



CAREER DEVELOPMENT IN THE TRANSITION FROM FORMAL EMPLOYMENT TO MICROENTREPRENEURSHIP

AS CONSTRUÇÕES DE CARREIRA NA TRANSIÇÃO DO EMPREGO FORMAL AO MICROEMPREENDEDORISMO

CONSTRUCCIONES DE CARRERA EN LA TRANSICIÓN DEL EMPLEO FORMAL AL MICROEMPREDIMIENTO

ABSTRACT

Objective: To understand the career development of individuals who transitioned from formal employment to microentrepreneurship in a peripheral urban region, engaging in activities that require low specialization.

Design/methodology/approach: Using a qualitative methodological approach, we drew inspiration from ethnographic research traits and employed three data collection techniques: documentary research, observation, and narrative interviews. The data were analyzed considering pre-established thematic aspects to later integrate a joint analysis through the triangulation of the findings.

Results: The findings revealed similar trajectories among the MEIs, particularly highlighting economic barriers, support networks, and the lack of planning during the transition. However, continuous development, worker agency, the pursuit of innovation, or the search for meaning were not central elements in the analyzed transitions.

Practical implications: From a practical perspective, the study raises questions about the quality of new work configurations and career patterns, and recognizes the relationship dynamics in these trajectories, leading to reflections on public policies for similar social groups.

Theoretical implications: Theoretically, the study incorporates a social bias, particularly into the theoretical framework of entrepreneurship and career transition studies, while also providing complementary analysis of both objective and subjective elements in the study of micro-entrepreneurial careers.

Social implications: In addition to highlighting the difficulties of a growing group of workers in Brazil, the study revealed space for greater interaction between MEIs, support institutions and public bodies, suggesting policies that integrate social aspects, such as family support and access to regulatory and legal guidance.

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Originality/value: In addition to addressing a relatively unexplored topic, the findings are significant as they contribute to mitigating the challenges faced by a group of workers who remain on the margins of academic discussions, providing present and future value to both theoretical, practical, and social field.

Research limitations: The number of research participants and the choice of two economic sectors to be included in the study are limitations of our study. These choices were based on our experiences in the fieldwork phase.

Suggestions for future research: Future studies could investigate topics not addressed in this work but that represent promising research paths, such as collective alternatives to mitigate the challenges of individuality in microentrepreneurship, explore effective programs that transcend horizontal initiatives, and consider the heterogeneity of social groups.

Keywords: Career. Job. Entrepreneurship. Individual Microentrepreneur. Transition.

RESUMO

Objetivo: Compreender como ocorrem as construções de carreira de pessoas que experienciaram a transição de um emprego formal ao microempreendedorismo em uma região urbana periférica exercendo atividades que exigem baixa especialização.

Design/metodologia/abordagem: Partindo de uma abordagem metodológica qualitativa, nos inspiramos em traços da pesquisa etnográfica e utilizamos três técnicas de coleta de dados: pesquisa documental, observação e entrevistas narrativas. Os dados foram analisados contemplando aspectos temáticos pré-estabelecidos para, posteriormente, integrarem uma análise conjunta através da triangulação dos achados.

Resultados: Os achados descortinaram trajetórias semelhantes entre os MEIs, envolvendo, em especial, aspectos relativos a barreiras econômicas, vínculos de suporte e a ausência de planejamento nessa mudança de posição laboral. Ao mesmo tempo, o desenvolvimento constante,

a agência dos trabalhadores, a busca pela inovação ou a procura de significado não foram elementos centrais nas transições em análise.

Implicações práticas: Do ponto de vista prático, o estudo contribuiu no questionamento acerca da qualidade de novas configurações de trabalho e padrões de carreira, assim como no reconhecimento das dinâmicas de relacionamentos nas trajetórias, levando a reflexão sobre políticas públicas para conjuntos sociais semelhantes.

Implicações teóricas: Do ponto de vista teórico, o estudo contribuiu a partir da incorporação de um viés social, especialmente para o quadro teórico de empreendedorismo e aos estudos que trazem ao centro as transições de carreira, bem como pela complementaridade entre elementos objetivos e subjetivos de análise no estudo de carreiras microempreendedoras.

Implicações sociais: Além de evidenciar as dificuldades de um grupo crescente de trabalhadores no Brasil, o estudo revelou o espaço para maior interação entre MEIs, instituições de apoio e órgãos públicos, sugerindo políticas que integrem aspectos sociais, como suporte familiar e acesso a orientações regulatórias e legais.

Originalidade/valor: Além de adentrar em uma temática ainda inexplorada, os resultados são relevantes, pois trazem elementos que contribuem para a redução dos desafios impostos a um conjunto de trabalhadores que ficam às margens das discussões acadêmicas, construindo um valor presente e futuro para o campo teórico, prático e social.

Limitações da pesquisa: O número de participantes da pesquisa e a escolha por duas atividades laborais para integrarem o estudo são limitadores de nosso estudo e se desenharam a partir de nossas vivências na etapa de campo.

Sugestão de pesquisas futuras: Estudos que investiguem alternativas coletivas para mitigar os desafios da individualidade no microempreendedorismo, bem como programas mais eficazes que transcendam iniciativas horizontais e considerem a heterogeneidade dos grupos sociais são temas não explorados neste trabalho, mas que representam caminhos



promissores para investigações futuras.

Palavras-chave: Carreira. Emprego. Empreendedorismo. Microempreendedor Individual. Transição.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Comprender cómo se desarrollan las construcciones de carrera de personas que vivieron la transición del empleo formal al microemprendimiento en una región urbana periférica, realizando actividades que requieren baja especialización.

Diseño/metodología/enfoque: Partiendo de un enfoque metodológico cualitativo, nos inspiramos en características de la investigación etnográfica y utilizamos tres técnicas de recolección de datos: investigación documental, observación y entrevistas narrativas. Los datos fueron analizados considerando aspectos temáticos preestablecidos para luego integrar un análisis conjunto a través de la triangulación de los hallazgos.

