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Making Sense of Renouncing:

A Typology of Types, Motives and Approaches to Renouncing at Work

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Abstract

In this paper, we provide an exploratory account of the experience of renouncing at work – giving up a work-related aspiration. Despite the importance of the phenomenon, the conceptualization of renouncing has been overlooked by the literature. Taking a narrative sensemaking approach to renouncing, we document variance in individual experiences to renouncing, i.e. how they subjectively understand what, why and how they renounce at work. Through a qualitative approach, we investigate the case of 30 academics working in three French business schools characterized by an increasingly influential managerialist 'publish or perish' regime, a context conducive to renouncing. Based on our findings identifying various experiences of renouncing, we inductively build a matrix and a model connecting six experiences of renouncing based on the type of renouncing (renouncing in order to succeed versus renouncing success itself) and how people approach renouncing (suffered, accepted or chosen renouncing).

Keywords: Renouncing, Narrative Sensemaking, Academics, Managerialism, Publish or Perish

INTRODUCTION

Renouncing, defined as ‘the act or practice of giving up or rejecting something once enjoyed or desired’ (Merriam-Webster Dictionary), is a crucial aspect of working lives. In organizations, renouncing can include different actions and decisions, including leaving a desired job, dropping a project, or refraining from voicing an alienating opinion. Renouncing can be about letting go or, by contrast, about giving up something to reach an objective. Despite the variety of existing actions under this umbrella, the literature on organization and work has failed to provide a clear conceptualization of renouncing. The term renouncement is used in research on how workers can overcome the value conflicts without renouncing their deeply held values (de Nanteuil, 2021; Donaldson, 2021). But the focus is much more on the knowledge of the different frames of justice or values in tension than on the experience of renouncement. Research is needed to understand how renouncing manifests at work, especially how individuals experience renouncing specific tasks and aspirations. This paper aims to offer the first understanding of such an experience by capturing how organizational participants approach renouncing at work.

To unpack renouncing at work, we take a narrative sensemaking approach to how individuals make sense of such situations (Brown, Stacey & Nandhakumar, 2008; Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012) to explain what, why, how individuals renounce. The ‘what’ unpacks the object of renouncing, the ‘why’ unveils the motivation for renouncing, and the ‘how’, the approach of renouncing. In Weick’s (1995) sensemaking perspective, the construction of meaning is then based on a retrospective analysis of the action. A narrative sensemaking approach has the distinctive feature of encouraging interpretation and reconstruction of situated and subjective social experiences (Chaudhry, Wayne & Schalk, 2009; Bailey et al., 2019). Narratives constitute ways individuals make their own experience meaningful or not through story building and telling (Mumby, 1987; Patriotta, 2003). In addition, narratives are used by

individuals in organizations to manage difficult situations, involving trade-offs (Brown et al., 2008). In this sense, focusing on narratives enables us to understand the differences in how individuals make sense of renouncing across different contexts.

Taking such a narrative sensemaking approach, we acknowledge that renouncing does not happen in a vacuum but depends on the organizational context. Organizations can impose constraining regimes to their members where norms and meaning are managed so that to maximize organizational participants' docility and utility (Kunda, 1992; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009) and those organizational norms themselves often trickle down from higher-order norms (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008; Roulet & Bothello, 2022). In such constraining contexts, we can reasonably assume that renouncing at work will be particularly salient. Still, even in such contexts, individuals remain reflexive actors who can 'agentially play' (Newton, 1998, p. 430) to make sense of such a constraining regime and generate their own stories around this sensemaking exercise (Currie & Brown, 2003). Individuals' sense of meaningfulness is thus 'crafted' by them in a narrative, which in particular helps them make sense of what, why and how they renounce at work. This paper examines renouncing as a pivotal human experience through which individuals make sense of their work. Meaning at work is sought, constructed and reinvented thanks to certain choices, or, on the contrary, is weakened because of certain choices (Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017): we argue that renouncing is one of those choices. We explore how renouncing can render work meaningful or meaningless for organizational participants.

We empirically address this question through a qualitative study of 30 academics working in three French business schools whose industry mindset (Philips, 1994; Roulet, 2020) is characterized by an increasingly influential managerialist 'publish or perish' regime (Grey, 2010; Mingers & Willmott, 2013; Willmott, 1995). We analyze how scholars identify what, why and how they renounce in such a context. The context of the 'publish or perish' regime

promotes productivism, and careers as based on the number of papers published in top journals. The shift to such a constraining regime can be morally excruciating for organizational members (Griffin et al., 2019). In this context, we find that our informants renounce in two ways. First, they potentially renounce meaningful aspects of their work – and, in some cases, their personal life – to be successful under this regime; but they might also renounce to comply to those constraints. On another dimension, we find they have different approaches to renouncing spread along a continuum: renouncing can be suffered, accepted or chosen.

From our findings, we inductively build a typological model of renouncing at work, crossing the type of renouncement with how people approach renouncing. Our model enables us to map out how renouncing at work ends up being an ambivalent human experience that can function as a requirement or as a proactive choice, as constraining or emancipatory, as associated with resistance or compliance, as painful or satisfying, and, ultimately, as meaningful or meaningless. We also unveil the potentially positive aspects of renouncing at work, when it creates opportunities for self-realization under constraints. This study is, to our knowledge, one of the very first to flesh out the conceptualization of renouncing at work. Through a narrative sensemaking approach, we contribute to the existing understanding of the management of meaning in a constraining regime and how individuals give meaning to their own experience and construct distinctive subject positions in this context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Even though renouncing - defined as the act of giving up an activity or an object - can be imagined to be commonplace at work, we have minimal research insights on the topic. In the context of work, renouncing could be about giving up a particular career-related aspiration. Yet, our understanding of what, why and how people renounce at work is limited, although it has the potential to illuminate how and when work is felt to be meaningful, significant and

purposeful (Bailey et al., 2019). Employees renounce an object or aspiration (the ‘what’), with specific motivations (the ‘why’) and in a specific manner (the ‘how’). Giving meaning to work is crucial to engage employees (Allan et al., 2019), and inversely, the absence of meaning caused by renouncing action, is likely to have dramatic consequences.

