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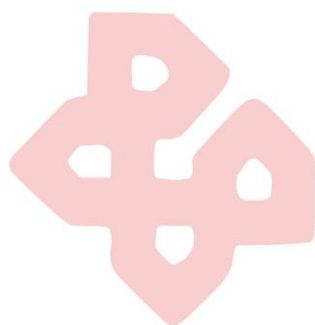
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MULTIDIMENSIONAL INEQUALITIES IN THE TRAJECTORIES OF YOUNG PEOPLE WHO GRADUATED FROM TECHNICAL SECONDARY SCHOOLS: GENDER, GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

Desigualdades multidimensionales en las trayectorias de jóvenes que egresaron de la educación técnica. Género, context geográfico y capital social y cultural



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Abstract:

The objective of the article is to analyze the trajectories of young people who graduated from technical-professional secondary level in Argentina, which includes a student population characterized by socio-economic heterogeneities. Theoretically, it starts from a multidimensional perspective that seeks to understand the multiple overlaps between some factors that present a high heuristic and comprehensive value of the heterogeneity of post-secondary courses: the geographical context, gender, and the social and cultural capital of households, and the eventual public policy devices that support them. The choice and decision-making dilemmas and evaluations of technical-professional education by young people are examined, within the framework of structural imperatives that condition their trajectories. In methodological terms, the study develops a qualitative design (complementary to a previous quantitative graduate follow-up), using the in-depth interview as the main research technique. A total of 32 interviews were carried out with graduates (women and men) of technical secondary school, who had finished their studies in 2009. The field work took on a federal character, as it was carried out in thirteen provinces of Argentina. It was a particularly heterogeneous sample, which covered a wide spectrum of geographic contexts; from rural areas and small towns, to intermediate cities, large cities and outskirts of large urban agglomerates. In this way, the particular conformation of the sample of graduates of this study, seeks to make contributions regarding the structure of opportunities that marked the post-secondary trajectories of young people, coming from different socio-economic conditions and contexts.

Key words: inequalities; technological training, secondary education, youths; trajectories.

Resumen:

El objetivo del artículo es analizar las trayectorias de jóvenes que egresaron de nivel secundario técnico-profesional en Argentina, que incluye una población estudiantil caracterizada por heterogeneidades socio-económicas. Teóricamente, se parte de una perspectiva multidimensional que busca comprender las múltiples imbricaciones entre algunos factores que presentan un alto valor heurístico y comprensivo de la heterogeneidad de recorridos postsecundarios: el contexto geográfico, el género, y el capital social y cultural de los hogares, y los eventuales dispositivos de política pública que los apoyan. Se examinan los dilemas de la elección y toma de decisiones y las valoraciones de la educación técnico-profesional por parte de los jóvenes, en el marco de imperativos estructurales que condicionan sus trayectorias. En términos metodológicos, el estudio desarrolla un diseño cualitativo (complementario a un seguimiento de egresado cuantitativo previo), empleando como principal técnica de investigación la entrevista en profundidad. Se realizaron un total de 32 entrevistas a egresados (mujeres y varones) de secundaria técnica, que habían terminado de cursar sus estudios en el año 2009. El trabajo de campo adoptó un carácter federal, al desarrollarse en trece provincias de la Argentina. Se trató de una muestra particularmente heterogénea, que cubrió un amplio espectro de contextos geográficos; desde zonas rurales y pequeños poblados, hasta ciudades intermedias, grandes ciudades y periferias de grandes aglomerados urbanos. De este modo, la particular conformación de la muestra de egresados de este estudio, busca realizar aportes respecto a la estructura de oportunidades que signaron las trayectorias postsecundarias de los jóvenes, provenientes de diferentes condiciones socio-económicas y contextos.

Palabras clave: desigualdades; educación media; formación tecnológica; jóvenes; trayectorias

1. Introduction. A multidimensional approach to the inequalities in trajectories

This article forms part of a multidimensional approach to trajectories, which aims to examine life histories (or sections of life histories) within the framework of the social relations and historical-institutional contexts in which they are embedded. In a scenario of increased uncertainty and individualization, this approach enables objective and subjective factors to be brought into play, linking them to the context and historical moment, with the aim of analyzing the overlapping of various factors that shape the trajectories of subjects over time (Jacinto, 2010; Roberti, 2017).

In particular, we analyze the post-secondary trajectories of graduates of technical-professional secondary education (TPE) in Argentina, covering a period in their life histories in which the relationships between inequalities, social reproduction, and opportunities for social mobility are particularly relevant. The multidimensional approach makes it possible to overcome some of the limitations of traditional follow-up studies of graduates, which presupposed linear relationships between education and work (Gallart, 2002). Within the tradition of trajectory studies, the perspective taken is that the objective factors generating inequalities (particularly social background, gender, and geographic context) interconnect in different ways depending on the heterogeneity of the labor market, educational segmentation, and the presence of public policy mechanisms aimed at equalization (Walter and Pohl, 2007). Together, they determine the potential paths available. However, the analysis of trajectories also makes it possible to introduce subjective dimensions, observing the ways in which young people influence and attribute meaning to the effects of the structures. We will thus examine the graduates' decisions and their ability to interpret opportunities and develop strategies, exploring their pursuit of education and employment alternatives, according to their interests and needs (Rambla and Kovacheva, 2021).

