

Young adult trajectories: life cycle and social mobility*

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ABSTRACT

This article aims at analyzing the transition to adulthood through interviews with youngsters from both genders living in Rio de Janeiro. It was found that the transition to adulthood is intertwined with a social mobility project which is best understood through the history of the interviewees and their families. Freedom, the value of individual privacy, access to education, the possibility of financial independence through work, and distinction vis-à-vis the parents' generation are presented as fundamental elements in this simultaneous transition between classes and maturity levels.

Keywords: family, life trajectory, social mobility, youth.

RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar os processos de transição para a fase adulta do ciclo de vida a partir de entrevistas realizadas com jovens, de ambos os sexos, moradores no Rio de Janeiro. No universo pesquisado, percebe-se que a passagem para a vida adulta está entrelaçada ao projeto de mobilidade social que é apreendido através da história da família e do próprio indivíduo entrevistado. A liberdade, a valorização da intimidade individual, o acesso à educação, a possibilidade de independência financeira através do trabalho e a distinção em relação à geração dos pais são elementos apresentados como fundamentais nesse movimento de transições de classe e de níveis de maturidade.

Palavras-chave: família, juventude, mobilidade social, trajetória de vida.

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Introduction

The research project entitled “Middle class families: young adults’ perspectives on social change” aimed at approaching changes in contemporary middle class families, more particularly the elongation of youth. This has been indicated by studies on youth, and by a previous research effort in which I studied three female generations from middle class families living in Rio de Janeiro. In these social segments, the extended period during which young adults live at the original family’s home and their late entry in the labor market (something associated with continuity of education into college) have been singled out as recurrent facts, which configure a particular kind of transition to adulthood. The original focus of the present research project was on the young adults’ life projects and the relative importance they ascribe to family relations and friendships, interpreted along class, gender, and generation lines. This project ended up being revised based on the outcomes produced during early interviews.

In order to assemble a research field, I activated my own social networks as well as those of the undergraduate students participating in this project in the Social Service School at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). The criteria for selecting the interviewees included having concluded or ongoing higher education, residency in Rio de Janeiro, and ages between 20 and 30. Aspects pertaining to religion, marital status, race/ethnicity as defined by the subjects, and household organization were left open. This procedure produced a heterogeneous pool of young adults, who nonetheless shared similar accounts of their life trajectories foregrounding a project of upward social mobility. This aspect came quickly to surface during the early interviews. Initial discussions about fieldwork based on the profile of the early interviewees ended up introducing the theoretical and methodological question of social mobility, which was not included in the original project outline. We therefore had to rewrite the interview guide in order to include life trajectories and the formulation of projects before proceeding with the interviews.

This article will develop issues related to class mobility and transition to adulthood presented during the life trajectory accounts of eleven unmarried young adults, six men and five women. In these life trajectory accounts, some topics such as family, work, and education appeared more saliently. This allowed them to compare their own life experiences and projects with those of their parents, something which elicited an inter-generational history showing different possibilities with respect to family organization, education, and profession.

The tension between a desire for social and professional mobility by increasing the level of education and the maintenance of socio-cultural patterns permeates the accounts, and is presented as one among the multiple and diverse ways of experiencing the transition to adulthood. This tension becomes evident in the elaboration of a life project which seeks, on the one hand, to uphold values

inherited from the original family, and, on the other, to reach a better status in society by means of a university degree and a more favorable position in the job market.

The investment made by young adults in a higher education project takes place within a broader context of changes in educational and economic patterns in a complex and heterogeneous society¹ which remains highly unequal.² If today there are greater opportunities for upward social mobility through education, this is apprehended and experienced differently by young individuals and their families. Family trajectories and inter-generational differences are vital for understanding the projects elaborated by the young adults, which are marked by a double movement: transition to adulthood and class mobility.

For these young adults, to pursue their education up to the university level is both an effort for achieving autonomy and independence vis-à-vis their families and a context which offers their life projects no guarantees of continuity. The effort towards this double transition in class and age status implies, on its turn, a constant questioning of oneself, an ever-renewed evaluation of the project's viability and the desire to keep it or not. Even though this is presented as an individual movement, to formulate projects and question them occur by means interactions within the different social worlds in which young people circulate. Moral conduct codes learned during primary socialization are paramount in this process, and even where there is a will to break off from the original family, these codes remain as a reference for one's choices and definition of life projects.