A narrative sensemaking approach to renouncing at work

To approach renouncing at work, we anchor our work in a sensemaking perspective (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Sensemaking is the "processes of interpretation and meaning production whereby individuals and groups interpret and reflect on phenomena" (Brown et al., 2008: 1038). Within the sensemaking perspective, a range of researchers (e.g. Chaudhry et al., 2009; Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012) acknowledge the need to understand individual differences in how employees make sense of their work life. The narrative approach takes this fine-grained perspective by acknowledging how personal life stories are created in sensemaking processes, at work and beyond (Maitlis, 2022). Because addressing the what, how and why individuals renounce at work requires understanding how they individually make sense of their situation and choices and reconstruct it to give it coherence, focusing on narrative sensemaking is highly relevant.

Thus, rather than attempting to identify the generic attributes of what it means to renounce at work, our approach endeavours to render the ‘messiness’ of how people narratively make sense of renouncing (Chaudhry, Wayne & Schalk, 2009). Simply stated, it focuses not only on *what* is meaningful in the process of renouncing but on the radically different meaning than renouncing can have, and *how* people actually give meaning to their work experiences and come to find their work meaningful. Meaningfulness at work, in this context, is ‘inherently tensional’ (Bailey et al., 2019a, p. 10).

We focus here on how individuals give meaning to their work experiences when they are embedded in a constraining regime that promotes, if not attempts to impose, particular

definitions of what is success. Existing studies have long shown that organizations' manage meaning' in organizational settings to promote, if not impose norms of efficiency (Jacques, 1995), accountability (Miller & O'Leary, 1987) and entrepreneurialism (Du Gay et al., 1996), among others, as meaningful. Those managerialist definitions of what is actually meaningful (Bailey et al., 2019) impose constraints on organizational participants: they have to construct meaningfulness as a function of what they decide to embrace or renounce. They may renounce actions that are not in accordance with their values to give meaning to their work; they may instead renounce actions that are in accordance with their values to better respond to the demands of the system (Canolle & Vinot, 2021). In sum, there is variance in the object that can be renounced: individuals might renounce to conform to the constraining regime or renounce aspiration to conform to the constraining regime. However, the quest for meaning is a moving, uncertain, and sometimes uncomfortable experience (Mitra & Buzzannell, 2017). The search for meaning is unstable because by becoming aware of tensions and negative work experiences, we identify what we are dissatisfied with what we want to do, or what we are looking for through work (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009; Oelberger, 2018). In this sense, renouncing might not always be a negative experience of giving up aspiration, it might generate new ways to develop aspiration.

Renouncing at work under a 'publish or perish' regime

To conduct our analysis of renouncing at work as an act of constructing meaning, we focus on the case of academics in business schools, a context in which the narratives of renouncing are necessary pillars of sensemaking. Existing studies emphasize that managerialism has grown in business schools (Clarke & Knights, 2015), leading them to impose constraining regimes around publication productivity and careerism (Prasad, 2015; Courtois, Plante & Lajoie, 2020). Practices of monitoring and incentivizing a specific form of performance were used to regulate how academic labour is conducted (Grey, 2010; Mingers & Willmott, 2013;

Willmott, 1995). Focusing on research publications in top-ranking journals (Wazir, El- Bassiouny & Schmidpeter, 2021) implied renouncing other academic activities (Clarke & Knights, 2015). Such a shift can be experienced as a 'moral injury' by organizational participants as their values are being violated (Griffin et al., 2019)

Existing studies have explored why academics tend to comply with this 'publish or perish' regime (Clarke & Knights, 2015; Clarke et al., 2012). A key reason resides in the notion that the system is dysfunctional but also comfortable (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Pfeffer & Fong, 2004). Some researchers find personal advancement in the 'publish or perish' system through improved career prospects, financial advantages and job mobility. Others are also driven by a desire to be socially recognized (Wazir et al., 2021) and derive a pleasure from self-accomplishment (Roberts, 2005, p. 624; Raineri, 2015). In all cases, they 'are inclined to comply with or conform to the demands of the performance culture, enticed, seduced and compensated by its potential rewards' (Clarke & Knights, 2015, p. 1879). Those who are successful may feel comfortable with the 'publish or perish' constraining regime, but at the cost of renouncing some of their professional aspiration and some activities despite their appetite (Bristow et al., 2017; Clarke & Knights, 2015; Mirc et al., 2017). On the other end of the spectrum, academics who do not reach the objectives are confronted with a feeling of failure and shame, ultimately leading them to renounce success. But within those two objects of renouncement, we can expect a diversity of attitudes towards renouncing, and by extension, towards the constraining regime. Renouncing can be accepted or rejected, and through their narratives, individuals might construct themselves as compliant or resistant subjects (Courtois et al., 2020). Yet, we do not know how it influences what and why they renounce. Our study contributes to this ongoing discussion by considering how individuals narratively make sense of renouncing as a pivotal experience, under the constraints of a 'publish or perish' regime.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This interpretive study was conceived to provide an exploratory account of the experience of renouncing at work, from the perspective of organizational participants embedded in a constraining regime. To do so, we focus on how academics working in French business schools engaged in narrative sensemaking to unveil how and what they renounce.

