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Identity Construction among Informal Sector Workers in Burkina Faso: Identification, Social Image, Belonging through Mimetic Desire and Intersectionality

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a psychosocial framework for understanding professional identity construction among informal sector workers in Burkina Faso, where 93.5% of the active population is affected by structural informality. Facing precarity, a lack of institutional recognition, and devalued social images, these workers develop complex identity strategies. Integrating social identity theory, the concept of social image, mimetic desire theory, and intersectionality, this study argues that worker identities are forged in a dialectical tension. On one hand, they are shaped by a mimetic desire for the norms and symbols of the formal sector, a perceived model of success. On the other, they are constrained by intersecting marginalization factors like gender, education, and social class. An integrative model is proposed, showing the quest for social recognition as the central driver of identity construction, leading to legitimation strategies and the creation of resilient, paradoxical composite identities. This work contributes a theoretical framework for analyzing identity processes in contexts of high socioeconomic vulnerability to the career counseling psychology literature.

INTRODUCTION

The informal sector constitutes the cornerstone of developing economies, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. In Burkina Faso, this reality is omnipresent, with more than 93.5% of the active population operating outside formal employment frameworks (INSD, 2024). While vital for the subsistence of millions, this sector is characterized by high precariousness, absence of social protection, and difficult working conditions (Traoré & Ouedraogo, 2021). Beyond these economic and social dimensions, a fundamental question arises for career counseling and work psychology: how do individuals construct their professional identity in an environment devoid of traditional structures of recognition and validation?

Professional identity, defined as a self-conception at work that involves the relationship between personal identity and collective identification (Costalat-Founeau, 2016), is profoundly challenged in the informal context. Workers often face negative social images, with their occupations perceived as "underemployment" or survival activities. The informal sector in sub-Saharan Africa represents about three-quarters of non-agricultural employment and approximately 72% of total employment, with about 93% of new jobs created in the region being informal (Chen, 2012). Yet, far from being passive, these actors deploy complex strategies to give meaning to their work, preserve their dignity, and claim a place in the social fabric. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for designing appropriate support and training policies.

This article develops an original theoretical framework for analyzing identity construction among informal sector workers in Burkina Faso. Four complementary theoretical approaches are mobilized. First, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and the concept of social image help understand how others' perceptions and belonging to a stigmatized social group influence self-perception. Second, René Girard's (1961) mimetic desire theory analyzes how the desire for belonging and recognition is structured through imitation of formal sector models. Third, Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework examines how the intersection of multiple power relations including gender, class, and education differentiates identity experiences. Fourth, the psychology of working theory (Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016) provides a framework for understanding how economic constraints and marginalization factors influence access to decent work.

This study addresses the research question: How are professional identities of informal sector workers in Burkina Faso constructed through processes of identification, social image, belonging through mimetic desire, and intersectionality?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Informal Sector Context in Burkina Faso and Sub-Saharan Africa

The informal economy in sub-Saharan Africa is not merely a transitional phenomenon but a structural feature of labor markets. Wells (2007) notes that informality in developing countries has evolved significantly over the past three decades, becoming increasingly central to economic activity rather than marginal to it. In Burkina Faso specifically, the informal sector encompasses diverse activities ranging from street vending and small-scale agriculture to artisanal production and services.

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The sector is characterized by several key features: lack of formal registration, absence of social protection, low barriers to entry, reliance on indigenous resources, family ownership of enterprises, small scale of operations, labor-intensive production with adapted technology, skills acquired outside formal education, and unregulated and competitive markets (INSD, 2016a).

The Burkinabè economy is nearly 90% rural and agricultural, with significant productivity in the rural sector and much subsistence agriculture for family consumption (INSD, 2016e). Rural agricultural entrepreneurship is often non-existent or very weakly developed, offering little prospect of diversification, valorization, and marketing of national products. This predominance of subsistence agriculture overshadows the low level of industrial production and tertiary activity dominated by the unstructured informal sector (INSD, 2016f). Since 1994, average economic growth has been estimated at 5%, with the productive system characterized by a predominance of the tertiary sector above 45%, the primary sector varying between 28% and 31%, and the secondary sector representing 14% to 24% (INSD, 2016c).

