

## **Possible Choices: narratives of university students**

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**ABSTRACT – Possible Choices: narratives of university students.** Based on an ethnographic research carried out in the city of São Paulo (SP), the article addresses the issue of educational choices in higher education. The narratives of four university students are analyzed, focusing on three processes of choices among students - the decision to enter in higher education, the choice of the course and the institution. The purpose of the article is to show the negotiations carried out by the students, constituting *possible choices*. As a background, is the argument that the conjuncture of expansion of higher education in the 2000s and 2010 - in its ambivalences and contradictions - allowed such choices to enter the field of possibilities for new agents, namely, students who are the first generation of the family to attend higher education.

**Keywords: Higher Education. Students. Professional Choice. Social Markers of Difference.**

**RESUMO – Escolhas Possíveis: narrativas de estudantes universitários.** A partir de pesquisa etnográfica realizada na cidade de São Paulo (SP), o artigo aborda a temática das escolhas educacionais no ensino superior. São analisadas as narrativas de quatro estudantes universitários, focalizando três processos de escolhas: a escolha por fazer ensino superior, por determinado curso e por uma instituição de ensino. O objetivo é mostrar as negociações de sentido realizadas pelos estudantes, constituindo *escolhas possíveis*. Como pano de fundo, está a argumentação de que a conjuntura de expansão do ensino superior nos anos 2000 e 2010 – em suas ambivalências e contradições – permitiu que tais escolhas entrassem no campo de possibilidades de novos agentes, a saber, de estudantes que são a primeira geração da família a cursar ensino superior.

**Palavras-chave: Ensino Superior. Estudantes. Escolha Profissional. Marcadores Sociais da Diferença.**

## Introduction

The time has come! You are likely at the end of secondary school, or in a *cursinho*<sup>1</sup>, and after giving it a lot of thought, you will finally *have to make the first major decision of your life*. And a question that always comes up in this moment is: 'Did I make the right choice?' (ABRIL, Guia do Estudante, 2016, p. 14)

Thus begins the first article of the 2016 *Student's Guide*, a publication aimed at helping students choose their university course<sup>2</sup>. Intended for a middle and upper class audience that perceives the transition from secondary to higher education as a *natural* process in their trajectories, the article defines this moment of choice as '[...] the first major decision of your life'. In order to help this process, the text proposes a *self-knowledge map*: '[...] no one can really know themselves without a sincere analysis of their personality'. In this sense, it suggests seven points for reflection, including *what are your personal traits?* and *what do you intend to be when you grow up?*

Other than the *Student's Guide*, several online publications offer help for millions of pre-university students unsure about *vestibulares* [see endnote 2], courses and higher education institutions (HEI)<sup>3</sup>. It is hard work to keep track of those publications: every year we find more and more vocational tests, educational rankings and expert opinions, not to mention fairs promoted by different institutions connected to education, such as the *Student's Guide Fair* and the *Student's Fair of the Company-School Integration Centre* (Expo CIEE), to name only a couple of the private events that take place in the city of São Paulo. In all this discursive production promoted by these publications and events, the famous question '*what will you be when you grow up?*' (image 1) is repeated several times, showing that it is one of the central, if naïve, questions that guide the process of formation of productive and fulfilled adults in contemporary stratified societies.

**Image 1 – Student's Guide Fair, Pavilhão de Exposições do Anhembi, 2017 – São Paulo**



Source: author's photograph

In order to give an idea of the dimension of excess that I felt while researching this discursive universe, I should mention that in the 2018

edition of the *Student's Guide*, 280 different higher education courses were listed<sup>4</sup>, from the so-called Brazilian *imperial professions* – medicine, engineering, and law (Vargas, 2010) – to the *extremely new careers*, such as design, beautician and gastronomy (Sampaio, 2014). Beyond the choice of courses, the pre-university student also needs to figure out the choice of institution with all the variables that this entails (whether a public or a private one; whether they will attempt to enter through ENEM<sup>5</sup> or other competitive *vestibulares*, whether the institution is close to where the student lives or in another city; if a private institution is chosen, what are the monthly tuition fees, available scholarships or discounts etc.). In fact, facing a differentiated higher education market, there are several options of courses and institutions in a large city like São Paulo.

However, beyond this *ideal* student imagined by those publications and events – young, about to finish secondary school, with an educational trajectory that allows them to *choose* with autonomy between so many courses and universities–, the recent Brazilian educational space includes very diverse student profiles, unequally marked by social markers of difference such as gender, social class, generation, and race<sup>6</sup>. Even so, the discourse of free and individual choice exclusively dependent on individual *gifts* still dominates an important part of the vocational guidance and coaching area, as well as the sector's publications and events.

Nevertheless, when talking to the university students that took part in the research presented in this paper, new questions were made: are the processes of choice of entering higher education similar for different student profiles? As we will see, in this paper I attempt to show that the answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, the *burden of choice*, as expressed by anthropologist Margaret Mead (1973)<sup>7</sup>, affects everyone, bringing doubts, anxieties and dilemmas to different student profiles. On the other hand, diverse social experiences marked by gender, class situation, educational trajectory, age, motherhood, and religion, among other variables, impose specificities that must be taken into account by the analysis. Do women face the same challenges when choosing higher education as men? Do young women find the same dilemmas as older women with children? How do social markers of difference such as class and race affect those choices in a heavily stratified country such as Brazil?