Research context

Until the end of the 2000s, French business schools had operated in a relatively stable environment in which the pressure concerning publication in top-ranking international journals was minimal (Boussebaa & Brown, 2017). However, several factors – including the globalization of higher education, the rising influence of accreditations and ranking bodies, and the drastic reduction of public funding – have introduced a much more competitive environment into French business schools than in the past (Dubois & Walsh, 2017). ‘Research excellence’ – understood as the number of articles published in top-ranking international journals (Butler & Spoelstra, 2012) – is becoming of crucial importance for French business schools in their efforts to rank highly, obtain certifications, raise funds and attract the best students and scholars (Callet et al., 2018). In such a context, scholars are placed in a constraining regime that forces them to consider renouncing in order to meet the expectations, or renouncing career and success under that regime.

Data collection

The data were collected between January and July 2018 and comprise 30 interviews with scholars working in three French business schools (10 interviews per business school), selected respectively among the top five (business school 1), the top ten (business school 2) and the top 20 (business school 3) schools within the baseline ranking from Le Monde 2018.¹ We decided to interview academics from these three business schools, since the pressure put

¹ This ranking is obtained by calculating the average ranking of French business schools based on their positioning within the five most influential ranking systems in France (*L'Étudiant*, *Le Figaro*, *Challenges*, *Le Point* and *Le Parisien*).

on ‘research excellence’ is closely related to the rankings of the business schools themselves (Butler & Spoelstra, 2012). We compared three business schools with different levels of demands regarding academic productivity, and thus variance in how organizational members have to renounce to other fulfilling aspects of their work or life. By interviewing scholars working in business schools characterized by different levels of managerialist pressure, i.e. various systems and procedures to monitor and evaluate the work quality (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016), we expect to gain access to a rich diversity of ways through which scholars analyze what should be renounced, why they actually choose to renounce and how they actually renounce. Within each business school, we adopted a purposive sampling method to increase interviewees' diversity (Patton, 2015). We thus conducted interviews with academics who have very different profiles based on publication records, gender, age, seniority, status and sub-disciplines. In addition, we included a number of participants with less than 5 years of experience as those participants are still very relevant because of the ideals they start their academic careers with (Raineri, 2015), and are still very much affected by renouncing. Interviewees’ profiles are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Although we conducted semi-structured interviews, the ultimate aim was to allow the respondents to construct meaning by and for themselves (Patton, 2015). Therefore, respondents had the opportunity to conduct a cognitive and narrative activity that allowed them to make sense of some of the choices they had made. We started with broad questions that focused primarily on their background and experience as researchers; we also asked them about the evolution of research practices in French business schools in general and their own

in particular. We then focused on more specific questions, asking respondents what they felt should be renounced in order to be a successful researcher in the current system and what they have actually personally renounced as researchers. Here, our positions of researchers, ourselves embedded in similar constraining regimes, enabled us to build proximity with the participants (Langley & Klag, 2019). In alignment with research taking a narrative sensemaking approach (Brown et al., 2008), we ensured the protagonists could provide their own stories of how and what they renounce. Our proximity and empathic approach to reflexivity (Alvesson & Skodberg, 2017) helped create a sense of intimacy that could support the sharing of those stories.

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed to yield a total dataset of 279,240 words. This dataset was then analyzed in order to reconstruct a narrative of how individuals made sense of what, why and how they renounce. We applied a thematic coding process (Boyatzis, 1998) in which we reviewed the transcripts independently and generated a list of salient conceptual categories to piece together the stories and experiences of renouncing for each participant. We then discussed and refined the different lists, combining categories that reflected the same underlying ideas and splitting categories where more fine-grained distinctions were needed. This process led us to first identify data-driven codes that reflect different ways of renouncing for researchers in a publish or perish system. Building upon this first coding, we identified sub-themes that correspond with how respondents analyze what should be renounced in order to meet the demands of this managerialist system and what they actually renounce as researchers. We then observed that respondents unfolding their narrative of renouncing.

After this first phase of coding, we aimed at abstracting our analysis as we identified recurrent themes around the type of renouncing and the approach to renouncing. First, we could identify one dimension around the participants' stances regarding the normativity established

by the system: we could reconstruct the narratives they develop as varying according to whether they renounce numerous activities to succeed as a researcher or, on the contrary, renounce success itself. On another dimension, our coding enabled us to understand the narrative around the agency (or lack thereof) participants had over renouncing.

Table 2 summarizes our data structure along those two dimensions. The first is around the type of renouncing – renouncing as a way to succeed, renouncing success itself. The second dimension is around how individuals approach this renouncing: by suffering it, by accepting it, or by voluntarily choosing it.

Insert Table 2 about here

FINDINGS

Mapping out renouncement

The starting point of all narratives we collected is found in the context shift, which demanded renouncing from the participants. In a widespread ‘publish and perish’ context, almost all the respondents claim that one needs to be much more careerist than in the past, i.e. to adopt a *‘more tactical, more strategic approach* (#21) by exclusively focusing on one’s publication record: *‘You need to publish, publish, publish and even now, still, I need to publish because as we said before, the CV is important* (#13):

‘The goal is to have as many publications as possible to fill my CV. When I want to change position, I know very well that the number of publications is something that will be extremely important for future employers’ (#27).

‘We are not only asked to publish but also to publish more and to publish in better journals’ (#10).

We identified two types of renouncement. First, some researchers decided to renounce in order to succeed while others renounce to succeed under those new constraints. Below, we unpack those two objects of renouncement, while recognizing they are not mutually exclusive with a number of our participants oscillating between both.

Renouncing to succeed as a researcher

To achieve a specific goal of becoming a successful researcher, respondents explain that they had to make significant sacrifices:

'We are evaluated based on the number of stars that we bring back, so I concentrated on the production of starred publications (...) I regret it, of course, I came into this business because I wanted to do things that I like but here the job is to publish' (#27).