Resultados: Los hallazgos revelaron trayectorias similares entre los IME, destacando en particular aspectos relacionados con barreras económicas, redes de apoyo y la falta de planificación en este cambio de posición laboral. Sin embargo, el desarrollo continuo, la agencia de los trabajadores, la búsqueda de innovación o de sentido no fueron elementos centrales en las transiciones analizadas.

Implicaciones prácticas: Desde un punto de vista práctico, el estudio contribuyó a cuestionar la calidad de nuevas configuraciones laborales y patrones de carrera, además de reconocer la dinámica de las relaciones en estas trayectorias, lo que lleva a reflexionar sobre políticas públicas para grupos sociales similares.

Implicaciones teóricas: Teóricamente, el estudio aporta un sesgo social, especialmente en el marco teórico del emprendimiento y los estudios que centran la transición profesional, al tiempo que proporciona un análisis complementario de elementos objetivos y subjetivos en el estudio de

carreras microempresariales.

Implicaciones sociales: Además de destacar las dificultades de un grupo creciente de trabajadores en Brasil, el estudio reveló espacio para una mayor interacción entre las IME, las instituciones de apoyo y los organismos públicos, sugiriendo políticas que integren aspectos sociales, como el apoyo familiar y el acceso a orientación regulatoria y legal.

Originalidad/valor: Además de abordar un tema relativamente inexplorado, los hallazgos son relevantes porque contribuyen a mitigar los desafíos que enfrentan los trabajadores que permanecen al margen de las discusiones académicas, aportando valor presente y futuro tanto al campo teórico, práctico y social.

Limitaciones de la investigación: El número de participantes de la investigación y la elección de dos actividades laborales a incluir en el estudio son limitaciones de nuestro estudio y fueron diseñados con base en nuestras experiencias en la etapa de campo.

Sugerencias para futuras investigaciones: Los estudios que investigan alternativas colectivas para mitigar los desafíos de la individualidad en el microemprendimiento, así como programas más efectivos que trasciendan las iniciativas horizontales y consideren la heterogeneidad de los grupos sociales son temas no explorados en este trabajo, pero que representan caminos promisorios para futuras investigaciones.

Palabras clave: Carrera. Trabajo. Emprendimiento. Microempresario Individual. Transición.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary career literature characterizes the modern work environment by frequent individual movements, positioning these transitions as a defining feature in various conceptualizations (Hirschi, 2018). In Brazil, entrepreneurship is increasingly gaining traction within the national labor market, attracting diverse groups of workers who pursue this path (Carmo, Assis, Gomes, & Teixeira, 2021). As a result, transitions



into entrepreneurship are common, particularly among those previously engaged in formal employment relationships (Burton, Sørensen, & Dobrev, 2016).

A key movement within this context is the transition from formal employment to the legal framework of the “individual microentrepreneur” (MEI), recognized as a simplified and low-tax option for those seeking work and income opportunities (Portal do Empreendedor, 2024). The latest report on the MEI profile indicates that more than half of MEIs had formal employment as their last occupation (Sebrae, 2022).

From an organizational and social standpoint, this classification facilitates the social inclusion of these individuals while structuring their labor relationships (Ansiliero, Costanzi, & Fernandes, 2020). The transition from formal employment (FE) to MEI – referred to in this study as FE-MEI – occurs within a broader framework of transformations in people management practices and production models, which shape individuals’ experiences and trajectories (Krein, Abílio, Freitas, Borsari, & Cruz, 2018).

An analysis of the implications of FE-MEI reveals that while this transition offers greater autonomy, it also demands longer working hours, blurs the boundaries between personal and professional life, reduces social protection, and increases income instability compared to formal employment (Rosenfield, 2015).

The individualization inherent in entrepreneurship intensifies workplace challenges (Ashford, Caza, & Reid, 2018). For individuals undergoing this transition, fundamental changes occur, including shifts in work content, the adoption of new roles, and the necessary relationships to develop these activities (Souza & Borges, 2020).

Given that FE-MEI remains underexplored in the literature, this study identifies this gap as a central point of investigation. To deepen our understanding, we adopt an integrated theoretical approach, drawing on entrepreneurship and

career studies. Our theoretical foundation is rooted in constructivist and ontoepistemological assumptions, which consider individuals and their contexts as interconnected and embedded in historically structured realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Methodologically, we employ a qualitative approach, incorporating three data collection techniques: documentary research, observation, and narrative interviews. Data were analyzed based on pre-established thematic categories and later synthesized through triangulation.

Building upon this foundation, our study aims **to understand how the career development of individuals who have experienced FE-MEI unfolds in a peripheral urban region, particularly in activities requiring low specialization**. The research begins by examining the broader historical and contextual background, followed by an analysis of the social microenvironment in which MEI careers are embedded. We explore workers’ career trajectories by considering both subjective elements—such as their experiences of professional change and career interactions—and objective factors, including enterprise characteristics, temporal markers, and contextual indicators.

The findings reveal common trajectories among MEIs, particularly regarding economic barriers, support networks, and a general lack of planning for the employment transition. Contrary to prevailing entrepreneurship literature, aspects such as continuous professional development, worker agency, the pursuit of innovation, and search for meaning were not central to FE-MEI experiences.

The study is structured into seven sections. The first presents the introduction, followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework on career and entrepreneurship. The third section explores FE-MEI, while the fourth outlines the study’s methodological approach. The fifth section examines the career development of MEIs, and the sixth analyzes the research findings. Finally, the seventh section presents the study’s conclusions.