Workers in the formal sector, including public administration, formal private enterprises, and NGOs, account for less than 5% of active individuals. Compared to men, the share of women working in the formal sector of public administration is low at 32.5%, and in formal private enterprises and NGOs the rate is 24.1%. The majority of working people in the informal sector have no education, with 88.5% having never entered school or not successfully completed primary school. Moreover, in the informal sector, the proportion of employers with no education is 77.2%, while those with higher education represent only 3.3% (INSD, 2016b).

The entry of the Burkinabè population into the labor market is very early. In rural areas, 80% of people aged 15-24 are working, while in urban areas 44% are working. The gap between men and women is smaller depending on place of residence and increases with age, then shrinks after age 55 in urban areas (INSD, 2016c). This early entry into the labor market has profound implications for identity construction, as young people must negotiate adult work roles before completing their psychosocial development.

Social Identity and Social Image in Precarious Contexts

Social identity theory posits that individuals seek to maintain positive self-esteem, which is partly derived from their membership in social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The theory proposes that individuals categorize themselves and others into various social groups, derive part of their self-concept from these group memberships, and engage in social comparison processes to achieve positive distinctiveness for their in-groups. However, informal sector workers constitute a social group whose image is often negative, creating what Tajfel and Turner term a "negative social identity."

As Rossier and Ouedraogo (2021) highlight in their study on decent work in Burkina Faso, certain informal occupations are perceived as "dishonorable" or "dirty," directly threatening the social identity of those who practice them. This perception aligns with broader research on "dirty work" in informal sectors across Africa. Cobbinah (2025) explores how immigrants in South Africa's informal sector experience the "taint" of dirty work, which includes physical, social, and moral dimensions. Leary & Baumeister (2000) argue that self-esteem functions as a sociometer, that is, a mechanism for assessing one's relational worth through the perceived gaze of others, which sheds light on the concept of social image. The concept of social image is closely related to the "looking-glass self" proposed by Cooley (1902), which suggests that individuals develop their sense of self based on how they believe others perceive them. Workers engage in a constant struggle for recognition, seeking to preserve their dignity in the face of stigmatization. This quest for social recognition is, according to Rossier and Ouedraogo (2021), a fundamental dimension of perceiving "decent work" in this context. The authors note that decent work in this context implies dignified work, meaning socially recognized work that situates the person in social space and prevents adoption of behaviors contrary to social norms.

The stigmatization of informal work creates what Goffman (1963) termed a "spoiled identity," requiring workers to engage in identity management strategies. These strategies may include concealment of one's occupation, selective disclosure, or reframing the meaning of one's work to emphasize its positive aspects. The psychological burden of managing a stigmatized identity can have significant implications for mental health and well-being, as documented in studies of precarious workers across sub-Saharan Africa (Barchiesi, 2017).

Mimetic Desire as a Driver of Belonging

Faced with this devalued social image, how do workers orient their identity aspirations? René Girard's (1961) mimetic desire theory offers powerful insight. Girard argues that human desire is not autonomous but imitative: we desire what others desire. According to Girard, desire is always triangular, involving the desiring subject, the desired object, and a model or mediator whose desire the subject imitates. This contrasts with the "romantic lie" that our desires are spontaneous and original. In the context under study, the formal sector embodying salary employment and civil service represents the model of success, stability, and dignity. It becomes the object of collective desire and the mediator of individual aspirations.

Informal sector workers, though excluded from this model, construct their identity by reference to it. This mimetic process manifests in several ways. Workers adopt symbols associated with the formal world, including professional titles such as "consultant," "director general" of one's own micro-enterprise, or "manager." They adopt

dress codes, with the suit and tie becoming a marker of professional respectability even for street vendors or informal service providers. They acquire artifacts such as briefcases, smartphones, and business cards that signal membership in the professional class, even when economic returns do not justify these investments.

The aspiration to formalization is not only for economic reasons but also as a quest for status, attempting to resolve the dissonance between desired identity (that of the "respectable" worker) and perceived identity (that of the marginalized informal worker). Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory helps explain the psychological tension created by this gap and the motivation to reduce it through identity work. Workers create mimetic structures through formation of informal associations or unions that reproduce the organizational charts and rituals of formal organizations, creating a sense of belonging and collective legitimacy. Musara and Nieuwenhuizen (2020) document how entrepreneurial leadership emerges in South Africa's informal sector through such collective organizing, demonstrating that mimetic structures can serve as vehicles for empowerment and not merely imitation.