This situation is experienced by individuals in ambiguous ways. To leave home and be economically independent are two processes understood by young people as markers of passage to adulthood. To quit the parents' house may or may not imply open conflict and family drama; to be independent may or may not lead to a rupture with the exchange circuit of goods, favors and affections within the family network.

Economic analyses based on data from the 2007 National Household Sampling Survey indicated the emergence of the so-called "new middle class" (Neri, 2008), as well as a decline in per capita income inequality since 2001. Access to higher educational levels and to better qualified job positions are indications of this new economic outlook (Barros et al., 2010). At the level of interpersonal relations, family incentives for their members to pursue further education are a socio-cultural element within this broader picture of socio-economic and social mobility changes – a moment which is different from any other in Brazil's history.

¹ Modern-contemporary society is identified by its socio-economic heterogeneity and by the coexistence of various cultural patterns. At the level of individuals, such heterogeneity and complexity are reflected in their life trajectories and in the social relations they establish in the different social worlds in which they circulate (Velho, 1994).

² Pastore (2001) explains the persistence of inequality in spite of social mobility by pointing to the diversity and heterogeneity of social trajectories: "In terms of a dynamic analysis, it is found that social inequality stems from the fact that the vast majority of Brazilians who move upwards in the social scale runs small distances, and only a minority goes long distances. This causes a narrowing of the social pyramid, which translates into inequality."

Pastore and Silva (2000) argue that social mobility in Brazil since the 1990's has shown a circular movement whereby the occupational rise of some would correspond to the departure of others from the job market due to death, retirement, or descent into lower occupational strata. Education plays a vital role in this process, something which was not the case in previous historical periods when occupational mobility did not require high educational levels.

These authors approach inter and intra-generational dynamics by comparing the life trajectories of parents and children, as well as the changes that occur during the lifespan of young adults who today enjoy broader access to education: "A good education has become a vital tool for competing and succeeding in an increasingly demanding market" (Pastore, 2001). In economic and sociological analyses, there are different methodological perspectives and more or less optimistic views on the reduction of socioeconomic inequalities. There is consensus though with respect to the role played by education in this process during the last few years.

For the young adults, in spite of social and economic instability, the path to social mobility cannot be understood only by reference to achievements in education and professional careers. World views and life styles are vital for understanding the choices made at this moment in life, and speak to the insertion of each individual in various social worlds and networks of sociability. These correspond to the relative position the individual "occupies in the social space, that is, in the structure of distribution of different kinds of capital [...]" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 27). They define a field of possibilities, the socio-cultural dimensions, and the space for formulating and implementing projects.³

The very definition of one's moment in life is an issue for the young. The meaning of being young or adult comprises esthetic patterns and the valorization of certain life experiences and behavior codes. The institutional aspects of the life cycle remain nonetheless important for defining age identity; thus, subjective aspects entertain a tense relationship with socio-juridical patterns.

In anthropological and sociological studies, the issue of life stages, especially with respect to transitional moments, is regarded as a fundamental social dimension for understanding the changing meanings attributed to age and the transformations in family and generational relations (Camarano, 2006; Debert, 2006; Lins de Barros, 2006a, 2006b; Peixoto, 2004).

The contemporary moment has been marked by the flexibilization and blurring of age borders, and the plurality and heterogeneity of generational and age experiences. Ages are no longer understood as chronological references through which individuals enter modern society and are regulated in their rights and duties. This would also imply that such stages define styles that may or

³ For Velho (1994, p. 46), "individual projects always interact with others within a field of possibilities. They do not operate in a vacuum, but based on cultural paradigms and premises shared by particular universes."

may not be adopted, and establish frontiers between individuals and social segments – as is the case with youth or old age as ways of being in the world.

Underlying this flexible and plural characterization of age identities, there is also the assumption of a break in the sequential linearity of life stages and in the expected connection between events in the life cycle. The “traditional” transition from youth to adulthood, identified by simultaneous events such as leaving the parents’ home, getting married and joining the labor market, gives way to dissociations between sexuality, marriage and procreation, and differential situations of class, gender and ethnicity which become increasingly relevant for apprehending the process of transitioning to autonomy and independence (Camarano, 2006; Guerreiro; Abrantes, 2004; Heilborn; Cabral, 2006). The uncertainties of the job market, interruptions in education, going back and forth to the parents’ house lead to a dissociation between existential autonomy and the social and economic independence typical of this transitional moment. In this literature, along with an emphasis on the social construction of age meanings, life cycle stages are analyzed as they are perceived by individuals in different social contexts, as maturity levels which generate and nourish new types of social hierarchy. Transition to adulthood, for instance, will presume a series of factors which should be made evident beyond chronological age such as experience, responsibility, and social, political and interpersonal commitments.