CAREER AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The career conception used in our research is supported by theories such as careers in context and the career ecosystem (Mayrhofer, Meyer, & Steyrer, 2007; Baruch, 2015). Emphasizing its procedural, historical, and contextual nature, this conception enables the observation of a person's career path within a broad framework that includes individuals, groups, organizations, and society, capturing their reciprocal interactions over time (Hughes, 1958).

This temporal perspective enables an analysis of various portrayals of the object of study and its transformations over time (Hughes, 1937). Meanwhile, its relational nature ensures that all levels of analysis and discussion elements remain interconnected (Moore, Gunz, & Hall, 2007). Furthermore, it facilitates the connection of objective factors – such as individual and enterprise characteristics, temporal markers, and contextual indicators – with subjective elements, including personal interpretations, career transitions, and interactions throughout the individuals' trajectories (Baruch, 2015).

The contextual perspective allows us to examine how structural factors influence workers' actions, behaviors, and experiences (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2015; Souza & Lemos, 2020). This approach helps identify career patterns and their respective barriers or enablers – whether subjective, economic, or social – while also enabling the recognition of individual trajectories and career patterns that may reflect broader social and political phenomena (Gunz, Mayrhofer, & Tolbert, 2011) related to FE-MEI, i.e., the transition from formal employment (FE) to being an individual microentrepreneur according to the Brazilian legal framework (MEI).

Additionally, this career perspective provides a foundation for analyzing key theoretical elements, such as agency, career mobility, personal fulfillment, and professional development (Vaclavik, Rocha-de-Oliveira, & Oltramari, 2021).

The conceptual framework of entrepreneurship adopted in this study follows a sociological theoretical perspective (Weber, 1999). This approach expands beyond the individual aspects of MEIs to include factors influencing the entrepreneurial process, as well as an organizational and contextual perspective that considers the historical background of the studied environment, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

The theoretical foundation of entrepreneurship allows for an interdisciplinary perspective (Vale, 2014), incorporating psychological, demographic, economic, and organizational dimensions (Cuervo, Ribeiro, & Roig, 2007). It also facilitates an integrative approach across individual, organizational, and contextual levels (Dyer, 1995; Low & MacMillan, 2007), highlighting the complementarity of various dynamics in career transitions.

The theoretical frameworks of career and entrepreneurship adopted in this study share common pillars, including time, context (ranging from micro-level spaces to broader scenarios), and individual and social relations (Weber, 1999; Baruch, 2015). This theoretical intersection enriches the study of career paths among individuals who have experienced FE-MEI.

This study combines these two theoretical perspectives to conduct a historical, temporal, and contextual investigation at the individual, organizational, and contextual levels of analysis. Furthermore, it adopts a relational approach that integrates both objective and subjective aspects while considering the various actors involved in a career as MEI.

THE TRANSITION FROM FORMAL EMPLOYMENT TO MEI

Career transitions can occur within an organization, between organizations, across occupations, or between professional fields (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). They can also be understood as movements that create discontinuities or interruptions in an individual's trajectory, requiring adjustments and generating new experiences



(Baruch & Quick, 2007).

Key elements in analyzing transitions include individual characteristics, career history, family socioeconomic background, support networks, perceptions of past and present positions, lived experiences, and future career projections (Burton et al., 2016). Additionally, the broader context and its historical background are essential for understanding career transitions (Briscoe et al., 2018).

Focusing on this phenomenon, we highlight political, legal, and socioeconomic aspects of the past and present related to entrepreneurship in Brazil and at the local level, specifically within the territory where this research was conducted.

Since the 1990s, Brazilian public policies have introduced initiatives aimed at promoting entrepreneurship, primarily as a strategy to reduce unemployment (Silva, Paiuca, & Schmidt, 2020). These initiatives include credit programs, streamlined legal processes for business creation, entrepreneurial skills training, and media campaigns that enhance the status of entrepreneurs (Ansiliero et al., 2020).

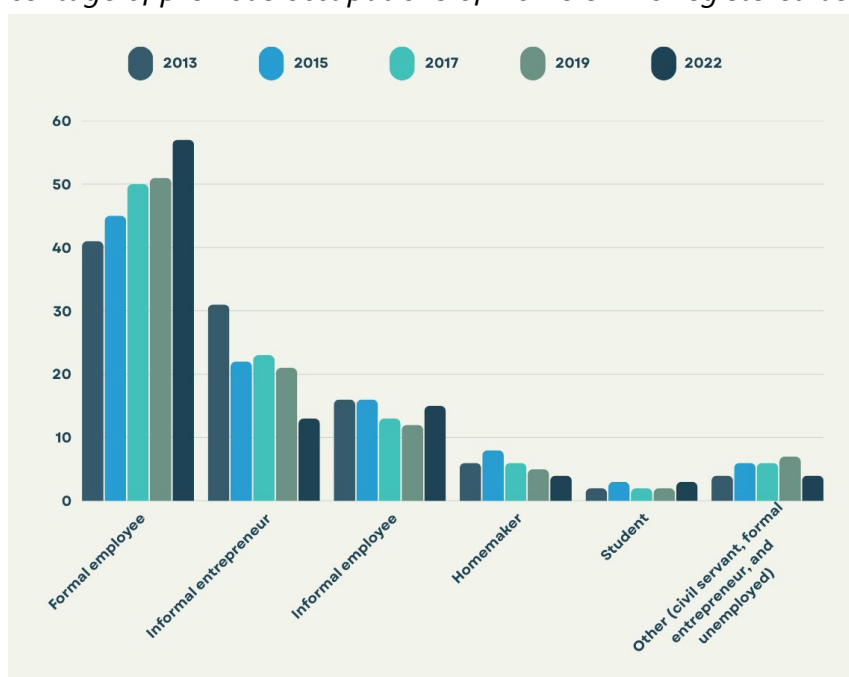
In parallel, legal reforms have sought to minimize the state's role while expanding the influence of organizations and workers in defining employment conditions (Campanha, Lorenzo,

Fonseca, & Paulillo, 2017). As a result, there was an increase in precarious employment arrangements and disguised employment relationships, particularly through special contracts and the widespread practice of compelling individuals to establish legal entities that are then contracted in place of traditional employment (Krein et al., 2018).