These sacrifices cause discomfort, as researchers sometimes neglect the aspects of their professional and personal lives that are crucial to them. But most researchers in our sample surprisingly do not focus their narratives around these sacrifices, although real and painful; they often try to rewrite their work narrative in a way that justifies their orientation and creates coherence: they may find meaning in the adherence to norms, or even in the pursuit of the higher goals aligned with those norms.

Renouncing as a sacrifice

Numerous respondents recognize that they sacrifice the pleasure of doing research in order to become more productive researchers:

'When I started my career as a researcher, I was passionate about research and had time to get into theories, to write papers that I really liked (...) What I renounce today is the pleasure. Today, it's about publishing' (#27).

They consider that they have no choice but to renounce, at least in part, their academic freedom, as doing so is necessary to publish in academic journals. Here, renouncing freedom is experienced as a constraining sacrifice that they are obliged to make in order to meet social expectations:

'It's necessary to sacrifice this freedom to publish because we have the freedom to participate but we don't have the freedom to be (...) I don't write as I want, I write as required by the journal in which I want to publish' (#22).

In particular, certain respondents tell us that they have renounced some meaningful research areas or research methods because they are not fashionable in academic journals:

'I'm very interested in topic 1. The problem is that this topic is not publishable (...) This is typically a topic that I like a lot, but I haven't worked on it because I know that I won't be able to write a paper that is clear, acceptable and understandable by reviewers of a good journal' (#27).

These respondents observed that the current research system increasingly pressurizes them to *'work on fashionable topics rather than less fashionable ones to increase their chances of being published' (#21).*

Although they claim to have never committed any dishonest acts, they denounce the idea that productivism may encourage scholars to renounce intellectual integrity and the use of relevant research methods by plagiarising the work of others or their own work, by cheating in their results, etc.

'Research methodologies that are demanding are abandoned because there is this pressure to publish fast. People opt for easier methodologies, faster ones' (#21).

'It leads to abuse (...) Falsifying data, taking up other people's ideas, plagiarising, etc.' (#10).

They regret that many articles are published in academic journals not because they are intellectually meaningful but because they fit editorial norms: *'Manuscripts that make the most sense are not necessarily the most successful (...) You know, there is this trend: "We need a sexy title... and so on"' (#23).* One respondent argues that this technical rather than intellectual approach can lead, in extreme cases, to Taylorist-like research practices in which co-authors specialize in doing only one activity as though on an assembly line: *'It is the division of labour of researchers, it is Taylorism applied to the world of research' (#21).* Some of these respondents are very clear in claiming that this technical approach to research

simply means renouncing intelligence: *'It's only about fitting with norms. For me, it's not about intelligence, acumen, it's not about getting to the bottom of things (#20).*

These respondents stated that making a successful career as an academic also implies renouncing to pedagogical and institutional activities. However, renouncing polyvalence is generally experienced as a very painful sacrifice because it jeopardizes the respondents' sense of doing meaningful work:

'It creates a kind of cognitive dissonance because we seek to publish in the best journals to have the biggest impact but, in fact, we realize that we have very little impact on society and on the business world. (#27).

Most of these respondents insist that it is very difficult for academics who want to make a successful career as a researcher to keep a personal life because *'we regularly do research during time that is supposed to be personal time (...) we never disconnect completely from research even when we go home'* (#23). In particular, several respondents argue that publishing in top-ranking journals allows for very little time, if any, for a personal life:

'We have a pressure that we bring back home; we must eat fast, and the children should go to bed as quickly as possible so that we can switch on our computers and start working. And that becomes difficult to manage' (#24).

'I think that it's very hard for a scholar to have a balanced life; it's difficult to achieve for most researchers (...) It's also a system where the more we do, the more people ask us to do things for them, so the more you publish, and the more requests you get to review papers' (#22).

In this context, many respondents feel obliged to renounce aspects of their personal life, including sleep, sporting activities, family, and hobbies, to pursue excellent research. Some respondents explicitly recognize that renouncing personal life is a sacrifice that comes with painful physical and psychological consequences:

'My family life is shit. My children and wife complain a lot. Even when I stay home, I work very long hours ... the benefit is that you may have more publications, the cost is on your personal life and other activities (#12).

Some researchers claim to overcome the discomfort caused by the multiple sacrifices involved in the pursuit of academic excellence by accepting and even adhering to the norms of the publish and perish regime. They then present their sacrifice as a form of self-discipline or even as a challenge.

Renouncing as a self-discipline

Some interviewees strive to adhere strictly to the standards of the academic journal in question in order to have a chance of being published: *'It's a world with its own codes, its own rules, its own language, its own access doors for which you need the right key, otherwise you can't succeed'* (#28). Normalizing pressures triggers renouncement on both the content and the form of articles:

'If we have innovative ideas, we know that we won't be able to publish them because it's tightly circumscribed, everything should perfectly fit the framework...' (#11).

These respondents think that they have no other choice but to concentrate on their research activity in order to be successful researchers: *'In my view, early on in one's career as a researcher, somebody who cares about being a researcher should mostly focus on research (...) and minimize other things'* (#13). These researchers impose on themselves a self-discipline which leads them to consider research as a specialization:

'To be successful at international level, you have to be ultra-specialized' (#3), i.e. *'someone who knows perfectly how it works in the world of publication (...) Someone who is very specialized'* (#10).

They believe that they are obliged to comply with the existing standards and to turn into *'publishing machine[s] in ranked journals'* (#28) in order to preserve their jobs:

'It's hard to get out of this system (...) We want to keep our jobs and we have children to raise' (#8).

