

# Transition to motherhood in the academic trajectory: strategies of dynamic self-repair and resistance in the social field of young university students

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## Abstract

This study aims to analyze the strategies of dynamic self-repair and resistance in the social field built by young university students who unexpectedly became pregnant during their academic formation. From the perspective of Semiotic Cultural Psychology, a case study built in a narrative interview situation will be presented. The case analysis reveals that the unplanned pregnancy was experienced by the young woman as a disruptive event, which, together with a restricted social and institutional support, resulted in significant challenges to reconcile different demands, putting her mental health at risk. In this scenario of complex developmental demands, intense efforts should be made with the purpose of dynamic self-repair and resistance to remain in the university.

**Keywords:** Case study; Cultural psychology; Higher education; Pregnancy.

The present study intends to analyze the semiotic strategies of dynamic self-repair and social resistance built and used by university students who unexpectedly became pregnant during their academic trajectories. The emergence of an unplanned pregnancy along the academic path can be felt/perceived by a young woman as a rupture, both in the sense of an unexpected interruption of what she imagined would happen in her life trajectory (for example, Higher Education and the transition from university to the labor market and, later, pregnancy and the birth of a child), but also discontinuities in the development of the self (understandings and expectations that were being built about themselves and the world). In this sense, semiotic strategies for dynamic self-repair have the main purpose of dealing with at least three complex distinct personal and

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sociocultural demands, which simultaneously present themselves in their life courses: (I) persist in the course of university education, (II) to handle the demands of the transition to motherhood through the news of pregnancy – a significant biographical event – and, (III) to start the realization of the personal-collective prospects aimed at entering the labor market.

In the light of the semiotic-based theoretical perspective of Cultural Psychology, the present study consists of an outline of a broader research project that aims to understand what semiotic strategies are being used to repair significant and simultaneous discontinuities in life trajectories, in addition to the articulation of different personal and socio-cultural demands that emerge at the same existential moment in different spheres of life. In this sense, the analysis scenario is composed of structural conditions that are part of the development of the lives of young women in the Brazilian reality, such as family arrangements existing in different social groups and the material and instrumental resources made available by university institutions aimed at assisting young girls in their Higher Education and labor market entrance processes, interfacing with the event of pregnancy. These are macro-social and contextual aspects that are crucial to understanding the ongoing transition processes. Furthermore, issues specific to the female condition in our society will also be considered and emphasized, which, among others, reveal the socio-cultural value attributed to motherhood and the social role of the mother, the social suggestions regarding the tasks of caring for children, primarily aimed at and the devaluation of women's activity in the labor market. When considering these aspects, we intend to analyze the effort of young university students to persist in the academic path in terms of resistance.

It is assumed that during periods of transition in the course of human development – such as when someone is trying to repair and resolve an existential rupture, which involves qualitative changes –, it is necessary to activate additional mechanisms for reorganizing the self, such as construction of a new hierarchical chain of signs that allows the person to adjust their development by repairing this rupture. It is noteworthy, however, that this challenging situation can become even more complex when these significant experiences of rupture and transition take place in educational contexts, such as the university. After all, such contexts also require that the person deals with multiple educational demands. Being in transition within this context of a culturally organized life leads to the emergence of other tensions and ambiguities, prompting development as it promotes the construction of new meanings that emerge in an attempt to address these tensions (Marsico & Tateo, 2018).

In order to build a sense of continuity, integrity and consistency through the experience of multiple significant personal-sociocultural demands, which can be experienced in terms of simultaneous disruptions throughout the life trajectory, there is a psychological search for the self-preservation of the self – through semiotic strategies of dynamic repair. Such strategies, when used, lead to the construction of specific signs –, the repairing signs –, which operate on the fragments of the interrupted trajectory, promoting some kind of articulation between these fragments, rescuing a certain sense of continuity (Pontes, 2016, 2019).

