gets rough and tough, you always think about dropping everything. But it's only one day when you're down. It passes real quick." M(3.5)

Phase IV, the most mature among of all of those involved in this investigation, is commonly characterized by stable, well-formatted family and professional structures. Pressures are applied by family/society more amenably. An is already established family, children already reared and often times already married lift a significant burden off these women's shoulders. On the professional side, the opportunities to take positions of greater relevance are (or would be), in many cases, left to a second plane to reserve more time for themselves and to the improvement of their quality of living. These women's discourse is rife with figurative achievement tales. Pride for their followed trajectories, for their structured family and for their career is found in all interviews.

"Everybody says they have problems; that they become problem children because the mother is away all day. My son's got nothing of that sort." M(4.1)

"I'm very determined and a perfectionist. When I presented and defended by doctorate the professor said she hadn't seen a true thesis in a long time. And that mine was the real thing. And everything I do has to be so" M(4.3)

The mildest form by which family and society pressures impinge upon this phase of women's lives does not occur by environment or power and pressure relationship changes that these institutions impose upon the female institution. The mild form, therefore, is much more a consequence of their own decisions for a better quality of living and greater dedication to themselves. However, this change of viewing and understanding their own existence (which is no longer restricted to work and family) does not preclude their forgoing the wish for career continuity and ascent.

"She talked to many executive women about the problem and many alleged that they did not any chief officer's job. They wanted to be recognized; they wanted to broach their own space. But not necessarily in a chief officer's position." M(4.1)

"I want to keep on working, and a lot. I want the [company] to grow and develop and to win many awards. The challenge is only just beginning." M(4.5)

Concerning the relationship between these women and the organizational culture within which they are, their way of perceiving it is milder and less isomorphic. In a behavior interpretative process, these women resort to much more sensitive statements and speeches than those voiced by Phase III women (the phase when isomorphism with the male institution is most acute). Their manner of dressing and gesticulating, of dealing with adverse conditions without losing their assertiveness and tenderness, resumes female tones. However, the achievement of such maturity and of this new manner of seeing things (mainly the pressures that the remaining institutions still exert upon the female institution) was not reached without 'suffering', 'determination' and "resilience' (lexical selection).

"Determination. I've always been very determined. I chased everything I wanted and got it. This is why people sometimes grieve and pine and I can't understand. I've always chased what I believed was right, what I wanted for myself." M(4.1).

There is a cultural barrier, but there's also the barriers that you set up. But I think that most hurdles are set by yourself. This creates suffering and anguish. You'll learn how to deal with this. To accept your own decisions."M(4.4)

Overall, Phase IV women's discourses disclose a personal need to care for their own self, even detrimentally to financial or career improvements. This waiving of obligations (on their own decision) to respond to organizational pressures in favor of their quality of living prompts women to waive the share of their legitimacy in the organizational environment (resuming their female characteristics reduces isomorphism with male institutions and, consequently, their legitimacy in the organization).

"Yes, today I wouldn't take a job with so many demands. It is no longer a case of free-for-all. Mainly, I have my daughter now, who requires me and needs my attention." M(4.2)

"I intend to continue with the project and consolidate it. And after I complete this phase I intend to offer my knowledge to society." M(4.1)

DISCUSSION

This study suggests that the relationship between women and their families, society and institutions changes with time. Among Phase I women the environment involves expectations and their families support them in their quest for their professional trajectories. The respondents demonstrated that they believe in the power of education and good academic background as a means to build a successful professional career. Women in this phase believe that, if they are well-prepared, professional opportunities will appear and they will be successful in their professional and personal lives. Being successful, making money, and then establishing a family seems to be the natural order of facts for most women in this phase. This phase includes references to the role of he mother, either as a role model to be followed or to be rejected.

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Family and societal pressures are compounded for Phases II and III women. In both groups the pressure if applied upon professional success and by the self-actualization of women as wives and mothers. Anxiety and uncertainty are brought about by the clash between this pressure and institutional reality. Phase II women begin to cope with institutional pressures for change. Being a woman with sharp feminities despite a good background is seen as a barrier against employment opportunities and professional growth. Many respondents report clashing situations between these two universes. How to reconcile a newborn son with the opportunity of new position in the company? When to take a break from the profession to start a family or to dedicate a bit more to the spouse? When to cancel a business trip to take the son to the doctor or to a school celebration? These are frequent questions that these Phase III women ask themselves or routinely hear.

Phase III women live in a period of convergence (Gladwell, 2001). In this phase, many opt for quitting their struggle for professional growth to dedicate themselves to their spouses and mainly to their children. While a few temporarily abandon their careers other leave in a quest for professional ascent. During an interview, a senior executive woman remarked that most of her colleagues opted for being only good professionals and abandoned the struggle for positions and status in their careers. Other women in this same group opt for professional life. In a few cases these women masculinize themselves and become an integral part of the dominant executive model.

As Capelle et al. (2003) as concerns the "similarization" process that women have to cope with for their legitimization in the work market, two types of women are noted in this process of female institution ascent. The "super-woman", who tries to keep herself gorgeous, well-dressed, feminine, a good mother, a good professional and a good wife. On the other side is the executive woman, characterized by a successful woman, wielding power and typically male physical attributes (scant makeup, short hair, dressed in business attire, etc). This investigation suggests that this isomorphic construction process of the woman occurs without the clear and transparent perception of the executive woman herself, who considers herself to be a "super-woman" because she is successful and for being capable of reconciling family and social pressures and for being professionally successful. (Menezes and Bertucci, 2009)

Another notable factor, mainly for Phase III and perhaps Phase IV women is the lack of conditions of these professionally successful women to promote changes in the corporate world. Phase III women who experience the clash between personal and family life and professional life do not propose to change institutions by making them a little more feminine. One of the respondents, upon being confronted by her male boss as to how would she reconcile her condition of being an executive and a mother, answered that this was her problem, and not the company's. This fact, as happened to many other respondents, could have been her chance to contribute towards changing institutions by making them more feminine, either by offering flexible working hours such as to afford a balance between family and work, or with the incorporation of equipment and resources such as to allow this and other women to meet their children's needs at different ages. The same thing can be observed among Phase IV women who opted for a better quality of living and feel less pressured by the institution. Despite the discontent with the condition of women within the organizations, none of the respondents seemed engaged to act as a male institutions change agent, making them better balanced and adequate to the professional growth of other women.

This study in under several limitations; the first and perhaps most critical of which may be related to the population and sample researched. All respondents come from a single Brazilian state. The data gathering methodology via an open interview facilitated the capture of elements by the interviewers so far not clearly approached by literature; the four-phase segmentation afforded a broader analysis, capturing the personal and professional growth process, but limiting the interfaces among generations.

Future studies may contemplate pairs of female and male professionals within the same four phases. The authors understand that many pressures and reactions observed cannot be exclusively feminine and that man can also, at the onset of the 21st century, be pressured by family, by society and institutions similarly to women in the same phases. Other studies focus upon qualitative analysis within companies in the quest for an understanding of the behavioral similarities and differences

between men and women within the same business environment or, otherwise, upon understanding how business practices facilitate the professional ascent of different genders.

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