REFLEXÕES SOBRE O TRABALHO SECRETARIAL E QUESTÕES PARA FUTUROS ESTUDOS: UMA CONTRIBUIÇÃO CONCEITUAL

REFLECTIONS ON SECRETARIAL WORK AND ISSUES FOR FURTHER STUDIES: A CONCEPTUAL CONTRIBUTION

Débora Carneiro Zuin
Doutora em Estudos Organizacionais pela University of Edinburgh, Edimburgo, Escócia.
Professora da Universidade Federal de Viçosa - UFV.
E-mail: **dzuin@ufv.br** (Brasil)

Patricia Findlay
Doutora em Management pela Oxford Univerity, Reino Unido.
Professora de Work and Employment Relations na Strathclyde University, Reino Unido.
E-mail: **patricia.findlay@strath.ac.uk** (Reino Unido)

REFLEXÕES SOBRE O TRABALHO SECRETARIAL E QUESTÕES PARA FUTUROS ESTUDOS: UMA CONTRIBUIÇÃO CONCEITUAL

RESUMO

Este estudo traz uma reflexão acerca de questões relacionadas ao trabalho secretarial. O objetivo deste artigo é gerar reflexões e levantar perguntas para encorajar mais pesquisas na área. O artigo apresenta uma revisão bibliográfica sobre o contexto do trabalho secretarial tais como tecnologia e gênero. O contexto do trabalho secretarial apresenta um desafio para a divisão do trabalho de secretários e o contexto também mostra que esta ainda é uma ocupação segregada. O artigo também apresenta algumas reflexões sobre as definições de trabalho secretarial e papel secretarial fundamentando o assunto com teorias sobre identidade, que com apoio na sociologia abordam a história do secretariado de sua formação até o contexto atual. Este estudo traz uma contribuição conceital à área secretarial e visa também fomentar o desenvolvimento de pesquisa nos temas abordados. Na conclusão, o estudo resgata os assuntos da revisão de literatura e apresenta questões que indicam maior desenvolvimento necessário no campo do trabalho secretarial.

Palavras-chave: Trabalho Secretarial; Contexto do Trabalho; Estudos Futuros.

REFLECTIONS ON SECRETARIAL WORK AND ISSUES FOR FURTHER STUDIES: A CONCEPTUAL CONTRIBUTION

ABSTRACT

This study brings a reflection on many issues related to secretarial work. The aim of this paper is to generate reflections and raise more questions in order to encourage further investigation in this area. The paper presents a literature review on issues of secretarial work context such as technology and gender. The context of secretarial work presents a challenge to the division of work of secretaries and the context also shows a still segregated occupation. The paper also presents some reflection on definitions of secretarial work and secretarial role underpinning this issue with theory on identity that with the support of sociology looks at the history of secretarial work to today's context. This study brings a conceptual contribution to the secretarial area and also intends to raise further development in research on the issues presented. It concludes by recapitulating the topics seen on the literature review and presents issues that indicate further development needed in the field of secretarial work.

Keywords: Secretarial Work; Context of Work; Future Studies.

1 INTRODUCTION

The focus of this study is on the secretarial occupation in order to reflect on the contemporary work of secretaries and to raise questions regarding occupational work among academic and others interested in secretarial work. The secretarial occupation has a number of distinctive characteristics. Firstly, it is predominantly gendered. Secondly, secretarial work combines technical skill with important interpersonal skills. Thirdly, secretarial work has been subject to significant challenges and pressures. Organisational, individual or social pressures affect their personal and occupational identity. This group of workers is worthy to be studied as they have a very important role in organisations in all sectors, and their work is not well known by most people, not least recognised by its multiplicity of tasks and skills. The following literature review aims at presenting important issues to be considered in order to understand and further study secretarial work.

Technology is an important subject presented in this work. One of the characteristics of modern economic growth has been the important role played by technological change (Kanwar & Evenson, 2003:235). A considerable amount of literature has emphasized changes resulting from technological advances and their effects on companies and society. Some of it is related to the distribution of work, particularly between men and women, working hours, the shape and intensity of work and the ways in which these experiences fit into the rest of people's lives (Beynon, Grishaw, Rubery, & Ward, 2002:7). New technology has changed the shape of many occupations in recent years and the secretarial occupation is one of them. Its historical tasks, roles, qualification, autonomy and job design are controversial in organizations and in the public and academic arenas.

The review of the literature brings attention to the topics that surround the content and context of secretarial work and that may require further analysis.

This article will first present the literature on secretarial work as an important occupation to be researched, starting from its history and the issue of the definition of what a secretary is. Then is brings attention to issues on technology and job design. Together with the technology subject there are questions in relation to gender and gender segregation. Then finally it will conclude by presenting further areas of study that may be explored in future research.

