

Pleasures and Pains about Remote Work Experience during the Covid-19 Global Pandemic: A diatextual approach.

Giuseppe Mininni
giuseppe.mininni@uniba.it
Amelia Manuti
amelia.manuti@gmail.com

*Department of Education, Psychology, Communication
University of Bari (Italy)*

ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 global pandemic has radically redesigned social, economic and cultural pivots of human life. Among these, individual professional experience has been completely upset by the introduction of remote/smart working modalities thus imposing workers to fast cope with this great change, adapting to different workloads and time schedules and in some cases even learning new skills. One of the most evident consequence for many people has been a stressful management of the work/family balance, because both life domains required attention and engagement. The consequence being a high perception of overload and a poor quality of life. In view of the above, adopting an applied psycholinguistic perspective, the present study aimed to investigate how individuals made sense of the experience of smart working during phase 2 of the Covid-19 pandemic. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with a group of 18 workers and diatextual analysis was used to analyze the discursive texture binding the interlocutors to the wider context of talk.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19, smart working, work-life balance, sensemaking, diatextual analysis

Introduction

The outbreak of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) has posed original challenges to both individuals and organizations. Covid-19 is a fundamentally people-based crisis: individuals are getting sick, and the repercussions for business and society enormous, and getting exponentially stronger day by day.

Consequently, in the effort to cope with the impact of the pandemic, many companies and organizations switched to remote work, in order to keep social distancing and exert control over the infection. This decision has

generated an active debate within the public opinion on the challenges and risks associated with this working modality that inevitably change the way people interact, exchange information and develop professional practices at work. The different interpretations of the subjective positions on smart working that emerged in the present study were extremely interesting for Applied Psycholinguistics, a research horizon that we have shared since decades with Maria Graça da Pinto in the framework of the International Society of Applied Psycholinguistics (ISAPL). This research contribution was sincerely inspired by the relationship of true friendship and reciprocal esteem that we have with her during these years of academic collaboration and participation to the ISAPL congresses, more specifically those in Porto (1997) and in Bari (2010).

The data collected had special relevance because they were featured by the reflexivity which is imposed by the current bonds that are limiting our research possibilities. Yet, we too as researchers had to surrender to “smart working”, so that our interpretations could have been implicitly influenced by some reference to the meaning we have attached to this research experience within the academic institution. Furthermore, smart working also gave us the opportunity to express gratitude through the ritual of the present academic celebration. Therefore, we engaged in focusing specifically on the communicative dimension of the issue debated.

Theoretical framework

One of the most evident features of modern times is the progressive institution of a clear separation between what people do “out of home” (basically studying and/or working) and what people do “at home” (traditionally the domain of intimate and most significant interpersonal relationships). The recent development of “new media” radically transformed, almost cancelled, the traditional distinction between public and private sphere, redefining a continuum of everyday experience (Broadbent 2011).

Smart working is a practice that makes transparent the dynamic of such intrigue, making the management of work lighter and at the same time making family and private life heavier. This hectic rhythm could be caught in the alternation (even listening to the same person) of two discursive

regimes fariming smart working as a “liberation” and as an “oppression”

Within this frame, remote work, better known as smart or agile work, is not an innovation. It is a world-wide working practice that encourages professionals to work beyond the conventional office setting. This is based on the idea that there is no need for work to be performed in a location. It is meant as a solution for many categories of workers to work from home, carrying out their activities and tasks, and achieving their goals in a more comfortable and efficient way. By this option, employees could manage their work autonomously, could manage family engagements, and even save money generally spent for mobility. In this vein, smart working is an opportunity for workers to balance work and life spheres (see for example the need for some women to look after their children and/or their old parents) and to craft their job according to their needs (in terms of time schedules or workload distribution).

However, the global pandemic has redesigned the physiognomy of smart working as we knew it.

The emergency has pushed companies to adopt this working practice as the only possibility to survive on the market and/or to guarantee services to the community, thus inviting all employees to stay at home and to work remotely. Many psychological, social and cultural implications of this radical turn to technology will be considered by research in the next few years (Kramer & Kramer, 2020).

One of the most prominent one is the difficulty in keeping defined borders between family and work spheres of life. Actually, the lockdown has forced all families and their children to reinvent their daily routines and to contemporary learn to deal with school, work and household engagements.