The formulation of life projects is therefore encompassed by this socio-cultural and economic context where class and gender conditions are fundamental for short, medium and long term perspectives (Franch, 2009; Leccardi, 2005).

Studying, working and leaving the parents’ home: transitional events and gender differences

In a previous research project approaching three generations of middle class women, the passage from youth to adulthood was interpreted by means of the transitoriness of life projects, the importance attributed to self-improvement, and the search for professional specialization and love relations. The sequential break of events marking the transition to adulthood is experienced by the permanence in the original family’s house, the circulation of these young adults between the houses of divorced parents or grandmothers, and eventual experiences of living alone which happen in parallel with professionalization and sexual experiences. The valorization of individual autonomy shared by the different generations was not necessarily associated with the young women’s project of financial independence (Lins de Barros, 2009; Lins de Barros et al., 2009). Differently from the individuals approached in this article, the young women in this previous research had parents with higher education degrees who occupied well-paid positions allowing them to support the extension of their children’s dependence on them.

The young adults approached in the present study have in common a project of education and social mobility, but there are differences with respect to family trajectories, life conditions, and attitudes towards the possibility of achieving the plans elaborated throughout the years. These are six men and five women who see themselves as belonging to the middle class. Given the importance of education in the passage to adulthood, the chosen age group sought to encompass individuals who were doing or who had completed college education. Age, sex, educational level and class combined with other factors brought to surface by their life stories accounts. These include the project of upward social mobility coupled with a tense process of achieving autonomy and financial independence; it is this project that characterizes the particularity of the universe studied.

Memory and life project are part of a same narrative logic which constructs biographies and trajectories while lending meaning to events and individual actions. Thus, the young adults also talk about their life projects from the standpoint of the situation in which they found themselves today, and of their intention to organize a history of themselves.⁴ In this transitional moment, some culturally validated markers of maturity levels are stressed, such as the possibility of leaving the parental home, working and being financially independent, getting married and having children. In the accounts, the dimensions of age and social class cross with the perception the interviewees have of themselves and of society, as well as with evaluations on changes in personal and family life and in the broader social order.

All research subjects are single, and one of the guys (Narciso)⁵ has a fourteen month son. Even though color/ethnicity is not an aspect dealt with in this article, it is interesting to present their self-definitions as this might contribute to delineate the profile of this group of young adults undergoing a process of social mobility. Thus, two of the men declared to be white, two *pardos* (brown), one light brown, and the other, “Latin American”. Among the women, one declared to be white, another brown, one light brown, one black and the fifth “more like a mulatta”.

With regards to education and occupation, men are distributed among the following fields and neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro: Diego is a teacher in private schools; he graduated in philosophy, and is doing a Master’s in this field; his monthly income varies between 1,500 and 2,000 Brazilian reais, and he lives in Vila Isabel (North Region) in a three-bedroom apartment shared with other two fellows. Alex is a telecommunications engineer and is currently unemployed; he lives off of “savings” accumulated during previous jobs and is also supported by his mother; he lives with

⁴ This research put forth a perspective focusing on the social construction of biographies (Bourdieu, 1996; Lins de Barros, 2006a, 2009; Velho, 1994). It interpreted the meanings brought about by the narratives, contextualizing them as discourses made by the individuals about themselves and society. It proposes to interpret the “flux of social discourse” (Geertz, 1978) by focusing on the conditions under which these narratives were produced and by seeking to identify recurrences of meaning in the different accounts.

⁵ All the interviewees’ names are fictitious.