This mimetic desire is therefore a powerful driver of identity construction, orienting individuals' strategies toward acquiring external signs of social recognition. However, it also creates a paradox: the more informal workers imitate formal sector models, the more they may internalize the devaluation of their own sector, potentially undermining collective pride and solidarity. This paradox is central to understanding the ambivalent nature of identity construction in informal contexts.

Intersectionality of Informal Identities

While mimetic desire draws a common aspiration, the lived experience of identity in the informal sector is far from homogeneous. The intersectionality framework (Crenshaw, 1989) is indispensable for understanding how identities are differentiated at the intersection of multiple axes of power and marginalization. Crenshaw originally developed intersectionality to analyze how Black women in the United States experienced unique forms of discrimination that could not be understood by examining race or gender alone. The framework has since been applied globally to understand how multiple social identities combine to create distinct experiences of privilege and oppression.

In Burkina Faso, several factors are particularly salient in shaping intersectional identities within the informal sector. Gender plays a crucial role, as women are overrepresented in the most precarious segments of the informal sector, including small trade and food processing. Their professional identity is often invisibilized or relegated to an extension of their domestic role (Traoré & Ouedraogo, 2021). Mhlana (2023) documents similar patterns in South African manufacturing, showing how precarious work is gendered, with women experiencing higher rates of informality and lower job security than men. Women informal workers often face a "double bind": they are stigmatized both for working in the informal sector and for working outside the home, violating traditional gender norms.

Education level constitutes another critical factor, with 88.5% of informal workers having no formal education. Illiteracy is a strong identity marker, creating a nearly insurmountable barrier to the formal sector and reinforcing feelings of exclusion (INSD, 2016b). The lack of formal education not only limits economic opportunities but also shapes how workers perceive themselves and are perceived by others. In societies where education is highly valued as a marker of modernity and progress, illiteracy can become a source of shame and internalized inferiority. However, informal workers often possess significant tacit knowledge and practical skills acquired through apprenticeship and experience, creating a tension between formal credentials and actual competence.

Geographical location also shapes identity construction differently for urban street vendors exposed to urban consumption models compared to rural farmers whose identity is more rooted in community traditions, with 99.2% informality in rural areas (INSD, 2016d). Urban informal workers may have greater exposure to formal sector norms and aspirations, intensifying mimetic desire, while rural workers may maintain stronger ties to traditional occupational identities and community-based forms of recognition. Migration from rural to urban areas, a common pattern in Burkina Faso, involves not only economic transition but also identity transformation as individuals navigate between traditional and modern value systems.

Social class and initial economic capital determine trajectories within the informal sector itself, distinguishing the identity of a shop owner from that of a street vendor, even though both share the same "informal" status (Traoré, 2013). Grimm, Knorringa, and Lay (2012), analyzing representative samples across seven West African capitals, identify a significant segment of "constrained gazelles" — entrepreneurs whose managerial skills and growth orientation rival those of top-performing formal enterprises, yet who remain confined by insufficient initial capital. This finding reveals that identity construction within the informal sector is not a uniform experience of survival, but rather a differentiated field of trajectories shaped by economic capital, education, and access to resources. Teyi, Larsen, and Namatovu (2023) explore how entrepreneurial identity in South Africa's informal economy shapes response strategies to adversity, showing that even within the informal sector, there is significant heterogeneity in how workers construct their identities and navigate challenges. Those with greater economic capital can invest in more visible and respected forms of informal enterprise, while those with minimal resources are confined to the most stigmatized and precarious activities.

Age and generational cohort also intersect with other

factors to shape identity. Young informal workers may view their situation as temporary, maintaining hope for eventual transition to formal employment, while older workers may have resigned themselves to permanent informality. The meaning of informal work thus varies across the life course, with different implications for identity at different ages. Additionally, religious and ethnic identities intersect with economic status to create complex patterns of solidarity and exclusion within informal labor markets.

Intersectionality reveals that "informal worker identity" does not exist as a monolithic category. Rather, it is a mosaic of identities shaped by unique experiences of oppression and opportunity. This insight has important implications for policy and practice, suggesting that interventions must be tailored to the specific intersectional positions of different groups of informal workers rather than treating the informal sector as a homogeneous category.

Psychology of Working and Decent Work

The psychology of working theory (PWT) developed by Duffy *et al.* (2016) provides a comprehensive framework linking contextual markers of social privilege and marginalization, personal resources, working conditions, fulfillment, and well-being. The theory builds on research from vocational psychology, multicultural psychology, intersectionality, and the sociology of work to construct an empirically testable model. The central aim is to explain the work experiences of all individuals, but particularly people near or in poverty, people who face discrimination and marginalization in their lives, and people facing challenging work-based transitions for which contextual factors are often the primary drivers of the ability to secure decent work.