This article is based on a qualitative follow-up study of graduates carried out in 2018, which complemented a longitudinal quantitative study of the cohort that had completed secondary technical school in 2009. It should be noted that the aforementioned quantitative study showed that the cohort in question (four years after graduation) exhibited both better rates of educational continuity and better labor market insertion than other secondary school graduates (Sosa, 2016). However, that same cohort reveals strong inequalities according to geographical context, gender, and socio-economic profiles (Binstock and Cerrutti, 2017). Taking this evidence as a starting point, the following section outlines the multidimensional approach that guided the qualitative analysis of post-secondary trajectories which, drawing on contributions from various research studies, delves into a set of factors, the interrelationship of which has barely been studied. These include the geographical context and its relative weight in the trajectories of graduates. Thus, the particular configuration of the sample of graduates in this study seeks to contribute, in conjunction with other factors of high heuristic value, to an understanding of the inequalities in trajectories.

2. Theoretical review and previous research

The reconstruction and analysis of trajectories are rooted in the field of biographical studies (Ferrarotti, 1988; Elder, 1994; Bertaux, 1997). From this perspective, the aim is to examine biographical variables within the framework of associated social and contextual relationships. But the objective is also to analyze the overlap between various factors that, in a series of interdependencies, shape the paths of the subjects over time. Thus, a central aspect for the analysis of educational and occupational trajectories is the inequalities that intersect them.

This interest in analyzing the overlapping of factors in order to gain an understanding of the inequalities and de-standardization of trajectories comes from contemporary transformations in the relationship between education and employment (Verdier and Buechteman, 1998; Morch et al., 2002; Gautié, 2003; Casal et al., 2006; Bendit et al., 2008). Thus, in the current context, graduate follow-ups must be complemented with new approaches, taking distance from a presumption of linearity. Indeed, the increased demand for credentials and the difficulties of labor market insertion create challenges for young people, who must not only adapt to diversified logics and changing and flexible work worlds (Longo, 2018), but also adjust their long-term aspirations—with little chance of fruition—to more pragmatic short-term expectations, especially in the case of low-income sectors (Elias et al., 2020). The new complexities therefore involve numerous dimensions and, at the same time, post-secondary trajectories tend to diversify unevenly, as demonstrated in several studies discussed below.

In the Argentine context, previous work has helped structure a field of studies on post-secondary trajectories. In a groundbreaking study, Filmus et al. (2001) found that in general only graduates from high-income backgrounds followed exclusively study-based trajectories. In the educational options traditionally linked to labor market insertion (such as technical and business schools), employment as the sole activity was not predominant. Rather, there was a significant tendency to pursue further studies following secondary school. The socio-economic level of the students was considered the most influential explanatory factor in post-secondary trajectories: both in terms of the possibility of continuing higher education and of dedicating oneself exclusively to study (Miranda and Otero, 2005).

Comparing two longitudinal studies of graduates from 1999-2000 and 2010-2011, Miranda and Córca (2015) highlighted another explanatory variable of the trajectories: economic growth and the expansion of social protections that occurred during the latter period. In this context, the labor activity of secondary school students reinforced a complementary, rather than exclusionary, sense of educational activity. Both the middle and lower sectors were favorably influenced by the context and the increased stability of family income.

In sum, in the education-work transitions of young people, we find both reproductive tendencies and socio-historical change, linked to socioeconomic cycles

and the expansion of educational opportunities. In this regard, the authors highlight the so-called “generational” effect, as a catalyst of the specific situation that delineates the trajectories of different cohorts of young people.

In the group studied, certain institutional milestones linked to public policies (or to the state in a broader sense) contextualize the trajectories. For example, the compulsory nature of secondary education established in 2006, accompanied by public policies that encourage educational continuity; and the government’s gender and/or youth agenda. In particular, this group has experienced a societal framework in which technical education has undergone a strong recovery and increased appreciation, both in terms of public policies and discourse, due to the enactment of the National Law on Technical-Professional Education in 2005 and the introduction of various policies (an increase in educational options, scholarships, etc.) aimed at promoting the continuation of postsecondary studies.

At the same time, the preeminence of higher education within the imaginary of social mobility, with tuition-free and open universities in all provinces, generates expectations of educational continuity at this level (although a high proportion drop out before graduating). Other post-secondary educational options were also expanded, although with less prestige: tertiary technical-professional education, and short, basic, and ongoing vocational training. Simultaneously, graduates embarked on their labor transitions in the context of a labor market crisis: labor indicators began to deteriorate around 2011, particularly in the creation of formal private-sector employment.

As previous studies have shown, the various types of capital that young people have access to along with their ties constitute a key dimension of inequalities (Wyn et al., 2017). These include economic capital (associated with the resources needed to support youth expectations), social capital (which includes not only inherited family networks, but also an individual’s experiences and relationships), and cultural capital (technical qualifications, cognitive resources, as well as the knowledge and expectations acquired during the process of socialization). These types of capital are closely linked to the household of origin, a variable that features prominently in the literature on youth trajectories. Several Latin American studies have highlighted the relevance of families as crucial in the decisions of young graduates, not only from a socio-economic point of view but also from a socio-affective perspective. The family serves as a source of support for an extended period of time, given the extended duration of post-secondary study. Moreover, the current context of uncertainty and precariousness, reinforces the role of families in providing flexibility and responsiveness to face these transformations (Córica et al., 2018; Pérez Islas, 2006). However, the support that parents can provide for their children is conditioned, both in terms of concrete economic support and the ability to guide their children in their choices (Sepúlveda, 2017).