The legal framework of "individual microentrepreneur" in Brazil, known as MEI, and the transition between formal employment (FE) and MEI (FE-MEI) gained prominence within these dynamics. Reports from Sebrae (2019a, 2022) describe microentrepreneurs as individuals who started their businesses to become independent or generate income, often without sufficient knowledge of business management. The majority have completed high school, belong to lower economic strata with a per capita family income of up to one minimum wage, and work from home.

Furthermore, the MEI classification encompasses workers from various backgrounds, including formal and informal employees, entrepreneurs, homemakers, public servants, and students (Sebrae, 2022). Figure 1 presents a historical series from 2013 to 2022, illustrating the previous occupations of workers who registered as MEI.

Figure 1
Percentage of previous occupations of workers who registered as MEI



Note: Adapted from Sebrae (2016, 2019a, 2022).



Most MEIs were formal employees. In addition, the annual increase in workers transitioning from formal employment averaged five percentage points per report. In the most recent survey, this group accounted for more than half (57%) of all MEI registrations, highlighting a growing and significant trend.

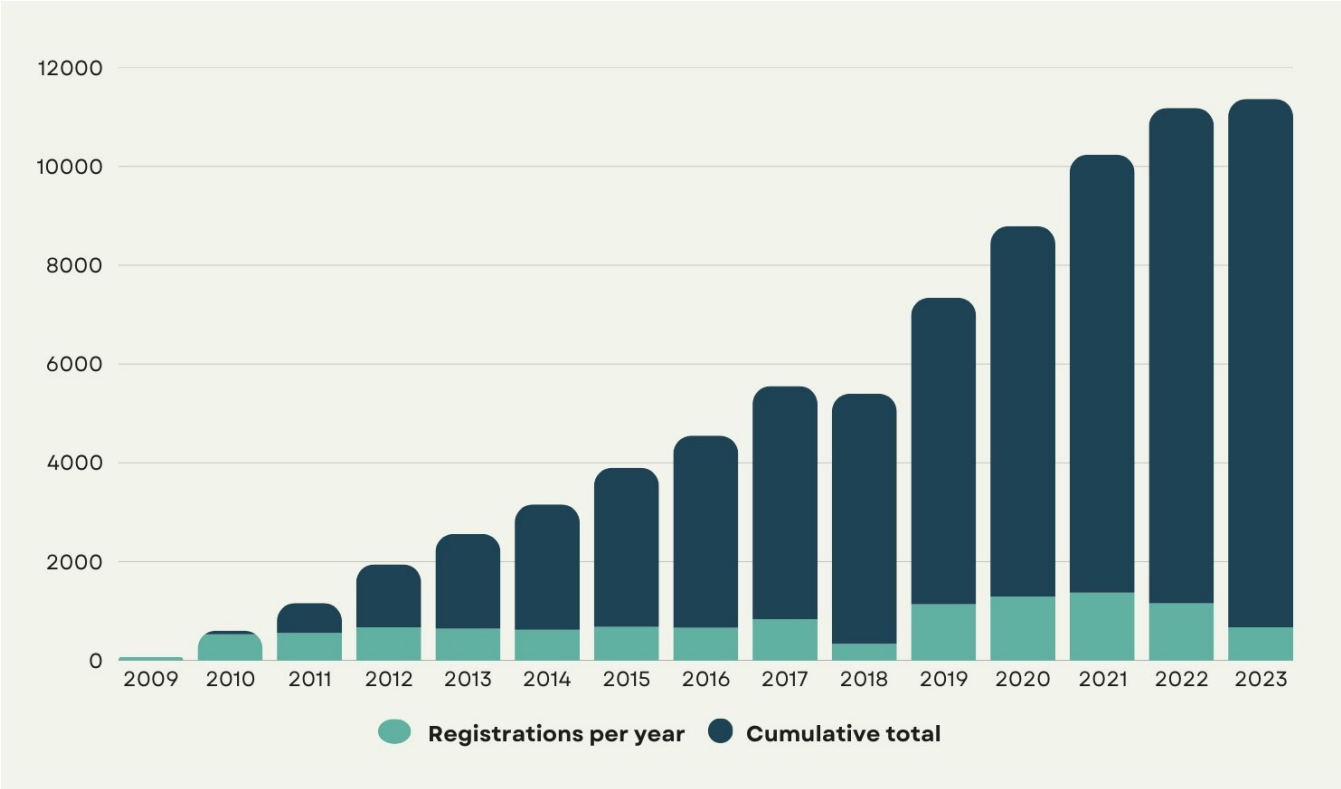
To further investigate the territorial characteristics of this phenomenon, we focused on the municipality of Santa Cruz do Sul (RS), in southern Brazil. This municipality was selected due to its historical, productive, and labor market traits, particularly regarding the connection between employment and entrepreneurship.

Located in the central region of the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Cruz do Sul has approximately 130,000 inhabitants (IBGE, 2022). Driven by a strong industrial base and a well-established retail sector, the city offers nu-

merous job opportunities (Fecomércio - RS, 2022). A distinctive feature of the local labor market is its historical connection to tobacco production and the presence of multinational corporations, which shape the region's employment dynamics. One such dynamic is the seasonality of jobs, where some workers are employed for only six months of the year, relying on alternative activities to sustain their income for the remaining months (Cadoná, 2017).

Aligned with the neoliberal policies of recent decades, the local labor market is characterized by flexible labor relations, precarious employment conditions, and an increase in entrepreneurship (Cadoná, 2017). Reflecting national trends, Santa Cruz do Sul has experienced growth in MEI registrations. Figure 2 presents a historical series of microentrepreneur registrations in the municipality from 2009 to 2023, showing a cumulative total of 11,252 MEIs during this period.