According to PWT, economic constraints and marginalization factors such as income, social class, level of education, and experiences of discrimination predict access to decent work. This link is mediated by personal resources such as work volition (the perceived capacity to make occupational choices despite constraints) and career adaptability (the readiness to cope with changing work tasks and conditions). Decent work, in turn, predicts needs fulfillment (satisfaction of needs for survival, social connection, and self-determination), which predicts work fulfillment (job satisfaction and work meaning) and general well-being.

Rossier and Ouedraogo (2021) tested aspects of this theory in Burkina Faso with a sample of 501 workers from both formal and informal sectors. They confirmed that economic constraints and marginalization factors impact obtaining decent work, mediated by work volition, with both related to work fulfillment outcomes. Importantly, their study revealed that social recognition is an especially important aspect of decent work in this context, leading them to develop and validate two additional subscales for the Decent Work Scale: physical safety at work and social recognition. The addition of these subscales reflects the cultural specificity of decent work perceptions in Burkina Faso, where collectivistic values emphasize social regulation processes over individual achievements.

The objective and subjective components of decent work appear to refer to two aspects of the same reality. Rossier and Ouedraogo (2021) found that mean differences between formal and informal sectors were high for economic constraints and marginalization factors but lower for work volition, decent work, and work fulfillment. This suggests that the Decent Work Scale assesses a subjective evaluation of working conditions that may be relatively independent of objective employment status. Workers in the informal sector, despite facing greater economic constraints, may still perceive their work as decent if it provides social recognition and allows them to maintain their dignity and moral standing in the community.

This finding has important implications for understanding identity construction. If decent work is primarily about social recognition and dignity rather than objective conditions, then identity work becomes central to achieving psychological well-being in the informal sector. Workers must actively construct narratives that frame their work as meaningful, honorable, and socially valuable, even in the absence of formal recognition or adequate material rewards.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article is based on a theoretical construction approach grounded in a critical and integrative literature review. The methodology unfolded in several stages, following established protocols for theoretical development in the social sciences.

Systematic Documentary Research

Initially, extensive documentary research was conducted by consulting academic databases such as Scopus, Cairn.info, ScienceDirect, PubMed, and Google Scholar. Institutional reports from the International Labour Organization (ILO), the National Institute of Statistics and Demography (INSD) of Burkina Faso, and the World Bank were also utilized. The search terms combined concepts like "informal sector," "professional identity," "identity construction," "Burkina Faso," "sub-Saharan Africa," "mimetic desire," "intersectionality," "social identity," "decent work," and "psychology of work." Both French and English sources were included to capture the full scope of relevant literature.

Particular attention was given to empirical studies conducted in Burkina Faso and other West African countries, as well as comparative studies across sub-Saharan Africa. The qualitative and quantitative work of Rossier and Ouedraogo (2021) on decent work in the formal and informal economy of Burkina Faso proved to be especially valuable, providing both statistical data and direct testimonies from workers. Additional sources on the dynamics of the informal sector, entrepreneurial identity, precarious work, and the formation of professional identity in African contexts were integrated

to enrich the analysis.

Conceptual Analysis and Synthesis

Subsequently, an analysis and synthesis of key concepts from different theoretical frameworks were carried out. The objective was to identify complementarities and points of articulation between social identity theory, mimetic desire theory, intersectionality, and the psychology of work. The analysis focused on how these approaches could be integrated into a coherent framework for understanding identity construction in the informal sector. Special attention was paid to identifying potential tensions or contradictions between the theories and to developing synthetic propositions capable of reconciling different perspectives.

Development of an Integrative Model

Based on this synthesis, a conceptual model was developed to explain the identity construction process of informal sector workers. This model articulates an analysis at the macro-level (socio-economic structures such as labor market segmentation, colonial legacies, and global economic integration), meso-level (group dynamics including professional communities, associations, and social networks), and micro-level (individual psychological processes such as social comparison, identity work, and the search for meaning).

The model was iteratively refined through comparison with empirical evidence from the literature, ensuring that the theoretical propositions were grounded in observed patterns of identity construction among informal workers. Testimonies from the study by Rossier and Ouedraogo (2021) were used to illustrate and validate each phase of the model, offering concrete examples of how theoretical processes manifest in the lived experiences of workers.