Gender has been identified as another of the core factors in the construction of inequalities in life histories. The assessment and evaluation of individual capabilities is almost always filtered through gender, as well as the distribution of

responsibilities and rewards stemming from this assessment (Reygadas, 2004). One aspect in particular that has been highlighted with respect to women's trajectories is the role of caregiving tasks that often begin at an early age, even among secondary school graduates (especially if they are from lower socioeconomic sectors). For this reason, Miranda and Arancibia (2017) indicate a need to study the association between education and family responsibilities, in order to account for the construction of identities in the analysis of women's trajectories. Beyond processes of change and/or a "fiction of equality" in education, within the labor market women find themselves caught between career and family, socially reproducing differences (Wyn et al., 2017; Jacinto et al., 2020). This is exacerbated by the fact that the care model in Argentina is based on family organization, with basic or practically nonexistent state provision of social care services.

The introduction of a gender-based analytical dimension is particularly relevant in a study on TPE, since this educational option has historically been sexist in nature. According to data from 2020, enrollment continues to be markedly male: only 34% of students are women (INET, 2022). In choosing majors and specialties, gender segregation related to the "sexual division of labor" is socially reproduced: male enrollment exceeds 70% in masculinized specialties while there is a greater presence of women in specialties considered "soft." In the case of the young women who graduate from TPE, the quantitative follow-up of the cohort of the group interviewed found that most transitions towards inactivity are associated with the caretaking tasks they perform within the home (Álvarez and Fernández, 2012). In a comparison of labor indicators by gender between secondary school graduates overall and graduates of technical schools, Sosa (2016) observes that there is a gap between men and women with the same education, with women participating less in industrial sectors.

The geographic context, understood as the spatial structures and the relationships between them, is a key dimension in structuring access to educational, socio-economic, and labor opportunities. With respect to TPE, these studies were previously not available throughout the entire country. Therefore, access to different resources is determined by the proximity to or distance from large urban centers and the size and characteristics of the local labor market, along with the socio-economic and socio-cultural conditions of households (i.e. the resources available for mobility, social networks, and support). The distribution of educational services is almost always spatially unequal, which is related (although not linearly) to segmented educational circuits with varying levels of quality. Additionally, socio-cultural and socio-territorial barriers (such as spatial mobility and the cost of transportation) restrict the access of young people in poverty to the formal labor market (Jacinto, 2010; Roberti, 2015).

Inequalities between geographical contexts are also related to differences in population density. In rural areas and/or small and medium-sized cities, the range and quality of educational options and other basic services (healthcare, recreation, etc.), job opportunities, and infrastructure (potable water, paved roads, connectivity, etc.) are limited. Likewise, access to the various public policies and

resources that have an impact on development is also reduced (Cetrángolo, Steinberg, and Gatto, 2011).

3. Methodological approach

In methodological terms, the study used primary data from the Qualitative Follow-up of TPE Graduates at the secondary level, associated with the Quantitative Follow-up of Graduates conducted by the National Institute of Technological Education (2009, 2011, 2013, 2017).¹ Its objective was to explore the evolution of the trajectories of technical graduates in greater depth, incorporating subjective and contextual elements that would facilitate an understanding of the overlap in the factors that shape them. A total of 32 in-depth interviews were conducted with technical secondary school graduates (women and men) who had completed their studies in 2009. The fieldwork was carried out in 2018 and covered thirteen provinces in Argentina.

The sample was particularly heterogeneous, covering a wide range of geographic contexts, from rural areas and small towns to medium-sized cities, large cities, and the outskirts of large urban agglomerates. This diversity allowed us to take into account the effects of the geographic context, as mentioned above.²

The socio-economic conditions and the cultural capital of the families also varied among the interviewees. More than half of the graduates come from households with medium educational capital, where at least one of the parents completed secondary school; approximately a quarter come from households with high educational capital, and another similar proportion come from households where both parents share low educational capital, up to primary school completion. This last group represents intergenerational mobility in access to secondary education in relation to their families of origin, as has been the case for previous generations.³ However, the majority of those interviewed represent mobility with respect to access to higher education, since only a quarter of their parents have completed this level.

¹ This study forms part of the last stage of the Follow-up of Graduates carried out by the National Institute of Technological Education (INET). It was conducted through the National Census of Graduating Students (CENUAETP 2009), the National Survey of Graduate Insertion (ENIE 2011), and the National Survey of Graduate Trajectories (ENTE 2013 for the first wave, and ENTE 2017 for the second). Based on the types of trajectories identified in the previous quantitative stage, a purposive sample design was created, considering the following attributes: gender, educational focus (industrial, service sector, or agricultural), and the four possible paths with respect to labor and educational trajectories (studies and works, only works, only studies, and does not perform either of these two activities). Following Bertaux (2005), the selection was based on the criteria of accessibility and heterogeneity within the cases analyzed, in an attempt to construct the sample based on a “variety of positions.”

² A large city was defined as having more than 100,000 inhabitants; a medium-sized city as having between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants; and a town as having a population of up to 20,000 inhabitants.

³ In the history secondary education in Argentina, technical education has played a role in social mobility. According to Gallart (2002), from its inception in the 1940s until the 1980s, its graduates were mostly men from low and lower-middle class backgrounds, who presented educational mobility with respect to their parents, who had only completed primary school.

Lastly, these differences are mediated by the condition of gender, resulting in greater or lesser freedom in the trajectories outlined in terms of both education and the labor market.

