

Degree and Career Choice by University Students: Themata and Representations

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This article stems from a study that aims to analyze students' social representations of their studying process and their university degree. With this analysis, it was possible to examine the content and shaping of such representations and to induce dialogical taxonomies considered as themata. We understand, based on Moscovici's proposal, that the understanding of the world, and thereupon the construction of social representations is organized according to dialogic pairs, dyadic oppositions that are at times expressed in the form of maxims and metaphors. The study was conducted by means of a qualitative method, with an analysis that follows the guidelines from the grounded theory. The induction of certain themata in this specific research has resulted, among other things, in understanding the beliefs, expectations and motivations the students have, in integration with the corresponding antinomies, while understanding the tensions in them. The referred themata was defined and elaborated in terms of the three dyads: the first one, lasting/fleeting, sets out an alternation between the notion of getting a degree as a life project, its choice being a defining event, and its perception with the fleetingness typical of these times, where the degree pursued is presented as a moment, a temporary path; the second pair, effort/pleasure, presents an opposition between the need for enjoyment and the effort necessary to complete the career path. The third one, certainty/uncertainty, accounts for the contradiction between the need to plan for their professional future and the volatility that characterizes the present times.

Keywords: themata, representations, university, degree, career.

INTRODUCTION

This article stems from a study which aims to analyze students' social representations of their studying process and their university degree. The initial concern driving the examination of students' representations is mainly related to their observed difficulties to develop a viable and satisfactory personal and professional project, and the dissatisfaction perceived in them. Both issues are evident in a lack of commitment and engagement with their degree, an apathetic attitude towards it and trouble to plan for a future connected with their choice in career (Bustamante, Ayllón and Escanés, 2018).

Delving into students' representations towards their degree and career path allows us to look closer into the way they understand and explain their choice, what students anticipate and expect from their course of studies, and to simultaneously examine how they build their identities based on their representations. It is not possible to analyze career choice reducing it to the point in time when students enter into university because, as stated by García Salord (2000), the choice in course of studies "refers back to each individual's process of socialization, the different contexts in which they participate and the different situations they live" (p. 13).

Therefore, the research has focused both on the content of the representations – beliefs, expectations, values – and their process of formation, taking close note of the ways in which personal experiences interact with the family mandates and cultural features of the time. With the adopted procedural process, as well as the selection of a qualitative methodology and an analysis strategy supported by the postulates of the grounded theory, certain contradictions have emerged. These have led to the construction of themata – defined as pairs of implicit antinomies, rooted in common sense – that are offered as the analytical result of this study.

The article is structured in the following way: a) Firstly, the theory of social representations is referenced, highlighting the social feature of representations and the importance of analyzing them in connection with the social and historical context in which they are formed; b) secondly, the object of representation is described – the university degree – and, as it is important to consider it in context, so Argentine universities and the importance of having a university degree in this country are mentioned; c) in the third place, there is description of a study considered to be a direct antecedent due to its theoretical and empirical similarity to this one; d) in the fourth place, the methodological approach is described, justifying the choices in procedural approach, qualitative methodology and the selected techniques and samples; e) next, matters related to the analysis of representations – which made possible the construction of the dyads – are specified, justifying and explaining the use of the concept of

themata for this research. Finally, in the section of results, themata are developed in terms of antinomies, deep-rooted ideas upon which students' representations of their degree and career are built and that, thus, affect their practices.

CONCEPTUAL EXPLANATION OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

Social representations are a form of practical thinking, focused on communication, comprehension, and management of the social, material, and ideal environment (Jodelet, 1984). They are known for their transversality, since they are situated in the interface of the individual and the collective phenomena (Spink, 1993). Each time these representations are studied, the origin of popular knowledge, namely, the transformation of institutional knowledge into another form of knowledge rooted in traditions, is addressed. Thus, representations may also be seen as institutions we share and that exist before we access them. "We form new representations from previous ones or against them." (Moscovici and Marková, 1998, p. 124). This marks a distinction between the present theory and hermeneutics, because even when it assumes, like hermeneutics, that reality is a social construct and that it must be interpreted, the theory of Social Representations emphasizes the constraints reality imposes on the individual and its way of interpreting reality. Social reality imposes interpretation constraints on individuals (Araya Umaña, 2002).

The social feature of the representation is highlighted. On this respect, Jodelet (1984) observes that the social aspect is present not only in the context where groups or individuals are situated, but also in both the communication generated among them and the codes, values and ideologies held in the social positions individuals belong to.

From the psychosocial perspective this research is based on, there is an interest in understanding the interplay between context constraints and subjectivity, seen as a process for making sense of concrete situations (De La Garza Toledo, 2001) on behalf of a constantly situated individual. The theory of social representations is effective at making individual and social subjectivity understandable (Perera Pérez, 2003).

