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Elements of reflexivity in the academic socialization of first-generation students in higher education

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Abstract

This article analyzes how first-generation higher education students elaborate expectations and action possibilities based on the relation between academic environment and social background. We analyze student trajectories to interpret the presence of elements of reflexivity associated to academic socialization. Based on ten in-depth interviews conducted in 2022 with students from a traditional federal university, we sought to understand how these students organize their action schemes, making sense of the university experience from their everyday practices. In the situations and standpoints expressed in their statements, we identified instrumental, moral, and political approaches which signal meta-pragmatic reflexive procedures. We verified that the inequalities experienced by the students in their relationships with classmates and the institution lead to socialization processes permeated by shocks. Individuals' symbolic work on some of these dislodgments reconfigures perspectives of action in coping with difficulties. Results show that students are mobilized to persist and succeed in university by distinct types of ends: instrumental, to achieve a better life; moral, to fulfil responsibilities with their families; and political, to build up social change. Their dynamics of individuation are therefore produced with the critique of the academic environment from schemes cultivated in the transit among distinct normative environments.

Keywords

Reflexivity – Everyday practices – Higher education – Student trajectories – Young people.

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Introduction

In the last ten years, after the national law that introduced a policy of affirmative action in federal higher education institutions (BRASIL, 2012), the presence of people from diverse social backgrounds, schooling trajectories, and life projects in academic environments has intensified. Many of these individuals are first-generation students, the first in their families to attend higher education.

The class effect on the chance to be admitted to higher education decreased between 2005 and 2015 (SALATA, 2018). This fact can be related to the combination of more places offered and the decrease in socioeconomic inequality in the period. At that moment, the diversity of social classes and races in higher education increased perceptively before the quotas law. However, this process was more intense in less competitive degrees (RISTOFF, 2014). Senkevics and Carvalho (2020) point out that the reserve of places was the only public policy with a clear effect against the upkeep of relative inequalities.

We sought to detect the elements of reflexivity present among students in this group, emerging from their difficulties and coping tactics. We based this work on ten interviews conducted with students or recent graduates from Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) who had an average family income up to two minimum wages³. We employed an interpretative perspective to visualize daily practices (COLOMBO, 2021). Based on Weidman (1989; 2006), we considered that academic socialization involves interpersonal interaction, learning, and social integration that connect students to normative environments. Thus, we focused on the description of situations that highlight dislodgment, exploring reflexive logics that emerge at points when the incorporated practical sense is insufficient (BOURDIEU, 2011).

First-generation students at the university

Studies about the first generation of students in higher education have shown individuals to uphold an intense feeling of waver crossing their histories in the commitment to produce new situations, offering their families benefits previously unknown. Family practices contribute to the school longevity of this group (PIOTTO, 2008; ZAGO, 2006). However, in elite programs, a feeling of not belonging to the group persists, “as a result of social distance and its reflexes on students’ lives” (ZAGO, 2006, p. 235). Other contexts, such as the workplace, are relevant for inserting first-generation students in higher education, mainly those over 30 years old (PIOTTO; ALVES, 2016).

In studies with students from UFRGS, Silva (2019) noticed that the university environment, perceived to be ambiguous, has allowed students to activate, improve, and incorporate new dispositions to break away from social reproduction patterns and transcend the possibilities imposed by their origins. Grisa, Neves, and Raizer (2020) showed that material and social variables, such as work hours and family support,

3- The data analyzed in this article are not publically available due to the need to protect the interviewees’ anonymity, according to the project approved by the appropriate Institutional Review Board, in this case, UFRGS’s Research Ethics Committee.

impacted the availability of time to study, a decisive factor for academic success that, when compromised, can lead to grade retention and drop-out. The possibilities found by students who faced disadvantages related to class and race are conditioned by everyday practices connected to the management of affirmative action.

Analyzing the perspective of Medicine professors, Nogueira (2015) exposed the perception that the quotas policy represents an interference in the “university power space” and uncovered actions to make Black students invisible, associated with the belief of a performance difference between quota and non-quota students. Bueno (2015) verified the need for actions that favor the persistence of quota students and democratic participation in the construction of institutional policies. Santos (2017) showed that the students yearned for inclusive policies and expressed the need for a public policy toward persistence to effectively democratize higher education.