The analytical strategy focused on the development of a *typology* (López Roldán, 1996), which explored the relationship between the factors analyzed. Following McKinney (1968), this theoretical-methodological tool is based on the selection, combination, and articulation of a set of dimensions that enable a comparative analysis of the data. In any typology, a number of variables that are more or less in line with each type are thus combined, highlighting the distinctive elements around which the classification is developed. For the construction of the typology, we started from the preliminary conceptual framework and constantly turned to the field data; in this back and forth, the categories of analysis were gradually clarified and the overlap between them became more complex.

Specifically, in our analysis we sought to understand the sequences, motives, and decision-making involved in post-secondary trajectories, conditioned by the structure of opportunities in terms of the geographic-institutional context, gender, and economic, cultural, and social capital. The selected factors thus served as a heuristic framework for understanding the consistencies and differentiations in the way the trajectories are configured. Using this strategy, different types are configured to reveal the complexity and heterogeneity of the “accumulation of advantages and disadvantages” (Saraví, 2020) that are inscribed in the various trajectories of graduates:

- **Trajectories of choice with the accumulation of advantages**

Men and women from middle-sector households, whose families have high cultural capital and reside in large or medium-sized cities, they express a strong belief in education as a factor of mobility and personal development. Beyond the fulfillment of family expectations, their trajectories reflect strategies of choice and of the social reproduction of their condition of origin.

- **Cumulative trajectories tied to opportunities and the balance between aspirations and subjective expectations**

Men and women from low and middle-income households who, although they face structural and biographical obstacles, have support from their families (symbolically significant but limited in economic terms) and from the state (both in terms of the availability of continuing education options and public policies) and are residents of medium-sized cities and small towns, they show strong determination and persistence in their studies, with a high degree of pro-activity and re-adjustment of expectations.

- **Trajectories with no margin of choice with the accumulation of disadvantages**

Men and women from low and lower-middle class households with socially reproductive trajectories (and traditional gender roles), strongly conditioned by

structural factors and residents of the three types of geographic context (although with a significant weight in rural areas). Beyond the educational achievement of the secondary school diploma, they reproduce trajectories that are predictable for their condition of origin.

4. Results. The trajectories of technical graduates: between conditioning factors and subjective choices

This section reconstructs the trajectories of male and female graduates, with a multidimensional analysis of the overlap of the various factors that configure unequal types of trajectories. Specifically, the analysis seeks to understand the sequences, motives, and decision-making, in order to delve deeper into the relationship between the conditioning factors and subjectivities that shape post-secondary trajectories. The results will be presented through two cases that illustrate the types mentioned above, while the subsequent discussion section will present an analysis of the way in which the various trajectories of the set of interviewees are configured.

4.1. Trajectories of choice with the accumulation of advantages

The following cases of Marcos and Melina⁴ illustrate the first category of graduates, children of the generation that played a leading role in the educational mobility of the last decades of the twentieth century. Social, economic, and cultural capital, resulting from this intergenerational connection, provide the resources and motivations for the development of trajectories in advantageous conditions.

Marcos' case reflects a typical trajectory of the 1980s (Gallart, 2002). His father is a technician and he attended a prestigious school in a large city. He values what he learned at school and has jobs in line with the progress he made in his schooling, with some leeway to decide on future studies and to combine studies and work. He lives in a large capital city in Argentina, with his family of origin, and comes from a home with strong cultural capital—both parents are professionals.

Like his father and two brothers, he attended an emblematic industrial school, choosing to specialize in mechanics. His graduation from secondary school is a significant turning point in his biography. Although he hesitates over which career to follow, he has no doubts about his educational continuity: *'because that's an idea passed down from my father [...]. The need to continue studying, they really instilled that in me'*. Finally, he enrolled in naval engineering at the most renowned state university in the country. He not only has a favorable context that allows him to pursue whatever degree he wishes to, but also the support of his family—*'I always felt accompanied'*.

⁴ The names of the interviewees have been changed in order to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of those who contributed to the study.

During his first years of university, he highlights the advanced educational level of his school and the knowledge he learned, especially in technical subjects: *'you come out better prepared than other secondary school graduates'*. However, he also points out the increased demands of this higher level: *'the level was quite high.[...]. It's up to you to prepare, to study. No one is standing over you'*.

With respect to employment, Marcos expected to work during the final years of his degree, but he started in his second year when he had one course that was incomplete. From that moment on, he worked: *'my plans changed [...]. I became excited about being financially independent'*. Through his school's employment exchange, he joined a small company as a technical draftsman at the age of 21.

'Presenting a résumé with the school's name on it was an advantage [...]. Without the technical school I don't know whether I would have been able to get the jobs I did, whether I would have been able to pursue the career I am pursuing'.

After six years working at this job, he decided to resign, noting that it was difficult to balance his studies with his work. However, at the time of the interview, he had been working as a maintenance analyst for ten months at a shipping company dedicated to marking waterways. This new job is closely related to his post-secondary studies; it also helped him learn about the labor market in the maritime sector and reaffirmed his career choice: *'you see what you read about in books in real life'*.

Regarding his future expectations, he plans to continue working for a few more years to earn money and then prioritize his studies (he is still halfway through his degree). He would like to work in the shipbuilding industry and specialize in engine maintenance. He is able to establish lines of continuity between higher education and employment. Despite deciding to delay his studies, he finds an opportunity to gain experience in his professional field. Additionally, he is able to combine the positive synergies of the geographical context—he has always lived, worked, and studied in this city—to gain access to advantageous opportunities. The impact of his technical education is evident throughout this trajectory: he draws on knowledge he learned in school for his post-secondary studies and job opportunities. Another aspect is that, as a male in a middle-sector household, he benefits from the fact that he is not responsible for household tasks or caregiving.