Analyzing social representations can also let us simultaneously explore the desires which the subject selects to self-historicizes and by means of which the subject establishes a relationship with the world, building their sense of self (De Gaulejac, 2002).

Considering subjectivity involves understanding representations not as mere cognitive expressions, but as constructions permeated with affection, always seen as a subject's

construction of an object and not just a reproduction of it (Spink, 1993). In order to approach the object of representation, it must be set up as an object of sociopsychological knowledge (Pereira de Sá, 1998). Then, in order to understand social representations, there is a need to analyze the relation between subject and object (also defined as ego-object), while incorporating a third element: the social subject (alter) (Marková, 2003). In this manner, it is possible to make a ternary interpretation of the facts and relations which takes into account the individual subject, the social subject and the object of representation. In this regard, Marková makes a significant contribution: acknowledging that this ego-alter-object triad can be recreated today, in some spaces, as ego-alter-thing (Marková, 2017). The implications that arise from the reformulation of this triad are associated with considering the cultural framework in which representations are formed, as well as the link established between the subject and the object of representation. If we talk about thing instead of object, the relation is one of consumption, dominated by the desire of a thing as a material or symbolic possession. Thus, we discuss a form of modern individualism in which the subject, though not able to discard his ego-alter interdependence, behave as if it was possible to do so, or at least, makes ego-alter relations secondary to ego-thing relations.

It is important to consider this contribution while wondering if the relation between students and their degrees is defined in this way, and also, when examining the construction of representations in the liquid modernity culture.

At the same time, as Moscovici (1979) observes, in order to recognize the social nature of representations, it is necessary to remember that “representations contribute exclusively to the formation process of behavior and social communication orientation.” (p. 51). Hence, it is necessary to take into account the socio-historical context and certain features of the time, which form the framework for the construction of social representations around the university degree and professional career.

THE OBJECT OF REPRESENTATION: UNIVERSITY DEGREES IN ARGENTINA

The construction of an object for its analysis always requires its contextualization. In Argentina, the country where this research is being conducted, universities have historically been regarded as a real possibility for social mobility based on personal merits. The structural model that Castel (1997) defines as a wage-based society, emerging after World War II, resulted in the increase of real wages and, thus, the possibility of integrating the working class with the mass

consumer society. For the educational dimension, it meant the democratization of academic schooling – ensuring equal opportunities among the youth – and believing in the meritocratic ideal. Access to university education enabled workers' children to reach better positions than their parents in the social ladder, and thus, young people's paths were no longer dependent on their class origin and begin to be self-determined by the individual effort of each person.

Dalle (2016) establishes that in Argentina the access to public university¹ activated three social mobility resources: a) journeys through educational institutions and social interactions with people that represent other symbolic worlds; b) parent's motivation for their daughters to get a university degree, and c) the formation of a contact network that allowed many to access professional jobs. The author examines the conditions surrounding the first generation of European immigrants, who were rural workers or non-qualified workers in their places of origin and that, after arriving to the country, were able to occupy qualified working positions and eventually become part of a small urban middle class. This meant an improvement in their own opportunities and their children's opportunities, who had greater chances of obtaining occupations typically reserved for the middle class. The population's access to public university is enhanced after the creation of 14 universities in the 70s (during a Peronist government). The establishment of these public universities in the Greater Buenos Aires area facilitated access to university studies for those living in working class and middle-low class neighborhoods. It also opened social advancement channels for these populations (Dalle, 2016). Later, in the 90s, seven national universities were created, most of them also located in the Greater Buenos Aires area, which resulted in an even greater expansion of the university system and a larger access to it.

However, with globalization, the predominance of financial capital, migratory flows and job insecurity, the post-industrial society became fragmented, turning into what Bauman (2007) called 'liquid modernity'. In this context, subjects would no longer be bound to their assigned positions, nor would they self-determine based on merit. They would instead be at the mercy of market forces unregulated by the State. The most innovative sociological feature is the growing strain in the upward mobility channels, due to the mass offer of university courses, which according to Sennett (2006) resulted in the collapse of meritocracy.

In Argentina, where the State provides public and free primary, secondary and higher

¹Higher education in Argentina is offered by national and provincial, free and public universities managed and funded by the State, as well as private universities, which have a varied educational offering aimed at different groups of students and, hence, offer a wide range of degrees and vary in their tuition fees. Both public and private universities are governed by the same basic rules and are regulated by the Ministry of Education.

education, we observe this phenomenon in particular. Kessler and Espinoza (2003) state that in the last decades of the 20th century, the children of working families had received better occupational qualifications than their predecessors but did not perceive a wage compensation corresponding to such advancement. The authors define this as “false upward mobility” (p. 5).