Therefore, one of the most crucial concern in Work and Organizational Psychology, that is the need for individuals to keep a balance between work and life demands, has thus become a priority because of the difficulties experienced by many workers in adapting to the “new normal”.

Accordingly, abundant research confirmed how the quality of life at work could influence the quality of personal life and vice versa (see for instance, Kalliath & Brought, 2008). Already, Zedek and Mosier (1990) and later O’Driscoll (1996) noted that there are five main models to explain and to understand the relationships between life and work spheres. The

segmentation model maintains that work and life are two distinct domains that have no influence on each other. In contrast the *spillover* model argues that one domain could influence the other in either a positive or a negative way. The third model, the *compensation* model, assumes that what may be lacking in one sphere, in terms of demands and/or satisfactions, could be made up in the other. The *instrumental* model postulates that activities in one sphere could be beneficial to the other and finally the *conflict* model proposes that when both domains have high levels of demands some conflict inevitably derives because of the individual overload. More recently, Clark (2000) proposed the *border* model assuming that “people are daily border-crossers as they move between work and home” (Guest, 2001: 259) and posing interesting questions about the permeability of borders and the subjective ability to manage them.

Certainly, the emergency caused by the global pandemic is pushing scholars and practitioners to revise these theories and to engage in investigating how individuals make sense of the new situation and what kind of strategies they are adopting to cope with these multiple demands inside and outside life domains.

In this light, the present study was aimed to give a first contribution to this debate, reflecting on the preliminary results coming from a qualitative research conducted on a group of workers who were invited to make sense of this experience through discourse.

The study

Smart working has been the main tool adopted by public and private organizations to deal with the emergence posed by the Covid 19 pandemic. However, far from being a voluntary support for workers' welfare and work-life balance conciliation, smart working has become an unavoidable choice for organizations striving for economic survival and competition. Consequently, many workers could experience the transition to smart working not only an opportunity rather as a tool producing potential conflict among life spheres.

Considering these assumptions, the main aim of the study was to focus on the subjective elaboration of smart working experience, investigating

how participants make sense and talk about this “new normal”, attempting to balance job demands with family needs.

More in detail, two hypotheses guided the research:

1) smart working experience would be told through the recurrence of two main macro-socio-epistemic rhetoric, that are widely accessible through public discourse: a positive one, anchoring this working modality to its beneficial effects for organizational efficiency and functionality in terms of time management and objectives’ achievement, and a negative one, mostly focused on its emotional impact on individuals, often generating feelings of relational disinvestment and existential dispersion;

2) the choice of this discursive modulation would be related to the professional role of participants and to some socio-anagraphic features (age, gender, etc.) impacting on digital skills and ordinary management of smart working and family needs.

In line with these aims, we adopted a psycho-linguistic perspective that allowed us to analyse how participants use discourse to shape their identity, giving sense to the context of talk. Diatextual analysis was chosen as a tool to go through these texts, tracing back the discursive towels of subjectivity, modality and argumentation that feature participants’ experience of smart working in this very complex moment of change management.

Participants and procedure

A few discursive data were collected at the beginning of the phase 2 of the Covid-19 (May 2020) through a narrative in-depth interview via skype. Participants were invited by informal contacts to voluntarily contribute to the study. The individual interaction with participants was guided by a semi-structured outline dealing with the experience of smart working and the need to manage the balance between professional and family needs. The complete outline of the interview is showed in appendix.

Participants to the study were 18 workers: 9 males and 9 females, aged between 29 and 55 years old. 78% of them were employed in big-sized

companies, while 11% worked in small and medium-sized companies. Finally, 33% of participants worked in public organizations and 67% in private contexts.

As for their working roles, 17% were employed in the service sector, 32% were teachers, 17% were call center operators, 17% were information technology operators and 7% brokers. This heterogeneity allowed a comparison between very different professional contexts, expertise and working modalities in order to better focus on differences and similarities in the experience of smart working.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis of contents (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was first carried out on the corpus collected to describe and organize “what” participants thought about smart working and work-life balance. Parallel, diatextual analysis (Mininni, 2005) was adopted to penetrate “how” did participants discursively constructed their experience with special reference to the focused topics of the study (Manuti, Traversa & Mininni, 2012; Mininni, Manuti, Scardigno & Rubino, 2014; Mininni & Manuti, 2017).

