CRISES OF SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCES: ADOLESCENTS AND THEIR PROJECTS FOR FUTURE WORK(1)

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Abstract
This is a report on data raised through research, which has already finished, about Identification references in adolescents.

Objectives: To analyze and reflect upon the collected data, adolescents’ representations about the work field and their projects for future work. To conceptualize about the crises of social significances which produce and order sense and, therefore, organize our perceptions of work through social discourses and practices which have an impact on the subjectivity of adolescents and young adults.

Methodology: Brief presentation of the concepts which frame the qualitative research in this area. Reading and analysis of fragments from adolescents’ accounts, obtained in focal groups at different state secondary schools.

Conclusions: The adolescents researched portray a self-image full of uncertainty and skepticism as regards their future possibilities. The impact produced by the fall of work as an ideal of doing and being is made evident in their accounts. Only some of them link their future project with an invested and valuable activity, even if this is not associated with economic safety and wellbeing. Others present themselves as incapable to modify the state of things, which offers a field connected with consumerist values and with the idea that “you are worth what you have (in material things)”.

Key Words: representations; adolescent; work; future projects; social significances.

We have finished our research about “The current state of identification referents in adolescents...” (2000-2002) and “Current modes of the parenting exercise in families with adolescent children” (2001-2003), which continues with the same line of work in “Families with children” (2004-2006), in La Plata and satellite cities.

We still have recurrent questions which constantly re-open in young people’s daily manifestations about their possible choices, the paths they take and these paths’ particular modes.

We believe that adolescents are at a key period of psychic transformation, of subjective reorganization, trying to remove themselves from childhood parental identification referents. During this passage from the familiar to the extra-familiar, society’s support or references are of the outmost importance, since they play the role of indicators of
and foundations for such passage.

We ask ourselves two questions: Which are the supporting structures at this moment of social imaginary signification crisis? (Castoriadis, 1994, 1997) What role does work play in our adolescents, since its position as a resource that guarantees their satisfactory social positioning in society has been lost, as they face their possible futures?

We will characterize the key implicit issues within these questions: the concepts of ideals, work and social imaginary significations. We will go through the theoretical aspects of these issues and, finally, we will show some answers given by adolescents from the material obtained in the research mentioned above.

We believe that early ideal formation has a structural value in the construction of both the identification process and project. This psychic formation will become more and more complex and it will change as the subjects pass through increasingly different ties with their prime figures -whose emblems they borrow - and as they have significant encounters with others, outside the family.

The early ideal shapes the ideal self, an imaginary construction of completion formed by the identification images and statements of childhood prime figures, who grant existence and value to that self, true and certain (Aulagnier, 1975). The gradual encounter with reality, with the limits of the self, with various looks and voices from others will symbolically mark the subjects, proving an understanding of “what I am not and what I lack” and forming the ideal to aspire to: ideal of the self.

This new instance will become a pattern of measurement and self-evaluation, representative of the group, of the culture and its emblems and values, of what it accepts or rejects. Thus, the ideals are constructions which emerge from the heart of the society to which they belong, and they become founding instances of their subjectivity, through the cultural models which circulate at a particular historical point (Green, 1983; Rozitchner, 2000).

As well as opening a protective space, a place which determines anchorage, permanence and belonging to a class, to a group, to a family; the ideals embodied in figures, in models, entail and support the access to differences. They are the conditions which enable the subjects to open themselves to reality, since they represent both the known, passed down generation to generation, and the new, produced by the historical time in which they live.

All subjects make the ideals their own and give them personal meaning, thus producing the standard against which they will measure their relationships with the values and goals of the group they belong to or wish to belong.