In 2009, the creation of 5 additional national universities – in the Greater Buenos Aires area – rekindled the discussion that universities might offer a real opportunity for social mobility. On the one hand, there is an emphasis on the fact that said universities facilitated access to higher education for a larger amount of students as a part of policies for social inclusion in the university system and within the framework of a popular democratic project (Accinelli and Macri, 2015). On the other hand, there is a critique towards the continuous social gap and actual chances of persisting and successfully obtaining a degree. The broadened access to university education is verified by the continued increase in new tuition. But this increase is shown not only in public universities, but also in private institutions. This last one represents an increasingly larger portion of the grand total of tuition.

In the province of Córdoba, the specific location where the studied population lives, the university offer is composed of 4 national universities, 6 private universities a national university institute and a private university institute. These universities have different branches which expand access.

This study is focused on the community of a private university, Siglo 21 University, whose headquarters are located at the city of Córdoba, in the province of Córdoba (Argentina).

PREVIOUS RESEARCH INTO REPRESENTATIONS RELATED TO THE UNIVERSITY DEGREE

Beyond the large amount of research done in Argentina about the entry into university and the academic trajectory, as well as the representations regarding certain dimensions of the educational event, we also elaborate on research work regarded as a direct antecedent because it addresses, from the social representations’ theory perspective, an object of representation similar to the one approached in this article. This research work was carried out by Ingela Bergmo-Prulovic (2013). In it, she states that the issues surrounding career are part of everyday life, so people have some kind of common-sense knowledge about their career, and this is why she approaches these topics from the perspective of the social representations theory. According to the author, although the meaning of ‘career’ is often taken for granted, mixed messages and

a lack of a conceptual definition tend to blur the understanding of this concept, especially in times of social and contextual change (Bergmo-Prulovic, 2013). Due to this, the author intends to explore social representations of career among a group of people in a context of changing working life conditions. The strategy chosen for her research is free association. Then, an inductive and thematic analysis is performed in order to disclose to which aspects of the career representations are anchored and how these representations relate to dominant thoughts in today's changing society. As a result of her analysis, the author identifies two stable and two more dynamic social representations regarding careers: career as an individual and self-realization project; career as a path for social/hierarchical climbing; career as a game of exchange, and career as an uncertain outcome. The debate around the topic of *powerlessness in the career* is of particular relevance. The author states that the representation of career as a game of exchange is constantly challenged by the discrepancy between the effort devoted and the actual outcomes after obtaining the degree.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The theory of social representations can be considered as a pluralist (Petracchi and Kornblit, 2007) and polytheistic (Castorina and Barreiro, 2012) method. The methodological choices are adequate for the nature of our subject matter. As explained in the introduction, one of the most significant aims of the study is to study representations from a procedural approach (Jodelet, 1984) as it will allow us to regard the construction of representations as a social process (Spink, 1993) and to approach the subject matter from its socio-historical and cultural interactions (Banchs, 2000). The procedural approach is characterized by a hermeneutic approach centered on diversity and aspects relevant for the representative activity, in the context of qualitative designs. Sperberg (1989, in Spink, 1993) claims that social psychology defines representations as central elements of communication. We can therefore assume that the study of social representation involves the study of language and communication (Moscovici and Marková, 1998), since representations are constructions developed during communicative exchanges and interaction (Castorina and Kaplán, 1998). It is its form of development that gives representations their social quality. Finally, as stated by Jodelet (1984), a representation always means something to someone and carries something from its maker, who expresses it: their interpretation. Consequently, representations are also created the moment they are expressed. Their communication would allow for the discursive development of said representations. Thus,

the application of a qualitative methodology is appropriate for the project. According to Vasilachis de Gialdino (2006), this methodology has 3 aspects: (a) its main interest is associated with the manner in which the world is understood and formed from the point of view of the participants, their meanings, experiences and insights; (b) it is interpretative, inductive, multi-method and reflexive, and (c) its purpose is to find and develop empirically based theories. A researcher using a qualitative approach will understand that reality is formed from the interaction with individuals, who attribute meaning to their actions, and this methodology seeks to understand and interpret those meanings. Then, this approach is intended to capture the meanings assigned in the action circuit, avoiding their predefinition before a close examination (Cipriani, 2013). A qualitative methodology facilitates the generation of new concepts, typologies, and theories to understand and define the studied phenomenon. Moreover, it is necessary to emphasize that collecting data on the words used by the observed actors is not this methodology's only purpose, but that it also aims to obtain their interpretation. Thus, in the next paragraph, there is a description on the selected research design and an explanation about the constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin, 2002) that was used for data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

This study was performed with two time intervals: the years 2012 and 2017. In both moments, we worked with unvaried subjects, the same students. There was an even larger sample in the year 2012, which was asked to present an autobiographical narrative, and a smaller sample selected in 2017 of students who were interviewed.