Diatextual approach is special address of Discourse Analysis, whose main aim is to reveal the relationship that binds interlocutors, texts and contexts of talk. Accordingly, the term diatext (from the Greek “dia” that means “through”) is “the context as it is perceived by the enunciators of the text, as they imagine it and show that they take it into account” (Mininni, 1992: 63). According to this methodological perspective, sense does not reside permanently within a text rather it goes through. Therefore, to penetrate within texts and to catch their meanings scholars need to focus on some discursive traces that concretely refer to the Subjectivity, to the Argumentation and to the Modality of any discourse.

These three discursive traces can be organized at least into a comparison between two or more «Socio-Epistemic Rhetoric» (Berlin 1993). The concept of «socio-epistemic rhetoric» presents the notion of «common speech» in a more concrete way, as it shows the real operating of different practices in uttering the «common sense». «Common speech» shows that «common sense» is constituted by binding various contrasting positions, so that people

can adapt their uttering intentions to the different contexts where they are inserted. The «common speech/sense» thickens various interpretative repertoires by orienting them in an ideological way.

Diatextual approach aims at penetrating into such a thick dynamic by pinpointing the socio-epistemic rhetoric used by cultural minds in order to build their controversial «objects». The most productive paths of research / instruments of analysis are the «Positioning Theory» proposed by narrative semiotics and the «Mitigation theory» proposed by pragmalinguistics and psychostylistics (Caffi 2013). By comparing socio-epistemic rhetoric, diatextual analyst aims at focusing on the reasons why a few positions of sense-making are discursively validated as legitimizing their dominion and why other positions of sense-making find difficult to argue in favor of their needs for freedom and autonomy. In this way Diatextual approach contributes to give a «humanizing» perspective to human sciences, as it aims at elaborating some proposals to build social relationships inspired by more shared planning of human dignity.

From a methodological point of view, by approaching to a text adopting diatextual analysis scholars should find answers to three basic questions: *Who is saying that? Why does he/she say it? How does he/se say it?* These answers are precious to analyze texts by collecting information about Subjectivity, Argumentation and Modality (S.A.M. model) and finally to organize the recurrence of some diatextual markers according to specific patterns of meaning as showed in table 1.

Table 1. Diatextual markers of the SAM model.

Questions of Diatextual Analysis	Dimensions of Diatextual Pregnancy	Diatextual Markers
Who?	Subjectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Agency</i>: any textual unit showing if the enunciator is source or goal of action; • <i>Affect</i>: any textual unit highlighting the emotional dimension of texts; • <i>Embrayage/debrayage</i>: any textual unit revealing whether the enunciator is involved or not.
Why?	Argumentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Stake</i>: aims and interests animating the text; • <i>Story</i>: scenes, characters, models of action; • <i>Network</i>: <i>logoi</i> and <i>antilogoi</i> activated within the several narrative and argumentative programs
How?	Modality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Genre</i>: any reference to the typology of text and intertextual references; • <i>Opacity</i>: rhetorical figures, frame metaphors, etc. • <i>Meta-discourse</i>: any expressions of comment and reformulation.

The first question (*Who?*) aims at clarifying how the interlocutor conveys his/her identity through discourse. Accordingly, with reference to the “Subjectivity” dimension, diatextual analysis allows to trace back discursive markers of agency, affect and the enunciative strategies adopted to signal his/her position toward the discursive context and toward the interlocutors (*embrayage/debrayage* strategies).

The second question (*Why?*) points out how the enunciator organizes the “meanings why”, that is the reasons that concretely guide stances and claims about the topic debated.

Finally, the third question (*How?*) focuses on the discursive modalities through which the meaning is shaped, namely it focuses on the stylistic and rhetorical options that make clearer the position and the subjectivity of the interlocutor.

Results

Data analysis showed some common features recurring in participants' smart working experience. However, the same upsetting experience was very differently constructed through discourse because of the very different professional, organizational, generational and family contexts they belonged to. For instance, a first element emerging from data analysis was the role played by smart working inside the organizational context. Some participants witnessed how smart working was already an ordinary organizational practice granted to many workers. Therefore, their organization was ready to cope with this challenging emergency, supporting remote work through efficient devices and platforms.