Figure 2
Time series of the number of MEIs in the municipality of Santa Cruz do Sul, Brazil



Note: Adapted from Portal do Empreendedor (2024).



In 2024, the municipality recorded over 11,000 MEI registrations. Considering its active workforce, this group accounted for 12% of all workers (Sebrae, 2019b; Portal do Empreendedor, 2024). These figures highlight the significance of this social group and indicate its growing relevance at the local level.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a basic qualitative approach (Merriam, 1998), allowing us to explore various paths in search of complementary information sources. This exploratory research collects data from secondary sources on the key topics addressed in the theoretical framework: career and entrepreneurship, as well as the transition from formal employment to individual microentrepreneur (FE-MEI). Additionally, we examined the historical evolution of the productive characteristics and labor market of the municipality of Santa Cruz do Sul (RS), in southern Brazil, where participants' career paths unfolded, aiming to establish connections between time and space in their professional journeys.

Subsequently, we conducted a fieldwork phase lasting six months, from our first contact with the urban spaces to the final interactions with participants. This phase was inspired by ethnographic studies, emphasizing close contact with individuals and their daily lives, direct observation, consistent presence in everyday situations, recognition of diversity and uniqueness, and continuous feedback to the research group regarding the information and data collected (Ferraço, 2007; Rocha & Eckert, 2008).

Our first step was identifying urban spaces where MEIs could be found. We visited peripheral areas of the municipality, particularly streets

with heavy pedestrian and vehicle traffic, as these areas were more likely to host small commercial and service enterprises. To ensure territorial segmentation, we identified three commercial zones with a significant concentration of businesses. We then began selecting participants, visiting enterprises in these regions to locate MEIs from lower economic strata who had transitioned from formal employment, aligning with the study's criteria.

The criteria to participate in the study included having a minimum of 18 months of experience as an MEI, ensuring participants had sufficient entrepreneurial experience, and being between 30 and 49 years old. This age range was established because individuals in this group typically have consolidated professional careers and a long-term perspective on their work, which are essential for analyzing both past experiences and future career prospects.

We also focused on two sectors: retail and automotive services, as they had the highest number of potential MEI participants. This selection ensured a meaningful sample size for in-depth research and enabled comparisons across different sectors, highlighting common experiences within this social group.

After identifying participants, we approached them to explain the research objectives and methodology. Those who agreed to participate signed an informed consent form. Once the group of participants was established, we organized meetings according to the frequency of interactions necessary for the study. This helped build a trust-based relationship, encouraging open and engaged discussions with the MEIs (Minayo & Costa, 2019).



Six MEIs participated in the study: three were retail business owners specializing in clothing, toys, and electronics, while the other three provided automotive services, primarily vehicle

washing. Table 1 presents the participants' socioeconomic, educational, career, and occupational characteristics.

Table 1
Participant's profile

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6
Sex	Woman	Woman	Man	Man	Man	Man
Age	31	38	40	40	47	49
Race	White	White	Brazilian Pardo	White	Black	White
Marital status	Married	Single	Married	Married	Married	Married
Children	2	2	2	1	1	1
Education	High school	Incomplete Elementary and middle school education	Incomplete high school	Incomplete Elementary and middle school education	Elementary and middle school education	Elementary and middle school education
Time as MEI	20 months	24 months	18 months	60 months	36 months	48 months
Sector	Retail	Retail	Retail	Automotive services	Automotive services	Automotive services
Monthly net revenue (BRL)	2,000	1,000	6,000	3,000	2,000	3,000
Business Location	Commercial space	Home	Commercial space	Home	Commercial space	Home
Employees	No	No	Works with the wife as a business partner. His son works when needed	Nephew, when needed	Son, when needed	No

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2024).

The number of research participants and the selection of two economic sectors are limitations of our study, and these elements were shaped by our experiences during the fieldwork stage. While we acknowledge the importance of highlighting these aspects, particularly to incorporate diverse perspectives, they should be understood as inherent features of a research journey guided by onto-epistemological precepts and conceptual frameworks, while also encountering challenges along the way.

Regarding data collection techniques, we employed three fundamental qualitative research methods: reading (document analysis), observing, and asking questions (narrative interviews) (Corbetta, 2003).

Documentary research seeks information, interpretations, and insights into a given subject. This technique is particularly relevant for studying ongoing phenomena that have unfolded over time (Tight, 2019). Our documentary research

encompassed two categories of documents: personal and institutional. The first included social media activities, online pages, and work-related files (administrative and legal records), while the second comprised legal documents from governmental and non-governmental agencies as well as media files. For documentary analysis, we followed three key phases: pre-analysis, material exploration, and interpretative analysis (Sá-Silva, Almeida, & Guindani, 2009).

Qualitative observation constructs meanings, acknowledges subjectivities, and relies on the interactive relationship between researcher and participant (McKechnie, 2008). It is particularly suited to studying social processes, offering a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the investigated phenomena. This technique was applied from the initial contact with participants, and to systematically record and organize observations, we maintained a field diary.



After observing the participants for over 54 hours, we recorded 18 field diaries. To organize these records, we organized the content both chronologically and thematically. The analysis of these materials evolved based on predefined themes, following a retroactive and cyclical process – allowing theoretical reflections to continuously inform and refine the interpretation of the collected data (Corbetta, 2003).

The narrative interviews averaged 120 minutes each, comprising the main narration and subsequent discussion. The study of narratives follows a sociological tradition that highlights the intersection of biography, history, and society (Mills, 1959). Narratives illuminate individuals' past experiences, contribute to the historical understanding of social phenomena, aid in interpreting contemporary reality, and provide insights for envisioning the future.