Diego. Lucas is an electric engineer with two specializations, one in electrical engineering and another one in security; he works for a large electricity company and earns 4,000 reais a month; he lives on his own in a rented apartment in Vila Isabel. Artur is a physics PhD student with a Master's and a B.A. in this same field; he receives a PhD scholarship with a monthly stipend of 1,800 reais; he shares a rented apartment in Botafogo (South Region) with a man and a woman, both foreigners. Nelson is a languages and literature undergraduate student, and receives a scholarship stipend of 300 reais, for the classes he teaches at his university; his other expenses are paid for by his father within limits which are negotiated between them; he lives with his parents and a brother in the family house in Jacarepaguá, Praça Seca (West Region). Narciso holds an accounting degree; he works as an accountant in an investment bank and has the possibility of making an MBA at the Getúlio Vargas Foundation paid by the bank; he earns 4,000 reais and his family income totals around 10,000 reais, including the salaries of his mother and two sisters; he lives with his mother, three sisters and a niece in an apartment in Bonsucesso (North Region).

The women's residential location, training and occupation are as follows: Sara is a social service undergraduate student and is financially dependent on her parents; during weekdays, she lives in Botafogo with other students, and in the weekends she returns to her parents' house in Campo Grande (West Region). Natália is a physics PhD student with a Master's and a B.A. in that same field; she receives a monthly stipend of 1,800 reais as part of her graduate scholarship; her family income, around 3,300 reais, includes her mother's minimum wage public assistance benefit, and her graduated sister's salary of 1,000 reais; the three of them live in a one-bedroom rented apartment in Botafogo. Tatiana holds a pedagogy degree and works as a receptionist in a firm, with a monthly salary of 600 reais; her family income totals around 2,000 reais, and comprises her father's salary and retirement pension, plus payments from rented realty; she lives with her parents and a sister in a house owned by them in Méier (North Region). Ingrid holds a social sciences degree, and is a civil servant working as an administrative manager for the city of Rio de Janeiro; she earns 1,500 reais a month, and her mother and sister help pay her monthly expenses; she lives with the sister and a cousin in a rented apartment in Lapa (Downtown); her mother spends some days a week with her daughters, but she lives in Pedra de Guaratiba (West Region). Laura is a Law school graduate, with Master's in philosophy and is currently a PhD student in social service; after teaching in a private college, she supports herself by means of a 1,800 reais stipend from her PhD scholarship, and shares with a friend the expenses of a rented apartment in Flamengo (South Region).

The educational trajectory of most these young adults included public schools since basic education. According to discourses emphasizing their own efforts and merit, some were able to get scholarships for studying in private schools during high school. Two of these are friends since this

period, when they both went to a catholic high school in the South Region. One of them, Ingrid, told of her experience by emphasizing her personal commitment with this project.

There I went and did it again, all by myself, I didn't even told my mom. My mom was scared, "You have no money, how are you going to do it? Soon it will be time for the college entrance exams, you'll have to keep the level up. What now?" "I'll sort this out, don't worry". Then I went back there, did the dynamics and all, my mom was getting disheartened [...]. Then I went there to study, my sister also got a scholarship, but my sister was not very nice so her scholarship dwindled with time. There was a time my mother would pay almost full fee for her, while I had a 70% discount.

Similarly, Nelson commented, "whenever a school allowed for those examinations to get a scholarship, I would go there and do them. During one year I had a 100% discount in the school I went, and for getting good grades I also got a 100% scholarship for an English course".

Public universities, be it undergraduate but especially graduate programs, are also present in the trajectories of most interviewees. Some like Lucas did the entire trajectory, from basic education to graduate school, in public institutions:

Public institutions until the very end, the last year of high school in a public school, from kindergarten to the third year. After that, I did a private preparatory course for the university's entrance exam. [...] As a matter of fact, I did not spend much with my studies. For college, I also went to a public school, and... After that there were my graduate degrees; one was paid for and the other was public. So, I spent very little with my studies.

In all these discourses, there is the idea of bringing together their own actions and those of their family group so these young people could pursue their university education. This is manifest in scholarships for undergraduate and graduate studies, financial support from the family, and the interviewees' own salaries – this was the case of Narciso and Tatiana, who paid for their college degrees obtained in private schools. These two were not the only ones to work while studying.⁶ During high school, some interviewees were already in the labor market. These were "eventual" jobs, like selling underwear or working as a vendor through temporary and fragile employment contracts, not very different from some of their parents'.