1) «Since many years smart working has been adopted by my bank as part of its organizational model, especially for those professional roles that do not have direct relationship with the customers and therefore for those who do not work in the agencies (...) this modality is regulated by internal norms, it is disciplined in a rigid manner and is possible only for limited time-frames (...) having already the infrastructures it has been quite easy to extend this modality to all the professional figures operating in the agencies» (Male, Bank Operator, 46 years old)

This perception of organizational readiness making ordinary something that was out of ordinary was a peculiar feature of the bank sector. Yet, in a similar vein, another bank operator working in one of the biggest Italian credit institutes observed that his bank was already predisposed to the implementation of smart working.

2) «The company where I work adopted smart working since many years, especially for roles like mine to allow to make consultancy directly by customers, using the same devices and supports we have in office (except printer) (...) during the Covid-19 emergency this working modality has been strengthened and has allowed us to work from home» (Male, Bank Operator, 39 years old)

On the other hand, very different perceptions were collected in small and medium companies and in private organizations where the change brought about by the pandemic led to a stop. This initial resistance to change was won thanks to the intervention of trade unions, that warmly supported this transition in order to protect workers' rights.

3) «At first, my company has stopped its activities for two weeks allowing workers to enjoy their holidays and only after the pressing insistences and the complaints of workers finally has allowed and realized a web infrastructure to work from home (...) in our case the pressure of workers and of trade unions has convinced the company to transform its way we work even because of the risks we would have encountered, the depletion of the holidays that could have provoked even layoffs, unemployment benefits or a failed renewal of the working contract.» (Male, administrative employee, 49 years old)

From a diatextual point of view, participants' different perspectives on smart working were discursively shaped through the recurrence of subjectivity markers (the S in the SAM Model). More specifically, personal markers such as "I", "my" "our" referred to the company conveyed a high sense of identification with the organizational context and the perceived organizational support with special reference to this situation. In a similar vein, cases of difficulties in adapting to change (see extract 4) were discursively shaped through the opposition between "we-workers" and "the company". Therefore, smart working was described as a conquest, workers succeeded to obtain.

4) «At the beginning of the pandemic the company has not allowed us to go to the office with heavy repercussions in terms of pay being the latter related to the contracts closed with customers (...) after a steady insistence we obtained the possibility to work from home through a platform that allowed new customers to make payments once settled the contract» (Male, administrative employee, 44 years old)

A peculiar case was the one of teachers who expressed great difficulties in adapting their tasks to the new working modality. They also maintained that smart working was not suitable for professions that need face to face interactions.

Diatextual analysis allowed to focus on the argumentative strategies (the A of the SAM Model) adopted by teachers to justify their negative attitude toward smart working and in some case their strong resistance to this practice. Accordingly, participants used the strategy of rationalisation (Van Leeuwen, 2007) recalling the fact that smart working was used for the first time in the school context and therefore teachers were not ready to manage the relationship with the class in remote.

5) «My school has implemented for the first time smart working modalities in order to cope with this emergency and to assure students the prosecution of their education according to the indications of the Italian Ministry of Education (...) it is the first time that the world of public education has been pushed to adopted this kind of teaching modality and I never had the occasion to use remote teaching in my past experience (..) I have always taught in presence by having students in front of me.» (Female, high school teacher, 50 years old)

6) «I have never considered smart working in a positive manner as for the education domain and after having made this experience I cannot but confirm my previous idea (...) I think it could be an interesting solution for those who are engaged in jobs that do not foresee human contact but this could not be the case of teaching professions that could at least use e-learning whenever classes are recorded and downloaded in a second time (...) not in streaming (...) the teaching relationship requires immediate reaction times without information technology barriers.» (Female, high school teacher, 47 years old)

The argumentative strategies used to legitimize and to justify one's own attitude toward smart working were further reinforced through the use of metadiscursive cues (Crismore, Markkanen, & Steffensen, 1993). More

specifically, interpersonal and textual metadiscourse frequently recurred within their contributions.

Interpersonal metadiscourse identifies all the communicative devices alerting the reader about the interlocutor's perspective, thus shaping their reciprocal relationship. In the present study interpersonal metadiscourse was evident in the use of attitude markers (e.g. "I believe", "I think that") and person markers (e.g. "I", "me", "our"). The function of these items was to highlight the speaker's attitude both to the content of communication and to the context of talk.

On the other hand, textual metadiscourse refers to all the aspects, allowing the reader to unmask the interlocutor's intentions by establishing precise and explicit interpretations. In this case, textual metadiscourse was aimed at reinforcing one's own position, making it more credible to the eyes of the audience and thus trying to catch consensus (e.g. as in the following extracts the use of intensifiers such as "exclusively", "strongly", "completely" and logical connectives as "in addition", "moreover", "furthermore" aimed at creating the climax in narration).