This approach does not aim to empirically test hypotheses but to propose a robust heuristic framework capable of guiding future empirical field research. The value of the model lies in its integrative capacity, bringing together multiple theoretical perspectives to illuminate a complex phenomenon, and in its practical utility for designing interventions aimed at supporting the identity development and well-being of informal workers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An Integrative Model of Identity Construction in Four Phases

The analysis leads to the proposal of a dynamic model of identity construction in four phases. These are not necessarily linear but interact continuously in a recursive process. Each phase is illustrated with excerpts from the empirical literature on the informal sector in Burkina Faso, thus anchoring the theoretical model in the lived experiences of workers. The model represents an ideal-typical sequence, acknowledging that individual trajectories may vary and that workers may navigate between phases or experience several simultaneously.

Phase 1: Confrontation with Negative Social Image and Precariousness

For many workers, the starting point is the awareness of the devaluing perception of their activity by society and the precariousness of their situation. This confrontation generates a profound identity tension, a feeling of "not being in one's place" or of practicing a "non-profession." The experience is particularly acute for those who have experienced downward social mobility, moving from formal employment or education to informal work. It also affects those who have never known formal employment, as they become aware, through social comparison, of the stigma attached to their work.

Testimonies collected by Rossier and Ouedraogo (2021) reveal this painful awareness of inadequacy and marginalization. A dolo (traditional beer) seller, a 46-year-old Catholic woman, illiterate and living in an uninhabited area, expresses the precariousness of her activity: "I started doing this, it's been eight years like this (laughs). Does dolo have a profit? Dolo has no profit (laughs), dolo has no profit in all of this, we manage (laughs). Me, for example, you get up like that, come to sell today, if you're lucky you might get five hundred francs [less than 1 USD] like that, that's your profit, and if there's no market you might sell and get, for example, two hundred and fifty francs like that."

This testimony reveals not only extreme economic precariousness, with a daily income of less than one US dollar, but also a form of resignation tinged with humor ("laughs") in the face of an activity that "has no profit." The repeated laughter may serve as a coping mechanism, allowing the speaker to maintain a psychological distance from the harsh reality of her situation. Professional identity is fragile here due to the lack of economic and social valorization. The expression "we manage" (on se débrouille) is particularly significant, as it captures the essence of survival in the informal sector: making do with inadequate resources, improvising solutions, and persisting in the face of adversity.

A 16-year-old Catholic young man, living in an inhabited area with interrupted studies and working in the informal sector, expresses the inadequacy of his work to meet his family's needs: "No, I am not satisfied with my work because when I come home at night with 500 francs [less than 1 USD]; it's not enough for me to eat at night; with 500 francs if I come home and there is no food, and I have a little brother and a little sister, the 500 francs will not be enough for the three of us."

This verbatim account illustrates the intersectional dimension of precariousness: a young worker, still of school age, forced to assume family responsibilities with meager means. Professional identity cannot be constructed positively here, as the work does not fulfill its primary function of ensuring subsistence. The testimony reveals the premature adulthood imposed by poverty, as the speaker must prioritize survival over education and personal development. His dissatisfaction is not merely economic but existential: he cannot fulfill the role of

provider that his family situation demands, threatening his sense of masculine identity and family duty.

Even in the formal sector, the awareness of generalized precariousness in the Burkinabè context influences professional identity. A 31-year-old Muslim man, living in an inhabited area with interrupted studies and working in the formal sector, relativizes his satisfaction: "Yes, I am satisfied with my work. Well, in a poor country like Burkina Faso, where the unemployment rate is very high, I think, well, my job is acceptable."

Professional identity is constructed here through downward social comparison: "my job is acceptable" not because it is intrinsically satisfying, but because others are in a worse situation. This cognitive strategy, documented in social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), preserves a minimal self-image by emphasizing relative advantage rather than absolute achievement. The qualifier "acceptable" is telling: it suggests resignation rather than enthusiasm, a lowering of aspirations to match limited opportunities. This testimony also reveals how the informal sector serves as a reference point even for formal workers, shaping their sense of relative privilege.