2 LITERATURA REVIEW

2.1 SECRETARIAL WORK

Despite preconceptions, either by academics or the general public, that the work of secretaries could be extinguished due to technological advancements, secretaries are still found in companies today. In a contemporary non-academic book that addresses secretaries and personal assistants (PAs), France (2009) presents a picture of the 'assistant' and argues on the future of the secretarial role, as she says:

> The advance of technology is changing the role of the assistant, but it is still as important as ever. There will always be a need for assistants, either in the more traditional role of diary management and PA-type duties or as office managers, project managers, event managers and so on. Today's assistants are expected to multi-task as well as being multi-skilled. They often have university degrees and are able to speak more than one language. They usually have the most important problem-solving skills and are the first to know exactly what is going on in the company, whether because they work for the top people and have access to confidential information or because they 'keep their ears to the ground' and know what's going on in the organisation as a whole – through the 'grapevine'. (France, 2009, pp. 206-207).

Given the presence of secretaries today in organisations and predictions of an occupation that will be kept as part of the labour market and will develop, it is important to know its history. Although there is much attention paid in the literature to the history and changes in clerical work, there is not much on the history of the secretarial role. From existing evidence, the next section will present a brief historical account of the secretarial occupation as well as presenting a discussion in relation to the definition of 'secretary'.

2.1.1 HISTORY OF THE SECRETARIAL ROLE

Women started to appear in the office in the 1930s, when they were employed to operate machinery such as typewriters. The Second World War contributed to the explosion of female office workers and slowly they became a regular kind of worker in every organisation.

Historically, people drifted into secretarial work after studying basic shorthand and typing, often beginning in the typing pool and progressing from junior to senior secretary, then to personal assistant. For many it was through lack of opportunities in the workplace; for others it was a

stopgap between school and marriage. There were certainly no opportunities for advancement beyond the limited secretarial world (Cox, 1998, p. ix).

In the years when women started to move into the labour force, job discrimination kept women out of highly-rewarded jobs (Abbott, 2005, p. 324) and as a result "in the glory years the labour force was full of extremely smart and well educated secretaries, a group that largely disappeared from the labour force once the great affirmative action settlements of the 1970s made it much easier for such women to become lawyers, executives and doctors."

2.1.2 DEFINITIONS: WHAT A SECRETARY IS OR WHAT A SECRETARY DOES

It is important to define what a secretary is. However, such definition is presented in the literature as a complex issue. Evidence shows that what a secretary is might be linked and described by what a secretary does. This is demonstrated from the definition of the word. The word 'secretary' derives from the Latin *secretum*, meaning keeper of the secrets (Cox, 1998); "in medieval times a secretary was the person who dealt with the correspondence of the king, or other high-ranking person, and consequently with confidential and secret matters (…)" (Vinnicombe, 1980, pp. 8-9). For France (2009), secretaries today do much more than what was usually understood by being a secretary; she argues that "(…) they were originally called secretaries because they were the holders of secrets; they still fulfil that role, but do much more" (France, 2009, p. 207).

Practitioners' literature from the 1980s (Eckersley-Johnson, 1983) attempts to define 'secretaries' through a description of their broad scope of duties and from analysis of job advert requirements for secretarial positions (Harding, 1985). Harding (1985, p. 59) also points out that it is important to consider that 'secretary' will mean different things for different people and that the main thing is to "recognize the distinction between secretarial duties and responsibilities rather than having a concrete meaning for secretary".

Pringle (1989, p. 22) also points out that secretarial work can be described in "professional terms" and it is usually done by addressing communications and administration. "A secretary's task is to facilitate communication between her section or department and the rest of the organisation as well as the outside world of clients, customers, and suppliers. This task involves both written and verbal forms. She may draft correspondence herself, or work from longhand copy, from shorthand or from a Dictaphone. She may type and circulate letters, reports, papers or minutes, or pass all but the most confidential down the line". For Vinnicombe (1980, p. 9), although a variety of tasks are

associated with the secretary in companies today, the original notions of confidentiality and skill in writing correspondence are still elements most traditionally linked with the occupation.

To further complicate the issue of defining secretarial work, today there are different secretarial titles in companies and organisations in all sectors. The secretarial function has changed its title to personal assistant (PA), personal secretary, and admin secretary (Stanwell & Shaw, 1974). The titles varies among 'secretary', 'junior secretary', 'senior secretary', 'personal assistant', 'admin secretary', 'admin assistant' and there are also the specialized secretarial positions (Eckersley-Johnson, 1983, pp. 8-9) that give some secretaries titles such as legal secretary, medical secretary and chartered secretary. The term 'secretarial function' in this study is used to refer to the job of a secretary, the nature of the position or the exercise of secretarial work. To describe what secretaries do it is covered by terms such 'secretarial tasks' or 'secretarial practices'.