The very notion of choice, in this sense, deserves to be questioned. As Maria da Graça Setton (2016, p. 65) remarked when reflecting about educational choices, '[...] the word "choice" is treacherous sometimes', taking on very different meanings. On the one hand, it evokes freedom, on the other, constraints. Critically thought as constitutive of the consuming individual in enterprise culture, according to Strathern's provocative expression (1991), or always in quotes because structurally determined, as Bourdieu claims (1998), the notion of choice is indeed full of traps. Nevertheless, the notion of choice in this paper is used when

claimed in the narratives of the students presented here as a recently acquired right.

In order to grasp these ambivalent, unstable meanings, I draw on Claudio Nogueira's proposal (2012) of reflecting on the *process of choice of higher education*, which would involve a series of analytical nuances: it is important to take into account, on the one hand, individual tastes and preferences, expectations and life projects, information on the university system and the job market; on the other hand, the configurations according to social class, gender, race, and generation given by social position, frequently unnoticed by the subject, that condition access to the more privileged positions of the educational system.

Therefore, the objective of this paper is to display narratives about dilemmas in the processes of higher education choice, pointing towards possible negotiations of choices. In order to approach such questions, I follow the narratives of four university students that chose to seek qualification and social mobility by entering higher education in the city of São Paulo, based on ethnographic research. In parallel, I point towards broader questions about the current configuration of Brazilian higher education related to social markers of difference. Thus, the goal is to insert these narratives in a broader configuration, taking into account individual projects and the field of changing possibilities (Velho, 2013)<sup>8</sup>.

## Field research and theoretical-methodological perspectives

Inspired by works with an ethnographic bent about educational processes made by anthropologists and sociologists that bring a closer look to students and their daily negotiations (Gusmão, 1997; Pereira, 2016; Willis, 1991; Ortner, 2003; Lahire, 1997), the field research presented in this paper was made based on talks and interviews with 21 university students of two private HEI in São Paulo. I selected three courses – nursing, education, and business – and two private higher education institutions that I called Center Faculty and Neighborhood Faculty<sup>9</sup>.

Other than participant observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 students. Most interviews were conducted near the faculties, or at their cafeterias. All the interviews were followed by informal talks, both in person and online, in order to keep track of their university experiences as much as possible. Contact exchange in social networks was a fundamental tool to sustain these interactions, chat, exchange references, see photos of family and subjects of interest, and also set up new meetings. By entering a *continuous online-offline flow* that allowed me to follow people, places, and hashtags, the research ended up having an unexpected continuity in the online universe (Miskolci, 2016; Lins, Parreiras & Freitas, 2020).

In this paper, inspired by the perspective of *portraits* used both in the research on educational success and failure conducted by Bernard Lahire (1997) and in the author's later methodological reflections (Lahire, 2004), I selected four trajectories to analyze in a more detailed

manner regarding the dilemmas involved in the processes of choices related to different social markers of difference. I therefore present narrative extracts from the interviewed students as well as ethnographic aspects analyzed during interviews and participant observation. As Lahire remarks (2004, p. 35), when analyzing individual trajectories through in-depth interviews, we are dealing with an effort to '[...] find the individual's incorporated heterogeneity', paying attention to the variety of experiences, contexts, contradictions, and dissonances<sup>10</sup>.

Regarding the Brazilian higher education system in which these students are situated, I should mention that since the 2000s there has been a large expansion which included an important amount of Brazilians that until then would never even imagine achieving this level of education (Sampaio et al., 2019; Macedo, 2019). In 1995, 1.7 million people enrolled in higher education, a number that jumped to 8.4 million people in 2018. Although this process marked a significant democratization of higher education in the country, especially for black and low income students<sup>11</sup>, there was also an unprecedented parallel process of educational commodification and privatization which meant that the private sector took up the majority of enrollments, up to 75% in 2018 (Brasil, 2018). The private sector has grown partly due to the market's interest in absorbing the demand from students that are unable to meet the criteria for public universities or confessionnal private ones, and partly subsidized by the federal government especially through policies such as the University for All Program (Prouni) and the Student Financing Fund (Fies) since the late 2000s (Sampaio, 2014; Almeida, 2014). During this process of expansion of Brazilian higher education in the 2000s and 2010s, several investigations have focused on similar processes to the ones described in this paper, namely the transformations in the field of possibilities of students from the lower classes regarding higher education, also stressing changes connected to markers of race and gender. I will highlight both recent work on policies and changes in student profiles connected to the private sector (Almeida, 2014; Abdal & Navarra, 2014; Milanez, 2016; Costa, 2019) and research on new public university students (Figueiredo, 2018; Lima, 2020).

In this context, through a narrower dialogue with the anthropological perspective, my view highlighted the experience of young and adult women, but also men, that entered higher education during this time with a special focus on a class fraction that has recently been in the center of the Brazilian debate on social class known as the *new working class*, *new middle class* or, according to the economic market's language, the *C class* (Kopper & Damo, 2018). However, I have also analyzed those classification disputes (Macedo, 2020). I did not use an *a priori* socio-economical criterion to establish who would be included or not in the field research. My interest was on the daily narratives about social markers of difference, gender and social class in particular, watching how those categorizations were *negotiated* in the daily life of these students, guiding their choices, or not.