These findings converge with international academic literature, confirming individuals’ difficulties in building relationships in complex institutional contexts to reach academic success (EVELAND, 2020). Their social background affects the gathering of information, creation of strategies, and mobilization for success in higher education (GUZMÁN-VALENZUELA *et al.*, 2022; WITTNER; KAUFFELD, 2023). There are differences between groups of students depending on their life trajectories, the presence of siblings in higher education (KIM; CHOI; PARK, 2020), or dispositions to mobilize networks (MOTSABI; DIALE; VAN ZYL, 2020; PATFIELD; GORE; FRAY, 2022). The meaning attributed to differences that characterize first-generation students diverge in different cultural contexts: in the Global South, in countries such as South Africa, what stands out is their resilience and the creative possibilities of their *habitus*, as opposed to the traditional deficit approaches in countries from the Global North, such as Canada (REED *et al.*, 2019).

Weidman (1989, 2006) understands socialization as a process through which people acquire knowledge, abilities, and dispositions that make them members of a specific community. Academic socialization reconfigures students’ *habitus* through complex arrangements of social relations that meet institutional normative pressures with answers informed by the interaction with non-academic environments and relationships.

To understand young students’ everyday practices and sensemaking, we must recognize that the factors pointed out in scholarship can be articulated in several ways to produce a social distance between first-generation students and their classmates. In this setting, there are efforts to produce oneself as a student, pervaded by reflexive components.

Everyday practices in the face of students’ inequalities

Everyday practices focus on how young people face challenges and use the resources available to them to build meaning in their everyday actions and affirm themselves in social spaces. Colombo (2021) calls attention to the symbolic aspects when analyzing young people’s routines and the differences that mark their lives. This constructionist perspective values meanings and interpretations individuals attribute to the material inequalities that underpin social relations. He affirms that “[...] a *material* difference becomes socially meaningful only

through the symbolic work of interpretation, which selects some differences and not others [...]” (COLOMBO, 2021, p. 25, emphasis on the original).

Thus, individuals deal with a margin of symbolic action regarding the limits imposed by the system to their conquest of cultural goods and positioning in face of soft exclusions that operate within the educational systems to preserve social hierarchies through subtle processes of marginalization (BOURDIEU, 2003). An indirect form of exclusion is the refusal to recognize the objective inequalities that distinguish individuals in a class society. Among young Brazilian university students, these disparities can mean the lack of resources for accommodation, food, and transport to attend classes. The precariousness of material life produces a situation of vulnerability and restricts the everyday practices required for academic success, which can determine interruptions in the schooling process.

Although the structural conditions and resulting hierarchies outline the opportunities available to individuals, their capacity to resist, criticize, act in a non-conventional manner, and think beyond common sense is never nullified, stressing the horizons of possibilities (COLOMBO, 2021). The procedures of social reclassification (BOURDIEU, 2001) establish pragmatic resources – instrumental, moral, and political – variably appropriated in social disputes. These efforts entail temporal and emotional costs, which are accounted for.

The analysis of everyday practices focuses on the relevance of contexts, social positions, and power hierarchies in which agents are inserted, as well as the ability to produce and arrange codes and meanings (COLOMBO, 2021). Therefore, it centers its attention on the practical use of situations by the subjects, i.e., how they modulate their competencies and cultural differences according to the action contexts to reach their objectives.

The seduction of individuals by the dynamics of the academic field crosses this negotiation. In this case, the student is moved by the pleasure of knowing, progressing socially, and acquiring prestige provided by academic activities and resulting titles. This bond, which Bourdieu (2001) calls *illusio*, operates over reflexive processes, especially when there are affective transactions. The *habitus* is then reformed in adjustment to the field’s forms of classification and social action.

The trajectories of young people from the social group studied in this research are marked by racism as a broad phenomenon and, in some cases, specific in the lack of recognition of the other and the occurrence of social distance when there is physical proximity and shared institutional association. Moreover, judgments based on social class hierarchize individuals according to their perceived cultural stock. The perspective of everyday practices contributes to visualize this phenomenon by evidencing that actors’ actions mediate the institutions’ effects on individuals.

The approach is also concerned with the resignification of social relations to produce autonomy in the face of challenges through an individuation process (COLOMBO; REBUGHINI; DOMANESCHI, 2021). The association between vulnerability and agency characterizes the everyday life of young people, producing distinct actions and agency styles (REBUGHINI, 2019). Temporary positions interconnect with the available resources and the boundaries set by each space’s social logics. By studying trajectories, we can explore the instrumentalization of repertoires built from past and present experiences to make room for inclusion and escape exclusion.