Currently, female graduates who have the resources and subjective strategies to undertake technical careers pursue their trajectories in a more favorable context compared to previous generations (Bloj, 2017). Not only have they embarked on their studies in a period of renewed appreciation for technical education, but also in the midst of a public agenda that has expanded their rights in terms of gender equity (Jacinto et al., 2020).

Melina was born and lives in a medium-sized city in the country's south. She comes from a family with medium-high educational capital. She has a technical background, since her father is a construction manager. She expressed her interest and determination to carry on with the family tradition of technical schooling at an

early age. She even had to overcome gender conditioning, confronting discouraging arguments from her family and the school itself.

A good student, she revealed a constant subjective disposition towards her studies. After receiving a degree as a construction technician, she made an additional educational effort and became licensed as a construction site manager, which led her to further continue her studies. Subsequently, she decided to enroll in the civil engineering program at the local public university, with a focus on hydraulics. She would have liked to choose construction, but prioritized staying in her city without generating extra expenses for her family, and taking advantage of local opportunities for higher education.

There are several indications of family support for her projects, in addition to financial support and housing. During her first year, encouraged by her father, she won a scholarship granted by a private company, receiving this financial incentive for almost a decade. Well into her studies, she considered working, but her family persuaded her to prioritize her studies: *'...it wasn't that they told me 'look, we need money', but you do start thinking 'I could contribute to the household'*. She persisted in her studies, even though the transition to university was not easy. Family support, her strong motivation, and forming a study group enabled her to get through difficult moments in her degree:

'I think that if I had gone somewhere else, it would have been harder for me without the company of my family, the support, the 'it's ok, don't worry' when you don't do so well, having my [study] group here'.

Currently, Melina is a part-time intern at the Provincial Water Institute (a position she got through a university professor) and she is about to finish a related higher education degree. This trajectory reveals strong continuity in her decisions. There was no space for exploration and she did not have to face uncertainties. She was able to overcome gender conditioning and pursue her strong technological vocation. Likewise, emotional support and family guidance accompanied her professional development. Her effort, perseverance, and responsibility—related to certain personal skills, but which she also considers a product of her education—, along with the financial support of the scholarship she received, made it possible for her to dedicate herself almost exclusively to advanced studies, following her trajectory in advantageous conditions.

4.2. Cumulative trajectories associated with opportunities and the balance between aspirations and subjective expectations

Biographical trajectories vary according to the conditions around them in different socio-economic and cultural sectors. Nevertheless, in this diversity of trajectories, subjectivity and the willpower or desire of young people to continue pursuing their education and/or to postpone certain roles and activities, play an important, albeit conditioned, role. Thus, subjectivities (motives, value judgments, expectations, attitudes) can help us understand the divergences from the predictable trajectories of a considerable part of the sample. Several trajectories reveal a

combination of objective and subjective factors that are interconnected in the unfolding of cumulative histories. We will illustrate these issues through the trajectories of Marta and Fermín.

Marta's case, a priori conditioned by living in a small town in Argentina's northwest, provides an interesting contrast with the previous cases. Following a childhood in a modest home with many responsibilities (caring for younger siblings and her father, who has a disability), she graduates in the first cohort of an annex of an agro-technical school (the only local school).

As Marta's family could not afford to pay for her continued education, the solution came from her partner, a rural laborer from the town, who had moved to the outskirts of the provincial capital for work. With respect to her post-secondary education, Marta recalls the support that made it possible: her partner, who supported her in her studies and spoke to her parents and the fact that they themselves were culturally open:

'If my parents had been more closed-minded, I would not have been able to pursue my studies there. An education in the capital is not the same as one in the interior'.

There she studied to become a primary school teacher and, when she was about to start her practicum, she unexpectedly got pregnant: *"I had been doing well, but my son interrupted my studies, especially since he was born with health problems."* But even motherhood did not stop her determination to study: *'we had to figure out how to keep going. I wanted to finish my degree, it was what I most enjoyed'*. A teacher training institute opened up in a town near her village, so she returned with her partner and son to take advantage of this opportunity. In Marta's trajectory, economic difficulties led her to prioritize the most affordable and geographically accessible options when making decisions about her education.

It is hard to imagine the trajectory of this interviewee without the public policies that supported her. She graduated in the first cohort of the town's primary school teacher training program. She also received assistance for continuing her education through various scholarships. Finally, she gained housing independence from her household of origin with the allocation of a social housing unit.

In terms of employment, Marta exhibits a strong desire to practice her profession. After sporadic work experiences with the municipal government, she began working as a teacher in her town. However, once her position as a replacement had finished, her only option was to work at a school in a nearby town, a situation that meant separating from her family, whom she visited only on weekends. Subsequently, she again secured an interim position in her hometown, where she currently remains.

Therefore, this interviewee faced several structural and biographical obstacles. On the one hand, the geographical and cultural context (local patriarchal traditions, which made her question whether her parents would accept migration for study purposes), along with the scarcity of family economic resources. On the other

hand, biographical events that led to interruptions in her studies (the illnesses of her father and her son, her unplanned pregnancy). Nevertheless, Marta readjusted her aspirations and expectations, facing the adversities with determination. Her strong commitment to her studies is accompanied by a perception of herself as a woman with a desire to pursue her profession. In this regard, while she found objective and subjective support from her partner to reconcile her professional career with her family life, traditional patterns are also reproduced in the domestic sphere.