After transcribing the interviews, we analyzed each narrative individually, identifying thematic aspects before integrating findings across accounts. This analytical integration was further reinforced through discussions within the research space (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2008).

Finally, it is important to emphasize that our research approach adhered to the organic, dynamic, and procedural nature of qualitative inquiry (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013), with processes overlapping throughout the interview script.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF MICROENTREPRENEURS

Analyzing the careers of MEIs is similar to observing a worker's journey or a trip to which the worker brings a suitcase filled with experiences and prepared according to their itinerary. The contents of the suitcase reflect places already visited, the encounters experienced, and how the traveler interprets those moments. In various forms, the items in the suitcase influence the next

steps of the journey and the destinations along the way. Following this analogy, we present the research findings and analyze the career paths of MEIs below.

The MEIs' origins and adolescence: The first items in their suitcase.

To analyze the experiences considered as the "first items" in the participants' "suitcase," we initially explored their origins (Souza & Lemos, 2020). According to the data gathered, these MEIs came from low-income families, typically with at least three children. Their parents had low levels of education, often not having completed elementary school.

I started working when I was 10 or 12 years old, doing something to make some Money – mowing the neighbor's lawn – to help the family. I've been working since I was little, carrying firewood. The family was very poor; my two sisters were taken to live with our uncles [and aunts] because of the family's poverty (Participant 5).

During adolescence, these individuals commonly engaged in work activities, primarily driven by their families' need for income. This context, combined with a lack of experience, led them into informal and on-demand jobs, typically involving manual labor and low-complexity tasks.

Regarding their educational level, it is noteworthy that not only did they lack higher education or technical training, but their schooling was also frequently interrupted during elementary or high school. They attended public and rural schools, with experiences marked by gaps between academic years, often due to work obligations. Many participants returned to school for one or two years before ultimately discontinuing their studies.



Adulthood and professional path: Interactions along the journey

Unlike the informal work experiences of their adolescence, participants predominantly engaged in formal employment upon reaching adulthood, though some informal activities persisted. In these formal roles, they occupied operational positions and performed auxiliary tasks in more complex functions, such as attendants, mechanics' assistants, or factory line operators. These jobs required significant physical effort and were characterized by low wages, minimal benefits, long working hours, and hierarchical relationships with employers.

Heavy routine, long commute, only four hours of sleep a night. I felt like it was slave labor – bleeding hands, exposure to chemicals on the [production] line. I got sick... We started at 7 am, left at noon, returned at 1 pm, and stayed until 6 pm. (Participant 2)

The analysis of the workers' memories and the circumstances that led them to leave their jobs showed an even balance between voluntary departures and terminations by employers. When workers left by choice, their primary reasons included personal issues like health concerns and family obligations, along with conflicts with authoritarian and abusive managers. Notably, these transitions lacked planning or alignment with career goals, suggesting a career pattern among MEIs (Gunz et al., 2011).

Examining career paths by field, initial job experiences played a crucial role in shaping future opportunities. For instance, Participant 5's first job was at a gas station as a car washer. He then worked as a mechanical assistant, automotive painting assistant, and mechanical electrician assistant. Two decades later, the microentrepreneur remains in the same field, operating a car wash and repair shop.

The credentials acquired early in their careers appeared to grant access only to similar work environments, reinforcing limited career mobility in both job levels and occupational fields (Vaclavik et al., 2021). Just as travelers collect souvenirs from their journeys, workers accumulate subjective experiences that shape and are shaped by their professional environments. Analyzing these micro-scenarios and broader contexts – considering the interplay between individuals, environments, and institutions – we observe the MEIs' career dynamics (Mayrhofer et al., 2007).

At the micro level, two key environments influenced participants' trajectories: school and work. Their schooling took place in public institutions, often in peripheral or rural areas, far from universities, vocational training centers, and language schools, limiting access to further qualifications. In the workplace, their experiences were primarily in small businesses with formal yet low-quality employment relationships, occupying operational positions with little room for career advancement.

The local job market also shaped their paths. Despite a high number of available jobs (Noronha, 2020), individuals with lower education levels were often funneled into insecure industrial employment, such as temporary contracts, or into small businesses with flexible but precarious hiring practices (Cadoná & Góes, 2015).

Recent changes in the organizational and contextual levels of labor relations also interact with the careers of MEIs (Weber, 1999; Mayrhofer et al., 2007). It is possible to note that changes in the labor order, following a neoliberal pace, are reflected in the understanding that past experiences in formal employment ensure greater security:



It's funny... the offer didn't seem like a real job. They wanted to hire me as an employee, but on demand (referring to the intermittent employment contract introduced by Law 13.467/17). They said I'd be just like the others, but also a little different. They also suggested I register as a PJ [legal entity, in this case, as an individual entrepreneur]. Under those conditions, it seemed complicated. (Participant 6)

This combination of increasing labor flexibility and constrained career agency due to past experiences led many into microentrepreneurship as an extension of their professional journey.

Next stop: microentrepreneurship

By understanding the experiences gained throughout the participants' trajectories, we analyze the FE-MEI, i.e., the transition from formal employment (FE) to becoming an individual microentrepreneur (MEI) as reflected in the Brazilian legal framework. Regarding the circumstances of leaving a job, the picture is diffuse, encompassing both dismissals and voluntary departures. The previously mentioned factors, such as workplace conflicts and the need to care for children, reappear as significant influences in these career transitions.

Except for one out of the six cases, leaving formal employment was unrelated to future entrepreneurial activity. Reflection on available alternatives – if any – occurred only after leaving the company. Participants' reports also indicated attempts to secure formal employment, which were often unsuccessful due to barriers such as low educational attainment and limited technical skills.

Given their precarious socioeconomic situation, participants had little time to deliberate on work options in the weeks following their departure from formal employment, whether in terms of new job opportunities or entrepreneurial

ventures. The urgency of their financial situation was a recurring theme, influencing their focus on immediate needs while sidelining long-term concerns such as acquiring qualifications that could enhance career stability or pursuing work that provided personal fulfillment (Moore et al., 2007).