The convenience sampling technique was chosen for the selection of the first sample. Said technique, as explained by Teddlie and Yu (2007), fulfills the accessibility standard which, in this research, was facilitated by students' proximity, their accessibility and the timeliness in collecting the autobiographical narratives. 120 narratives were collected, and its thematic density was the seed for the questions addressed in this research work. Said narratives were analyzed following the guidelines of the grounded theory.

In the year 2017, interviews were conducted with some students who had made the narratives. In order to select the narratives and thus, the authors, a theoretical sampling was chosen (certain categories present in the narratives worked as selection criteria).

The student selection procedure based on theoretical sampling may be seen as part of intentional sampling which, according to Vieytes (2004), does not follow criteria concerning randomness or probability to select the sample subjects or determine the sample's size, but that aims to reach the research's purposes and objectives. Here, what drives this type of sampling

and determines its potential is the intention to obtain the greatest possible quality of information from the selected cases for the purpose of studying the research question in depth (Patton, 2002). For that matter, the size of the sample is not predefined as it does not follow fixed rules, on the contrary, it is defined over the course of the research work (Martinez Salgado, 2012). This results from the need to include sample units which were not initially planned, looking to obtain higher-quality information. In this way, it is the researcher's own inferences that work as categories of sample selection. As suggested by Krueger and Casey (2014), the sampling finishes when theoretical saturation is reached, this is the point where a certain range of ideas have already been heard and additional interviews do not produce new insights. At this point, we already have all the necessary elements to build a comprehensive and convincing theory on the subject matter at hand.

The research was performed as follows: the narratives were classified: a) firstly, according to the main source of the information (Jodelet, 1984b). In other words, each narrative had a primary source from which the student obtained his information about the career path. Here, we distinguish between personal sources (information from their own experience) and impersonal sources (information stemming from social and media discourse). b) Secondly, according to an emergent category: the value at play in the choice of career. This category refers to the reasons and arguments on which the students base their appreciation or choice in career. These are classified according to their expressive (arguments related to what one can be and do with a degree), identity (arguments related to what one can be and have with a degree), instrumental (arguments related to what one can do and have with a degree) and altruistic (which integrates what one can do, be and have). Eight narrative groups were formed to build the sample of students to be interviewed. This was done by matching the source of information category with the value category. Two narratives were selected for each subgroup: the first 16 interviewed students.

Table 1.

Selection criteria for the first sample of students to interview

	Personal sources	Impersonal sources
Expressive value	2	2
Identity value	2	2
Instrumental value	2	2
Altruistic value	2	2

Then, while in the process of interview analysis, another category emerges, that of the modality of family discourse. This category accounts for the level of influence a family has in career choice and for the affective component present in family discourse, which may be inferred from the students' narratives. Through this, four subcategories of family modality were formed: the consensual one, the protective one, the pluralist one and the laissez-faire one. By taking two narratives from each subcategory, we identified 8 additional students to interview, trying to expand on the information gathered. By doing so, the final number of interviews done was 24.

The students' placement was not simple, as their phone numbers or other forms of contact were not available. Each students' situation was different, some had dropped out of university, a few had changed careers, several were halfway through their career track, others were working on their thesis and one of them had already graduated. Even when there is no certainty of having reached category saturation, it is considered that the information obtained on discursive density is enough for the defined objectives and that it fulfills the proposed objectives.

As a whole, our sample also has a rich diversity in informants, which is useful for achieving saturation required by the theoretical sampling. The table below classifies the interviewed students according to some elements that describe their: a) cultural capital (1 is used to indicate their lack of a parent with a secondary or tertiary certificate, 2 is used to indicate that they have a parent with a secondary or tertiary certificate, 3 is used to indicate that they have a parent with a university degree, 4 is used to indicate that both of their parents have a university degree); b) their gender; c) the number of entries (this refers to whether this is their first career or if they have tried other ones previously); d) their real trajectory (among the students who are still studying for their degree, we identify those that are halfway through it, when they are in their second and third year; or those who are finishing it, when they are in their fourth year); e) the first career they studied at University Siglo 21 (which may not be the one they are currently studying) and f) their city of origin.

Table 2.