Work, as a value, as well as the language through which culture and therefore the
family passes down its models and ideals to the new generation, precedes and follows the individual subjects. In the adolescent process of letting go of the parental instances, the access to jobs takes on a constituting value of one’s identity/subjectivity, and it is also one of the foundations which accounts for adolescent resolution, partly due to the economic independence it implies. On the psychic level, within the sublimatory processes, it is formed into an elaboration of the function of playing as long as it has the necessary added element of pleasure so that an activity is invested (Rodulfo, 1992) and not alienating. On the social level, this access operates in the form of reference as to the position the subjects might occupy among others, taking into account both their own satisfaction and their role in the generation chain, as continuation of the projects started by their predecessors (heir – successor) and as providers for future generations (predecessor – donor), to whom they will pay symbolic debt with the culture that has made them.

Freud, already in 1929, in Civilization and its discontents, stated that all man wishes to find in life is happiness and that “this plan to be happy imposed by the pleasure principle is unattainable” in absolute terms. “We try to find it in love, at work, in creations and inventions.” And he suggests that, because it is potentially within everybody’s reach, everyday work is the most effective resource to deal with discontent in culture – which brings suffering rather than happiness.

Expanding these concepts taken up by Le Fur (2002), we can point out that everyday work grants social recognition because of the outcome of such practice. The product is lost by the producer in order for it to circulate within the culture as a value. Work, then, provides identification support and symbolic value so as to face adolescent exit. This scenario is still valid for those subjects who manage to enter the work force after a variable period of training.

The discontent of current culture has become considerably more complex, not only because of the growing precariousness and reductions of work offers, but also because the intrinsic value of work has been shadowed along the crisis of social significations as a construction which give orientation, direction and meaning to society’s life and the individuals who compose it.

The globalization of the market economy, the shrinking of the State-Nation which breaks down as it moves in favor of international private assets, and the hegemony of the liberal economic model are some of the key variables which have been part of the established crisis of significations which used to be key to the subject’s formation: God, nation, state, citizen, goods, virtue, sin, work, justice, and so on.

The spaces left by the fragmentation and dilution of these significations are occupied, in daily life, by social discourses and practices created and sustained by the mass
media, cuyo ofrecer son confusos, contradictorios y paradoxales. Un cambio en la producción de subjetividad se produce entonces: de subjetividad de ciudadano a subjetividad de consumidor, asociada con el paso del Estado benefactor al Estado técnico-administrativo (Corea; Lewkowicz, 1999).

Consumo también genera reconocimiento social, pero, a diferencia del trabajo, no implica productos de los sujetos, sino una imagen efímera que debe ser constante y renovada. Además, es necesario resaltar que "el mercado y sus descontentos" responden a las reglas de demanda y oferta: el mercado premia o sanciona una empresa después de lo que ha sucedido. Por lo tanto, el proceso anticipatorio que permite la posibilidad de construir un futuro proceso laboral en adolescentes ocurrirá con obstáculos o revelará sensatez. Necesitamos señalar que las representaciones que construyen son la inscripción de las mencionadas representaciones circulantes en los sujetos. "Los actos del sujeto se externalizan en el social y el social se internaliza en los sujetos. Pero los sujetos son éticamente responsables por lo que hacen con la posición que les otorga la sociedad, condicionada por el tiempo. Ni es inexorablemente determinado ni es necesariamente confundido con la subjetividad grabada por los discursos legitimados allí" (Le Fur, 2002). El escritor hace referencia al proceso instituyente mencionado por Castoriadis (1975) como una fuerza que se opone a los sujetos y activa la creación de nuevos sentidos y el cuestionamiento de las posibilidades presentadas por las situaciones.

Volviendo a nuestro estudio, ilustraremos estos conceptos con fragmentos tomados de las producciones de los adolescentes que fueron entrevistados. Primero, describiremos la metodología utilizada para la recolección de datos.

Dado que nos concentrarnos en las maneras en que los adolescentes expresan y son hablados actualmente, los datos con los que trabajamos incluyen palabras, descripciones detalladas de situaciones, actitudes, interacciones, comportamientos, creencias y pensamientos. Trabajamos con lo que los adolescentes piensan y dicen sobre el mundo hoy, sobre ellos mismos, y sobre sus vínculos con pares y con sus familias.