This variation in job titles resulted in companies and recruitment agencies not being consistent in the way they advertise jobs (Carysforth, 1997); making a clear definition is still an obscure issue. With a brief look at websites of employment agencies it is possible to find various titles in which the position for a secretarial function is advertised. Whilst some job adverts in the United Kingdom give the title of 'administrator' or 'admin assistant', others will simply use the title 'secretary'. Carysforth (1997, p. 13) also suggests that at the beginning of the 1990s there was a trend in organisations towards replacing secretaries and PAs with administrative assistants and administrators. She suggests that this was caused by advances in computerisation that allowed executives to do most of the routine work themselves. Carysforth (1997) identified this trend as a positive career prospect for secretaries because there would be more career opportunities for secretaries in job roles that incorporated high-level IT skills. However, Carysforth does not consider that this trend may not signify a positive career prospect as the replacement of secretaries for 'administrative assistants' may not mean a change for a better position; it might be only one result of the title variation across different secretarial jobs and the inconsistency caused by this variation.

Some authors agree that it is difficult to describe the exact secretarial role as it usually varies according to the nature of the post (Harrison, 1985, p. 299; Thurloway, 2004), hence the importance of the context of their work. As Cohn (1985) notes,

_____

> Secretaries are expected to handle whatever clerical and minor administrative problems their employers are likely to be faced with. Proficient secretaries, as they gain experience, usually learn to provide a variety of services beyond merely typing dictated letters. This can entail providing information on commonly used files, composing routine statements for frequently sent letters, or making practical arrangements for the solutions of petty problems. (…) this can mean the substantial transfer of responsibility from executive to secretary. Examples involve those secretaries who graduate to handling some of the duties of the executive himself and secretaries who collude in the protection of deficiency, such as covering up for an alcoholic. (Cohn, 1985, p. 185)

This expansion of responsibilities is very company- and person-specific (Kanter, 1977; Cohn, 1985). This may depend on the secretary's qualifications and the need of the employer (Cohn, 1985). It also can be dependent on the nature of the relationship of the secretary and the line manager. As Cohn argues, "different individuals have their own routines and require different responses from their secretaries. As a result, good working relationships are often difficult to achieve. When this occurs, executives work to preserve these ties by taking their secretaries with them from job to job." (Cohn, 1985, p. 185).

It is agreed that there is no single answer to the question 'what is a secretary?' (Pringle, 1989, p. 2, Thurloway, 2004). According to Pringle (1989), statisticians as well as industrial sociologists attempt to answer this question by describing the tasks which secretaries usually perform. Nevertheless, secretary is one of the few employment categories for which there has never been a clear job description (Pringle, 1989). Describing what a secretary is may be very difficult as it has a relation to the nature of office work, which covers an amazing variety of jobs and functions. Pringle (1989) also points out that it is due to the continuous efforts to acquire recognition as skilled workers and to improve the conditions of the secretarial occupation that it becomes feasible to answer the question "what is a secretary?" by developing a job description (1989, p. 21).

2.1.3 IDEAL TYPICAL OCCUPATION

Barley & Kunda (2001) argue that secretaries are part of the group labelled as "ideal typical" occupations. Ideal typical work "is an abstraction that captures key attributes of a family of occupation. Like the language of work, however, ideal typical occupations are temporally bound, historically situated, and beginning to show signs of age. When the nature of work changes, the continued use of an ideal type may obscure more than it reveals" (Barley & Kunda, 2001, p. 83). For example, an ideal type secretary may invoke an image of a lady who sits behind a desk, types and answers the telephone all day, enduring in her subordinate position and loyalty to her line manager. Today some secretarial work bears little resemblance to this image.

For the purposes of this paper, a practical definition of secretary is considered as anyone employed by the job title of 'secretary', regardless of any specification such as legal, medical, school or other additional title that might imply different tasks and work context.

2.2 THE CONTEXT OF SECRETARIAL WORK

The context within which secretaries work in many countries is important in understanding what they do. A lot of what they do might be related to changes in their own work as well as changes as a result of organisational work. It is important to investigate what kind of changes are affecting their work, as well as the extent to which this is affecting and changing their work.

Institutional, scientific, and social developments have direct impacts on some professions, such as law, accounting, and medicine (Broadbent et al., 1997, p. 3); it is believed that those impacts are also directly affecting the work of secretaries and other occupations around the world. They are the ones that support the work of many knowledge workers, as cited above. Views from practitioners contrast with those of academics. When studies indicate that changes due to technological advances have a clear effect on the job design of office workers, secretaries may believe that technology itself poses no threat to their career; instead technology is seen as bringing challenges and opportunities. This idea is clearly exemplified by some authors like Harding (1985, p. 171) and by texts on websites of associations of secretaries (EUMA, 2008; FENASSEC, 2013; IAAP, 2008 and IQPS, 2008). Some join practitioners' views, as with Eckersley-Johnson (1983, p. 2), who states that the secretary's role is changing due to fast and continual technological development, especially in office equipment systems. However "rather than eliminating secretaries from the office, technological developments have freed them from many time-consuming routine tasks so that they may be better employed in the more specialized areas of office work (...)" (Eckersley-Johnson, 1983, p. 2).