Some of these respondents not only see renouncement as a way to become a recognized researcher by complying with the regime's norms; they also consider renouncing as a way to tackle a new and personal challenge.

Renouncing as a challenge

A very small number of respondents argue that they can find pleasure in this productivist system:

'Even if this game doesn't make much sense (...) there is nevertheless a kind of personal challenge to prove that we can play this game and succeed in reaching its objectives. So, it's a motivational force, a feeling of self-efficacy' (#5).

This pleasure is not reduced to the academic recognition unfolding from adhering to norms; the respondents perceive the higher objective justifying these norms (i.e. producing high quality research) and use all the means at their disposal to achieve this supposedly superior objective:

'It's important to have these norms for guaranteeing quality (...) Journal norms guarantee quality and the seriousness of the publication' (#11).

They insist that the quality of some editorial processes allow authors to 'improve the quality of work' (#28) through editorial comments that are 'stimulating, intellectually speaking' (#2):

'Doing research disciplines me (...) it helped me in the end because it helped me do more in one area and remain focused on one area... (#22).

This means that adhering to norms which appears as a form of unacceptable sacrifice for some respondents, is understood by others, especially among those who are immersed in a particularly favourable context for publishing in high-ranking journals, as being a meaningful and stimulating way to meet an intellectual challenge:

'People should renounce the ambition to write as they want (...) Conforming [to editorial requirements] is difficult because many people often enter this profession because they look for non-conformity, but what I find is that this discipline, very often, stimulates ideas' (#22).

Renouncing success as a researcher

Dedicating one's professional life to activities outside the pursuit of academic excellence allows respondents to avoid a sacrificial life oriented towards publication. But such an issue is also presented as a resignation. For certain respondents, it is a painful resignation. However,

others justify this choice by explaining that they are preserving a certain balance in their lives or devoting themselves to more meaningful activities.

Renouncing as a resignation

Certain respondents prefer to focus on their ‘academic freedom’ (#1): by abandoning the logic of publication, they resign themselves to being discredited as researchers. Yet, paradoxically, it makes them believe they can more easily make sense of their research:

‘This project that I left (...) maybe a 4-star article will come out of it, but I didn’t find pleasure in it (...). I prefer to invest myself in other projects that make more sense to me, where I have more fun’ (#17).

This resignation was more often expressed in the school that adopted an abrupt and demanding change in its research objectives. Some respondents go so far as to explain their refusal to conform to the normalizing pressures by arguing that they can thus become more useful and responsive to society's needs:

‘The good researcher is the one who is (...) not only focused on career advancement through producing and creating a portfolio of publications’ (#18).

‘I’m not ready to renounce finding meaning in what I do (...) Science, initially, is to bring knowledge that is useful and usable by society’ (#23).

‘It’s a choice, necessarily. From the moment you choose to be versatile, it means that you renounce being... a researcher recognized as a successful researcher... What matters to me now is to take pleasure in what I do, and to see the usefulness of what I’m doing from a societal and managerial point of view’ (#20).

These respondents develop narratives aimed at positively revisiting their professional orientations and choices. They consider those choices necessary in order to preserve certain aspects of their work and personal life.

Renouncing as a mean of self-preservation

Renouncing academic excellence may be presented as a means of self-preservation, especially when respondents perceive the publish and perish regime as instrumentally driven:

'I would never refrain from working on a topic because it was not fashionable, or because I could not "sell" my work. I don't care (...) I could not survive in the academic world otherwise' (#7).

Certain respondents go so far as to say that they refuse to publish in the best journals in order to preserve their intellectual integrity: *'I refuse to renounce my sense of ethics and honesty' (#15).* For many, the sacrifice was felt to be too significant, jeopardizing their sense of self: *'I would never make that sacrifice, even if there is this "publish or perish" system' (#24).*

'I am not in this "publish or perish" craze, I refuse it... I don't want to play this game. For me, research is not about publishing at all costs (...) [It is necessary] to be faithful to certain values: human values, scientific values' (#10).

Some researchers renounce focusing exclusively on publishing in top-ranking journals in order to preserve other meaningful aspects of academic work such as teaching and institutional activities:

'I know some colleagues who renounce supervising PhD students because they find them to be a pain in the arse. PhD students don't do what they are asked (...) For me, renouncing all these things in order to get published would be tiring' (#22).

'It doesn't make sense to publish in a journal, to have stars, but have no impact on society. This isn't research that makes sense' (#28).

'If there is no impact of the research outside of publication, it doesn't make sense. This is a big give-up, it's a real decision to make. If I have to publish in the top-ranking journals and not be read, but get bonuses and salary increases, there is no point. It also means that you have to think about impact from the beginning because you hope to be read. Will it be used by companies? Can it also be used at the pedagogical level for students? It's very important to be able to talk as a researcher to a bachelor, master or continuing education student' (#26).

'I teach students who are going to have managerial responsibilities, I help them to open up, to see better, to feel better, to understand situations better, and that is what is essential for me' (#1).

For these reasons, some researchers prefer to carry out managerial activities, which they consider to be a more appropriate direction for their skills and concerns. One of them justifies his assumption of responsibility in the following way:

'Each activity has its temporality. If we look at research at a very high level, that means publications in the best journals, we are in long cycles and we have to produce a lot. I'm not interested in that. I don't care about being a researcher... I'm not interested at all. What

matters to me is that I enjoy what I do and that I perceive a social and managerial utility. Because I come from the business world, I like to think, but I also need to see a transposition of the reflection to the practical level' (#20).

A number of respondents also emphasize that they refuse to sacrifice their personal life in order to do research:

'I don't want to turn into these publication machines. I have friends and colleagues like this (...) [They renounce] all other things in life. Yes, personal lives' (#18).