7) « [...] I had difficulties in teaching using online platforms because of the limitations due to the distance with my pupils [...] it is not easy in face to face interaction I succeed in explaining new subject matters and making some examinations in the meantime (...) I cannot do both in smart working (...) furthermore teaching math it is very difficult to follow students (...) once they lose a passage just because they tend to distract themselves (and at home they have much more distraction than at school) all my efforts are lost (...) moreover in class I can perceive if they are following me because of their gaze (...) through the webcam they all seem distracted.» (Female, middle school teacher, 54 years old)

Similarly, teachers of primary school agreed that smart working could not be a solution for this context, it cannot substitute human relations. From a diatextual point of view, the opposition between face to face and remote working was constructed through very vivid images animating the modality of discourse (the M in the SAM Model) and underlining what was missing

with smart working and could not be substituted by the cold image of a personal computer: the smell of the environment, the screams of the pupils, their cries, their smiles.

8) «Among the weaknesses of smart working there is the absence of human relationships, of contact with people and with the context, the absence of passion and love that cannot be substituted by a cold screen (...) the smell of the environment, the screams of the pupils, their cries and their smiles (...) Everything becomes immaterial (...) among the strengths obviously we cannot admit that technology has allowed even in such a terrible moment to go on with our working keeping the relationships with the students even if in totally new way.» (Female, primary school teacher, 52 years old)

9) «Smart working in a primary school could be only a temporary remedy during in a situation of emergency (...) each activity that we can plan, even the most involving one, could never substitute the human contact». (Female, primary school teacher, 48 years old)

Conversely, this negative perception connected to smart working was completely redefined with reference to other kind of jobs that do not need face-to-face interaction as a prerequisite. Call center operators, for example, argued that smart working was useful to them to manage their work/life balance.

10) «Making my job through smart working is a warrant (...) I have a list of contacts and of services to provide (...) What is important for my company is not how I work but that I work efficiently concluding contracts (...) To work from home gives me the serenity and calm that I need in the contact with the customer to convince him/her about my argumentation (...) this makes me achieving my organizational goals faster and paradoxically working less and dedicating more time to my family (...) the time I generally spend to go to work now is saved and dedicated to my family» (Male, Call Center operator, 47 years old)

Another important aspect that made the difference in the evaluation of this new working modality was the age of participants. As it could be easily imagined and is also supported by the literature (Charness, 2006) older workers were more resistant to the adoption of smart working with respect to younger workers. To this purpose, a very interesting image was the one introduced by the teacher in extract 11 who described this emergency as a “trauma”, that she hoped to avoid in the future. The use of the intensifier “evidently” contributed to reinforce the pathos of her discourse, stressing the absolute personal adversity to this experience.

11) «Evidently my personal experience is at the limit of the “trauma” (...) I cannot but considering this experience as a negative one and obviously I cannot but hoping that next year we will come back to an ordinary working modality» (Female, high school teacher, 61 years old).

A similar discursive strategy was used by a colleague who marked as “evident” the repercussions of the use of online teaching on both students and teachers, thus emphasizing the difficulties experiences during the lockdown.

12) «[...] the average age of teachers is high and those who have never had motivation to develop digital skills now are resistant to learn with great repercussion not only for students but for colleagues as well, differently from those who adapt to change» (Female, high school teacher, 52 years old)

Younger workers, on the other hand, declared themselves favorable to the extensive use of smart working, which was depicted as a positive working modality, even if for some it engendered a complex managing of teamwork and communication with colleagues.

13) «[...] I will be available to use this working modality also in the future without hesitation, rather I would be very happy to do it» (Male, IT operator, 29 years old)

14) «Obviously, the immediacy of the interpersonal relationship to solve problems could not be found in smart working (...) anyway the emergency has pushed us to learn also how to deal with such difficulties all in all in a easy way» (Male, IT operator, 37 years old)

15) «[...] Unfortunately teamwork according to me is damaged by the physical absence experienced through smart working [...] however it is not something that could not be overcome» (Male, administrative employee, 50 years old)

16) «Fortunately, communication with my colleagues concerning teaching issues is rarely realized through videoconferencing (...) we succeed in communicating but I prefer the traditional model (...) the problem is that the use of informal communication texting systems that we already adopted before the pandemic (as for instance Whatsapp) generates a lot of information, often useless and redundant» (Female, high school teacher, 47 years old)

Among the positive aspects, participants referred also to the possibility to have more time for personal interests and hobbies.