This study reflects on the secretarial occupation, considering that secretaries are part of an occupational group that is changing and that might affect the nature of their work.

2.2.1 TECHNOLOGY AND JOB DESIGN

Looking at the context of professional work, several studies reflect on the impact of technology as a substitute for labour (Broadbent, 1997; Webster, 1990-1996). It has been

_____

suggested that it is not possible to predict the effects of technology developments on professionals. According to Broadbent et al. (1997, p. 7), besides the unique set of factors that pushes socio-economic development, "new technologies are both pulling and pushing change and these changes are having a number of effects on professionals". New technologies can promote the development of new groups of experts and this process raises questions as to whether such new groups of experts constitute new professions. As technology raises questions regarding the emergence of professions, the same technology is capable of disrupting existing ones and empowering others.

Changes in labour as an effect of technological developments have also been linked to the concept of resistance (Crompton and Jones, 1984; Pfeffer, 1992). For Crompton and Jones (1984, p. 56), the first generation of computers were introduced into non-manual work with minimal resistance from the workforce. Most clerks at that time probably had very little conception of what the impact would be, and in any case, the proportion of non-manual jobs was still increasing in the buoyant economic climate of the 1950s and 1960s.

The increase in office machines and the continuous development that has been happening in all major areas in technology has meant a significant change in office routines (Cockburn, 1985; Harrison, 1985; Webster, 1990) and those routines affect directly the work of secretaries.

In the secretarial context, it was believed that technology played the main part in a sharp division between men's and women's job in the office (Pringles, 1989, p. 174). Figure 1 below provides a timeline of office technology, which has led secretarial roles to change over the years.

Figure 1 - Time Line of Office Technology

OFFICE TECHNOLOGY TIME LINE	
1870s Telephone Typewriter Carbon Paper	**1940s** Mechanical listing printing calculators Punched card systems (payroll) Dictaphone/stenographic machines with plastic belts
1880s Comptometer calculating machine Mimeograph machine Cash register Adding machine Pneumatic tubes	**1950s** Electronic digital computers (transistors) Electronic digital computers (vacuum tubes) Data processing - paper and tape cards Xerographic duplication Data processing – telewriters Data processing – computers
1890s Dictating and stenographic machines	**1960s** Magnetic tape "selectric" typewriters Microchip computers Magnetic tape (replacing punched cards) Magnetic ink character recognition
1900s Loose-leaf ledger sheets Multigraph Two colour typewriter ribbon Addressograph	**1970s** Microcomputers Optical scanning and recognition equipment Video display terminals for data/text editing Facsimile transmission Electronic (solid state) calculating machines
1910s Power statistical accounting machines Bookkeeping and billing machines (Combinations of typewriter and computing machines).	**1980s** Local area networks, integrated systems Non-impact printers Software packages for microcomputers
1920s Adding/Subtracting calculation machine Ditto machines (gelatin duplicating)	**1990s** PCs E-mail Internet
1930s Bank check sorting/proofing machines Dial telephones Electric typewriters (earliest versions) Machine accounting systems (central records control, payroll)	**2000 and beyond** Wireless networks Voice recognition Electronic document collaboration Virtual meetings Virtual assistants

Source: Adapted from http://www.iaap-hq.org/researchtrends/history.htm

In addition to studies on technology developments, many authors comment on the effect and repercussions of the word processor in the structure of secretarial hierarchy and job design (Pringle, 1989; Vinnicombe, 1980; Webster, 1990).

Vinnicombe (1980, p. 2) prophesied in her studies a possible division of work of

secretaries: those who work in the word processing units and those who work as private secretaries or personal assistants. She presented opinions about these changes, as for some people this structural changes would represent a "dead end leading to an automated ghetto" whereas for others word processing is seen as a career ladder into a managerial position. Vinnicombe (1980:2) also predicted a possible end to secretarial hierarchy progression, which would bring profound consequences to the way secretaries have to be trained and selected.

The issue of secretarial job design has also been analysed in relation to the concept of lack of career progression. In further studies, Burke & Vinnicombe (2005, p. 165) referred to the term of "glass-ceiling" which, in the mid-1980s, became part of the vocabulary of those discussing women and career progression. The "glass ceiling" refers to an invisible but impermeable barrier that limits the career advancement of women. Other terms also became used such as "sticky floors" and "concrete walls" referring to similar obstacles to women experiencing difficulties in promotion. They believe that during the 1980s and 1990s, women have made progress in different areas in an organisation and cite there are now more women in senior-level executive jobs and other higher functions within a company. "But real progress has been slow with only modest increases shown at these levels" (2005:165).