Due to the political and socio-economic crisis that the country has been through since 2015 which resulted in the stagnation of private higher education enrollment (Brasil, 2018), job market prospects have worsened and unemployment has risen, making the analysis more complex. Thus I had to face the challenge of conducting ethnographic research that, according to Paul Willis' perspective, 'recognizes and records how experience is *entrained* in the flow of contemporary history' (Willis & Trondman, 2008, p. 212).

Based on this recent configuration as reference, the talks and interviews conducted with the students mostly approached three processes of choice: the choice of undertaking higher education, the choice of a specific course and the choice of an educational institution. In this regard, both life trajectories (school, family, work etc.) and future expectations (professional qualification, jobs, social mobility, dreams, projects) constituted fundamental dimensions to understand narratives about choices, dilemmas and future perspectives.

It is also important to clarify the perspective of social markers of difference being used here. More than detecting the constitutive importance of social markers such as gender, social class, and race, the point here is to understand these categories as always superposed (Davis, 2016; McClintock, 2010). Following this, we can define social markers as '[...] a way of designating how differences are socially instituted and might contain implications regarding hierarchy, asymmetry, discrimination, and inequality' (Saggese et al., 2018, p. 19). However, more than dealing with ready-made categories, the theoretical-methodological point is to grasp how these categories are produced and negotiated in daily life (Brah & Phoenix, 2004).

While talking to university students during the research, several dilemmas became clear when it comes to choosing a course and an institution in order to enroll in higher education. Therefore, what follows are narratives and experiences of four first-years that had recently gone through the process of entering higher education and were already enrolled in the first term of their courses. Following a more ethnographic narrative, these four cases were selected for this paper because these students shared close experiences both regarding the course and the university. I believe this proximity allows for a closer look on the workings of the process of choice and the dilemmas faced when entering higher education<sup>12</sup>. These university students had in common not only their initial experiences in a large private institution, but they (in the case of the three young people presented) were also the first generation in their families to enter higher education (Dumais & Ward, 2010)<sup>13</sup>, and already had jobs before entering it.

## Leaving the 'dream' for later: Janaína and Henrique's dilemmas

I met Janaína through social networks. Since I did not know how to start talking to business students at Center Faculty, I decided to search on my phone. Sitting on a bench at the Faculty's door, I logged on a social network and began to look at photos posted in the app that used its geolocation. This is how I came upon a *selfie* of Janaína that was taken there, looking happy during her first weeks of class with her new classmates. The photo's caption was the hashtag #ADM [*administração*, business management] and happy faces and heart *emojis*<sup>14</sup>. I wrote a message to Janaína in the app, explaining my research and my presence there. She replied quickly.

Through this online talk, we set up a first meeting for the following week at a nearby diner in which I also met some of her classmates that would become a part of the research as well, notably Mariana and Henrique. During this first talk, that happened at 18:00 on a Thursday, April 2018, Janaína had just left work, so we would have one hour before she had to attend her classes. A 20-year old woman, wearing dress pants and a white shirt, with a crucifixion necklace (she belonged to the Catholic Youth), Janaína soon told me that ever since her father died when she was 15, a large share of the responsibility for the household fell on her shoulders. With three younger siblings and her housewife mother, Janaína, as the eldest daughter, became the household's primary breadwinner and had to pay most of their expenses. Ever since then, other than a small pension that her mother received, she financed a large part of the family's expenses.

When she was 15, facing the crisis triggered by her father's death, Janaína found a job as saleswoman in a neighborhood's clothes store, and worked there for two years. At 17, she found a new job, this time as a Young Apprentice<sup>15</sup> in the management area of a car parts company, working with billings. She was still on that job at the time, and worked Mondays through Fridays from 8:45 to 18:25. Since she lived at Grajaú, a neighborhood at the south end of São Paulo, her commute took her an average of two hours, which forced her to leave for work at 5:30. After leaving work, she walked to the Faculty and arrived with few minutes to spare before classes started at 19:00. According to Janaína, after the classes ended at 22:00, she would only be home at around midnight. Since she still needed to shower, have dinner, and prepare her clothes for the next day, she was only able to go to bed at around 1:00. So, between laughter and complaints, Janaína told me that she usually only got about four and a half hours of sleep most nights.

During the same meeting, Janaína told me that ever since she was a teenager her *true dream* was to study psychology. When faced with the classic question: *what will you be when you grow up?*, Janaína always imagined herself as a psychologist. In particular, she pictured herself working in a hospital, providing psychological care for sick people. She

told me that in the previous year she actually attended the first term of a psychology course in another private university, but soon noticed that things would not work: besides a higher monthly tuition (she paid R\$600, with a discount, in the previous institution; but now she had been granted a scholarship at Center Faculty and paid R\$228 every month during the first half of 2018), the course demanded a lot in terms of schedule and studying, which would make it impossible for her to commit to a full-time job. By talking to other classmates and doing online research, she also realized that psychology is a career with slow returns, more suitable for people who have *family help*, it was not for her, not at that troubled time in her life. Ever since her father died – she stressed this several times – she was aware that her choices would not belong solely to her, rather, she also had to take into account the responsibility of making the family's ends meet.