In turn, the emergence of repairing signs occurs through intersubjectivity, that is, the relationship that the subject establishes with the other(s) through the different spheres of life in which the person is inserted – and in which other people are present, such as family members –, circumscribing “[...] the conditions of possibility for the subject to be in the world, their awareness and reflection on themselves and on other beings in and of the world, the permanence and transformation of themselves that this being in the world entails, and, ultimately, the possibilities and implications of becoming and not being in relation to others” (Simão, 2010, p. 88, own translation)<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, I-other relationships can guide the subject's

<sup>3</sup> In the original text: “[...] às condições de possibilidade de o sujeito ser e estar no mundo, à sua consciência e reflexão sobre si mesmo e sobre os outros seres no e do mundo, à permanência e à transformação de si que esse ser no mundo acarreta e, em última instância, às possibilidades e implicações do vir a ser e do não ser na relação com os outros” (Simão, 2010, p. 88).

personal elaborations in the direction of reorganizing their experience in the face of the disruptive event. This reorganization implies a personal dialogue within the scope of temporality (Pontes & Simão, 2018; Simão, 2016).

In order to support the case analysis that will be presented in this article, it is important to briefly review the most recent studies that focus on the phenomenon of transition to motherhood in the academic trajectory and define what semiotic strategies of dynamic self-repair are and how they work.

## Transition to motherhood in the academic trajectory

Over the past few years, several studies on Higher Education in Brazil have highlighted the importance of creating and implementing public policies that aim to promote gender, race, and class equity, aspects that strongly influence the conditions of access and permanence of students (Barreto, 2015; Silva & Borba, 2018). This is the case of many young university students who get pregnant during their academic trajectory and need to reconcile several complex different personal and socio-cultural demands, related to the requirements of the transition to motherhood and Higher Education.

The expansion of schooling in Brazil in the recent decades has promoted an increase in university places offered at public universities and a significant increase in women in these educational contexts. In 2017, 57.0% of the total enrollments in undergraduate courses was composed of women, with a majority also in the total of enrollments (55.0%) and graduates (61.1%) (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira, 2017).

However, despite these socio-cultural transformations, followed by the feminist movement (Ricoldi & Artes, 2016), which pushed women to perform multiple functions beyond the domestic space, the personal-collective expectation of primarily female responsibility for the care of the home, husband and children. Motherhood carries culturally constructed and shared meanings that attribute to a “feminine essence” the natural ability to care for children and the personal fulfillment of women through motherhood. Such signs and meanings guide the thinking, feeling, and acting of people inserted in these contexts and ends up minimizing the potential challenges that can arise in the experience of becoming a mother (Urpiá, 2009). In this way, the new openings in the social field for women are in conflict with traditional social functions such as domestic life and motherhood, leading to the emergence of several tensions and ambivalences.

The multiple attributions accumulated by university women who become mothers emerge as challenges for the permanence and conclusion of the academic path, forcing them to adopt varied strategies such as taking a leave of absence or taking fewer disciplines per semester to meet the different requirements (Prates & Gonçalves, 2019). In addition to these obstacles, the study by Silva et al. (2020) reveals that student mothers still need to face patriarchal conceptions of some family members, who believe that a woman with children needs to stay at home and take care of domestic and parental care. In addition, many colleagues and professors are unable to understand their absences in the classroom and delays in completing academic tasks due to the challenges faced in the exercise of motherhood.

Following this direction, Soares et al. (2017) identified that the excessive workload distributed in the shifts of academic activities, the rigidity of the deadline for these activities, and the lack of an exclusive structure for breastfeeding at the educational institution contribute to the interruptions of university activities. The results of the study also pointed out the lack of family support in this period as yet another challenge experienced by these young women.

In turn, the literature review conducted by Vieira, Souza, and Rocha (2019) reveals that among university mothers, feelings described as stress, impotence, and lack of motivation are common, and that these students are more susceptible to interruption and dropping out of training when they do not have the necessary social support. It is noteworthy that the repercussions of the interruption and abandonment

of the academic trajectory go beyond the non-formation of productive subjects for the economic system. After all, the context of higher education consists of a space for human development and the interruption of this trajectory implies the exclusion of the opportunity to access knowledge and hegemonic cultural goods, as well as critical and political awareness (Marinho-Araújo, 2016). For this reason, an adequate social and institutional support network proves to be essential for these young women to be able to meet the demands of motherhood, as well as to persist and resist in the university course (Moreno, Duarte, & D’Affonseca, 2020).