Fermín, who comes from a family with average educational capital, chose technical school because his father and uncle attended. He is studying architecture and associates the possibility of pursuing further studies with the proximity of a state university: *'they would not have been able to pay for my studies, I was able to study because I had the opportunity to access the university due to its proximity'*.

During the first three years after graduation from secondary, he dedicated himself exclusively to his studies. When he began to work (*'to have money'*), he entered occupations related to his education, which he accessed through family ties. One of the highlights was becoming a foreman in his uncle's company. However, in order to prioritize his studies, he opted to work in his mother's company performing administrative tasks. It is a *'comfortable'* job for him and, since he has no domestic or caregiving tasks to perform at home, his prospects for finishing his degree are good. Thus, this graduate has a margin of flexibility due to the fact that he is male and belongs to the middle class. He prioritizes his studies and says he does not care about the precarious nature of his successive jobs.

However, developments in another area of his life cause a readjustment in his aspirations for future labor insertion: political activism. In his own words:

'... activism, architecture, urban planning would be the cycle, so to speak. Political activism is my calling and my professional career is related to that. For example, I study architecture and what interests me in terms of my profession is the moment in which one generates social changes: I believe that the way to do that is through the state'.

To fulfill his aspiration for the future, he feels that he must continue his education: *'...as an urban planner I need a lot more training because the department is quite limited'*.

Thus, the high degree of proactivity of this young man leads him to inter-generational educational mobility, which gains momentum as he readjusts his aspirations to pursue a career in the public sector, motivated by his political commitment. He exhibits a long transition between education and work, and is willing to relegate economic independence in the pursuit of his aspirations. He relies on the support of his household. At the same time, the 'generation' effect can be observed, as he has adjusted his aspirations and expectations to the political and socio-cultural context of the time.

4.3. Trajectories with no margin of choice with the accumulation of disadvantages

In contrast with the cases examined above, the following trajectories of Álvaro and Elba present a sequence that is characteristic of the living conditions of vulnerable sectors, where traditional gender roles and the geographic context, marked by the scarcity and weakness of institutional resources and public policies, accentuate inequalities.

Álvaro's case reflects an accumulation of disadvantages. The isolated characteristics of the small town where he lives, coming from a home with low social and cultural capital, and, finally, a series of personal and family events, placed him in the position of supporting his parents.

Álvaro lives in a small town in northeastern Argentina. He has several siblings, all adopted, like him. His "simple" life, as he calls it, was spent in the village in a modest family. As a child, he worked for his father and this is naturalized in the telling of his story: "sometimes my father would ask for help, or he would say 'boys, let's go sow,' a father's typical request, in other words, pretty normal."

He went to a boarding agro-technical school, which was the only secondary school in town. He exhibits educational mobility, since he managed to finish school, although his post-secondary trajectory reproduces his family's condition. He states that he would have liked to pursue university studies, but to do so he would have had to move.

'I thought about trying to pursue a degree, to study something. But just at that moment, my mother got sick [...]. I had to decide between becoming more of a man of the house or trying to find the opportunity to continue studying. I decided to stay at home'.

Thus, the difficult economic situation of the family, his mother's illness, the mandate to 'be the man of the house' tied to patriarchal patterns, and the lack of higher education options within his context, all determined his taking on caregiving responsibilities at home. In addition, the role that the family seems to have assigned him, within the group of his siblings, weighs heavily, since he is the only one who stays with his parents. It is likely that because he had no female siblings in his family structure, he was the one who took on the caregiving tasks.

With a strongly conditioned life story, his range of opportunities was reduced. The effects of the context and the family's socio-economic and cultural capital play a determining role, limiting his post-secondary trajectory. In his own words: 'yes, there were obstacles... more than anything else, the economic aspect didn't help and the distance'.

He takes several vocational training courses in an attempt to develop useful skills for work; one of them helped him secure a job at a local company. However, his work trajectory is dominated by low-skilled jobs as a cleaner. He also 'assists' his father on the farm where he works. Currently, he is a municipal employee—in cleaning jobs—and works as a DJ, although he considers that a hobby. The prospect of living on his own does not appear to be imminent either: 'my job right now is not

a sustainable salary, unfortunately it is low'. In this story, the geographical context and the complex household situation contribute to a trajectory with minimal margins for decision making.

The multidimensional nature of the inequalities observed in Alvaro's case is even more complex for women who must take on socially reproductive responsibilities in their homes, without support in caring for their children. Elba's story demonstrates how the determinants of the geographic context, the weak social and cultural capital of her family, and the lack of support from public policies strongly conditioned her post-secondary trajectory.

Elba has lived her entire life in a small town in the country's northwest. She comes from a family of small-scale farmers. From an early age, Elba and her sisters were in charge of the house and housework. Due to its proximity, she attended the local agro-technical school, the only institutional option available. The length of the school day and the combination of studies and housework made those years tiring: 'we would get home in the afternoon, exhausted, and we had to do the cleaning because my mother worked at the municipality'.

Elba had expectations of 'continuing my studies, finishing my degree, working in that field, and then starting a family. But well, it didn't turn out that way'. She pursued post-secondary studies with numerous starts and stops, determined by her family's economic situation, which made it difficult for her to achieve her expectations. She briefly studied programming—'my mother encouraged me to go'—but then decided not to continue for economic reasons: "I couldn't afford it." In this case, although the family encourages educational continuity, they do not have the cultural and social capital that would provide her with support on this trajectory.