Educational mobility is also married with spatial mobility. Most of the subjects have transited, either alone or along with relatives, between different cities and Rio de Janeiro neighborhoods. Significant gender differences in residential itineraries are reflected in the greater geographical mobility of men. The training of this set of interviewees might be a reason for such difference, but it also makes sense if one thinks in terms of gender-based behavior patterns which created better possibilities for men to leave their cities and go to Rio de Janeiro in order to study.

⁶ As Sposito (2005, p. 106) puts it, "Thus, for the Brazilian youth, school and work are projects that overlap, or that will be differently stressed according to the moment in the life cycle and the social conditions allowing them to live a juvenile life."

The international emigration of Brazilians during the turn of the twenty-first century shows a trajectory which starts with a trip to the United States, where they enter the job market as masons, butlers or maids, and is followed by plans to return to Brazil (Assis; Campos, 2009). This experience is in sharp contrast with that of the four interviewees who left their parents' homes in other Brazilian states or in other cities within the state of Rio de Janeiro in order to continue their studies into higher education, or to seek for a better job. Diego was the one who left home the earliest. When he was sixteen, he left his parents' house in order to join a religious career; he spent eight years in catholic seminars in different cities, and studied until he got a philosophy degree. He moved to Rio de Janeiro in search for a job after he decided to abandon the original project.⁷ Alex and Lucas came to Rio de Janeiro on their own after they got into engineering school. Artur continues his studies in graduate school after having lived in Belo Horizonte with some relatives' friends in order to prepare to take the entrance exams at the university in Viçosa (Minas Gerais state), where he attended college while living in a student dorm.

The other two subjects who never left the neighborhood they have been living since childhood are considering the possibility of leaving the house. Narciso's financial independence allows him to consider the idea of living on his own, and plan the financed purchase of an apartment. His financial independence is linked to his responsibilities towards his family and son. He has been working since an early age, and paid for his undergraduate studies.

I have been working for a long time. Let me see... I've sold nuts on the streets, I was a delivery boy for De Millus, I delivered underwear, I have worked as a locksmith, a telemarketing operator, I have done some internships, an internship in TIM [mobile phone company] for two years, then in a foreign company which was pretty much the same thing. Then I went to work with auditing, I audited for a Swiss bank, a little over a year, one year and a half. Then after that, I moved to the bank, to the BBM bank where I work today.

Just as the other interviewed men, Narciso understands that he cannot afford expenses beyond his economic condition, and knows which steps he can afford to take – even being someone who does not go without spending on leisure and on his two “girlfriends”, one of them the mother of his son. The reason behind his project of leaving the house is therefore less the cohabitation with his mother and sisters than the realization of his independence.

For Nelson, it is the search for privacy and freedom that leads him to look for an apartment for himself. The conflict-ridden relationship with his father due to his sexual orientation and the presence of a brother with serious psychological problems have led him to seek his mother's support in order to carry out his project of leaving the parental home. The perception of the

⁷ The transit allowed for by religious life made easier Diego's displacement and his project. It is not possible to delve deeper into this question here, but this will be done in the future.

constraints and conflicts he faces for preserving his privacy and freedom to take home friends and boyfriends brings his experience closer to that of the interviewed women – with the exception of Sara, as will be seen below.

Among the women, four live with their parents, with the mother, sisters and cousins. Even though Sara spends her weekdays in an apartment shared with other female university students, her reference is the parents' home in Campo Grande, in the city's West Region. The experience of living away from her parents and together with other young women has prompted her to dedicate much of her time to religious activities among evangelical university students. Sara refers to the apartment she shares with the other students as the "Alpha and Omega office". The house in Campo Grande is her family home. This experience is a moment of transition and definition of future projects guided by religious militancy, a sort of preliminary experience of leaving the parents' house which follows a more or less defined direction. This experience is similar to the one found previously in a research I carried out among university students who make of their individual migration to Rio de Janeiro a transitional experience towards an independent and autonomous life (Lins de Barros, 2004). In any case, Sara does not think of a future separately from family plans, as she intends to work at her parents' shop after graduating while conciliating this activity with her religious militancy.⁸

Natália has had two experiences of leaving and returning to the parents' house. In one of them, when she was nineteen, she lived with a boyfriend for five years and then returned to the house where she lived with her mother, a sister and an aunt. The one year and seven month period she spent in Germany during her PhD, when she had to face on her own life in a foreign country, was also lived as an experience of having left the parental home. Upon her return to Rio de Janeiro in order to live again with her mother and sister, she felt a retrocession in her difficulties for re-adapting to family life. This was manifest in constant negotiations over everything, from financial to affective issues. Her project of having a place for herself, where she plans to constitute a family and take her career forward, does not exclude her responsibility towards her mother, whose hearing is impaired. Therefore, the plan of leaving the house includes a close relationship with her mother. Responsibility is part of her project of autonomy and freedom.