Description of the sample of interviewed students

	Cultural capital	Gender	Entry No.	Real trajectory	First career studied at University Siglo 21	City of origin
1	1	F	1st career started	Halfway	Public Accountant	Río Segundo
2	1	F	1st career started	Halfway	Graphic Design	Winifreda
3	1	F	1st career started	Halfway	Human Resources	Jovita
4	2	F	1st career started	Halfway	Public Accountant	Río Gallegos
5	2	M	1st career started	Finishing	Administration	Córdoba Capital
6	2	M	1st career started	Finishing	Administration	Córdoba Capital
7	2	M	1st career started	Finishing	Administration	Córdoba Capital
8	2	F	1st career started	Finishing	Fashion Design	Río Tercero
9	2	F	1st career started	Finishing	Human Resources	Comodoro Rivadavia
10	2	F	1st career started	Finishing	Human Resources	Comodoro Rivadavia
11	2	F	2nd career started	Halfway	Agricultural Administration	Córdoba Capital
12	2	F	2nd career started	Halfway	Tourism Management	Córdoba Capital
13	2	M	2nd career started	Dropped out	Law	Córdoba Capital
14	3	M	1st career started	Changed careers	International Relations	Córdoba Capital
15	3	F	1st career started	Changed careers	Public Relations	Río Cuarto
16	3	F	1st career started	Finishing	International Relations	Salta
17	3	M	1st career started	Finishing	Public Relations	Córdoba Capital
18	3	M	2nd career started	Changed careers	Administration	Córdoba Capital

19	3	F	1st career started	Halfway	Marketing	Almafuerte
20	3	F	3rd career started	Dropped out	Administration	Laborde
21	3	M	1st career started	Finishing	International trade	Córdoba Capital
22	4	F	1st career started	Finished	Human Resources	San Juan
23	4	M	2nd career started	Halfway	Human Resources	Córdoba Capital
24	4	M	1st career started	Writing thesis	Industrial Design	Jovita

REGARDING REPRESENTATIONS' ANALYSIS

The formation and transformation process concerning representations of degree and career involves a mutual relation between students, their degrees and the surrounding possible careers. There is an interdependence between the social and the individual, which is why transformations in social reality cause tensions within the constructed representations. This results in the need to give continuation and stability to an identity that has been built and reaffirmed through the choices identified in the students' narratives containing beliefs, values, and expectations through which they build their systems of representation. Two general premises have emerged from the analytical process that have been useful for the interpretation and construction of themata: the first is the relation between subject and object, in other words, the one at play between student, degree and career, which can be understood in terms of an association beginning long before the choice in career and that involves the possibility of figuratively projecting a future vision of self, as well as what this association allows one to be, do and have. A student's engagement with this project and with building their desire to enter, stay and continue in a career path is born from the subject's historicization. This allows us to understand the students' own insistence on tracing their desires' origins back to their childhood and claiming that they *always* preferred a specific discipline. Moreover, it is a decision embedded in a matrix of associations which involves personal and external expectations and motivations. This first issue is important to justify the adequacy of social representations analysis for understanding the students' choices in degree and career and their subsequent trajectories, facing that career choice is not an individual decision in any way nor is it purely

rational, but it is actually linked to collective, affective, at times unconscious experience.

The second emerging issue is that tensions acting at the cultural plane have an impact on tensions experimented by students in connection with their choices and trajectories. As stated by Spink (1994, cited in Banchs, 2000), while dealing with common-sense, it is not necessary to classify contents searching for those that are stable and consensual, because they are essentially heterogeneous. Nor is it necessary to uncover any underlying logic, because there is none. Delving further into common-sense analysis, it is possible to find not only logic and coherence, but also contradiction.

These contradictions are indicators of existing tensions in the systems of representation over the thematized element at stake. This explains why it is important to analyze themata. Moscovici proposes a concept of themata based on Holton's proposal, claiming that the seed of a social representation is formed from certain central notions of knowledge that exist in a society's collective memory. The understanding of the world, and thereupon the construction of social representations is organized according to dialogic pairs, binary oppositions (Moscovici & Vignaux, 1994 quoted by Gattino & al, 2008) that at times are expressed in the form of maxims and metaphors. After that, Marková (2003) adds that dialogical taxonomies are related to the notion that categories in social thinking are integrated with their respective antinomies, among which there is a mutual interdependence and tension. She states that it is necessary to view the mind, not as if it was a mechanism without history, but that we should instead see it as a historically and culturally constituted phenomenon in communication, tension, and change. Therefore, change, which has always been perceived as something that should be stabilized in order to achieve stability, is actually needed. For an organism is to be considered alive, it must come into conflict and tension within itself and must have the force to endure the conflict and tension, as antinomies in the mind are the source of movement and vitality. In other words, throughout history and in different cultures, thought is presented through polarities, dyadic oppositions and antinomies that create necessary conflict. (Marková, 2015). According to the author, within the framework of social representations, dyadic oppositions, namely, the source of ideas for themata, are part of common sense and are established in and through experiences lived for generations. They operate at a subconscious level and are not observable since they are implicit.