The institutional support network is ensured in Brazil, mainly due to legal aspects. Law nº 6.202/1975 guarantees pregnant students the right to exceptional treatment, making the educational institution responsible for monitoring extra homework or essays – as compensation for absence from classes –, for three months, from the eighth month of pregnancy. These young mothers may stay at home for longer periods in particular cases, confirmed by the presentation of a medical certificate (Presidência da República, 1975).

However, even with these legal achievements, including the implementation of daycare centers in universities, the literature has shown that student assistance policies for this population are still insufficient (Dias & Soares, 2019; Vieira et al., 2019). In this way, the emergence of an unplanned pregnancy in the academic trajectory can be experienced by a young university student as a significant rupture in her trajectory, threatening a certain sense of continuity of the self and requiring the construction and use of semiotic strategies for dynamic repair (Pontes, 2016, 2019).

## **Semiotic strategies for dynamic self-repair and resistance in the social field**

The semiotic strategies of dynamic self-repair are the expression of a continuous effort of semiotic self-regulation of the mind, through events that cause a rupture in the system of personal-cultural meanings, in order to maintain the individual’s psychological health.

With the occurrence of a personally significant and unexpected event, which suddenly and definitely ruptures what was imagined and expected to happen in the near or immediate future (temporal rupture) – such as the occurrence of an unexpected pregnancy in the academic trajectory –, leads to the emergence of an internal turmoil triggered by the rupture. External ruptures provoke internal ruptures related to the sense of the self, threatening a certain sense of continuity and identity: meanings about who one was, who one is, and who this person will be. The expansion of uncertainty regarding the future can undermine the structures of meaning constantly built by individuals between the past, present, and future (Valsiner, 2019). The self, as an interpreter, makes efforts to translate the ruptures into symbolic terms, connecting the fragments of the suddenly interrupted life trajectory, in order to rescue a sense of integrity. The self struggles to find itself, to rebuild itself and, for this, it gathers its forces for self-repairing, using semiotic strategies of dynamic repair, creating and making use of a myriad of signs (repairing signs), which can be overlapping, with the purpose of repairing the connection between the past and the present, building a sense of possible future (Pontes, 2016, 2019).

In short, when a person experiences significant and unexpected disruptions in the course of his or her development, it is necessary that some generalized, even temporary, meaning be constructed to provide synthesis, unity, and relief. We argue that the experience of significant disruptions, sometimes temporally simultaneous, requires a specific type of semiotic process – the semiotic strategies of dynamic self-repair. These strategies, when used, lead to the construction of specific signs – the *repairing signs* –, which have the power to make some kind of connection of the fragments of the interrupted trajectory, building an articulation between these fragments and rescuing a certain sense of continuity (Pontes 2016, 2019). The repairing signs operate on significant disruptions in the course of life and promote the emergence of new meanings in the present, the reconstruction of meanings attributed to experiences in the past, and a new

orientation towards the acceptable range of constructions of meanings for the future, connecting the past and future in the present. Re-launching them in a new narrative, always unique – and, in a way, unified and coherent –, about oneself and his or her own life.

## Method

The present study is an excerpt from a postdoctoral study in Psychology (PPGPSI/UFBA), entitled “*Rupturas na transição para a vida adulta: estratégias semióticas de reparação e resistência do self*”, under the responsibility of the first author of this article. A qualitative case study built in a situation of individual, in-depth narrative interview will be presented here.

## Participant

The participant whose narrative will be analyzed is a 25-year-old university student, who unexpectedly became pregnant at 19, when she was in the third semester of the Psychology course at a public and federal university in the city of Salvador/BA, Brazil.

## Data analysis

According to Yin (2015), the case study is a research method that allows the understanding of complex social phenomena, as it allows researchers to focus on a contemporary phenomenon in depth, from a holistic and contextual perspective. Interviews are important sources of information. The technique used in this study for conducting these interviews is close to that described by Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2017) when dealing with the narrative interview, in which the “question-answer” scheme or a directed script is not followed, but, rather, broad themes to be proposed to the interviewees. Thus, by encouraging the participant’s spontaneity and ‘storytelling’, it is intended to privilege their own perspective in the narration of events. The interview was recorded using a digital voice recorder.