Another critical challenge was the participants' limited capacity for financial investment in their businesses. Starting an enterprise with minimal resources proved to be both complex and exhausting. The inability to stock products, pay a technician to legalize activities, or invest in storefront improvements were commonly cited difficulties that made the early stages of entrepreneurship particularly arduous.

From a temporal and procedural perspective on career and entrepreneurship (Hughes, 1958; Low & MacMillan, 2007), an essential aspect of the transition is the link between career trajectories and the type of business undertaken. The ventures participants initiated were closely tied to their skills and previous work experiences, which significantly influenced their entrepreneurial choices.

When I get to the store, I do exactly what I did before – put things away, mop the floor, dust clothes. Whether I like it or not, it's something I did in my previous job. Even in my other job, I served customers, chose outfits to buy, looked at what they were wearing, picked colors – it's my domain. (Participant 1)

The research findings highlight that participants engaged in microentrepreneurial activities early on, fueled by an initial influx of customers and new experiences that fostered enthusiasm. However, most accounts pointed to a gradual decline in clientele after the first few months, leading to a dissipation of early excitement. This shift was accompanied by challenges commonly associated with entrepreneurship (Rosenfield, 2015), including income instability and the anxiety induced by uncertainty.



The COVID-19 pandemic was another pivotal factor in FE-MEI, triggering adjustments and new experiences (Baruch & Quick, 2007). Participants' narratives frequently mentioned adapting business activities, facing unmet expectations, experiencing drastic income reductions, and relying on emergency aid as a coping mechanism. Beyond these entrepreneurial challenges, they also reported changes in their professional relationships. Even digital channels such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and supplier websites were insufficient to prevent perceptions of weakened business ties, growing distance from partners, and difficulties in establishing lasting connections.

This is how these workers navigated FE-MEI, carrying their burdens, facing challenges, and relying on the support of a few individuals along the way.

Present daily life

Experiencing daily life alongside the participants revealed key aspects of the study (Ferreira, 2007). Regarding the physical environment of the analyzed microenterprises, while each had its own peculiarities, certain common characteristics emerged. Some businesses operated in masonry buildings, while others were housed in wooden structures. Generally, these spaces were small, with worn structures and heavily used equipment.

In establishments selling products, limited inventory on the shelves was a persistent issue. In service-oriented businesses, a lack of organization of materials and inconsistencies in environmental documentation were common, particularly concerning the inadequate disposal of waste generated by their activities, in compliance with Complementary Law No. 741/2019 issued by the municipality of Santa Cruz do Sul (2019).

The aesthetic conditions of these businesses often led to distrust and alienation among

customers. Participants reported that some individuals, especially those who discovered the business online, seemed uncomfortable when they first encountered the physical space. This hesitation extended to potential partnerships with other companies. In such cases, the combination of modest facilities, the classification as MEI, and the entrepreneur's relatively short time in business generated skepticism in attempts to establish connections with companies and other legal entities.

Daily life also revealed insights into the dynamics of relationships and support networks among these workers (Dyer, 1995; Burton et al., 2016). They interacted with a variety of actors, including clients, family members, friends, suppliers, government agencies, and support institutions. However, their primary routine interactions occurred with clients, family members, and friends, while relationships with suppliers were infrequent. Engagement with government agencies (such as the local executive authorities and regulatory bodies) and support institutions (such as the Brazilian agency that supports entrepreneurship, Sebrae) appeared mainly in retrospective reports from participants, in which these actors played a guiding but sporadic role at the beginning of their entrepreneurial journey (Mantovani, 2019).

We did not identify any collective force or action from these workers over organizations and institutions, whether in digital spaces (such as social networks or online forums) or in person (Ashford et al., 2018). There were no indications of a coordinated effort by the social group to advocate for shared demands. This suggests that, metaphorically speaking, the worker's journey is far from an excursion, where a collective body could negotiate more advantageous conditions in various situations.

To mitigate the challenges of independent work, we observed that the loss of social support



traditionally provided by formal employment was partially compensated by family ties. While this support was neither consistent nor sufficient to significantly advance the businesses, it played a role in ensuring their basic continuity, assisting in client acquisition, and offering emotional reinforcement to the microentrepreneurs.

With these items in the suitcase, where can they go?

The participants' main aspiration was to achieve economic stability that would provide emotional balance and better conditions for their families. In line with this desire, their primary career prospects included either the continuity and consolidation of their businesses or a return to formal employment.

For those who expressed an intention to continue their entrepreneurial path, their discourse was marked by hope for business improvement, albeit with a lack of clarity on how this could be achieved. A common element among these participants was the belief that business growth would be linked to physical improvements, such as façade renovations, the acquisition of furniture and equipment, and ceiling repairs.

Returning to formal employment was also a recurring aspiration. However, participants did not articulate clear conditions or plans regarding their preferred work areas. Their strongest desire was stability, regardless of the field or position. Despite this aspiration, their behaviors suggested inertia rather than proactive efforts to secure employment that aligned with their expectations.

When considering future directions, the limitations in the career paths available to MEIs become evident. Any shift in this journey's itinerary means significant challenges. For example, returning to formal employment illustrates this scenario well. Constraints rooted in the past serve as barriers, such as educational experiences at the

individual level and the professional environments (Weber, 1999; Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2015), or the "places visited" during the "trip." Low educational attainment restricts access to higher-quality job opportunities, whereas prior work experiences shape professional perceptions and limit awareness of alternative career paths and employment opportunities. It is as if the traveler struggles with a foreign language or lacks a passport, making movement difficult or even preventing entry into new professional territories.