Thinking in oppositions or antinomies is part of the cultural socialization process, we define what is good in accordance with what is bad, inclusion according to exclusion and morality in opposition to immorality. However, not all dialogical taxonomies turn into themata.

In times of a social challenge, like a crisis, or a threatening event as the introduction of a new technology, taxonomies connected with the phenomenon turn into meeting points for debate and dialogue (Moloney & al., 2015). Marková (2017) believes that dyadic oppositions underlie common sense, that at some point they may enter into speech and communication and become thematized. While certain norms are internalized, dyadic oppositions are stabilized and taken for granted- They regulate the activities of the subjects and the group. Because they are internalized and implicit for generations, it is not necessary to mention them in public discourse unless they are breached. However, if these norms are modified due to social change or if a particular behavior becomes ambiguous, the barrier between the two elements in the dyad becomes blurred.

Hence, it provokes debate and discussions. It turns into a theme, it is introduced into language, becomes thematized and starts to create social representations. Analyzing the students' representations of their degree and career and identifying underlying themata has led to a more comprehensive understanding of the case and above all, it has allowed us to analyze such representations in light of their social nature, oriented towards certain existing notions in society's collective memory.

For example, the maxim "that it provides job opportunities" expressed by many parents and that is a family mandate for most of the students, can be included in the dyad effort/pleasure. This results in the following thematization of career: Does one study a degree to work or to enjoy?

The maxim 'this is a choice for life', which is continuously expressed by students and is a source of tension in career choice, is expressed in the dyad lasting/fleeting. It leads to the thematization of whether the career is a defining, transcendent, lifelong choice or if it consists of a renewable pact, a trial or a brief moment.

The students' representations of their degree and career exist around these pairs and are inspired by debates around what these oppositions create, contradictions emphasized by social, media and advertising discourse. In order to understand better what has been exposed, one only needs to look closely at the most widespread slogans and messages of our time, which put a strain on traditionally accepted values: *Just do it, enjoy the moment, nothing is impossible, because you're worth it, think different*. These values are often associated with individualism and denial of limits. We are simply emphasizing even more the description already made by Bauman, which contextualizes and explains the themata addressed below.

RESULTS: THEMATA AND REPRESENTATIONS OF UNIVERSITY DEGREE AND CAREER

Lasting/fleeting: career as a defining or as a temporary choice.

Within the system of beliefs linked to the analyzed representations, there seems to be a contradiction between believing that career choice lasts for life and believing that it can be changed. In the first scenario, a career is presented as a life project, which is why its selection is considered to be a defining event. The choice in career is seen as a statement.

I thought that when we chose a career, we were supposed to spend our lives making a living from it. (N. [narrative] 43, Macarena, Human Resources)

I knew that what I chose was going to be for life because I didn't want to waste time on regrets. (N. 84, Norberto, Public Accountant)

It is possible to identify multiple emotions in connection with this belief: a strong certainty, self-confidence in making the right decision or feelings of fear and stress, caused by the self-determined obligation to continue studying.

In the second scenario, there is an open possibility to change careers, which requires more or less emotional effort from the student.

I was always afraid of making the wrong choice with these quick options and making a mistake for all my life. Then, I realized that I want to learn, and learning involves making mistakes. (N. 98, David, Business Administration)

I hope I've made the right choice... Even though I think I have, it still wouldn't be the end of the world if I'm wrong. (N. 71, Norberto, Public Relations)

The duality presented does not only include the possibility of switching careers or institutions, but it does actually refer to a broader conception of the life project, linked to foundational family values, religious structures of evaluation and representations concerning commitment, as well as some discursive forms in which students have been socialized.

The notion of something being lasting or eternal entails permanency, uniqueness and

immutability. Among other assertions associated with the notion of eternity, it is possible to state that reality is lasting or eternal not when it is one way at a certain time and another way at another time, but when it instead remains the same on a stable and constant basis. Moreover, the notion of eternity is associated with the notion of fulfillment.

The Judeo-Christian doctrine supports this notion, characterized as essential and stable, which embodies perfection: God is eternal, the faithful are on the pursuit of eternal life. Then, similarly to what happens when the notion of ‘calling’ is retrieved, the notion of ‘eternity’ is linked with the Judeo-Christian tradition and, therefore, it portrays the traditional values associated with this culture. Eternity as a feature of transcendence or the quality of something “worthwhile” appears spontaneously in the students’ narratives when they refer to career choice being “forever” or “for life”, with vocabulary similar to that used traditionally when talking about marriage. Additionally, the notion emerges when they explain their choice in career as a basis for identity, namely, with the purpose of claiming that *one* is always the same. The assertions: ‘it’s a career I’ve always been interested in’, ‘I chose it ten years ago and never changed’, or ‘I’ve always loved designing’ illustrate this point.

