

Careers, Identities and Professionalization. a Study on Doctors about Their Social Representations Related to the Labor Market Today and its Foreseeable Future

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Abstract

This study is in line with the analyses of university and working career in their interaction in relation with conditioning factors. It comprises two central issues: the issue of identity bound to the issue of professionalization within the domain of training and employment. Nowadays, professionalization of the individuals, inside a troubled occupational world, demands the implementation of mechanisms favoring the development of both the individuals and the institution in which they work. All this has an impact at the local, regional and even national levels. Three levels of analysis interplay from a sui generis perspective: macro-meso-micro-macro (Aparicio, 2005; 2007a; 2007b, 2013a, 2014, 2015 b, d – See the Three- Dimensional Spiral of Sense Theory). The aim was to be aware of the doctors' representations regarding the value of such degree under the present "degree devaluation", and its impact on the professional future as well as on the core issues of the labor market which need urgent measures with a view to a better interaction between the two systems. The methodology used was quanti-qualitative (semi-structured questionnaires, interviews, and hierarchical evocations). The population consisted of doctors (2005-2012) from the National University of Cuyo, in Argentina. The results helped us understand the nucleus of such representations and the peripheral aspects by career and institution, thus revealing professional and disciplinary identities. The professional identities show the situated needs in terms of professionalization within the different contexts and, particularly, within the labor market.

Keywords: Careers, Identities, Professionalization, Social Representations, Labor Market

1. Brief Framework: What is the future for PhDs?

This research work is part of the issue of Professionalization, (Lang, 1999; Bourdoncle 1993) associated to the issue of professional, personal, institutional and social identity (See. Part I. Introduction; Aparicio, 2015, in press; 2014b).

This is part of a set of continuous works concerning professional performance of different populations (university graduates, drop-outs, students who take longer to complete their studies, teachers, etc.), covering 20 years of existence of different courses of study at Universidad Nacional de Cuyo (UNCuyo, Argentina).

We have worked on two core issues: identity related to professionalization in the field of formation, and professional insertion.

Professionalization has been source of long debate since the 80s (Lang, 1999). On the one hand, the effects of "overcrowding" in higher education (Bourdoncle & Demailly, 1998) has emphasized the need to consolidate certain competences and sets of knowledge essential for professional practice and its corollary, social recognition of professional groups (Bourdoncle, 1993). The professionalization of individuals (training on an existing field) or of the activities (construction and/or redefinition of new profiles of an existing profession) demands the implementation of new mechanisms. On the other hand, as regards this research, the conditions of professional practice in the working world have changed, and professional insertion as well as duration and promotion represent a complex problem with a variety of variables.

Briefly: the quick changes within the professional world demand innovative transformations in training institutions and consolidation of new competences valued by the market. All that could influence on professional and institutional identity updating.

There are many institutional efforts which have not always been accepted. In the specific field of training, the new professionals encounter various difficulties, in addition to lack of recognition. Some authors even speak of de-professionalization of those graduates on this field, and they are left behind into a process of "proletarianization" (Ozga & Lawn, 1981). There exist other problems: "semi-professional" status in a broad sense (Etzioni, 1969), the devaluation of the graduate's image in the field of education (training) along with an ever growing weakening (burnout) (Tardiff & Lessard 1999; Maroy 2006; Aparicio, 2006a, 2006 b, 2007 a, 2007 b, 2009 a, 2009 b, 2009 c, 2013 a).

In general, considering the existing literature, it can be said that there is a certain tension between the area of work and the area of training, as well as between the expectations at the moment of vocational choice and the actual experience in the professional environment; also, between the "ideal" situation expected by the PhD students and the real one of the PhD graduates; between the representation of the doctors and their world experience. Is there an identity crisis as regards the deep changes in the labor market and as regards expectations? (Goffman, 1963). Is there certain overprescription in the institutions to respond to the changes in the labor market along with underprescription in the means used to such response, as it is usually said? Within this framework, the links between the personal training experience and the professional life become a source of concern in the field of training and, especially, in the studies related to humanities and social sciences.

Besides, this issue involving institutional and even disciplinary identities, as well as the identity reconstruction processes, is accompanied, as it has just been said, by actual insertion conditions, duration and professional mobility; all of them will have an impact on professional performances (Dubar 1991, 2000 a, b and c).

This research develops along two lines: actual insertion (here, effect/variable-dependent) and the conditions (core variables, sociocultural, psychosocial and institutional) associated to professional performance, which favor or prevent achievement within labor organizations (here, independent/intermediate variables): Expectations, Internality, Engagement, Social Representations on the value of education in society and related factors, such as power relationships, stereotypes, prioritized values in each micro-system, frustrations, possibilities of professional success, etc.