The following year she enrolled in a special education teaching program in a nearby city. During that period, Elba got married and moved in with her husband. However, the economic situation continued to represent an obstacle and, when she was in the third year of her degree, she became pregnant and decided not to continue her studies: 'I would have liked to finish my degree [...] I was forced to stop because of the economic situation. After that, I had no one to take care of her [her daughter]'

Likewise, the possibility of studying was limited by living in a small town and having to travel to the nearest city: 'it is as if this place has been forgotten'. As for her work history, it is brief and characterized by informality—consisting of "odd jobs"—, along with periods of unemployment and temporary social assistance plans, unrelated to her technical training. At the time of the interview, Elba was working as a housewife—'I spend most of my time cleaning'—and caring for her daughter. She also helps her mother, grandmother, and sisters.

5. Discussion. Multidimensional inequalities in post-secondary trajectories

In this section, we discuss the results of the set of cases analyzed (linking them to the types of trajectories presented) in light of the theoretical conceptualizations considered. As a reflection of the times, the vast majority of the group studied shared the expectation of pursuing higher education following secondary school. However, the effects of the geographical context are key in shaping the trajectories and the structure of opportunities in which the graduates develop (Atkins, 2017; Cetrángolo, Steinberg, and Gatto, 2011). In particular, they play a conditioning role in access to higher education: processes of residential mobility occur mostly due to the lack of educational opportunities in the areas where they live (Martínez, 2016). When they cannot resort to migration, young people must adapt to the opportunities available in the context, which vary greatly in large and medium-sized cities as well as in small towns and villages. In rural areas or small towns, only a favorable socio-economic condition makes it possible to overcome the difficulties tied to the lack of institutional options for continuing post-secondary studies. On the other hand, in the medium-sized cities of provincial capitals, there are options for free higher education; in this sense, the socio-economic level of the family has less impact on educational continuity. The limitation comes from the fact that, occasionally, they had to choose a major that was not “exactly” the one they wanted, as we observed in the case of Melina.

In contrast with the case of secondary education, where most of the graduates had continuous trajectories (INET, 2018), post-secondary studies present other types of challenges. In some cases, these challenges are linked to the transition from one level to another and to a change in levels of difficulty; thus, interruptions in studies, dropping out, and difficulties in achieving a passing grade begin to become apparent in post-secondary trajectories. Additionally, the expectation of being able to devote themselves exclusively to their studies did not always become a reality. Some had to work full time, which conditioned educational continuity or postponed the completion of advanced studies, as can be seen in Marcos’ case. In large cities, access to state-run post-secondary institutions is more affordable; however, it seems that studying competes more with working. The combination of studying and working delays the completion of studies, especially among men, generating a strong inequality: for those with medium and high socio-economic capital, it implies the prolongation of their studies; on the other hand, those who come from more vulnerable homes abandon their studies, following the patterns observed in other studies of secondary school graduates (Miranda and Córca, 2015).

Employment trajectories are diverse although, viewed sequentially, most jobs are linked to: 1) the need to work without a choice (particularly among the most vulnerable male population); 2) finding a synergy between study and work in the pursuit of experience. Gender inequalities are particularly evident in the labor sphere, in that women are faced with more adverse conditions for working in technical professions. This is due to both discrimination in access and in terms of opportunities to develop technological careers, as has also been shown in other studies (González Ramos et al., 2017; Martínez García, 2019).

Despite the years that have passed since graduation, most of them continue studying. Those who were “only working” at the time of the interview were in two virtually opposite situations. Some are university graduates starting out in their careers as professionals. Others have dropped out of school or take only occasional professional training courses and have already established a new household or have responsibilities in their household of origin.

Gender shapes different paths, since for women, the study-work relationship overlaps with caregiving tasks. However, the majority begin (and many continue) post-secondary studies, giving priority to their studies or to the study-work combination, and delay the establishment of their own household. Others, although they have formed a new family, undertake studies and/or work outside the home. This includes young women with a strong disposition and determination to pursue their studies, despite coming from vulnerable homes or having family responsibilities. A third group are those who reproduce traditional gender patterns in the lower socio-economic sectors. For them, the passage through technical school was their last educational opportunity and, from that moment on, the priority is the constitution of a new family (occasionally work, do not study). The interruption of post-secondary trajectories was caused by early motherhood along with the condition of poverty and having come from homes with low cultural capital.

On the other hand, there are evident conditions and support that enable female interviewees to continue their post-secondary studies. But while these practices and discourses enable graduates to study or work outside the home, traditional roles prevail within the families (both their families of origin and their own) with respect to the mechanisms for reconciling productive and reproductive demands. It is the mothers or the graduates themselves (when they have formed their own households) who are in charge of household chores and childcare.

Inherited social and cultural capital is reflected in different types of household support. As seen in the previous cases, within the context of the current phenomena of uncertainty and precariousness of the labor market, the processes of de-familialization in these trajectories can be called into question. Rather, families appear to be very present (in accordance with their contexts and resources) in supporting young graduates, providing a source of security and a series of non-monetary services (López Blasco, 2006). Indeed, the existence (or absence) of family support structures is one of the most important factors of inequality in youth trajectories (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Ule et al., 2015). The analysis of these cases allows us to observe that families support and make commitments to the educational processes of young people. In particular, with regards to their work-study decisions, in numerous trajectories, families provide information, guidance in decision-making, and/or a “realistic perspective” on what major to study or at what point to enter the labor market. Likewise, cultural capital reveals the differentiated expectations of parents according to the gender of their offspring. Patterns of the social reproduction of gender stereotypes shape expectations of offspring, for example, in terms of caregiving tasks and/or the continuity of family endeavors.