Laura has left her parents' house in Maricá (Rio de Janeiro state) in order to pursue her college studies. At that moment, she lived with her sister in the city of Niterói, also in Rio de Janeiro. Later on, a job in Rio de Janeiro has again driven her away from the parental home. After renting a room for a while, she was finally able to share an apartment with a friend.

⁸ Religious militancy should be stressed in Sara's life project. This topic, which is vital for understanding the trajectory of individuals in Brazilian society, would demand a literature review which could not be done here.

With the exception of Sara, the youngest among all female interviewees, the others show more clearly a desire for privacy and freedom which is to be fulfilled by leaving the parents' house. For Natália, Tatiana and Ingrid, a tense and conflict-ridden relationship with the parents or sisters has been an important factor in their desire to live on their own, which is nonetheless hindered by unfavorable personal and family financial conditions. Referring to her sister in response to a question about how she would get an apartment for herself, Ingrid showed irritation towards the situation she lived in and her sister's behavior and attitudes towards their apartment's common space:

It would not be at all like this mess here. Look, these belong to my sister, who is an arts graduate [she points to the shelves with various materials – paper, plastic, boxes...]. She thinks the apartment is her studio, so she gets mad when we try to keep things tidy. No, each furniture has a color. My mother will buy things and we say, "Mom, isn't it all dark?" Then she brings these light-colored things, it's all a mess.

Natália and Ingrid define very well the role played by family relationships in supporting them financially and in organizing the domestic environment. The idea of responsibility permeates the meanings they ascribe to their own lives. Natália works since she was fifteen, and, since she never had full scholarship, she paid for part of the fees in the schools she attended. Based on calculations she made on the household budget, she shows how herself, her mother and her sister – who "took a little longer to become responsible" – contribute to expenses with food, rent, medicine, and clothing. Ingrid reports on her own effort and persistence for getting scholarships in private schools. She follows her mother's recommendations for an independent life project based on work:

"You have to work, you have to have your own money, your first husband has to be your occupation, a worthy job, so you can take care of your own lives, have a house, a ceiling, a field." Thus, this idea is quite insisted upon here in our house.

Tatiana gives more importance to the comfort she finds in her parents' home than to the search for a new residence. In her parents' place she can count on the available furniture, appliances, paid telephone, internet and health care bills, as well as on her mother's domestic work – she pays for her to take care of her clothes. Thus, to stay in the room she shares with her sister is a strategy for dealing with paternal control and intrusions on her privacy. She is also willing to cover for eventual financial difficulties faced by her father, as when she paid for his credit card bill. When recalling this fact, she highlights the idea of responsibility and family reciprocity, defined by Tatiana as "care", a terms she uses to describe his father's concern with guaranteeing the family's basic expenses as well as a "certain comfort".

Religious experience has also contributed to the profile of this research universe, and makes up, along with representations on the family, a picture for distinguishing between young males and females. All men have identified themselves as Christians, mostly Catholics, and there is no passage through other religions or churches. Among women, relationship with religion shows a less traditional character, tending to follow individual and transitional choices – with the exception of Sara, who is evangelical and an active participant in the Alpha and Omega “Christian student movement”, for which she plays a leadership role in the university campus. Natália is a Catholic “by training”. Tatiana is sympathetic to “spiritualism”. Ingrid currently attends a messianic synagogue. Laura goes to umbanda, but she was once a Catholic and has already attended candomblé.

Religious transit in the case of women and the continuity of a family-based religious reference in the case of men may become at once clearer and more complex when one looks at this religious dimension along with the greater or lesser tension and drama in family relations, as discussed above. This is seen in the more direct forms whereby men engage with their parents, that is, by not making problematic the financial aid they provide when they are in a better financial condition. Of the men interviewed, only Nelson showed a discourse filled with tension; he remains “stuck” in his room all day in order to study, listen to music and try to engage in internet conversations via MSN, Twitter, Fotolog, or YouTube. He communicates with his father – who acts as a quite impersonal “bank” – through paper notes: Nelson writes down how much he needs and his father leaves the amount solicited on the same piece of furniture. Nelson never abuses this fatherly bank.