Once the interview was transcribed, data treatment and analysis were started. Through the intensive reading of the transcript, synopses of the case were elaborated, seeking a comprehensive or holistic view (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998) in the first moment, and classifying the data, in a second moment, by categories of analysis proposed in the following central axes: (1) meanings of Higher Education, labor market insertion, and motherhood; (2) emergence of asymmetries and tensions between different personal and sociocultural expectations related to significant biographical events (such as pregnancy, academic training and insertion in the labor market) that are simultaneously present in the course of life; (3) restorative signs and semiotic strategies used to reconcile the different personal and sociocultural expectations related to the biographical events identified above and, thus, to promote a consistent articulation between aspects of autobiographical memory (past) and present perspective on oneself and expectations for the future, and (4) a social and institutional network of existing and effective emotional and instrumental support.

The research project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Universidade Federal da Bahia, Institute of Psychology (opinion nº 2.283.053). The participant signed the Informed Consent Form, authorizing the dissemination of the results for teaching, research, and publishing purposes. It was guaranteed the free access to the information collected and any clarifications requested, as well as the suspension of participation if the participant wanted to do so. Secrecy was also guaranteed in order to ensure the privacy of the participant and the confidentiality of the data involved in the research.

## Results

The participant's narrative, using the alias of "Flávia", was organized based on three main thematic axes: (I) Rupture in the academic trajectory due to the unexpected pregnancy, (II) Transition to motherhood, and (III) Persistence in academic education and future perspective. These thematic axes contemplate aspects of specific interest to this study, such as: the meanings built on Higher Education, labor market insertion, and motherhood; emergence of asymmetries and tensions between different personal and socio-cultural expectations; social and institutional support network; gender issues; and future expectations (labor market insertion).

### A rupture in the academic trajectory: the unexpected news of pregnancy

Flávia was 19 years old and was studying the third semester of Psychology when she found out she was pregnant. She reports that the news of her pregnancy gave rise to an intense concern, after all, she had not planned that pregnancy and imagined that this event would imply renouncing aspects considered important in her life, such as academic education: *"I was very concerned because it would disturb my life [...] I was going to have to abandon everything [...] So I was very desperate"*. The university, for Flávia, was conceived as an important element for the maintenance of their mental health: *"it [the university] has always been that, a place that kept me minimally well [...] always something... helping me to keep, keep myself organized [...] coming here, for me it was always very good [...] it was wonderful [...] I used to love it"*. Flávia was the first woman in her family to go to college and this achievement was perceived as valued by family members. For Flávia, it consisted of the possibility of following a different path in relation to the other women in the family, whose destiny was linked to reproductive roles, that is, to the care of the home and children.

The unexpected pregnancy, thus, threatened her permanence in the academic trajectory. In an attempt to resolve this unsettling situation, Flávia considered the possibility of having an abortion. However, wrapped in a semiotic trap set in motion when her ex-partner reports the news of the pregnancy to her family – as a strategy to prevent her from interrupting it –, she felt forced, for fear of moral judgments, not to abort and take the pregnancy to term: *"I was trapped [...] I was finished right there, I really wanted to abort. And then I had to accept it [...] it was difficult for me"*.

The experience of pregnancy was described by Flávia as "very complicated", reflecting on her academic trajectory: *"I couldn't get out of bed because I felt a lot of pain, a lot of colic. [...] Then the pain passed and there was a burning sensation in my breast [...] and that was until the end of the pregnancy. I couldn't even properly go to college"*. These symptoms were pointed out as reasons for the frequent absences in class, culminating in the moment when a professor had an attitude considered "rude", leading to the temporary interruption of her academic trajectory:

*In the first week I was absent because I was feeling bad [...]. Then I came to the professor and said: 'professor, I am without a group', and she said: 'oh, why are you without a group? it's already the second week of classes!' [...] then I was like 'no, because I was sick, I'm pregnant' I explained to her, then she said 'ah, but pregnancy is not a disease, no! Find a way!'. After that day I didn't want to go to class anymore [...] I was scared, because I didn't expect her reaction, a psychology professor... and then I was like, I don't know, I was feeling guilty, because I was pregnant.*

After this event of non-support by a professor, Flávia interrupted her academic trajectory for a year and a half.