'I don't want to sacrifice my family life. It's impossible. My personal life comes first and only after is there research' (#9).

The balance between activities is not the only lever to rebuild the meaning of their professional orientation. Some of these respondents also put forward the idea that they manage to do research in a different way as a means of emancipation.

Renouncing as a means of emancipation

Many respondents manage to free themselves from the expectations of their school in terms of publications without abandoning their research activities:

'I publish different articles in journals that are not ranked. ... We have different rankings that are specific to management. I have many articles that are outside these rankings and are not recognized as such' (#19).

This choice is emphasized by researchers with a certain seniority and willing to be attentive to their own desires: *'I started to choose the projects that make the most sense to me, that give me the most pleasure' (#17).*

This emancipatory discourse was sometimes adopted by respondents who play the academic game while allowing themselves the pleasure of doing research in other ways: *'It's necessary to work on publications which are meaningful and publications that "pay the bills"' (#23).* In many cases, it created opportunities for deviating from the norms or canons of the publication system. Renouncing on some aspects of work opens up room for creativity. Some of them justify their choice by arguing that the different ways of doing research are complementary because they are addressed to different target groups:

'Giving ourselves spaces of freedom (...). We write two papers. The three-star paper, very smooth paper. We had a great idea from the start. And then the other paper which would be aimed at practitioners, something that addresses practitioners' questions' (#15)

Contextual determinants of how individuals make sense of renouncing

In this last section of the findings, we explore the contextual determinants explaining the variance in how individuals make sense of renouncing at work. In particular, we look at variance across two dimensions: first across the three organizational contexts (the three business schools), considering the difference in their constraining regimes, and second across individual contexts.

A core determinant here is the organizational incentives, which have a stimulating effect and encourage some researchers to change their attitudes towards publication targets. The norms of academic productivity, which cause unacceptable sacrifice for some respondents, is understood by others, as being a meaningful and stimulating way to meet an intellectual challenge. In some contexts, however, evaluation systems were frequently and abruptly changed, triggering to resignation. Consequently, certain respondents preferred to focus on their 'academic freedom' (#1): by abandoning the logic of publishing performance. They resign themselves to being discredited as researchers in such a competitive context, as the only way to make sense of their own work:

'We prefer to work on what we want, without which research activity would be void of meaning' (#11).

'I don't want to do it, and I won't be able to do it anyway. It would be too costly for me, psychologically speaking. I need meaning, and producing articles for the sake of producing articles; I don't find it meaningful (...)' (#20).

This resignation was more often expressed in the school that adopted more demanding change in its research objectives. Some respondents go so far as to explain their refusal to conform to those pressures, rationalized as a way to be more useful and responsive to society's needs:

'The good researcher is the one who is (...) not only focused on career advancement through producing and creating a portfolio of publications' (#18).

'I'm not ready to renounce finding meaning in what I do (...) Science, initially, is to bring knowledge that is useful and usable by society' (#23).

'It's a choice, automatically. From the moment you choose to be versatile, it means that you renounce being... a researcher recognized as a successful researcher... What matters to me now is to take pleasure in what I do, and to see the usefulness of what I'm doing from a societal and managerial point of view' (#20)."

At the individual level, we observe the role of work experience. More experienced researchers care more about making choices that are conform to their own preferences, and more likely to deviate from the constraining regime. In other terms, they are less likely to renounce to succeed, but more likely to renounce success: *'I think that with experience, you want to do what you like' (#17).*

In their case, renouncing success is an introspective journey which gives them the freedom to choose their research question, their way of doing research but also the people with whom they want to do research:

'Okay, we'll have to publish, but first we have to go back to "what do I want to do? Who do I want to work with?"' (#28)"

DISCUSSION

Our results show that renouncing is a pivotal experience through which respondents construct themselves, through narratives, as compliant or resistant subjects in the 'publish or perish' regime. Furthermore, the narratives we unveiled show that renouncing can be experienced differently depending on whether the act of renouncing is painful or satisfying. In the following, we connect our different findings in a theoretical model of renouncing at work, unveiling the relationship between the *how*, *why* and *what* of renouncing.

An inductive model theorizing renouncing at work

Figure 1, below, presents a dynamic model of renouncing at work. On one dimension, we identified two types of renouncement. In the first case (upper part of Figure 1), renouncing can be a by-product of complying with the demands of this performance culture: renouncing is needed to reach the objective set up by this environment. In the second case, renouncing is about the giving up on adhering to the constraining regime altogether, implying a rejection of the positive outcomes as associated with such adherence. In our context, researchers could decide to renounce being recognized as successful publishers and make a career by rejecting the ‘publish or perish’ norms.

On another dimension, we distinguished the approaches to renouncing: renouncing can be suffered (i.e. individuals feel like they have no other choices), accepted (i.e. individuals renounce to comply to norms), or chosen (i.e. individuals renounce for instrumental reasons, to reach coveted outcomes). When renouncing is suffered, it can be described as a *sacrifice* that individuals feel obliged to make in order to survive in this context (Cannolle & Vinot, 2021). Alternatively, renouncing may appear as a *resignation*. This decision can generate a lot of personal insecurity (Collinson, 2003) due to the negative professional consequences that could arise from refusing to comply with the constraining regime. On the other hand, when norms imposed by the constraining regime are made sense of, individuals can transition to accepting renouncement. While norms can be imposed from higher-order institutional logics (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008), and through organizations, their enactment ultimately comes down to individuals (Roulet & Bothello, 2022). In the first scenario, renouncing is associated with *self-discipline* as the individual aligns himself or herself with the constraining regime at a personal cost. Alternatively, renouncing can become a *means of self-preservation*, if it is aimed at rejecting the constraining regime for one’s own sake. When individuals do not simply accept renouncing but chose it, it can become an emancipatory act (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992) that produces a sense of existential *self-realization*. The rejection of the

constraining regime become a way of differentiation, leading to self-esteem. In sum, renouncing by rejecting the norms can be a form of positive deviance (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004; Roulet, 2020): escaping the constraining regime can have a beneficial individual impact. Alternatively, when individuals renounce to reach an objective, it can be seen as an opportunity for *self-improvement*: adhering to the constraining regime becomes a fruitful personal challenge.