Present circumstances further limit agency and the capacity for change (Vaclavik et al., 2021). The need for flexibility in daily life exemplifies this challenge. This necessity stems particularly from roles fulfilled (Dyer, 1995) and family responsibilities that often leave participants with no viable option other than self-employment, which offers autonomy and flexibility.

If it weren't for this (working as an MEI), I wouldn't be able to take care of my two little ones. I spend the day here, looking after them and staying with them when they're not at daycare. (Participant 2)

It's hard to find a good job... I keep an eye out, but with my situation, I don't find anything worthwhile. It's always jobs that will give me a headache – temporary positions that last six months, pay almost the same as what I make now, and then I'm back to square one. (Participant 6)

Broader contextual and local labor market dynamics also contribute to MEIs remaining in their current activities (Gunz et al., 2011). Key factors include the flexible yet precarious conditions of people management practices and a labor market characterized by insecure and unattractive employment options (Cadoná & Góes, 2015). Table 2 provides further details on the career stages discussed in this section.



Table 2
Career development of participants

Career moments	Characteristics
Origins and adolescence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Low-income families and parents with low education;• Work activities before adulthood;• Informal and on-demand work relationships, with manual and low-complexity activities;• Interruptions in studies during primary or secondary education.
Adulthood and professional path	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Predominance of formal employment relationships, with low salaries, rare additional benefits, and long working hours;• Operational and auxiliary positions in more complex functions;• Lack of planning or clear objectives in career transitions;• Similar work activities throughout the career path;• Flexible local work context.
Next stop: Microentrepreneurship (MEI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leaving formal employment due to dismissal or personal initiative, unrelated to future activity;• Failure to find formal employment opportunities;• Need for speed in finding work and income to meet family demands;• Businesses started are linked to the participant's skills and work experiences.
Present daily life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Projects located in peripheral neighborhoods;• Projects with small square footage and structures worn out by time;• Aesthetics as a source of mistrust and customer alienation;• Relational bonds of support and high interaction with customers, family, and friends;• No collective force or action by MEIs;• Dilemmas balancing positive and negative perspectives linked to acting as an MEI.
Where can they go?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Desire for a future that offers economic stability;• Consolidation of the business and return to formal employment as career prospects;• Lack of clarity about how to achieve goals;• Subjectivities linked to freedom, security, and family present in career projections.

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2024)

Finally, while the next steps remain uncertain, it is possible to understand that, even though careers are unpredictable in a strict sense, they are unpredictable within a framework of predictability of insecurity and flexibility. The heavy suitcase carried by workers makes actions difficult due to the lack of autonomy and does not allow them to bring their skills and experiences to contexts that open up new perspectives.

CONCLUSIONS

Investigating the careers of MEIs, we found that their trajectories shared many similarities. Key topics included economic barriers, support networks, and a lack of planning, which played significant roles in career transitions. Contrary to what the entrepreneurship literature suggests, factors such as continuous development, worker agency, the pursuit of innovation, and the search



ch for meaning were not central elements in the transition from formal employment (FE) to MEI (FE-MEI).

Given the ongoing consolidation and growth of microentrepreneurship in Brazil, our research also sought to identify elements that could help mitigate the challenges faced by these workers, aiming to generate present and future value for both theoretical and practical fields (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013).

From a theoretical standpoint, this study makes four key contributions. First, the adopted methodology helps to address the need to incorporate a social perspective into the theoretical framework of entrepreneurship and career transition studies (Burton et al., 2016). Second, it reinforces the importance of the temporal dimension in examining specific events, particularly those related to entrepreneurship (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2015). By jointly considering past, present, and future, we gain a clearer understanding of the factors driving transformations and continuities in these career paths.

Third, the study's integration of both objective and subjective elements in the analysis of microentrepreneurial careers enriches research that bridges the concepts of career and entrepreneurship. The combination of statistical reports with an exploration of everyday conditions and personal experiences of MEIs provides a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Fourth, the analysis of career transitions examines two distinct moments: leaving a previous job and starting a microenterprise. This approach allows us to capture both the content of these transitions and the dynamics between them, which is particularly relevant for research at the intersection of work and career studies (Briscoe et al., 2018).

From a practical perspective, the study offers four significant insights. First, it raises critical questions about the quality of new work configurations and career patterns (Vaclavik et al., 2021). By examining the MEI framework and transition processes, the research highlights systemic vul-

nerabilities, tracing their roots and effects.

Second, it emphasizes the importance of relational dynamics in career development. Greater interaction between support institutions, public agencies, and MEIs is needed. Moreover, our findings reveal that career transitions are deeply intertwined with family relationships. This suggests that public policies targeting similar social groups should go beyond technical and organizational considerations to address broader aspects of entrepreneurs' lives.

Third, the study examines the intersection between MEI careers and shifts in people management practices and production models. To counterbalance the effects of labor flexibilization and foster a more equitable distribution of power among stakeholders, it is necessary to rethink political ideologies that shape microentrepreneurial policies. There is potential for collective practices and closer collaboration among workers, who can exert influence over institutions that shape their career trajectories.

Fourth, by conducting an in-depth analysis of a group of contemporary microentrepreneurs, this study contributes to international discussions on the structure and working conditions of emerging forms of self-employment (Ashford et al., 2018). The proposed framework allows for cross-territorial comparisons, which, in turn, can inform improvements in public policies at the federal level and practical adjustments to work models within existing legal frameworks.

Finally, the study identifies unexplored areas and raises questions for future research. For MEIs – especially those transitioning from formal employment – what collective strategies could help mitigate the social isolation associated with this shift? What responsibilities do local governments have in supporting entrepreneurs facing socioeconomic vulnerability? How can public authorities and support institutions act more effectively, moving beyond generalized initiatives to address the diverse realities within the microentrepreneurial sector? What alternative analytical



perspectives, theoretical frameworks, and research approaches could further enrich studies on microentrepreneurship?

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