These two lines represent the two poles in our theoretical model, which include, at least, the four variable types already mentioned. These variables, according to our sui generis systemic approach, interact within a "self-sustained" movement (feedback) (Aparicio, 2005a, 2012a, 2014c). Analysis shows, on the one hand, the gap between the training provided by educational institutions and that demanded by the market (disarticulation between the education and productive systems). On the other hand, the differentiated conditions of the individuals received by each institution (self- and institutional selection processes): variables which have an influence on the professional achievement levels, as far as the results of our studies are concerned. These studies not only add inputs and outputs but also, and fundamentally, human processes that appear on the base of the figures of the systems, accounting not only for the factors have a significant impact on achievement, but also for the "underlying" reasons that make the figures in the national and, system meaningful and, more broadly, in the international framework. It is actually an integrating and holistic approach that helps analyze the mechanisms and/or factors anticipating achievement at the psycho individual level, and at the same time going through the meso-institutional/organizational level (university, labor market). This achievement, in this study, reminds us of the experience in the labor market of doctors in the framework of degree devaluation (Aparicio, 2005 a, 2007 a and b, Boudon, 1973; Lévy-Garboua, 1976, 1977; Dupray, 2005; Dupray & Moullet, 2004; Calmand & Haller, 2008; Giret, 2003; Giret, Moullet, & Thomas, 2003; Mansuy, 2004; Olivier et al., 2008). We should also add, on the one hand, the market demands new competences and, therefore, new mechanisms from the institutions, as well as the effort of the individuals to support the changes. On the other, this leads to identity transformations and the implementation of identity strategies (Goffmann, 1963) to deal with the difficulties posed by the new contexts and, related to that, there appears the need for professional recognition. This problem does not seem to be different for those who reached the highest academic level (Dubar 1991, 2000 a, b and c).

The original approach joins explanation and comprehension; quantitative and qualitative methodology aiming at explaining and reveal conditions of achievement. As strategies, the macro-meso-micro-macro dimensions are gathered: processes and results; transversal and quasi-longitudinal (personal experiences or life, ...); diachronically and synchronically (Aparicio, 2005a, 2007a and b, 2012a).

Several research works done for 30 years have led to the development of the theory, which Dr. Aparicio has called The Three Dimensional Spiral of "Sense" Theory.(2015 a, 2015 b; 2015 In press)

2. Material and Methods

The quantitative-qualitative method was applied. This study refers only to the qualitative method.

Participants: Consisting of doctors in education at Universidad Nacional de Cuyo (National University of Cuyo)(2005-2009) and doctors in social sciences; this study is still in progress), Two research laboratories took part in this work: the Laboratorio de Investigaciones en Educación (Education Research Laboratory - Conicet/UNCuyo, Argentina) and Social Psychology Laboratory - Conicet, UNCuyo). It is expected to find different profiles according to the work/professional disciplinary areas in which they are situated together with the differences of the respective contexts with their strengths and weaknesses.

The samples of the groups included were significant, and also allow for a quantitative treatment of the data.

2.1. Materials

Quantitative and qualitative techniques were applied. We also used the "hierarchical evocation" and the lexicometric analysis techniques. The latter allowed to show which representations are part of the "nucleus" of a doctoral training in each of the groups, and which are their most evident differences and the ways they experience their professional practice according to their expectations.

2.2. Core questions in the researchwork

How and where are the doctors in education positioned within the market? Which professional structures are they inserted in? Which are the aspects defining their actual insertion on terms of positioning achievement – objective/subjective – within the hierarchical scale? What are their expectations regarding their PhD training? Do they regard PhD education as a progress route? Which values are prioritized? Are they in search for stability, reality or the economic benefits associated to the PhD degree? How do they see their future? How do they see their role? Which are, in their own perspective, the factors prioritized by the market nowadays? Have they experienced any discrepancy between the training they received and the market requirements or not? Does hope or pessimism prevail? Do these doctors share specific "identities" or "interests"? How similar or different are these?

3. Results

They were presented in two sections: quantitative (descriptive plan, correlational and explanatory) and qualitative. As we could observe, differences are noticed between the groups. In fact, there appear PhD training and its impact on labor positioning, professional promotion and mobility known by the individuals, extra-curricular development experiences which contributed to labor insertion and continuity, correspondence (or lack of it) with professional expectations, the gaps between the dream world at the moment of entering a PhD training and actual everyday world, the difficulties at obtaining recognition due to the "plafond" effect, more and more evident in a controversial working world, in which education does not go parallel to the macro social and economic context development. We can also observe an ever changing world which has an impact on identities, thus disrupting individuals and organizations. Therefore, we come across individuals who are fulfilled by their profession, but many others want a change and are even considering quitting and going into a more income-producing career. The level of satisfaction varies with the individuals but also with the careers, as it was already hypothesized. In the end, it all depends on the interplay between personal competences, institutional/organizational conditions, and the possibilities offered by the macro social context in relation with the different disciplinary areas (for example, for those graduated in education, the PhD degree represents a bonus in the labor market). Scrutinizing the shared representations is, thus, a way of going deeper into this issue, as we go beyond statistics and apart from linear analyses. There is no linear professional career. The three levels of Dr. Aparicio's theory (Aparicio 2007 a and b, 2015 a and b, 2015 in press) interplay in every case, and make an impact on the possibilities of fulfillment along with organizational growth.

At the theoretical level, this research allowed: a) to, produce knowledge regarding differences and similarities presented by the doctors recently incorporated into the professional world; b) to test the heuristic value of some explanatory and comprehensive methods; c) to go deeper, from an interdisciplinary perspective, into the higher education/occupational world relationship, as well as into the professional world transformations and their impact on the level of identity. In fact, we discovered more fulfilled "identities"; others which are blocked, and others in search for transformation.

At the applied level, those responsible for the educational and working areas have empirical elements to dispose of which may lead to improve the areas of the system where the breach is wider.

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