Insert Figure 1 about here

We also found that choosing what, why and how to renounce partly depends upon the organizational and the individual contexts. Some organizational contexts offer such incentives that their members are ready to make more sacrifices, and thus renounce more of their personal life and professional freedom, in exchange for success. However, when expectations of success increase brutally in an organizational context, members may feel resigned and renounce success altogether. Experience also enabled our participants to be more prone to renouncing to success, rather than renouncing to succeed, thus deviating from organizational norms without discomfort. In a nutshell, we found that the organizational context and individual experience potentially mediate the sensemaking process of renouncement.

Contributions of conceptualizing renouncing at work

Focusing on the narrative of renouncing, the first area of contribution of this study concerns the management of meaning at work, under a constraining regime (Kunda, 1992; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009) which can be assimilated to a system of institutional logics (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008) that operates as a form of social control (Janowitz, 1975). We

show that constraining regimes that determine what is meaningful at work (Kunda, 1992; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009) also defines what one should renounce, and, thus, what one should consider as meaningless or, at least, less meaningful than the socially promoted managerialist ideals. We found that renouncing is a dual route: by determining the object of renouncing, it could be a lever to meet or to escape the demands of the dominant discourse.

On the one hand, our conclusions reveal that renouncing can be experienced as a very painful sacrifice that those who feel ‘trapped’ within a constraining regime feel forced to make. Renouncing, in this case, can be a way to react to the ‘moral injury’ (Griffin et al., 2019) of being imposed a new set of norms and values. On the other hand, we found that renouncing to meet the demands of the constraining regime could paradoxically lead individuals to experience self-emancipation and self-improvement. In this case renouncing can be experienced as a legitimate demand that helps to perform better work, that individuals voluntarily impose on themselves. It is a unique form of positive deviance, in the sense that individuals in such situations deviate from their own ideals and aspirations, to align themselves with broader norms (Roulet, 2020). Self-accomplishment can be a derivative of renouncing, not only as a consequence of reaching the assigned objectives or being considered as successful (Roberts, 2005; Clarke & Knights, 2015) but also from having the strength to renounce those aspects of one’s work or one’s life that the average person would not be able or willing to renounce (Dempsey & Sanders, 2010).

Our study also contributes to the literature on constraining regime and meaning-making by further unpacking the norms enacted in academia, promoting productivism, normalization and careerism (Clarke et al., 2012). Previous research has shown that the ‘publish or perish’ discourse promotes individualist behaviours, hyper-competition and the production of stereotyped studies (Clark & Knights, 2005; Mingers & Willmott, 2013). But our study, by focusing on narrative sensemaking (Chaudhry et al., 2009; Brown et al., 2008), establishes

that the constraining regime is conveyed through various mechanisms at inter-individual, organizational and institutional levels (Kunda, 1992; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Renouncing is triggered by the observation of others renouncing either as sacrifice or resignation. We found our respondents constructed their own narrative around renouncement as a function of the choices made by others and the consequences it had for them. In this sense, the informal pressure exercised between peers at inter-individual level might foster renouncing. The constraining regime can be enacted through ‘multiple local and distal discourses’ (Kuhn, 2006, p. 1340), including narratives of renouncing that are shared by organizational members, ultimately regulating individuals’ sense of meaningfulness. At the organizational level, deviance from the publish and perish regime of norms– or inversely, adherence to – might generate stigmatization (Hudson et al., 2022) and have consequences in terms of attractiveness for employees and rankings.

Another general contribution of our study is to bring in renouncing as a core lever of sensemaking to the literature on how individuals reflect on their own experience within a constraining regime (Knights & McCabe, 2000). Our narrative sensemaking perspective (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; Maitlis, 2022) focused on how individuals give meaning to their own behaviour and construct themselves within such a context (Bailey et al., 2019). Generally speaking, existing studies show that organizational participants can either adhere to managerialist definitions of what is meaningful or adopt more resistant postures through alternative constructions of meaning such as cynicism, scepticism or mistrust (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Knights & McCabe, 2000). Adhering to the dominant discourse can bring material rewards but also a sense of self-worth and self-accomplishment to successful people – to the rejection of what is regarded as a pressurizing, dysfunctional and immoral system, creating feelings such as anxiety, frustration or anger (Roberts, 2005; Clark & Knights, 2015; Bristow et al., 2017).

Practical implications, limitations and future research

Our work offers several practical implications for organizations and individuals. In the era of the ‘great resignation’ (Sull, Sull & Zweig, 2022). Our typology of renouncing at work can help individuals revisit their choices with more indulgence: renouncing to success, to refuse the norms of a constraining regime, can be an emancipatory choice as well. For organizations, it calls norms and culture into question: renouncing is likely to be invisible, yet to strongly affects employees’ wellbeing. Our study invites organizations to give visibility to renouncing at work, and question the practices that may cause renouncing.