The thematization of this notion with its dialogic pair, fugacity, is evident in students’ assertions, who show their position towards it when they note that their choice can be modified, that is to say, when they opt to present the chosen career as a moment, as a temporary project. “If I’ve made the wrong choice, it is not the end of the world, I can change it”.

The thematization of this dialogic pair is present in today’s context, characterized by the liquidity in structures, during which the notion of time has undergone great modifications and has become, as Bauman described, time pulverized into multiple eternal instants (2007).

Certainty/uncertainty: Planning for a career or living the moment.

In line with the transformations mentioned, which describe the imposition of a logic of expiration over durability and uncertainty over predictability, we present the thematization of the dichotomy certainty/uncertainty.

Discourse in favor of letting things flow, logically aligned with the liquidity characterizing our time, is conceptually opposed to the search for prediction, planning and anticipation, which is the basis for the primary notion of project, thereby, of career and in more general terms, of the whole educational system. The proposal to let things flow, proposed as some kind of relaxation and loosening up, on occasion masks the intention to control an

inevitable consequence resulting from any personal project: the possibility of frustration.

This tension is evidenced repeatedly in the students' speech. Society mobilizes students indicating that the future is in their hands, but at the same time, it urges them to live the moment, emphasizing the precariousness of life.

It is possible to observe the referred tension between two fragments of an interview where a student says: "I don't know if I'm going to major in Human Resources, nowadays, I'm just seeing where life takes me" and then states: "No matter the cost, I will graduate (...) because I want to set an example for my children whenever I have them". Inside the representations of career, we can see coexisting notions competing against each other: career as an obstacle (I just want to be done with it), career as an inconsequential project (I don't know if I will do this all my life) and career as a way to gain social recognition (it's a source of pride, I will set an example). Therefore, the refusal to plan long-term is one of the most significant transformations: immediacy and imminent achievements replace the possibility to postpone pleasure while looking to shape an imagined project.

Engagement involves forgoing other possibilities and focusing only on one thing. It requires facing the consequences of letting other opportunities pass. For this reason, there is a dissonance with current cultural features, which recommend severing ties and emphasize not letting opportunities pass (Sennett, 2006), stimulating the need to live the present moment.

The notion of certainty, as it was conceived for this analysis, implies the possibility of predicting, planning, and anticipating, and hence, developing a project. In this case, a career project. Meanwhile, uncertainty is directly associated with unpredictability.

The themata certainty/uncertainty: has already been studied by Smith and Joffe (2013) in his study concerning global warming. The authors claim that in the conceptualizations regarding the causes for global warming, there is a strong element of uncertainty, caused partly by contradictory sources of information that stress apocalyptic scenarios and natural ones. They contrast said uncertainty with the certainty associated with the representation of the ozone hole. Notwithstanding, the uncertainty component makes it harder for people to make informed decisions concerning global warming. Uncertainty is extended to the public sphere through media.

Smith and Joffe (2013) stress that it is a challenge for media and people to make sense of uncertainty. As is stated by the theory of social representations, people rely on familiar everyday experiences to make sense of unknown and uncertain information. In the case of the quote presented below, the student relies on already available information and her past experiences

for her first attempt at differentiation, though her knowledge is not enough to overcome uncertainty.

I started to rule out all the careers part of natural and economic sciences. But then, it was hard to continue, because I struggled to know what I liked and what I wanted to do when I was older... (N. 52, Luciana, Human Resources)

Smith and Joffe's contribution (2013) and their emphasis for working on the sense attributed to uncertainty helps understand the specific case of students who choose a career that continues with the same specialty studied in high school. In these cases, the sensation of uncertainty is smaller, or does not explicitly emerge in their narratives. Although any process concerning the future, as is the case with a university degree, inevitably implies its fair share of uncertainty, the information received by the students on different spaces of socialization and past experiences, especially those lived at school, are elements that define the sense given to said uncertainty.

Effort/pleasure: career as work or as a means of consumption.

The dichotomy effort/pleasure has also been an axis around which many moral values of the times were defined. In the case of our western culture, Bauman (2000) explicitly states this dichotomy, which explains our intention to analyze it as themata. The author says that effort was always legitimized as a driving force for progress. Associated with work in the form of service, it was a means of humanization accessible to any worker. This is how the worker gained access to social recognition by performing a task and was fulfilled in their confidence of doing a good job. Beyond considering some other jobs which could be considered as vocational, sources of pride or self-worth, it was impossible to claim that a work lacked value or was considered degrading. All honest work helped achieve moral standing and spiritual redemption. In connection with this, Tiramonti (2010) informs that work ethic – as a characteristic world-view of modernity – redefined relations between personal and work needs and set the limits for a dignified life. In other words, this molded the civilizing patterns of that era and thus, organized individual and social life. In contrast, what today's sociocultural features show is that consumption has become the legitimized means for inclusion in the system: the capacity to consume and have, through said consumption, pleasurable experiences. At this point, it is

necessary to highlight the incidence of the tension existing in this dyad concerning students' representations of their university degree and career.