17) «[...] I also succeeded in devoting to cooking and to fitness constantly because my long walk toward the railway station and back home are an old memory» (Female, administrative employee, 47 years old)

18) «[...] surely this working modality allows me to devote much more time to my favourite passion: reading» (Female, call center operator, 38 years old)

Smart working gave the occasion to many of them to re-discover the pleasure to share rituals and simple ordinary things with the family and to feel the support of the dear ones during this difficult moment of change.

19) «Both me and my husband work at home and at least between us there is a total affinity and symbiosis (...) as for my daughters one is too young and I hope she will never remember this pandemic the other one experiences this news positively because she is happy that mum and dad are at home with her.» (Female, administrative employee, 47 years old)

20) «My family wants me to work in smart modality for ever to stay home with them, especially my children» (Male, administrative employee, 44 years old)

21) «My older son, aged 4 years old, has perceived that this is a strange time because he sees us both at home but he is happy [...] My wife is happy to have me at home because I can help her with the children while she devotes to something else.» (Male, administrative employee, 49 years old)

22) «My son is enthusiastic, he plays and has fun (...) my wife is happy because she has found an occasion to relieve her domestic loads and I am happy because they are all happy» (Male, IT operator, 37 years old)

From a diatextual point of view, the supportive role of the family during the lockdown was shaped through metaphors, one of the most important markers of modality of discourse. For instance, in extract 23 the worker compared his family to the mother hen where he could find protection and serenity during the storm.

23) «[...] to stay at home with my family during this phase has been also a protection (...) my family, my house have been like a mother hen where to go during the difficult moments when the storm was blustering and surely it has contributed to give me serenity» (Female, administrative employee, 47 years old)

In a similar vein, the difficult confinement between professional and personal life was compared to the “wave movements beneath the beach” (ex.24). Life and work often invaded each other’s borders that were defined as provisional (again ex. 24). This was the main difficulty experienced in smart working: to protect the borders between these two life spheres.

24) «Borders are provisional and the invasion of one alternates to the the invasion of the other (...) as the “wave movements beneath the beach” (...) when I am at home I work in an empty room that I transformed into a office and where I keep my books and documents (...) to avoid waking up my wife I decided to keep also a sofa bed so that when I feel tired I can sleep and avoid to disturb her.» (Male, administrative employee, 44 years old)

25) «[...] To have a certain mental order I need a space all reserved to me I dedicated a room to my work (...) obviously by this I have avoided all the distractions and I succeed in “detaching” from everything and concentrating especially during my lesson.» (Female, high school teacher, 47 years old)

26) «[...] I choose to work in the attic that has become my studio, I took there all my stuff (...) it could seem a radical choice but I think that to have a space devoted to work is a priority in order to concentrate in what I do (...) to listen to the voices of my children and of my husband would have distracted me from the explanations [...]» (Female, high school teacher, 61 years old)

27) «I work in a small room that since many years has become my studio and where I study and prepare my lessons (...) I can work there without any interruption (...) my family recognizes that space as my space for work exclusively.» (Female, primary school teacher, 48 years old)

28) «As concerns the space I had to settle myself in the hall because I need to be calm and concentrated when I work remotely (...) a small error or a distraction could provoke serious damages in my work» (Male, IT operator, 37 years old)

Contributions from female participants highlighted a further need emerged in this complex situation: the need to manage their different roles (wife/mother/worker) and to look after the household and the children. Many women decided to work in the kitchen in order to have control over them and to satisfy their demands. This choice led to an actual “fusion” between work and family (ex. 29)

29) «In general, when I cannot count on the help of my family to watch over my child, I work in the same room where he is so that I can watch over him [...] the need (and of course the desire) to devote myself to his demands led especially during the first phase to a sort of fusion between work and family (...) by this the choice of the kitchen as the best place where I can settle myself to work. It cannot be different» (Female, administrative employee, 47 years old)

30) «I decided to work in the kitchen, to look after my two children and I have to admit with few difficulties because workload is sensibly diminished» (Male, administrative employee, 44 years old)

Despite a general positive appreciation of smart working as a tool for conciliation, some participants witnessed a work/life conflict engendered by this emergency.