Phase 2: Triggering of Mimetic Desire and Legitimation Strategies

In reaction to this negative social image, individuals turn towards the dominant and desirable model: the formal sector, which embodies stability, dignity, and social recognition. This mimetic desire triggers active legitimation strategies aimed at reducing the gap between self-image and social image. Workers seek to define what constitutes "decent work," with an implicit reference to the norms of the formal sector. The process involves both external imitation (adopting the symbols and practices of the formal sector) and internal reframing (redefining the meaning and value of one's work).

A 29-year-old Muslim woman, living in an inhabited area with completed studies and working in the informal private sector, defines decent work as follows: "Decent work is someone who does their work honestly, without theft, without shady business, that's what I call decent work. A job that pays you a salary you deserve."

This verbatim account reveals two dimensions of mimetic desire. First, the insistence on honesty ("without theft, without shady business") is a moral legitimation strategy: the informal worker distinguishes herself from illicit or dishonorable activities, claiming a dignity comparable to that of the formal sector. The emphasis on moral integrity suggests that in the absence of institutional validation, workers rely on ethical conduct to establish their professional legitimacy. This aligns with Weber's (1905) concept of the Protestant work ethic, where moral virtue becomes intertwined with occupational identity.

Second, the reference to "a salary you deserve" is an imitation of the formal salary model, perceived as the norm for just remuneration. The use of the term "salary" rather than "income" or "earnings" is significant, as it evokes the regularity and contractual nature of formal employment. The notion of merit implies that compensation should reflect effort and contribution, a principle more easily applied in formal contexts with standardized pay scales than in the unpredictable informal economy.

An 18-year-old Muslim young man, living in an inhabited area with interrupted studies and working in the informal sector, adds a social dimension to decent work: "Yes, I'm waiting. Decent work is work without cheating, interesting, and appreciated by others."

The expression "appreciated by others" reveals the heart of mimetic desire: the need for social recognition, for validation through the eyes of others. Professional identity cannot be constructed in isolation; it requires the approval of the social group, which functions as an identity mirror. The phrase "I'm waiting" is also significant, suggesting that the speaker views his current situation as temporary and holds out hope for something better, perhaps formal employment or a more respected informal job. This temporal orientation towards a better future helps sustain identity in the present, even when current circumstances are unsatisfactory.

The criterion of work being "interesting" adds a dimension of intrinsic motivation and meaning, suggesting that decent work should provide not only material rewards and social recognition but also personal fulfillment. This aligns with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness for psychological well-being.

A 32-year-old Catholic woman, living in an inhabited area with completed studies and working in the formal sector, synthesizes this quest for dignity: "Well! For me, decent work is a job that does not tarnish your honor, a job that is enough for you."

The metaphor of a job that "does not tarnish your honor" is powerful: it contrasts dignified work with dishonorable, stigmatized work. Professional identity is constructed here in a logic of symbolic purity, where certain occupations are perceived as "contaminating" to one's social image. The concept of honor is central in many African societies, where reputation and social standing are collective goods that can be enhanced or diminished by individual actions. A job that "tarnishes honor" not only affects the individual but also brings shame to the family and community.

The phrase "a job that is enough for you" adds a pragmatic dimension, suggesting that decent work must provide adequate material support. The combination of moral ("does not tarnish your honor") and material ("is enough for you") criteria reflects the dual nature of decent work as both a source of livelihood and a basis for social identity.

Phase 3: Negotiation of a Composite and Intersectional Identity

Individuals cannot simply imitate the formal model, as they are constrained by their multiple social affiliations and structural positions. They must negotiate their

identity at the intersection of factors such as gender, age, education level, and geographical location. The emerging identity is therefore a composite construction, a unique bricolage that integrates mimetic aspirations, structural constraints, and cultural resources. This phase involves creative identity work, as individuals selectively draw on available identity materials to construct a coherent sense of self.

The case of an 11-year-old Muslim girl, living in an inhabited area with incomplete studies and working in the formal private sector, illustrates the intersection of age, gender, and family aspirations: "No, I am not satisfied with my work because it has not allowed us to do many things, like buying a motorcycle. I wanted my mom or dad to be able to ride the motorcycle that I would like to buy." This testimony reveals a professional identity under construction, marked by an early entry into the labor market at age 11, well below the legal working age. The child's work is framed in terms of family obligation and filial piety, with satisfaction measured by the ability to contribute to parental well-being. The desire to buy a motorcycle for her parents represents a mimetic aspiration oriented towards symbols of social mobility and modernity. The motorcycle is not merely a means of transportation but a status symbol, representing progress and social advancement.