A number of studies have pointed to the associations between masculinity and machinery and sexual symbolism in constructing gender relations (Pringle, 1989; Webster, 1993; Crompton et al., 1996; Cockburn, 1985; Faulkner & Arnold, 1985) which has contributed greatly to advances in research on gender and technology.

Compton and Jones (1984) point out that although the impact of computerization on clerical and administrative work has been profound, they recognise that computerization has not been the only force for the rationalisation of non-manual work. "Much clerical work had already been rationalized and broken down into its constituent elements before the introduction of the computer" (1984:43), indeed, some authors see computerisation and new technology as a final stage in the deskilling of non-manual work (Compton and Jones, 1984; Ackerman et al., 1997). Considering the extent and rapidity of computer-associated changes in companies and their effects on labour and the likelihood of even greater changes in the near future, this justifies the treatment of this proposed reflection to aid further studies within the context of secretarial work.

2.2.2 TECHNOLOGY AND GENDER

Pringle & Game (1984) are among the defenders of the pessimistic view about the effects

of technology. Agreeing with Braverman's (1974) ideas, they consider that "the gender context of technology raises questions about some of the central concepts in labour process analysis. In particular, we must reconsider very carefully the idea that work has been systematically deskilled under late capitalism" (1984, p. 2).

Not all authors have presented a pessimistic outlook of the future of secretarial work in relation to technology, such as the ideas disseminated by Braverman (1974) with regard to the deskilling of clerical work. More optimistic views emerged from studies and writings focusing on the potential benefits of information and office technologies (Thurloway, 2004), such as the ideas of Compton and Jones (1984, pp. 44-45) who suggest technology required more skilled and responsible jobs, such as programmers and systems analysts.

> The secretarial profession has been greatly changed by the advancement of information technology. The computer is now common place, and most secretaries have found that they must have at least basic word processing skills to do their job. The typewriter is virtually non-existent. Technology should not replace flair and intuition; rather it should remove unnecessary obstacles from your work to enable you to concentrate fully on writing with the flair and drive that all good writing should possess (Spencer and Pruss, 2000, p. 125)

One of the changes from technological advances reflected in the issue of flexibility in office work, especially among women workers. According to Coyle (2005, p. 74), there were temporal and spatial changes in the organisation of work as well as the increase in the number of women in the work force and the feminisation of work. These facts were some of the issues concerning the types of flexibility discussed. For Coyle (2005, p. 76) "flexible working time concern all those just in time arrangements that enables employers to adapt staff levels to match peaks and troughs in demand". What is argued is whether this is a strategy to control or give meaning to women's work.

2.2.3 WORK DIVISION

There is a great variability within the secretarial occupation in terms of skills, education, and other aspects that shape the work of secretaries and their identity formation.

Firstly, there is the question of how the secretarial occupation is divided. As some other occupations and professions, such as software workers, are divided in terms of skill level and entry qualifications (Marks & Scholarios, 2007), would the secretarial occupation be divided by skills, tasks, level of education or any other aspect?

Secondly, how different are secretaries from other studied occupations? What makes

_____

them a distinctive group of occupational workers? The lack of clear distinction in terms of category, also supported by an unclear definition in the Standard Occupation Classification (SOC), represents a challenge in analysing this group. This can be considered one of the differences from other occupational groups. There is a great variation in names and definitions of the category, such as administrative assistants, office professionals, etc. Nomenclature might be an area of different perspectives among secretarial workers. While some workers clearly avoid the term 'secretary' – a fact also evident on websites of associations of secretaries – others may take pride in being called a secretary, as revealed by Kennelly's (2002, p. 613) study, which concluded that secretaries who enjoy their job take pride in the name secretary and see no need to be referred to as an 'office assistant' or 'administrative assistant'. On the other hand, this movement among secretarial workers has a partial resemblance to some of the professionalisation process as described by Abbott (1988, p. 11): "(…) they (professionals) change their names, in order to lose their past, to assert their monopoly, and, most importantly, to give themselves a label of legislative restriction". This lack of a clear title may not be the right way of getting legislative restriction in this case, however, it might be a way of striving for losing their past, as stereotyped as it still is today.

2.3 IDENTITY

A relevant literature that aids understanding of any occupation is that on identity. The word 'identity' is itself a contested concept (Huot & Rudman, 2010) and has a combination of meanings. In sociology, identity has no clear definition,

> it is used widely and loosely in reference to one's sense of self, and one's feelings and ideas about oneself, as for example in the terms 'gender identity' or 'class identity'. It is sometimes assumed that our identity comes from the expectations attached to the social roles that we occupy, and which we then internalise, so that it is formed through the process of socialisation (Marshal, 1998, p. 296).