31) «[...] there have been some frictions with my wife (...) it has been unavoidable especially because of the small spaces we had at home (...) we have children and they were curious about the information technology devices that we used so sometimes they touched the screen and the keyboard making me stop my work and

asking my wife to look after them continuously and forgetting that she had the same problem.»

32) «[...] my husband complaints about the fact that am devoting more time to work as compared to the past (...) he always invites me to turn down the laptop and actually I have to admit that sometimes I lose control over time and stay longer at the desk tiring my eyes.»

33) «[...] now we are experiencing more conflicts than in the past because I am often nervous during working hours for the difficulty in using these devices (...) therefore smart working makes professional and personal life more complex»

34) «There have been some tensions as already said because I tend to accumulate tensions during teaching online that afterward negatively impact on my family»

35) «I would lie if I say that my wife has not hindered my work at least in the first phase of the pandemic (...) smart working seems a good and idyllic experience but you cannot imagine what is behind it [...] we were all happy to manage the tsunami that surprised us [...] but we underestimate the difficulties of the first days, the family conflicts and the sense of guilt because I felt that things were getting worse because I had no patience at all»

Participants also agreed upon the evidence that this situation contributed to strengthen their sense of self efficacy and their motivation as important personal resources. This acknowledgement was discursively reinforced using emphatics such as “certainly”, “obviously”, “greatly” that contributed to give credibility to the argumentation.

36) «My sense of efficacy has much improved because of the possibility to work from home (...) my motivation is the same but the beneficial effects are evident in the professional domains (making me feel less tired and overloaded) and the family domain (allowing me to stay with them long time).»

37) «Surely the sensation that to work this way is easier (...) I feel more motivated [...] working at home everything is more serene and has objective positive implications for family management»

The positive evaluation of the experience was supported using some narrative markers of the self. More specifically, narratives were disseminated by markers of evaluation aimed at signaling the evaluative position of the enunciator toward the object of discourse, markers of commitment and agency, that shaped the proactive role of participants in coping with the emergency (Bruner, 1997).

38) «No doubt that my experience has been widely positive (...) I will continue working this way even after the pandemic (...) I also think that my company will implement this working modality given the success of these days» (Female, call center operator, 38 years old)

39) «This experience has been certainly positive because the alternative would have been to stop working and time would have never passed (...) I imagine the psychological difficulties of the children of my class, closed at home with no possibility to meet friends and teachers and to do something funny like listening to a story or to color their drawings»

Despite the strengths granted by smart working and experienced by participants, many workers agreed upon the fact that it could not be considered as an ordinary working modality rather it should be an alternative that could be deliberately chosen in case of personal needs and/or for exceptional situations.

40) «Generally speaking I think that this form of work is positive given that there will be no abuse of it [...] for the future I hope that smart working could be used by employees in a responsible way and only for some residual activities when there are actual needs allowing the possibility to go to the office.»

41) «[...] In future I will be available to use smart working again, no doubt for the administrative side while for the commercial one I have necessity to meet customer» (Male, Bank Operator, 46 years old)

42) «Surely I will never use smart working to substitute face to face teaching anyway I will accept this new modality of next year the emergency would have not stopped or for some extracurricular activities and/or other kinds of projects» (Female, high school teacher, 52 years old)

Conclusion

The Covid 19 pandemic has produced a context of great uncertainty and apprehension that is mirrored in the discursive construction of smart working experience made by millions of people and revealed the radical ambivalence that features human beings' daily life. Therefore, people came to interpret smart working as a "conquest" and as a "sentence".

The individual experience of smart working emerging from the narratives of the lockdown drew to resources of meaning widely diffused in common speech. Accordingly, diatextual analysis contributed to unveil the discursive construction of two different socio-epistemic rethoric of smart working: "trauma" versus "control". The choice of words, the frequent recurrence of modalization, intensification and mitigation discursive cues, the network of pragma-linguistic assets such as "to describe" and to "narrate" allowed to participants to adopt strategies aimed to enhance the potential of Self-actualization or Self-reduction that are inherent to smart working. This profound ambivalence was correlated to the stories of the people involved in this experience as well as to the variation of the contexts and institutions.