Facing these dilemmas, she chose to take a leave of absence in the psychology course and get a transfer to the business course at Center Faculty: *'Finally I ended up choosing business because it's a more practical course. That's what my boss had been telling me since the beginning'*. Because of these pressures, Janaína ended up accepting that a night course in business would suit her current *student-worker* situation in which having a job was a necessary condition in order to study (Comin & Barbosa, 2011), especially because she was the one who paid the tuition fees. Following this logic, the business course would give her a university diploma before the psychology one, and also ensured better short-term employability and salaries.

Even though she missed her psychology course (*'maybe some day?'*), Janaína told me that her true dream was to have a university diploma, so that even the choice of course was a secondary concern. By following her on social networks, every now and then there were images of nostalgia about the area of her teenage dream, with photos of the psychology course captioned *I miss it*. However, for Janaína, *'nowadays what matters the most is to have a diploma, it is already a basic requirement'* more than following a specific area, as she reflected during the conversation. In this regard, she told me how whenever her company had a new job offering, the human resources sector would not even schedule interviews with people who did not have a university diploma or were not attending a higher education course. Facing the demands of a job market that requires ever higher qualifications, she figured that the business diploma would present her *a good gamut*, offering very diverse possibilities of job openings in companies.

When reflecting on her school trajectory, Janaína remembered her experience in several public schools in the southern part of the capital. During secondary school, even though she tried to be a good student, both the full time job and a great dedication to the Catholic church resulted in very little study time. At the end of secondary school, she attempted the ENEM a few times, without success: *'[...] I realized I would have had to study much more than I did. And if I wanted to get a Prouni scholarship, I'd have to study even more. How could I find the time?'*

*It wasn't possible for me, here [at Center Faculty] was more practical'. This view of the practicality regarding enrolling at non-confessional private universities, as evidenced by other conversations I had during the field work, has to do primarily with how simple their vestibular is, since it usually demands only writing a short essay, and this test can be scheduled any time according to the customer.*

Self-identifying as a white middle-class woman, throughout the conversation Janaína told me that she was aware of how distant her social and economic situation was from the Brazilian privileged elite, but it was not a *dramatic* situation especially because she had what she considered a good job. Furthermore, she was going much further in her education than her family had: her father dropped out of school after the fourth year of primary education; her mother had completed secondary school, but since she had four children, she could not have a job. Thus her trajectory was already different, something that she valued by building a narrative that exalted her own effort. And Janaína credited this not only to her own merits but also to a broader generational change that happened in Brazil during the 2000s which resulted in a more democratic access to education: '*... even if my mother wanted to, she couldn't study because she had to care for her siblings, everything was harder back then*'. In any case, it is worth mentioning that since she was also an eldest sibling, she also had to care for the younger ones. Even so, she was able at that moment to have a job and establishing that qualification through education was a priority in her life.

In this regard, Janaína's narrative was close to her colleague Henrique's, with whom I talked the following week: according to him, one of the great advantages of studying business at Center Faculty was the fact that it was cheaper and also opened up *lots of job opportunities*. At only 18 years of age, Henrique (also single, childless, living with his parents and siblings) told me that, just like Janaína, he started to work early: in his case, when he was 12 at a neighbor's hair salon in the Diadema region (metropolitan São Paulo area). He juggled this job with school for four years. When he was 17 and started to think about higher education, he dreamed of studying medicine, a project that was soon supported by his parents. However, the cold water was thrown almost immediately: the medicine course at the university he visited with his mother cost R\$6,900 at the time, in 2017. Then they checked other health related courses such as dentistry, physical therapy and nursing, and found all of them expensive. Since business was one of the cheapest courses offered by that institution, it caught their attention. '*To be honest, I've always wanted to work in an office*', Henrique told me later when he was mentioning some doubts he still harbored over those choices. Negotiating with such possibilities, Henrique then told me that ever since he was a child he dreamed of some job in which he could dress socially and that also gave him some stability. Here, as in other cases analyzed in the research, the status associated to certain forms of wardrobe were attractive for *office work*, associated to more qualified jobs and that ensured distance from unqualified or manual labor, so undervalued in Brazil

since it is pejoratively associated with the working classes. As Henrique attempted to clarify to me during an interview: *'My goal is really to attend higher education. Some day then I might be able to study medicine or physical therapy as a hobby, who knows'*.

According to the research and the conversations I conducted, it seems that such narratives about the versatility of the business course are rather frequent, even though it is rarely one's *dream job*, as according to both Henrique's and Janaína's narratives. From this perspective, the business course is often seen as an option that *opens many doors* and *ensures better employability*. However, it is also often considered the *choice of the indecisive*. Even so, since it is a course heavily linked to entrepreneurship, it becomes attractive due to the centrality that such an ideal plays in contemporary ideology (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2009). It is no surprise that the course has been listed as one of three major higher education courses in Brazil for the last ten years, and it had more than 682 thousand enrolled students in 2017 (Inep, 2017).