Identity here is shaped by the intersection of childhood and work, creating a premature adulthood that may have long-term developmental consequences. The child has internalized adult responsibilities and measures her worth by her economic contribution to the family, a common pattern in contexts of poverty where children are expected to contribute to household survival. Gender also plays a role, as girls' labor is often invisibilized or naturalized as an extension of domestic duties, even when it takes place in the formal sector.

The aspiration to improve the parents' condition reflects the collectivist values typical of African societies, where individual achievement is meaningful primarily in relation to the well-being of the family and community. This contrasts with individualistic models of career development that emphasize personal fulfillment and self-realization. The child's identity is thus constructed at the intersection of age, gender, family role, and cultural values, creating a unique configuration that cannot be understood through a single analytical lens.

Women, in particular, must negotiate their professional identity at the intersection of gender and social norms. The previously mentioned dolo seller, illiterate and in an uninhabited area, embodies a doubly marginalized professional identity: by her gender (an undervalued female activity associated with domestic production) and by her lack of formal education. Her identity is constructed through resilience and humor in the face of adversity, demonstrating agency even in conditions of extreme constraint.

Informal women workers often face contradictory expectations: they are expected to generate income for the family, but their work is often considered secondary or less important than that of men. They must navigate between the roles of mother, wife, and worker, reconciling the demands of each sphere. Their professional identity is therefore often fragmented and contested, requiring constant negotiation with family members, customers, and the community.

Geographical location is another crucial factor of intersectionality. In the rural areas of Burkina Faso, where 99.2% of employment is informal, the distinction between formal and informal may be less salient than in urban contexts. Professional identity may be more closely tied to land ownership, ethnic identity, and traditional occupational roles than to the formal-informal dichotomy. Migration from rural to urban areas involves not only an economic transition but also an identity transformation, as individuals must learn to navigate urban labor markets and adopt urban identities while maintaining ties to rural communities and traditions.

CONCLUSION

The construction of professional identities among informal sector workers in Burkina Faso is a highly complex process occurring at the intersection of individual psychology, social dynamics, and broader structural constraints. By articulating theories of social identity, mimetic desire, and intersectionality within the framework of the psychology of working theory, this study has demonstrated that identity construction is a permanent negotiation between a devalued social image and a powerful desire for recognition and belonging, largely modeled by the attraction of the formal sector as a reference point for dignity and success.

Far from being mere "survivors" or passive victims of exclusion, informal workers are active agents of their own identity, engaged in an incessant quest for dignity and social recognition. They deploy sophisticated strategies of moral legitimation, symbolic appropriation, and collective organizing to construct positive identities despite structural constraints and social stigma. Their identity work involves creative bricolage, drawing on multiple cultural resources and social positions to forge composite identities that are simultaneously resilient and paradoxical.

The integrative model proposed here provides a heuristic framework for analyzing identity processes in situations of great socioeconomic vulnerability. It highlights the central role of social recognition in identity construction, demonstrating that decent work is not merely about objective conditions but about subjective perceptions of dignity and social worth. The model also emphasizes the importance of considering intersectional factors in understanding differentiated experiences, showing that gender, education, age, and location combine to create unique identity challenges and resources for different groups of workers.

By integrating mimetic desire theory with intersectionality and social identity approaches within the psychology of

working framework, this work contributes to enriching career counseling psychology in African contexts. It offers practical implications for supporting informal workers in their quest for dignity and social recognition, suggesting that interventions must address not only material needs but also identity and recognition needs. Recognizing and understanding this quest for dignity is the indispensable first step for constructing more just and effective career guidance and employment policies, not only in Burkina Faso but in many countries of the Global South where informal work remains the predominant form of employment.

The model also contributes to broader theoretical debates in work and organizational psychology about the nature of professional identity in contexts of precariousness and uncertainty. As formal employment becomes less stable and secure even in developed economies, insights from the informal sector may become increasingly relevant for understanding identity construction among all workers. The strategies that informal workers use to construct dignity and meaning in the absence of institutional support may prefigure broader transformations in how professional identities are constructed in an era of precarious work.

Ultimately, this research affirms the fundamental human need for recognition and dignity in work, regardless of employment status or sector. It challenges the stigmatization of informal work and calls for policies and practices that honor the contributions and humanity of all workers. In a world where informal work is the reality for billions of people, understanding and supporting the identity construction of informal workers is not a marginal concern but a central challenge for psychology, policy, and social justice.

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