Diatextual approach allowed to trace back specific markers of this discursive alternative, highlighting the different identity positionings of interlocutors, the different argumentative resources adopted and their expressive and stylistic modulations. Age and working context (e.g. school versus call center) were the most crucial predictors of the choice of such socio-epistemic rhetorics. Yet, the age of participants and the typology of their professional role were two features that impacted negatively on the

need to adopt remote working. Older workers, poor in digital skills and resistant to change, and teachers, profoundly aware about the importance of face to face interactions with their students. On the other hand, younger workers, young mothers and fathers, people working in more executive technical roles, were positively oriented toward smart working that allowed them to gain time for family, for their hobbies and to work more efficiently in a comfortable and quiet place.

REFERENCES

- Berlin, J. (1993). Post-structuralism, semiotics and social-epistemic rhetoric: Converging agendas. In T. Enos & S. Brown (eds.), *Defining new rhetorics* (pp. 137-153). Sage: Newbury Park
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V., (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Broadbent, S. (2011), *L'intimité au travail. La vie privée et les communications personnelles dans l'entreprise*, FYP Editions: Limoges.
- Bruner, J., (1997). A Narrative Model of Self-Construction, special issue on Self Across Psychology: Self-Recognition, Self-Awareness, and the Self Concept, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 818, 1, 145-161
- Caffi, C., (2013). Mitigation. In M. Sbisà & K. Turner (eds). *Pragmatics of Speech Actions* (pp.235-288). Berlin: De Gruyter.
- CHARNESS, N., (2006). WORK, OLDER WORKERS, AND TECHNOLOGY. *GENERATIONS*, 2, 6, 25-30
- Clark, S., (2000). Work/Family Border Theory. A new Theory of Work/Life Balance, *Human Relations*, 53, 6, 747-770
- Guest, D., (2001). Perspectives on the study on Work/Life Balance. *Social Science Information*, 41, 2, 255-279
- Kalliath, T., & Brought, P., (2008). Work–life balance: A review of the meaning of the balance construct, *Journal of Management & Organization*, 14: 323–327.
- Manuti, A., Traversa, R., & Mininni, G., (2012). The dynamics of sense-making: a diatextual approach to the intersubjectivity of discourse, *Text & Talk*, 32(1), 39–61.
- Mininni, G., & Manuti, A., (2017). A rose is more than a rose ... the diatextual constitution of subjects and objects, *Text & Talk*, 37(2), 243-263.

- Mininni, G., (2005). Diatext as a mirror of human complexity, *World futures*, 61, 165–173.
- Mininni, G., (1992). Diatesti. Per una psicosemiotica del discorso sociale. Liguori: Napoli
- Mininni, G., Manuti, A., Scardigno, R., Rubino, R., (2014). Old Roots, New Branches: The Shoot of Diatextual Analysis, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 11(4), 384-399.
- O' Driscoll, M., (1996). The interface between Job and off-job roles: Enhancement and Conflict. In C. Cooper and I. Robertson (eds). *International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, vol. 11, pp. 279-306. Chichester: John Wiley.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2007) Legitimation in discourse and communication. *Discourse & Communication*, 1(1): 91–112.
- Zedek, S., & Mosier, K., (1990). Work in the family and employing organization, *American Psychologist*, 45, 240-251
- Crismore, A., Markkanen, R. & Steffensen, M. (1993). Metadiscourse in persuasive writing: A study of texts written by American and Finnish university students. *Written Communication*, 10, 1, 39-71.
- Kramer, A., & Kramer, K., (2020). The potential impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on occupational status, work from home, and occupational mobility, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 19, 1, 1-4

APPENDIX

OUTLINE OF THE INTERVIEW

- Can you please briefly introduce your self: age, marital status, profession.
- For which organization are you currently working, which is your position in the organization?
- Was this your first time experience of smart working? Can you please tell u show did you experience woking remotely during this pandemic?
- Did you receive a training to use smart working devices before starting?
- Which devices do you use to work remotely (laptop, webcam, platforms, etc.)?
- How do you manage your time working remotely? Do you respect your normal schedules?
- Do you access to all the materials and documents you need to work?
- What are according to you the weaknesses and the strenghts of smart working?
- What do you miss more about face to face work?

- What about the management of the borders between professional life and family life? Can you please tell us an episode of conflict between these spheres?
- Are you willing to continue working remotely in the future?
- Do you think this experience has impacted on some personal, social, professional aspects of your working and personal life? Could you please make some examples?