## Transition to motherhood

The transition to motherhood had significant implications for Flávia's mental health, being perceived as a boundary experience between sanity < > non-sanity. The interruption of the academic trajectory and the departure from the university context were pointed out as aspects that contributed to his intense psychological suffering: *"I saw myself at the very edge between sanity and insanity, I felt like I was walking on a tightrope, and I needed to do something not to lose it, and for me the [university] was always that, a place that kept me minimally well, despite all the suffering, despite everything"*.

The puerperium period was considered as one of the most difficult moments in her life, with motherhood meaning as an experience of imprisonment, of loneliness, as a field of impossibilities: *"Terrible. I used to hate staying at home all day [...] for me it was a huge conflict, I had no one to talk about it [...] I didn't like it, for me it was [...] The worst moment of my life [...]. I didn't study, I couldn't leave home, I couldn't come to college"*.

The comparison of her situation with that of her fellow university students contributed to the meanings constructed for the puerperium in terms of unproductiveness and involution, leading Flávia to feel as if she was being "dumbed down":

*I couldn't go out, I couldn't study anymore, and my friends were all going to college, they were, you know, studying and living their lives, and I was there like [...] Being a housewife. It was terrible for me [...] They were producing, they were studying, they were evolving towards academic knowledge and I was feeling dumbed down at home.*

The experience of temporality was also affected by the puerperium and its affective-semiotic repercussions on Flávia's subjective dynamics. For the young woman, time started to flow more slowly and gradually, and she felt as if she was in a world parallel to other people:

*"It's as if I was looking at the world and saw everything in slow motion, I can't explain it, it was very difficult. For me, things were happening out there, but it was like I was apart from them, like I wasn't involved, I don't know [...] It was very strange. It made me more desperate.*

The strategy found to preserve her mental health and to be able to keep going by taking care of her newborn daughter was to "escape" the imaginary situation from the use of symbolic resources from fiction stories: *"it was as if I really had [...] I got pretty involved in the series' stories, it was like I was running away from my own story, because I didn't want to look at mine"*.

## Persistence in her academic trajectory and perspective for the future

The return to academic activities happened when her daughter turned eight months, when she separated from her partner and moved back in with her father. Her father offered support that was considered as unsatisfactory, representing an unqualified caregiver for his daughter, but he was the only one she had to help her to resume her academic trajectory. Flávia emphasizes, in her narrative, the need to return to university and continue her academic education: *"I came back because I didn't see myself going anywhere, I knew I needed to return. [...] It was a year and a half at home doing nothing, without studying [...] and for me it was very bad"*.

In order to cope with the demands of academic training and reconcile them with the demands of motherhood, Flávia reports that her return to the university took place gradually, taking fewer subjects per semester. Even with this artifice, the challenge of having time to study persisted, making her study at night, sometimes until dawn, after her daughter slept.

In this process of resuming the academic trajectory, she describes the dynamics of support < > non-support of her formal and informal network. For Flávia, the university did not offer any support for the continuity in the academic trajectory after the birth of her daughter, putting her permanence in Higher Education at risk: *"Also, the university does not support us to continue, right? Okay, fine, there is the daycare center, but it is very difficult to get [a place in] the daycare center, we have some help, but it is very complicated to get help"*. On the other hand, she recognizes that most of the professors were understanding when Flávia needed to take her daughter to university:

*Most of the professors [...] I brought her (daughter) several times to class because I had no one to leave her with [...] Many professors received very well and were pretty understanding and like 'no, no problem, she can stay, she's not disturbing' and I knew she was disturbing the lecture, but they were super supportive [...] in general, the professors were very cool.*

The support network consisted of her father – support considered as unqualified –, eventually by her mother – who was not often available to take care of the granddaughter – and, only through legal measures, her ex-partner, who paid child support and took care of the daughter on weekends, every fifteen days. As her daughter grew, she was enrolled in a kindergarten, which was also assessed as an important source of support for Flávia, allowing her more free time to study.