The form of evaluation of the present work requires that professional activity meet certain criteria comparable to the one used to value art: "Good taste, refinement, discretion, selfless dedication and a broad education." (Bauman, 2000, p. 58). Therefore, any activity that only caters to subsistence is underestimated and careers or jobs that allow a person to experience (or consume) innovative, exciting or varied experiences are idealized.

In this context, the consumption of pleasing objects and sensations has become one of the greatest goals to be achieved through the choice in degree and career. Pleasure finally becomes an obligation: those who do not experience pleasing sensations will be discarded, in a position of low social recognition, self-perceived as a failure.

We may speak about a subjectivity which favors the obligation to enjoy (De la Peña Martínez, 2015) and sparse enjoyment. When enjoyment becomes an obligation, we can no longer speak of desire. Bauman prefers to speak about wishes, to distinguish between this temporary and spontaneous motivation – which must be immediately satisfied –, and desires – which grow, develop through time and mainly require delaying immediate pleasure to emerge. We can appreciate this duality in the following quote.

...great demands and considerable complexity of this degree [engineering] left me with no free time, I was supposed to get up early to study and go to bed doing so. (...) In the end, I decided to quit it and to focus on a passion I had set aside because I thought it could only be a hobby: drawing. (N. 34, Gustavo, Graphic Design)

The need to postpone pleasure is implied in defining a career project. However, postponing pleasure and dealing with the frustration involved requires some tools developed by students in their previous socialization. Touraine (2000) establishes that as subjects in a consumer society we are as manipulated "by the search for a pleasure that is found in our passions as humankind was in the past by its subservience to God's or society's laws." (p. 63)

DISCUSSION

Delving into students' representations concerning their degree and career path allowed us to

look closer into the way they understand and explain their choice, what students anticipate and expect from their course of studies. As indicated at the beginning of this article, the initial concern leading this research was associated with students' difficulties to develop a realistic and satisfying professional and personal project, which resulted in a lack of commitment and engagement with their careers.

The way in which students build their images about the chosen career, the vocational meaning they have, and the strategies used during their career path are all dimensions affected by the history, culture and moral values characteristic of the time. Students build their theories about their future degree and career, assigning personal interpretations to them. History and the subject's own practices play a leading role in this construction. Under no circumstances are these individual appropriations of group representations. Instead, they are constructions developed and expanded upon in social groups, and thus, meanings are attributed to shared experiences. In the process of formation and transformation of social representations regarding degree and career, not only are those representations modified, but so are subjects themselves.

Social representations of degree and career cannot be separated from the discussions which give rise to them. If historically the choice in career was unarguably defined by family mandate or by a social insertion strategy enabled by career choice, these key elements of appreciation and evaluation, which according to our analysis are still present with some intensity, coexist with the expectation of living pleasing and rewarding experiences. This last one, as expressed by Bauman (2000) is promoted by the complex intertwining of impositions on what to do and not do set by aesthetics, and about pursuing dreams without giving up (page 62). What is the purpose behind describing the identified themata in this case? A first answer to this question aims to highlight the relation between representations and practices. The identified tensions, besides being the source for representations, define students' practices. In the context of these tensions, students choose their careers and, if possible, develop their professional project. Consequently, any intervention or scaffolding work must be performed considering the mentioned contradictions, to help the student experiencing said tensions. This is where the main practical contribution of this work resides. Giving an account of the themata that give rise to representations of degree and career invites any actor participating in the process of university admission and assistance to wonder about the following issues: How is it possible to create experiences that give sense to their uncertainty? How can we help them with the frustration a change in career causes some students? What possible strategies can be used to acknowledge the constraints caused by some discourses presented as new social impositions?

The theoretical/methodological contribution I have tried to make with this research consists in the use of postulates from the grounded theory, which resulted in the induction and creation of categories that originated themata. Moreover, the analysis of the construction of representations – not only in terms of content – contributed to the development of insights concerning a topic relevant for academic concerns and educational policies.

If social representations are understood as a network of interacting concepts and images with contents progressively evolving through time and space (Moscovici 1998 in Rodriguez Salazar 2007), the presentation of the proposed themata and originating representations will be timely and useful to shed light on the issue addressed by this research.

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