Leidner (2006) offers two sets of meanings of identity: firstly, a set that focuses "on individuality, the life history and the social relations that constitutes the person" (Leidner, 2006, p. 426); secondly, a set that focuses on "collectivity, patterns of shared identification". Leidner argues that both sets of meanings can be applied to both "self-conception and how one is regarded and treated by others" (2006, p. 426). Further to the definition of identity, it is important to draw on the difference between self and identity when analysing identity issues. Leidner's first set of meanings of 'identity' is related to the meaning of the 'self' as presented by Webb (2006, p. 10), as "our

personal awareness of a continuity of being, which is unique, physically embodied and (…) shares a capacity for agency". For Webb (2006, p. 10) identity "focuses on processes of categorising people or allocating them to groups". Indeed, the process of categorizing others is what differentiates self-identification and identification or categorisation of oneself by others (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). People are commonly categorised by others in relation to various areas, such as race, gender, and status.

It is not different in the case of occupations; occupations are usually externally identified in a way that has no counterpart in the domain of self-identification: "formalised, codified, objectified systems of categorisation developed by powerful, authoritative institutions" (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 10) – one example is the SOC.

> The modern state has been one of the most important agents of identification and categorization in this latter sense. In culturalist extensions of the Weberian sociology of the state, notably those influenced by Bourdieu and Foucault, the state monopolizes, or seeks to monopolize, not only legitimate physical force but also legitimate symbolic force, as Bourdieu puts it. This includes the power to name, to identify, to categorize, to state what is what and who is who…"(Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 10)

It is suggested here that the formal codification of occupational categories implies nothing about the variety and the nature of the work of such categories in the lived experience of the persons categorized which is related to their personal and occupational identity. The formal classifications are merely the ways which powerful institutions, like the government, use to define or identify who someone is.

Work is an important basis for identity. Although insights provided by various disciplines are useful to understanding occupations, the foci of analysis are, for example, usually issues of race, nationality and gender on which analytical attention has been theorizing on collective and personal identity, with little attention to work (Leidner, 2006). "Work, however, must be acknowledged as an important basis of identity, functioning as a shaper of consciousness, a determinant of status, an arena for self-development, and a source of social ties. People's relation to work, hence, influences their sense of self and the sense that others have of them" (Leidner, 2006, p. 424).

2.4 A GENDER SEGREGATED OCCUPATION

Building on the work division as presented in a previous section, secretarial work is also a distinctive occupational group because it is a highly gender segregated occupation. Nevertheless,

_____

according to Kennelly (2002, p. 613), some women have not accepted and adopted cultural representation of secretarial work as demeaning, monotonous, simplistic, and oppressive because of their experience in the occupation.

It is important to note the definition of segregation. For Siltanen et al. (1995:4) segregation is used as a general term to "include a number of different data patterns. All of these different data patterns relate to the distribution of men and women in employment, and all are of interest in the study of gender inequality" Segregation is different from concentration as "segregation compares the tendency for men and women to be employed in different occupations from each other across the entire spectrum of occupations under analysis. It is a concept which inherently symmetrical; the relationship of female workers to male workers is its key feature" (Siltanen et al., 1995:4).

Scott (1994:1) suggests, "segregation has been shown to be strongly related to inequalities in pay, career prospects, and employment protection. It has proved to be one of the most profound dimensions of labour market inequality and the most enduring".

This gender segregated occupation brings issues related to opportunities for progression as argued by Scott (1994). Beynon et al. (2002, p. 305), in their work on the management of employment change, conclude that many of the occupational areas studied are dominated by women, and there is a persistent lack of opportunities for promotion and training. They highlight this is even more explicit in traditionally female-dominated occupations, such as clerical work, that show "a decline in opportunities for progression up a career ladder, associated with the flattening of the organisational hierarchies" (Beynon et al., 2002, p. 305). However, the study shows that in the companies where the investigation was carried out, there is, simultaneously, a decline in barriers to women's upward mobility. The authors referred do suggest that "this greater acceptance of women entering supervisory and lower managerial positions has perhaps obscured the overall decline in promotion opportunities".

The issue of gender is almost inevitable in studies of the identity of secretarial workers. However, gender sometimes can also pose a barrier to more in-depth studies of the occupation as there is a lack of recognition of this category of worker. Tolbert (2005) adds that "various studies have provided evidence that female-dominated jobs are less likely to receive societal recognition of the skills and knowledge that are required of workers, compared to similar, male-dominated jobs (Steinberg 1990 cited by Tolbert, 2005, p. 333). That is, being a gendered occupation, secretarial work is one example of how women can contribute to organisations with technical, intellectual, and emotional labour that is often invisible (Wichroski, 1994, p. 40).