Going back to Janaína's case, although her real dream job was hospital psychologist, what mattered the most to her was to have a job, and the area was a secondary concern. Thus, when reflecting on her future expectations, Janaína said that she would like to stay a few more years at the company she worked for, rising in the career ranks: *'[...] I want to stay there 4 years or so... I don't think about spending 12 years in the same company. We have to grow, and to achieve that it's important to change our experiences every now and then'*, which indicates expectations of flexibility aligned with the current historical period (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2009).

Among their dreams for the following years, they mentioned traveling abroad for the first time and also owning their own house someday. Henrique said that his main dream was *to help my parents and have a stable life*. But he himself acknowledged that his main concern would be to meet the expectations placed on him by his parents as a good student who was the first member of his family to enter higher education. Therefore, support and demands were two sides of the same coin. *'My father is very demanding. He's supportive, but he's demanding'*.

In the middle of these challenges, and facing a national outlook marked by political and economic uncertainties, other than a very high unemployment rate – when these talks took place, in the beginning of 2018, the national unemployment rate was 12.6%, and 26.6% among young people<sup>16</sup> – Janaína and Henrique carried on between effort and worry. Based on their narratives, we can see a series of dilemmas about higher education choices that, far beyond vocations and aptitudes, impose pragmatic choices that leave *the dream* for later.

## **Mother and daughter united in search of the diploma: Mariana and Ana Paula's dilemmas**

It was through Janaína that I met Mariana, also a business student taking night classes in her first term at Center Faculty in 2018. Since she already knew about the talks I had with Janaína and Henrique about their choices in higher education in the previous weeks, Mariana agreed to meet me in the following week, also at 18:00, before the classes started, at a diner near the university.

Somewhat shy, Mariana told me that she was 19 years old and that she juggled the first term of her course with her job as a Santander bank intern. She briefly recalled her education and work trajectory: when she was 15, through a scholarship offered by the public school she attended at the Saúde neighborhood, she got a chance to attend a certificate program at SENAI<sup>17</sup>. She had the option between mechanics, electrics and business; she chose the latter. Due to this course, when she was 17 she had a initial job experience in the office of a private university as a Young Apprentice, working with management.

Single, self-identified as black and living with her mother, stepfather and a 20-year old brother, Mariana said that as soon as she finished secondary school she was already planning to enter higher education. Always with her family's support, especially her mother's, she was unsure between psychology, social service and nursing: *'I like to help people, that was my main motivation, I wanted a job in which I could help other people'*. However, after thinking about nursing and talking with her mother, she realized that she *wouldn't be able to stomach* a health-related course. On the other hand, psychology was seen as an expensive course that would require too much dedication, which would be hard to reconcile with work – necessary in order to afford the tuitions. In turn, social service was seen as a hard, undervalued job which might also not be ideal.

After talking to her mother, Mariana began to think about two new choices, law and business: *'[...] my mom said that I have very strong opinions, I've always been very sure about right and wrong. I think she pictured me as a lawyer or a manager'*. Thus, Mariana spent 2017 thinking about these possibilities. With her daily experiences working at Santander bank (first as a Young Apprentice, then as intern), she realized she was enjoying the area, which helped her choose the business course.

At the end of 2017, already more certain about her choice, Mariana – who lives at Jardim Clímax, at the south end of São Paulo – began to research some possible universities in the city, all of them private institutions: she visited some of the large competing educational companies, looked up the amount of online complaints about each institution, and read a few online publications such as the *Student's Guide* and *Mundo Vestibular*. She settled on Center Faculty because of an agreeable location and price, and also because it was recommended by a friend that already studied at that HEI and enjoyed it.

Mariana recalls that she gave up trying to enter a public university because they always seemed *too bureaucratic*: very disputed *vestibulares* or the ENEM, with a fixed date and very high demands. According to Mariana, private universities can also have good quality and are *much more practical*: ‘[...] we visit, get to know the place, do internet research, get information on websites. When it’s time for the vestibular, it’s much more practical, we just have to schedule, write the essay and that’s it. It’s also more practical if you need a transfer’. This perspective that appeared in several talks during the research must be stressed because it focuses on some of the several obstacles that still remain for low-income students to access Brazilian public universities. When she decided on Center Faculty, it offered Mariana a scholarship that reduced her monthly tuition to R\$380 for the first term, a lower price compared to the competition.

In general, Mariana said that she was enjoying the university experience very much. The business course seemed adequate for her current interests: ‘[...] it’s a very broad job market; to be honest I can’t see a single disadvantage in this course, only advantages’. After she got the diploma, she intended to work in management – at a company, and office or even at a bank –, but if at all possible she would like to find some sort of interface with social services. It is that old dream of *helping others* that was still a priority for Mariana.

When reflecting on her family trajectory (her father, who did not finish primary school, worked as a taxi driver; her mother, who finished secondary school, was a podiatrist), Mariana told me that she was happy with higher education especially since she was sharing this experience with her mother, who was also attending a course. Ever since our first conversation, I could notice the very strong relationship Mariana had with her mother, Ana Paula, and it was no surprise that she took her advice regarding possible course choices. Therefore, when talking about her mother, Mariana was proud to say that *after much struggle*, at 43 years of age, she was studying education through an e-learning course at a public university. After I mentioned that I would like to meet her, I talked to Ana Paula a few days later through Whatsapp, a messaging app, and luckily she was already willing and enthusiastic to collaborate with the research.