Despite the many strategies used by Flávia to guarantee her permanence in the academic trajectory, as previously described, the challenges to reconcile academic life and motherhood persisted over time. Intense ambivalence was experienced in relation to motherhood and major obstacles were envisaged for her future professional goals, such as holding an academic master's degree after graduation. Faced with the intense psychological suffering experienced, Flávia decides to start doing psychotherapy. And so, through this experience, she reports that it was possible to reframe her past, present, and future (imagined) life trajectory: with her psychologist, she managed to co-construct the meaning that her daughter is not an obstacle towards achieving her professional goals and that, although difficult, it is not impossible to reach them:

*[...] before therapy I used to see my daughter as an obstacle stopping me from doing things, she is not an obstacle and many of the things I didn't do I justified that I didn't do because of her, but not today. Today, for me, it is very difficult, very much, but I keep doing it and gradually [...] after we have a kid, we need to reformulate [...] [cries] not that I am not going to get a master's degree, not that I am not going to do what I want, but it won't be at the same time. [...] It is more difficult than it is for the others, but it is not impossible [cries].*

Academic training proved to be an important value for Flávia and her family. Having been the first woman in her family to enter Higher Education, she hopes to be a role model for her daughter in the future: *"I want her to keep studying too [...] it is a new perspective [...] to even have me as a role model, as someone whose footsteps she wants to follow, that she admires. This is what I want"*.

## Discussion

The unexpected pregnancy in the academic path was experienced by Flávia as a significant rupture in her system of personal-cultural meanings, of what was imagined and expected to happen in the future: academic training – so valued by her, her family, and the socio-cultural context in which is inserted. The university plays an important role in affective-semiotic regulation in her life and mental health, as it diachronically articulates her past life history, including the previous generation of women in her family, with the present moment and the field of possibilities glimpsed for the future. Flávia emphasizes the importance of being and doing *"different"* in relation to the choices of her family members, as she believes that being at the university and having a degree can guarantee better living conditions for her, for her parents, and for the next generation

of her family. In this sense, abortion was considered as a possibility to interrupt the ongoing disruptive event, but abandoned at the moment when Flávia realizes that she was captured by a semiotic trap, triggered by her ex-partner who wished to take the pregnancy to term. According to Valsiner (2012, p. 29, own translation)<sup>4</sup>, “a semiotic trap is a form of symbolic ‘capture’ of someone else’s self, in a network of shame, inferiority or another way of showing the superiority of the person who places the trap over the one who is the target of it”. In this sense, Flávia entrusted to her ex-partner both the news of the pregnancy and the intention to interrupt it, in order to count on his support. However, the ex-partner communicates the news of the pregnancy to the members of his family, submitting Flávia to an imagined network of judgments, shame, and abandonment in case she took her abortion plans forward.

Feeling trapped in the transition to motherhood and affected by physiological and psychological changes in the ongoing pregnancy, perceived as unpleasant, Flávia finds it difficult to continue the academic trajectory, deciding to temporarily interrupt it. As some studies point out, the problems related to physiology that affect pregnant women are pointed out as a condition that can interfere with the progress of the academic trajectory, leading to their abandonment (Soares et al., 2017). In the case analyzed, the feeling of guilt raised by the tension between the physical-psychological transformations of pregnancy and academic demands reveals the difficulty of reconciling the semiotic fields of motherhood and the university, raising a sense of inadequacy that promoted her removal of the educational context. Thus, one of the biggest challenges faced by Flávia was to find a symbolic place to become a mother at a time when academic education occupied a central place in her life.

With the birth of her daughter and the lack of support from her social network, Flávia resorted to the strategy of imaginative escape from reality, through fictional stories. An attempt not to face difficult thoughts and feelings, about events perceived as imprisonment of the self – inserted in a field of impossibilities –, and which caused intense psychological suffering. After all, the “mother” and “housewife” signs referred her to traditional gender roles exercised by the women in her family, to whom she tried to distance herself through academic training. With the self-regulating “university” sign temporarily banned, she felt as if she was “walking on the tightrope”, on the boundary between sanity < > non-sanity. It is worth mentioning that social support is a protective factor and appears to have the potential to mitigate impacts in the face of challenging events that permeate the transition to motherhood (Maffei, Menezes, & Crepaldi, 2019; Moreno et al., 2020).

With her daughter’s growth, other strategies were constructed in an attempt to repair the self, such as accepting the support perceived as unqualified offered by the father to assist her in the care of the daughter, allowing her a certain “freedom” to return to the university context. Later, her daughter’s entry into kindergarten also allowed more time to devote to studies. Unlike what the literature indicates – that is, that during this type of transition in development, changes occur in the social support network to expand support, which is offered mainly by the partner and by female figures such as the mother and mother-in-law, as well as by friends (Maffei et al., 2019) –, Flávia’s emotional and instrumental support was scarce and offered more consistently by her father.