Despite its contributions, our study presents some limitations. First, academia and in particular business schools are peculiar contexts. They were appropriate to study renouncing because of the strong constraining regime – as a form of industry mindset (Philips, 1994; Roulet, 2020) that forces researchers into making those choices (Prasad, 2015; Raineri, 2015; Courtois et al., 2020). Yet, productivism and careers have an idiosyncratic meaning in those contexts. Our results might also be affected by the fact researchers, despite the emerging ‘publish and perish’ norms, are often passionate about their work (Clarke et al., 2012; Bristow et al., 2017). Future studies could investigate renouncement at work in other contexts, and involving different trade-offs and dilemmas. Such perspective could lead researchers to further investigate how renouncement can be a source of positive deviance (Spreitzer & Sonenschein, 2004), as it generates new opportunities to do things differently and innovate at work while pursuing the highest and most consensual objectives of the organization. Similarly, we could have explored a larger or more homogeneous set of respondents. Some respondents had limited years of experience: their perspective on renouncing will necessarily differ from more experienced researchers. Differentiating respondents across their specific individual contexts could help better understand the role of such characteristics on how and what individuals renounce, and why. It is also possible that the types and approaches to

renouncing differ according to personality traits, and in particular personality maturation and changes related to education and work experiences. Just as the personality traits and changes can influence the will to succeed and effective career success (Hoff, Einarsdóttir, Chu, Briley & Rounds, 2021), they may also explain the types and approaches to renouncing at work. Further research is needed to understand contextual and individual determinants of renouncing and how they interact.

CONCLUSION

For many of us, renouncing at work is common and is likely to be a widely shared experience. Renouncing can help us overcome tensions at work and construct ourselves as compliant or resistant subjects in a managerialist context. This study is, to our knowledge, one of the first to explore and flesh out how individuals make sense of renouncing and build a narrative around it. Building on qualitative data from business school academics under a ‘publish or perish’ constraining regime, we inductively build a typology of what, why and how individuals renounce at work. We unveiled how individuals can move from suffering through renouncing, to accepting it, to choosing it. Importantly, our study highlights the positive aspects of renouncing: renouncing can be a way to succeed and a means of self-emancipation.

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Table 1: List of respondents

Informants	Gender	Business School	Years since PhD defense	Status	Main discipline	Duration (min)
#1	Male	BS-1	15-20	Full Professor	Organization Theory	51
#2	Male	BS-1	+20	Full Professor	Strategy / Entrepreneurship	53
#3	Female	BS-1	15-20	Full Professor	Organizational behavior / HRM	58
#4	Male	BS-1	+20	Full Professor	Organization Theory	66
#5	Male	BS-1	5-10	Assistant Professor	Organization behavior / HRM	73
#6	Male	BS-1	5-10	Associate Professor	Organization behavior / HRM	50
#7	Female	BS-1	0-5	Assistant Professor	Marketing	64
#8	Female	BS-1	0-5	Associate Professor	Organization behavior / HRM	74
#9	Male	BS-1	5-10	Associate Professor	Finance / Accounting	58
#10	Male	BS-1	+20	Full Professor	Strategy / Entrepreneurship	60
#11	Female	BS-2	15-20	Full Professor	Business Ethics	62
#12	Male	BS-2	10-15	Full Professor	Finance / Accounting	71
#13	Female	BS-2	10-15	Full Professor	Finance / Accounting	66
#14	Female	BS-2	15-20	Full Professor	Organization behavior / HRM	62
#15	Female	BS-2	+20	Associate Professor	Business Ethics	74
#16	Male	BS-2	5-10	Associate Professor	Strategy / Entrepreneurship	61
#17	Female	BS-2	5-10	Associate Professor	Organization behavior / HRM	61
#18	Female	BS-2	5-10	Associate Professor	Organization Theory	64
#19	Female	BS-2	10-20	Associate Professor	Marketing	53
#20	Male	BS-2	5-10	Associate Professor	Organization behavior / HRM	62
#21	Male	BS-3	10-15	Full Professor	Strategy / Entrepreneurship	65
#22	Male	BS-3	+20	Full Professor	Finance / Accounting	53
#23	Male	BS-3	0-5	Associate Professor	Organization behavior / HRM	33
#24	Female	BS-3	5-10	Full Professor	Marketing	52
#25	Female	BS-3	10-15	Full Professor	Organization behavior / HRM	32
#26	Male	BS-3	10-15	Full Professor	Strategy / Entrepreneurship	84
#27	Male	BS-3	5-10	Associate Professor	Marketing	47
#28	Male	BS-3	5-10	Associate Professor	Strategy / Entrepreneurship	61
#29	Male	BS-3	10-15	Associate Professor	Organization Theory	61
#30	Female	BS-3	10-15	Associate Professor	Organization Theory	37

Table 2: The four ways of experiencing renouncing in a ‘publish or perish’ regime

	Suffered renouncing	Accepted renouncing	Chosen renouncing
Renouncing in order to be successful	Renouncing as a sacrifice <i>‘The pressure to publish in very good journals means that we are forced to abandon the freedom to work on certain topics’ (#21).</i>	Renouncing as a self-discipline <i>We have to choose the right subjects, collect data, process them, craft a theory on to them that fits well and write in really impeccable English’ (#27)</i>	Renouncing as a challenge <i>‘Very often, discipline stimulates ideas’ (#22)</i>
Renouncing success	Renouncing as a resignation <i>‘From the moment you choose to be versatile, it means that you renounce being a researcher recognized as a successful researcher’ (#20)</i>	Renouncing as a means of self-preservation <i>‘It’s something that I have firmly decided. I do not want to pollute too much my personal life with my professional life (...) It may require the postponement of research projects, or the delay of some projects (...) to renounce top-publications’ (#29).</i>	Renouncing as a means of emancipation <i>‘To be a good researcher, you have to give up on having a great career. In the sense that the publications that make sense are not necessarily the ones that will be promoted, not necessarily the ones that will have hundreds of citations’ (#23).</i>

Figure 1: A theoretical model of renouncing at work