Thus I met Ana Paula a few weeks later, in April 2018, at the podiatry clinic in which she worked at Jardim Clímax, after her shift at around 19:00. She knew I was interested in talking to university students that were the first generation of their families to attend higher education, and her daughter had told her that I had talked to Mariana and other students at Center Faculty. Ana Paula soon said that she was interested in the research because she also believed in education’s potential and hoped that stories such as hers would show other people how it is always possible to start a new stage in education, even after you are an adult with children.

Sitting at the podiatry room in which Ana Paula worked, in between the reclining chair and the rest of the clinical equipment, she de-

tailed her several work, education, and family experiences. A 43-year old woman, she started by proudly recalling the varied professional experiences she had throughout her life: house keeper, housemaid, nursery assistant, bar waitress. She had worked as a podiatrist ever since she finished the certificate program offered by SENAC, which was already quite an achievement, in her opinion:

*I came to a moment in my life in which I finally understood: if I am unqualified, if I only have secondary school, what am I going to be in the future? I'm not going to want to spend my life working at other people's homes. Because that's what a housemaid does, right? I don't want that until death do us part! So what am I going to do with my life? That's when I started to want to change.*

According to Ana Paula, the certificate program was decisive for her to quit housework and start a new professional trajectory. She recalled how she could not stand to work at someone else's house anymore, having to clean, iron, cook and wash: *'[...] housemaids spend the day on their feet. That's extremely exhausting'*. As I noted previously (Macedo, 2015), besides the required activities – exhausting and undervalued since they are considered unproductive labor – housework is a stigmatized job in Brazil, seen as a *non-choice* and even as a remnant of the country's slavery past. In Ana Paula's case, her mother had also worked as a housemaid. She thought it was necessary to break with that family cycle:

*I grew up watching my mother working like that, and she always told me it was hard. She talked about a lot of humiliations. Indifference. Sometimes she didn't know whether she'd be able to eat at the house or not, so she had a big breakfast before leaving. It was a very hard reality... And in my case, especially in the first job, the lady kept a great distance from me. She helped me get the scholarship for the course, all right, that was important... but there was a huge distance between their environment and the one I grew up in, the one I consider my own. The feeling I had when she looked at me... that way of looking created a huge barrier. I was supposed to please, but I always felt like I was bothering her.*

Such memories left great marks in Ana Paula and made her emotional during this conversation. She asked me whether I had watched *The Help*, a 2011 movie. I said yes. Starred by Viola Davis, we recalled the story about three women working as housemaids in the 1960s United States, a period marked by violent racial segregation. Self-identified as black, Ana Paula told me that she cried when she watched the movie: *'[...] it was during that movie that I understood and said: "Oh wow! That separate toilet thing has been there for a long time! It's because they [the bosses] think that black people are dirty, that's why we can't use the family toilet!'"* Ana Paula also added, after remarking on how most housemaids in Brazil can only use a separate, usually tiny, toilet located in the service area: *'[...] I saw myself in that situation, and I saw my mother in that situation'*.

Thus, when building this trajectory, attending higher education became a big individual project. However, that possibility was not al-

ways in sight for Ana Paula. She told me that when she finished secondary school, the social and political context was different and constituted a much more difficult reality:

*Back then there weren't some things that help that exist today. These days we have these programs to get scholarships, for instance. Back then, in the 1990s, it was much harder to study. It was hard to say: "Dad, I'm going to university and you're paying!" There were two of us, from a very humble family, there was no way.*

Attending an education course, however, was an old childhood dream. At least, that is how Ana Paula reconstructed her story. According to her, already in primary school she dreamed of becoming a teacher and working in the school that she attended. However, as she grew up, she began to notice that the job also had its risks and disadvantages:

*[...] when I saw how disrespected teachers were, that broke the spell. I didn't have a second choice, but I didn't go for the first one because I saw it was very complicated. [...] That isn't how I see teachers, and that isn't how I want to be seen! And ever since then things just got worse, right?*

After several work experiences, two marriages, motherhood (besides Mariana, Ana Paula is the mother of a 20-year old young man), she got a cell phone message from a friend in 2017 with an ad about e-learning courses at that public institution that offered three choices: engineering, basic certificates in other school areas, and a basic certificate in education<sup>18</sup>. When she realized the course was free of charge, she said her heart skipped a beat: *'At first I wasn't sure it was true: so many fake news these days, right?'* After researching online, Ana Paula confirmed that it was true and signed up for the *vestibular*: there were 50 openings, she placed 58<sup>th</sup> but she was recalled for one of the remaining places after the first selection. She was incredibly happy: *'[...] can you imagine it? I hadn't done anything since 1998 and it worked! It was very good!'*