El trabajo de campo se realizó en varios institutos de segundo grado, tanto urbanos como suburbanos, en La Plata y ciudades satélites. Trabajamos a través de la formación de grupos focales voluntarios. También tuvimos entrevistas con padres y un grupo de discusión con los docentes. Los grupos fueron coordinados por dos miembros del equipo de investigación, quienes tenían el encargo de mantener el registro de la dinámica del grupo y de realizar una grabación audio. Un sistema de categorización fue elaborado a partir de los protocolos de la transcripción siguiente, y un sistema de categorización se produjo después de su lectura y discusión. La construcción toma en cuenta la recurrencia de temas, el marco teórico y los objetivos establecidos. Los puntos nodales fueron establecidos una vez...
coincidences had been extracted, and they permitted the discrimination of different inclusion dimensions. The following categories resulted:

1. **Selfimage**: reference to how they perceive themselves, salient characteristics to define themselves
2. **Relationships**: how they define and describe all ties and inter-personal relationships with others
3. **Perception of reality / Strategies**: ways of perceiving reality in its various forms and facets, strategies used to solve the problems presented by each area
4. **Project**: setting expectations, desires and action plans for the post-schooling period
5. **Interests, desires, dreams and inclinations
6. **Worries**

The fragments extracted from the interviews with the researched adolescents make two movements currently taking place in young people evident: 1. the desubjective reproduction of a feeling of *impossibility* to project a future and 2. the subjective emergence which sustains a possible future and the ambition to save the values of solidarity and respect for others as fundamentals which make this attainable.

**Type 1 answers:**

“I work and study. I look after a little girl. But I get really upset when lots of kids who finish high school can’t go to college, or who finished school and are on the streets…”

“You make a really big effort to study, you get a degree and you can’t work. You have to go and cut the grass…” “Sometimes I don’t feel like going on, because now you can never be sure that you’ll have a job, even if you have a degree.”

“Money, like he said. Money is what matters the most. Without it you’re nobody. If you only make 300 pesos, you can’t even have a family. What for then? For your kids to suffer?”

**Type 2 answers:**

“You have to study and work, go ahead and do what you can at the beginning. You can’t choose right now.”

“For me, what matters the most is to have goals. You have to study or try to work, not just sit there (…) I don’t know, but let me tell you, right now I’d rather make a little money doing what I like.”
“The most important thing to decide is whether to do things right or wrong. When you’re little they tell you “things are like this” and you believe them. But when you’re a teenager, you start understanding, you get all the points of view and then make a decision.”

(Conversation)

- Those who go abroad do it out of necessity (…) If we all think that way, Argentina will get worse and worse. I want to do something here.
- But it’s our fault!
- It’ll be out fault in a short time, when we’re older, … our responsibility.
- It’s true that politicians are to blame for what’s happening today. They say there are no jobs but they make tons of money. Everything is done out of convenience. But if everyone thought about what the people in power are doing, we could get together and we could change some of it…
- It’s a good thing that we’re 15 or 16 and we can see this.

As shown above, the predominant strategies fluctuate between opposites: disbelief, discouragement, going abroad, staying and saving oneself, or grouping, doing things right, all in all, taking active part.

At the same time, they seem affected by what is happening around them but have difficulty in finding a place that values and allows their expression. In that sense, in some groups (especially in the groups formed at suburban schools, where children are less used to extracurricular activities) the adolescents made explicit their satisfaction of being granted such a space to think and discuss issues about themselves, and to listen to themselves and to others.

What we pointed out shows that, in qualitative research, after a field intervention, transformations in previous conceptions operate both in the social actors and in the researchers. These transformations allow for the consideration that exchange and joint work are always opportunities to envision some of the discovery and opening to change.

Notes
1. These concepts were included in the paper read in the Iberoamerican Congress of Orientation, “Reality as scenery: the challenge of vocational-occupational orientation”. UNLP, 24-26 September, 2003.

References

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