The family also appears as a space that generates significant landmarks that cause important changes of direction in the trajectories of graduates. Changes in family situations such as having a child, moving in with a partner, the loss of employment of the main breadwinner, and the death or illness of a member of the immediate family cause departures from the expected trajectories (Roberti, 2017). The consequences of these events depend on the stage of life in which they occur. If they take place early on, they may mean that young people must take on some fixed responsibilities in the household, as in the case of Álvaro. If they occur following the completion of secondary school, they may entail the (sometimes temporary) withdrawal from higher education and/or the beginning of working life, as in the case of Elba.

Finally, the various public policies and resources available also provide significant sources of support that can influence the development of these trajectories (Cetrángolo, Steinberg, and Gatto, 2011). For some young people, these sources of support, such as educational scholarships, are crucial to the realization of their expectations. It should be noted that, beyond what they have inherited, these graduates have not only developed a cultural capital (in terms of diplomas) greater than that of their parents, but also their own social capital through friendships, companionship, and networks of social and political participation (activism), which serve as support for educational and labor practices. The cases of Marta, Fermín, and Melina illustrate the importance of various public policies and resources in conjunction with these relational supports.

6. Conclusions

In this article, we reconstructed various life stories of (male and female) technical graduates, who were specially selected to closely examine a series of units of meaning, presented as key factors in the analysis of post-secondary trajectories. From this angle, the perspective of trajectories as a theoretical-methodological tool acquires a heuristic quality in the reconstruction of the itineraries studied, by allowing us to delve into both the decisive moments and the objective and subjective factors that influence every biography.

In theoretical terms, the work is aligned with perspectives that argue that, far from individualization based on free and rational choice, trajectories are heterogeneous and reflect the persistent impact of inequality factors (Tarabini, 2020). However, from the interpretivist perspective taken, the trajectories show—in a dynamic and contextually and historically situated way—the close overlapping of various factors.

As a generation, young people live in a historical context where, although they have greater educational opportunities and more years of schooling than previous generations, they must face uncertain labor markets with limited opportunities for generating formal employment. Thus, the generalized expectations of educational continuity end up reflected in a multiplicity of paths, where the

social, economic, and cultural capital of the household and of the geographic context condition these paths. The overlap between the various forms of capital allows us to shed light not only on the technical occupations of parents who had a strong influence on educational decisions, but also on networks of relationships that generate opportunities for study and employment.

In general terms, interviewees with low levels of capital either do not begin post-secondary studies or give them up after a short time (conditioned by the impossibility of migrating or the difficulty of balancing studies and work). Young people with medium-low levels of capital tend to end up on one extreme or the other. There are some who manage to overcome these conditions (with the help of available educational opportunities and scholarships), focusing their efforts on studying; while at the same time, there are others who, despite their initial aspirations, do not manage to continue and finally drop out. Lastly, there are those with high levels of capital who manage to complete (or are close to completing) their higher education studies.

Among the structural conditioning factors and subjectivities, a multidimensional perspective allows us to identify other meso-level structures that serve to provide institutional support, enabling the mobilization of resources in accordance with the strategies of young people. This support is tied, on the one hand, to established institutions, such as the availability of secondary and post-secondary education in the local geographic context (traversed by segmentations of quality) and on the other hand, to public policies that support educational continuity, such as scholarships and accompaniment in terms of guidance and pedagogical assistance (Walter and Pohl, 2007), which are cited by several interviewees as the reasons they were able to continue their studies.

However, the trajectories also reveal how subjective and relational factors add twists and particularities to similar conditioning factors. Subjects redefine opportunities based on their attitudes and identities. Among these factors, the belief in meritocracy, which leads them to continue their studies and/or to postpone certain roles and activities, plays a relevant role in understanding decision-making processes and in biographical sequences. They also interpret and seek opportunities and even negotiate according to their interests.

Indeed, the trajectories reflect a range of possibilities that are quite far from inexorable determinism. Contingencies and unanticipated events (such as unplanned pregnancies, the loss of employment of the main breadwinner, the illness of a family member) generate situations that produce changes in the expected trajectory. This is particularly evident in the case of women who must negotiate with the responsibilities assigned to their gender, adopting patterns of behavior that respond to the commitments involved in raising and caring for others (within their family of origin or once their own household has been constituted). However, adopting a multidimensional analytical perspective makes it possible to account for the way in which different dimensions of inequalities are reinforced, as well as their contemporary transformations.

In this regard, the focus on gendered trajectories shows how gender biases are reproduced and also transformed. In particular, it is evident that some women shift decisions regarding the establishment of a new household, prioritizing post-secondary studies and professional development, negotiating potential migration, care, and support for their own projects with their partners. Moreover, observations show that, as a sign of the times, unplanned pregnancy is not perceived as the end of expectations in the educational sphere. Horizons are broadened, prioritizing both the reproductive as well as the educational spheres, as a way to access better jobs. Thus, expectations for the future include the ability to evolve in all three spheres.

In closing, it should be noted that, although the multidimensional perspective on trajectories makes it possible to grasp the complexities of the interactions between various factors, the dynamism of the scenarios, and the dizzying changes in temporalities, there is also a need to continuously renew this perspective. Indeed, the uncertainty of the context and the historical moment (including the intensification and reconfiguration of inequalities stemming from the pandemic), plus the evident limitations of the meritocratic illusion, push the theoretical and empirical framework towards new complexities.

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