In addition, she also chose to gradually resume her academic activities in order to achieve them, despite the existence of her daughter – perceived as a “hindrance” to the realization of her personal-professional goals built throughout her life trajectory. As other studies point out (Vieira et al., 2019), university students who had children during their academic trajectory reported significant challenges to reconcile the double, or even triple working hours, pointing to the lack of support in caring for the home the children as one of

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<sup>4</sup> In the original text: “Uma armadilha semiótica é uma forma de ‘captura’ simbólica do self de uma outra pessoa, em uma rede de vergonha, inferioridade ou outra forma de mostrar a superioridade da pessoa que coloca a armadilha sobre aquele que é alvo da mesma” (Valsiner, 2012, p. 29).

the main problems faced. Thus, aiming at tracing a different path in relation to the women of her family, whose destiny was doomed to reproductive roles, academic education represented a highly valued goal for Flávia, associated with personal and family fulfillment.

The persistence of psychological suffering in the face of the challenges in reconciling motherhood and the academic career led Flávia to find another reparation strategy: to start psychotherapy. Through this dialogical space, she was able to co-construct, with her therapist, an important repairing sign for the disruptive event in her life trajectory: it would be "*difficult*", but not "*impossible*". In other words, her daughter's existence was not an obstacle that imprisons her in a field of impossibilities, but which, despite making the challenge of persisting towards the goal of academic education greater – full of self-value –, it was still possible to be achieved.

## Conclusion

Over the past decades, Higher Education has been the target of numerous national and international educational policies, with emphasis on contextual, philosophical, ideological, and structural discussions that have influenced the conditions of access, permanence, democratization, and universalization of Higher Education in the country. In this way, the expansion of Higher Education and the feminist movement promoted a significant increase in the number of women at the university. However, even today, the challenge of reconciling motherhood and academic training is an obstacle to the permanence of young women in the academic trajectory.

In this endeavor, complex developmental phenomena are at stake, such as the normative transition to adulthood and the non-normative transition to motherhood, which require intense self-reconstruction in order to sustain these multiple and often ambivalent positions. The rupture experience that an unexpected pregnancy can represent in the life trajectory and, particularly, in the academic trajectory of a young university student will require intense efforts in the attempt to build dynamic self-repair strategies, in order to reconstruct a sense of self, that is, to rescue a certain sense of continuity, integrity, and identity: meanings about who she was, who she is, and who she will be. In this sense, it is essential to build a connection between the present and the past, of what the young woman had envisioned for herself in terms of personal-collective life goals, as well as her persistence in academic training towards labor market insertion – which it involves a connection between past-present and future, with what the person aims to become or achieve in the future.

In this scenario of intense and complex developmental demands, the gender issue proves to be important, as it crosses the personal experiences of young university students in the socio-cultural context. Thus, even today, women are given the responsibility for reproductive roles, which involves caring for children and doing household chores, based on the belief in a natural ability of motherhood. This personal-cultural expectation will influence the type of social support that a young woman who becomes pregnant in the academic trajectory will receive. Non-support or insufficient social support may jeopardize the students' permanence in their academic trajectory.

The university also proves to be fundamental for the permanence, with dignity, of young people who have obtained access to Higher Education, offering an adaptive support structure, and facilitating actions that avoid failure and abandonment. When this does not happen, pregnancy in the academic trajectory endangers a dignified permanence, the academic success, and course completion of these young women. This has a wide repercussion in the life of a young woman, because the context of Higher Education consists of a space for human development and the interruption of this academic trajectory implies the exclusion of the opportunity to access knowledge and hegemonic cultural goods, as well as a critical and political awareness which involves, among other things, the struggle for equal rights between genders.

## Contributors

F. S. QUEIROZ, J. S. NASCIMENTO, and F. D. T. FONSECA contributed to the literature review described in the section “Transition to motherhood in the academic trajectory”, and also participated in the discussion of results and analysis and interpretation of data, while V. V. PONTES contributed to the analysis and interpretation of data, discussion of results, and review and approval of the final version of the article.

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