In a context of development of the knowledge economy (Walby et al., 2007:25), gender

composition of occupations changes in complex ways. "The presence of women may rise or fall as a result of these complex intersections, leading to the gendering, de-gendering or re-gendering of the employment under scrutiny".

3 CONCLUSION

This paper highlighted the work of secretaries in many aspects. It opens doors to different analysis of secretarial work in places where the context of work may differ from realities usually studied and assumed by a researcher. Secretaries in different places may experience their work, and the many issues as explored here, differently depending on their work context or as a result of the changes they experience. This article brings a contribution to workers and researchers as both will benefit from discussion of the topics presented and more importantly, from future research that might be generated from the issues raised here.

Given the issues presented, it would be useful to study and explore secretarial work, following the same methodological choices of studies carried out in different countries where the issues presented here may appear differently in a given situation. A cross-national comparative study of secretarial work may reveal different data on the issues presented.

It is true that "identities of workers are shaped by the work they do" (Leidner, 1993, p. 212) and the relationship between occupations and identity may require investigation as to whether and how occupations determine identities. The answer is not yet known. However, this paper brings a reflection on the consideration of the relationship between one's personal and occupational identity in terms of how an occupation is understood by its holder and how the holder perceives other people's understanding of his/her occupation.

On several secretarial practitioners' websites (IAAP, 2008; EUMA, 2008 and IQPS, 2008) there is a clear attempt to create a 'professional' title rather than 'occupational', and an extensive discourse that encourages secretarial workers towards a future of challenging jobs and roles. In this sense, existing accounts in the literature fail to resolve the contradiction between what is understood in theory about this segregated occupation and what is the perception of secretarial workers themselves in relation to their performed work, the content of the tasks, duties and skills involved. This is another key issue for further investigation.

Still about the context within which secretaries work in many countries is important in

_____

understanding what they do, what changes happened in their own work as well as changes resulted from organisational work. It is important to further investigate what kind of changes are affecting secretarial work and to which extent they might be changing this type of work.

There is a clear concern related to the continuity of gender segregation in occupations and what might be happening to secretarial work is still to be further explored. For Scott (1994), gender segregation has shown more continuity than change, and aggregate indices of segregation suggest than has been little change over the years, despite general and external changes in the structure of the employment. Although some occupations showed small changes in the in their sex compositions, greater changes are presented in others (Scott, 1994:4).

The work of secretaries has changed over the years and so have the various aspects of their work. The nature of secretarial work as well as the way they perceive themselves are changing and might take different shapes in different places, contexts and cultures. The existing studies that attempt to look into secretarial work are very useful in highlighting important issues in relation to secretarial work. However, unlike studies of other occupations, they are usually focused on one subject, for example gender and gender segregation. Such studies do help in elucidate aspects of occupational work, but sometimes they do not present a clear picture of the work undertaken.

Nevertheless, adding knowledge to organisational studies about the secretarial labour force will certainly be beneficial for organisations, workers and academia. Organisations need to be aware of the facts and future of secretarial work and personnel. It is important to break this period of lack of references to them in the literature, since "the productivity in organisations is inextricably bound up with the efficient utilisation of the secretarial staff" (Webster, 1990:iv) whether or not this occupation will remain in the labour force.

So far, discussion or reflection on secretaries' responses to fast changing organisational structures is brewing in the academia but there is still a lack of understanding of the dynamics of the work of this distinctive group of workers.

REFERENCES

Abbott, A. (1988). *The System of Professions*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Abbott, A. (2005). Sociology of work and occupations. In *The handbook of economic sociology*. 2nd ed. Edited by Smelser, N. and Swedberg, R. New York: Russel Sage Foundation.

Ackerman, F. et al. (1998). *The Changing Nature of Work.* Washington: Island Press.

Barley, S. R. and Kunda, G. (2001). Bringing Work Back In. *Organization Science*, *12(1)*, pp.76-95.

Beynon, H. Grishaw, D. Rubery, J. and Ward, K. (2002). *Managing Employment Change: The New realities of Work.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Braverman, H. (1974). *Labor and monopoly capital: the degradation of work in the twentieth century*. London: Monthly Review Press.

Broadbent, J. M., Dietrich, M., Roberts, J. (1997). *The end of the professions? The restructuring of professional work.* London: Routledge.

Brubaker, R. and Cooper, F. (2000). Beyond "Identity". *Theory and Society*, *29(1),* pp. 1-47.

Burke, R. and Vinnicombe, S. (2005). Advancing Women's careers. *Career development International, 10(3),* pp. 165-167.

Carysforth, C. (1997). *Administration Procedures for Advanced Secretarial Students*. Heinmann: Oxford.

Cockburn, C. (1985). *Machinery of Dominance: Women, Men and technical Know-how.* London: Pluto.