When it comes to e-learning – something that is quickly expanding in Brazil<sup>19</sup> – Ana Paula says that in the beginning she thought that it would be easier, but that was not the case. Especially for someone coming from a full-time job, *'[...] it takes a lot of attention, a lot of discipline'*. Another negative factor is the lack of integration with classmates, since it is a very lonely way to study and makes it hard to create networks of friendships and possible professional contacts. Even so, Ana was enjoying learning about Brazilian educational policies such as the Brazilian affirmative action law implemented in 2012. Besides, Ana Paula supported the policies of racial and social quotas, as she made clear in her narrative in this interview:

*I've always studied in public schools, I'm black, and now I'm entering university – I don't know if it is the quota policy, because I mentioned my race and the school I attended, so it must be some kind of quota, right? Those policies make things easier... I ended up being benefitted by them, they helped. Do you have to have the same merit as everyone else? Sure, but because of the inequality that we live in, those policies are necessary.*

Ana Paula and Mariana sometimes agreed, sometimes disagreed in their opinion about politics, social markers of difference and inequalities. Even so, we can find in both narratives the expression of constant negotiations about the processes of choice when entering higher education, revealing several challenges in the attempts to seek a diploma.

### **Between vocational and pragmatic narratives: possible choices**

I would like to stress a few common traits in the narratives about higher education choices of the four university students presented here (Janaina, Henrique, Mariana, and Ana Paula): their public school experience, the priority of work over higher education, the generational difference with parents that did not have a diploma which made them the first generation of university students in their families, the fact that all of them lived in peripheral neighborhoods in São Paulo, and their experience of entering higher education simultaneously understood both as a search for professional qualification and a personal achievement.

Since one of the main questions when conducting interviews and talks for the research was how three processes of choice were made – choosing to enter higher education, choosing the course, choosing the institution –, the narratives presented above show how all those issues, in the given context, are superposed. The moment in life, tuition prices, childhood or teenage dreams, the university's location, the opportunity of scholarships by both public and private colleges, family expectations, the expansion of the Brazilian higher education system – several aspects are superposed and reveal multiple connections that shape paths in a way that the choice of course is articulated with the choice of institution, and both are connected with the more general decision of entering higher education, taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the market and by public policies in Brazil in the 2010s.

In any case, I state that what matters most in these narratives is the way that the students negotiated their choices. Even in the cases in which the dream course or university were unattainable, the notion of choice was negotiated and valued, in an effort of self-affirmation that I believe must be stressed in the analysis. If in the past experienced by family members, or, in the case of middle-aged students such as Ana Paula, higher education appeared as something unattainable, and the future in the job market was seen as a place of *non-choice*, the claims to a right to choose takes pride of place in these narratives. Therefore, criteria such as aptitudes and tastes, the influence of parents and friends, previous work experiences, lifestyles and even religious vocations were presented in the narratives about the process of higher education choices. Going beyond the common dichotomy associated with the idea of choice – either free or determined –, such narratives reveal the way that these processes are weaved during daily life, in a constant but unstable way, alternating restrictions and possibilities, dreams and frustrations,

adaptations and new arrangements delineated in a specific social and historic conjecture that allowed this step.

I would like to stress the importance of looking at these choices in a nuanced way, simultaneously taking into account *pragmatic narratives* (ease of access, job market opportunities, university's location and tuition fees etc.) and *vocational narratives* (skills, dreams, imaginaries, *loving* a subject, the desire to do good, among other presented motivations) (Macedo, 2019). Aware that their actions and decisions did not take place in a make-believe world preached by a certain view of *free choice* usually presented in vocational tests, the students' narratives aim to assign a meaning to the steps taken in their different trajectories.

With a focus on the French educational context in the 1970s, in an analysis that became central in contemporary discussions on the social sciences and education, Pierre Bourdieu (1998) reflected on how the *choices of fate* when it comes to education, even though they appeared to individuals and their family members as *free* or as the result of *natural gifts*, appear to the sociological eye as an '[...] internalization of the objectively determined fate' (p. 47). According to Bourdieu, '[...] both children and their families are always oriented by reference to the forces that determine them. Even when their choices seem to follow the irreducible inspiration of taste or vocation, they betray the transfigured action of objective actions' (p. 49).

Even though I acknowledge the importance of this perspective, and I partially use the Bourdieusian theoretical apparatus in this analysis, I believe it necessary to nuance this determination when we approach individual trajectories. This form of analysis not only neglects the *negotiations of meaning* that subjects themselves attribute to these decisive moments, but in ethnographic writing such criteria would not take us far. I thus come closer to Paul Willis' perspective when, studying the meanings that young working class British people assigned to school life in the 1970s, stated that '[...] it is facile to simply say that they do not have a choice' (1991, p. 11).

Therefore, going beyond a binary and somewhat reductionist perspective between free or determined choices, I am dealing here exactly with the challenge of understanding the nuances that constitute different meanings assigned to such processes of choice, even if unstable, between resistance and resignation, enchantment and disappointment. It is also about the challenge of taking into account the transformation of the field of possibilities – bearing in mind the recent expansion of higher education in Brazil –, building new imaginaries of education, work, and social mobility.