But even in this case as well as in Tatiana’s, who feels watched over all the time by her father, the view is that the parents, and above all the mothers, are a reference for life and for work understood as a value. Natália is the only one who declared to have learned nothing with her mother and much less with her father, with whom she has not been in contact for years. Here, there are also gender differences. Diogo encapsulates what men think of their parents in the expression “a model of achievement”. Narciso develops this perception further when referring to his mother, who became a widow very early in life:

My reference is her. Even with all the difficulties which came along with losing a husband having four children, she did her thing and raised us. None of us has become a criminal, no one followed a wrong path, all of us have focused on studying and on progressing. And this has nothing to do with remaining close to us, because she used to work a lot. I have her as... as... not as a mirror, but as a model, so to say.

Even while holding a more critical perspective, the women also presented the values received from their fathers and mothers as a life legacy important for positioning themselves in the world, and, above all, for their future projects. Female work becomes a definition for being a woman, as

Ingrid has put it with respect to her mother's advice on marrying first of all work, and only then seeking a husband. Tatiana's determination for continuing to work and not replace the fatherly authority with that of a husband is perceived as an attitude similar to the one experienced by her parents, who struggled against her motherly grandparents who opposed their marriage – they were nonetheless able to keep “struggling” and acquire their own house. Laura on her turn sees paternal values as responsible for her professional training, and as well as for her position in the world marked by respect for others and concern for political events and injustices.

Social mobility and transition in the life cycle: intertwined phenomena

Struggles, hardship, overcoming social life conditions, effort and hard work set the tone for the subjects' accounts on their parents' life and moral legacy for their own life projects. Thus, even with the familiar crises mentioned here especially by the women and by Nelson, the interviewees did not feel they have had, or will have, a significant break with parental values. Except for Natália, all young adults interviewed singled out their parents as the most important references as far as moral standards are concerned. The parents' life trajectories are perceived and valued for their positive achievements, such as overcoming unfavorable social conditions or valuing honest work. This would have opened up social mobility perspectives for their children, so they would have their own life projects. This picture is not so different from the one painted by Oro (2004) and Machado (2004) in their analyses of research data on representations by university students and professionals on the values they inherited and on their references in daily life. Both studies found that the family, in its multiple and new modalities, is represented as a foundation for forming the individual character, as well as an important reference for defining their religious affiliations.

An outcome of expected mobility is the gradual distinction of young adults vis-à-vis their parents due to their new social interactions and experiences. University life, for instance, may both define an opportunity for upward mobility (an idea which, as remarked above, is shared by the family nucleus) and open up a window for the quest for individual independence and freedom.

Even in the case of those whose parents have a higher education degree (Narciso's mother is a social worker and Nelson's father concluded engineering school after marriage and fatherhood) or who entered college more recently (such as Artur's father), there is a process of educational and professional distinction vis-à-vis their fathers and mothers.⁹ Diego's parents worked “in the fields”; today, he is a mason and she is a maid. Artur's mother is a seamstress. Ingrid's mother works for the city as an assistant nurse and part-time as an attendant; Sara's parents run a market in Campo

⁹ Narciso talks about his mother's trajectory at various levels: educational, professional and spatial. The latter refers to her displacement from a slum to an apartment in the North Region. His narrative seeks to present an exemplary case, with the clear intention of demarcating his values of reference.

Grande. Laura's father owns a barber shop in Maricá and her mother is a basic education teacher. Alex's mother was a bank cashier for many years and is today unemployed, just as his father, who has made some attempts at starting his own "business".

For these young adults, upward social mobility is triggered by a higher education diploma, as explained by Narciso:

Yes, she rose, because my mother has a Master's or something like that, so I think this was vital for her to rise. My financial evolution also took place after I graduated. My salary almost doubled. No, it was an almost 150% increase. This owed much to my degree.

To delineate this research universe in terms of class condition meant to observe the elaboration of social distinctions made from the point of view of family history and in relation to the field of possibilities which had been laid out for each of the interviewees. Thus, during research attention was given to social trajectories, networks of belonging, experiences of mobility within the family and by each of the subjects, and their contact with groups and circles affecting their world view and life style (Velho, 1994). The social site that they construct at this moment in their life trajectories defines, in Ortner's terms (Ortner, 2003), a class project by constituting a desire for change in one's position and for a constant investment in the construction of a class identity.