Cohn, S. (1985). Clerical labour intensity and the feminization of clerical labour in Great Britain, 1857-1937. *Social Forces*, *63(4),* pp. 1060-1068.

Cox, D. (1998). *An introduction to office management for secretaries*. London: Cassell.

Crompton, R. Gallie, D. and Purcell, K. (1996). *Changing Forms of Employment: Organisations, Skills and Gender.* London: Routledge.

_____

Crompton, R. and Jones, G. (1984). *White-collar proletariat – deskilling and gender in clerical work*. London: Macmillan.

Eckersley-Johnson, A. L. (1983). *Webster's Secretarial Handbook. 2nd ed.* Springfield: Merrian-Webster.

EUMA (2008). European Management Assistants. Retrieved February 26, 2008 from http://www.euma.org/.

Faulkner, W. and Arnould, E. (1985). *Smothered by Invention: Technology in Women's Lives.* London: Pluto.

FENASSEC (2013). Federação Nacional das Secretrárias e Secretários. [National Federation of Female and Male Secretaries]. Retrieved February 26, 2013 from http://www.fenasec.com.br.

France, S. (2009). The Definitive Personal Assistant and Secretarial Handbook – A best-practice guide for all secretaries, Pas, office managers and executive assistants. London: Koogan Page.

Harding, H. (1985). *Secretarial Procedures*. London: Pitman.

Harrison, J. (1985). *Secretarial Duties*. 7th ed. London: Pitman.

Huot, S. and Rudman, D.L. (2010). The performances and places of identity: Conceptualizing intersections of occupation, identity and place in the process of migration. *Journal of Occupational Science*, *17(2)*, p.68–77.

IAAP (2008). International Association of Administrative Professionals. Retrieved February 26, 2008 from http://www.iaap-hq.org/researchtrends/history.htm.

IQPS (2008). International Association of Administrative Professionals. Retrieved February 26, 2008 from http://www.iaap-hq.org/.

Kanter, R. (1977). Men and women of the corporation. New York: Basic Books.

Kanwar, S. and Evenson, R. (2003). Does intellectual property protection spur technological change? In *Oxford Economic Papers*, 55, pp. 235-264.

Kennelly, I. (2002). "I Would Never Be a Secretary": Reinforcing Gender in Segregated and Integrated Occupations. *Gender & Society*, *16(5)*, pp.603-624.

Leidner, R. (1993). *Fast food, fast talk: service work and the routinization of everyday life.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Leidner, R. (2006). Identity and Work. In *Social Theory at Work* edited by Korczynski, M; Hodson, R. and Edwards, P. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Marks, A. and Scholarios, D. (2007). Revisiting technical workers: professional and organisational identities in the software industry. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, *22(2)*, pp.98-117.

Marshal, G. (1998). *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pfeffer, J. (1992). *Managing with power: politics and influences in organizations*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Pringle, R. (1989). *Secretaries Talk: Sexuality, Power and Work*. London: Verso.

Pringle, R. and Game, A. (1984). *Gender at work.* London, Pluto.

Scott, A. (1994) *Gender segregation and the SCELI research*. In Scott, A. (1994) Gender segregation and social change – men and women in changing labour markets. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Siltanen, J.. Jarman, J. and Blackburn, R. (1995) *Gender Inequality in the labour market: occupational concentration and segregation – a manual on methodology*. Geneva, International Labour Office.

Spencer, J. and Pruss, A. (2000). *The Professional Secretary*. 2nd ed. London: Continuum.

Stanwell, S. and Shaw, J. (1974). *Essential Secretarial Studies*. London, Edward Arnold.

Thurloway, L. (2004). *Silent evolution or quiet extinction: skill and the secretarial labour process.* (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation) Henley Management College.

Tolbert, P. (2005). Occupations and organizations – Introduction. In *The Oxford Handbook of Work and Organisation.* Edited by Ackroyd, S.; Batt, R.; Thompson, P. and Tolbert, P. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 329-337.

Vinnicombe, S. (1980). *Secretaries, Management and Organizations.* London: Heinemann.

Walby, S. Gottfried, H. G. And Osawa, M. (2007). *Gendering the knowledge economy: comparative perspectives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

_____

Webb, J. (2006). *Organisations, identity and the self.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Webster, J. (1990). *Office automation: the labour process and women's work in Britain.* London: Harvester.

Webster, J. (1993). From the word processor to the micro: gender issues in the development of information technology in the office. In *Gendered by Design? Information Technology and Office Systems.* Green, E. J. (1993) London: Taylor & Francis.

Webster, J. (1996). *Shaping Women's Work: Gender, Employment and Information Technology.* Harlow: Longman.

Wichroski, M. A. (1994). The secretary: invisible labour in the workworld of women. *Human Organization. 53(1)*, 33-41.