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## Notes

- 1 [Translator's note] A *cursinho* (literally, "little course") is a private school that specializes in preparing Brazilian students for the *vestibular*, a series of tests that public and private universities apply in order to accept new students. Each university usually designs its own *vestibular*. *Cursinhos* are normally attended either immediately after finishing secondary school, or in parallel with its final year, mostly by middle-class students and above.
- 2 The *Student's Guide* has become the main publication on vocational and professional guidance in Brazil, sold by Abril publishing first as a magazine and later also in online formats. It was first published in 1984.
- 3 Among these publications, I mention the quality of *Guia Tô no Rumo: jovens e escolha profissional*, created by Ação Educativa and especially designed for educators that work with young people from public schools (Souza, 2014).
- 4 As a baseline, according to the publication's own research, in the *Guide's* first edition in 1984, 83 university professions were listed. Available at:  
<[http://origin.guiadoestudante.abril.com.br/premio/sobre-premio/conteudo\\_132818.shtml](http://origin.guiadoestudante.abril.com.br/premio/sobre-premio/conteudo_132818.shtml)>. Last access: 15 sep. 2018.
- 5 The ENEM – National Secondary School Exam – is the main exam for access to higher education in Brazil. Created in 1998, it went through a few changes in the 2000s until it was merged in 2010 with the SISU – Unified Selection System – and became the main door to higher education in the country. About the ENEM's expansion in the 2000s connected to different educational policies, especially the Prouni, see Almeida (2014).
- 6 In the research conducted in England by Reay et al (2005) with middle-class young people, we also saw that the choice of going into higher education appeared as something considered self-evident and natural. Against that, British young people from the working classes were wracked by doubts and ambivalences during the process of choosing to enter higher education.
- 7 Margaret Mead's reflection (1973) on educational choices is made comparatively, investigating the *burden of choice* between young American women in the 1920s as compared to young Samoan women, light and unburdened, not torn apart due to the constant need to make individual choices.
- 8 Anthropologist Gilberto Velho (2006; 2013), throughout his work, used the concepts of *project* and *field of possibilities* based on ideas by the Austrian sociologist Alfred Schutz. According to Velho, the *field of possibilities* is the *area of maneuvers* that '[...] allows some choice and decisions by individual agents' (Velho, 2006, p. 8). In turn, the investigation of *individual projects* is '[...] an attempt to notice how, and how far, individuals can organize themselves in order to develop specific conducts in order to reach their goals' (*ibid.*).
- 9 Center Faculty is in a central region of São Paulo, near subway stations. Thus it displays a more heterogeneous audience than Neighborhood Faculty in the Taboão da Serra/Campo Limpo region, in São Paulo's southwest metropolitan area. If one of the motives of institutional choice for Neighborhood Faculty (other than price and reputation) was close distance to home, when it comes to Center Faculty the emphasis was on close distance to work.
- 10 As Lahire mentions, against more univocal analyses of social dispositions such as the ones performed by Pierre Bourdieu, we are betting on a more nuanced

look at social agents that highlights contradictions and dissonances: 'This does not mean that contradiction should be privileged against coherence, nor heterogeneity against homogeneity, rather that we must avoid being blind and deaf to dissonances, differences, contradictions and heterogeneities whenever they exist' (Lahire, 2004, p. 44).

- 11 In 2012, a law was signed that established a national system of affirmative action in Brazil, and ever since then 50% of federal public university places have been set aside for students that self-identify as black and/or low income (Telles & Paixão, 2013).
- 12 The narratives of Ana Paula and Mariana, since they were mother and daughter and thus also display generational transformations, were analyzed in further detail in this paper than the first two cases, Janaína and Henrique. This also corresponds to the ethnographic flow of the field research that took place.
- 13 In a paper called "Cultural Capital and First Generation College Success", Dumais and Ward analyze how being the *first generation* of the family to enter higher education introduces a series of additional challenges to the processes of choice in higher education (Dumais & Ward, 2010).
- 14 *Emojis* are a graphic sign language widely used in social networks when the research was conducted.
- 15 The Young Apprentice program helps young people enter the job market, based on the Apprenticeship Law (Law 10,097/2000), which determines that middle and large-sized companies must hire young people from 14 to 24 years of age as apprentices. Information available at: <<http://site.aprendizlegal.org.br/o-que-e>> last access: 01 jul. 2019. Since this has become an important path towards a first job in a city like São Paulo, the program was mentioned several times throughout the research.
- 16 Based on IBGE data, available in a news article at the G1 portal: <<https://g1.globo.com/economia/noticia/2018/08/17/desemprego-entre-os-jovens-e-superior-ao-dobro-da-taxa-geral-aponta-ibge.ghtml>>. Last access: 01 nov. 2018.
- 17 The SENAI – National Industrial Learning Service –, created in 1942, is a non-profit private institution that offers, among other services, professional certification courses for young people.
- 18 [Translator's note] In the Brazilian higher education system, there are two kinds of undergraduate degrees: the basic one, called *licenciatura*, that entitles the owner to teach basic subjects (mathematics, languages, science, history etc.) in primary and secondary schools; and the advanced one, called *bacharelado*, with which the owner is entitled to the full job title (engineer, lawyer, anthropologist etc.).
- 19 E-learning courses have grown 226% in Brazil from 2007 to 2017, according to data from the 2017 Higher Education Census (Brasil, 2018).

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