The social mobility characterizing these young adults' trajectories should be apprehended based on their biographies and family trajectories. These are vital for understanding how young people coming from low education families and standing precarious work conditions were able to join a university and are seeking work positions closer to their professional and financial aspirations, which are marked by prestige and status. In a way, the economists' evaluations singling out education as the best condition for accessing goods are reproduced in the subjects' positive discourse about the acquisition of educational and cultural capital.

Prestige and pride are distinctive marks of some of the young adults who were the first in their families to go to a university.

I am the only one who has been able to enter a public college and achieve. I came from nowhere, and I am now earning some money through what I have studied, and being successful. So this ends up being an example for the entire family. What they think of it? They are proud... I returned home for the end of the year celebrations and there are now a lot of neighbors who know me, and I don't know them.

The women, even those who pursue continuous qualification in graduate school, have a more critical stance towards the possibilities made available to them. Ingrid has put this perception most clearly. A social sciences graduate at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, she is today employed in the administration of a city hospital. She deals critically with her social position: "I see myself as belonging to the class C, I don't like a creeping and crawling middle class. I think I am a

bit below the creeping and crawling middle class.” This critical view, impregnated with the knowledge she acquired during the social sciences course, made Ingrid the only one who did not consider herself as part of the “middle classes”. All the others saw themselves as belonging to a segment of the middle classes, which today is made up of a “middle class”, “middle middle class”, “lower middle class”, “ascending middle class”, as Narciso has put it.

Class distinction and hierarchy become a yardstick for comparison, first of all, with the parents’ generation, then with one’s own childhood and with other social segments, with respect to the conditions for access to higher education and consumption.

To buy a computer, a television set, a sound system, to pay for one’s trips, leisure and so forth, to plan the purchase of a car or an apartment through installment plans, put them on a par with the middle classes according to their own accounts. The project of pursuing one’s education further and getting better positions in the job market completes the definition of class showed by these young adults.

To conclude, we have seen that there is a project of social mobility intertwined with the transit to another moment in one’s life trajectory. Freedom, the preservation of intimacy, the possibility of independence through work and relative disembedding from the family are presented as fundamental elements in this transitional movement between classes and maturity levels. One can be young and adult at the same time; to have independence and be affectively dependent on the family; to have children and not get married; to be economically responsible for the family and to aspire to privacy; to live with one’s own subjective and objective uncertainties, as well as with those of one’s parents. There is nonetheless a feeling that these correspond positively to the social expectation of moving on to another level of life, even if this is not ritualized. In this sense, the life cycle is the temporal marker of one’s trajectory. In the contemporary moment, this marker points precisely to the complexity of society, where individualistic and traditional values coexist in the actions of a same individual, in independence and autonomy projects, and in the preservation and valorization of the family’s institutional and affective ties.

These young adults’ life projects do not translate into a “hardening” of life, as Nelson evaluates when he defines a young person as a “non-paralyzed adult”. Just as the parents who got into college “not on the right age”, they too may think that the future does not end with a college degree and a position in the job market. On the other hand, all of them highlighted their personal responsibility towards their family and themselves. Far from being attached to conspicuous consumption and the satisfaction of immediate desires, they make plans, financial investments, share household expenses and help their parents. Next to such responsible attitudes and amidst inter-family conflicts, these “good boys” and above all “good girls” do not show a traditional pattern for constituting a family and love ties: to get married is a short term possibility for the men. For the women, to get married

(or “live together”) will only happen when they are sure they can sustain their own independence and autonomy. In this respect, it is worth recalling Ingrid’s mother’s advice: to marry work first and foremost.

The different ways by which the men and women in the studied universe perceive the possibilities for realizing their life projects deserve a new research investment for delving deeper into other aspects, such as their disheartening with respect to future professional plans, and the plausibility of marriage vis-à-vis principles of female autonomy and independence.

Our analysis of the transition to another life stage by means of social mobility projects showed a process and a disposition for similar action. Simultaneously, it unveils distinctions internal to the social universe studied, which point to the plurality of life experiences and different interpretations constructed by young men and women about their own life trajectories.

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