The element that articulates this operation is social reflexivity, the constant questioning of knowledge and interpretations over the situations experienced by the actors in a dynamic of sensemaking across shared practices shared in everyday life (COLOMBO, 2021; PINHEIRO; COLOMBO, 2021). Another characteristic of reflexivity is the recognition of the conditions in which social actions are produced (COLOMBO, 2021). Individuals produce meanings about their actions as they need to express their reasons before other actors or challenging situations. This way, “social knowledge materializes when there is a rupture that demands the suspension of usual thought” (PINHEIRO; COLOMBO, 2021, p. 16).

It is necessary to pay attention to situations that remove agents of their daily actions (BOLTANSKI, 2014) and disputes that demand the creation of new interpretations and justifications from previously gathered repertoires. This principle also finds a correspondence in Bourdieu’s (1994, 2011) analysis of the sources of social change. The misadjustment between subjective expectations and objective conditions can lead to questioning the workings of the social reality in which the subject is immersed and inquiring about the possibilities of transformation. This gives rise to pragmatic and meta-pragmatic procedures for approaching action (BOLTANSKI, 2014). The first ones seek to overcome challenges, while the latter aim to organize the perception of the unevenness between reality and normativity to deal with the “eclosion of a crisis in which there is a high level of reflexivity” (CORRÊA; DIAS, 2016, p. 95) and one needs to reorder classification schemes.

In the process of academic socialization, we observe young people to be subjected to dislodgments resulting from difficulties in their schooling trajectory. When challenged by new and sometimes unusual social experiences, they produce reflexivities associated with processes of evaluation and classification. Such phenomenon can be recognized from the description they provide about their conditions, possibilities, and actions.

Methodological strategy

This article results from a research project on trajectories of academic socialization at the *Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul* (UFRGS). UFRGS is amongst the biggest, oldest, and most prestigious Brazilian universities. Its organizational culture values and tacitly demands students’ exclusive dedication to degree studies, an institutional *ethos* with variations according to disciplinary areas.

The *corpus* we used for this article is composed of in-depth interviews with students who answered a survey applied in 2021⁴ and were available to being interviewed. Among the 1,463 valid answers, we identified 42 people with a family income up to two minimum wages and parents with no university diploma. Table 1, below, describes the demographic characteristics of the ten participants whose interviews were analyzed in this article.

4- Research Project funded by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) 428680/2018.

Table 1- Participants, according to program area⁵, entry year, gender, color and age

Code	Program Area	Admission	Birth Year	Pronoun	Color	Age
A01.1107	Human Sciences	2017	1999	She	White	23
A02.1207	Human Sciences	2017	1986	She	White	36
A03.1407	Agrarian Sciences	2015	1992	She	Brown	30
A04.2007	Applied Social Sciences	2015	1989	He	White	33
A05.2007	Exact and Earth Sciences	2018	1997	She	Brown	23
A06.2207	Health Sciences	2019	1995	He	Brown	25
A07.2507	Exact and Earth Sciences	2019	2001	She	White	21
A08.2707	Engineering	2020	2002	He	Black	20
A09.2707	Biological Sciences	2021	1997	She	Black	23
A10.2807	Applied Social Sciences	2021	1993	He	White	29

Source: Created by the authors.

The interview questions sought to provoke reflexive exercises in the interviewees when describing their ways of acting and judging in their life contexts – school, family, university, leisure. The rationale was to analyze everyday practices in students’ trajectories in the university in order to identify situations of inflection. After the interviews were transcribed, we analyzed their content identifying excerpts related to the following themes: admission at the university; interaction with the curriculum, professors, and classmates; and moments of inflection. In the excerpts, we looked for information that characterized students’ reflexive processes, toward a classification of the selected text strings into three categories: crises and challenges; mobilization; and reflexivity.

Students’ trajectories in the process of academic socialization

The students that compose the first-generation of the family at university face singular struggles and take up reference roles in the scope of their social space (PIOTTO, 2008; ZAGO, 2006). The interviewees tell in their stories the schooling difficulties in their families and express the meaning of being at the public university as a generational and class conquest nourished by cultivated expectations.

In my family, nobody has a university diploma. My father could do a technical [upper secondary course] in Electronics and my mother couldn’t study. She stopped in the fourth grade. [...] My

5- Program areas were listed according to the correspondence between the undergraduate programs in which the interviewed students were enrolled and the framework of knowledge areas by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq).

sister, at least, could finish high school. So, their dream was to have a [higher education] graduate in the family, and my father really wanted it to be in the federal [university]. (A05.2007).

I remember that my mother incentivized me and said: “you have to be admitted, you’re the daughter of a maid, you’re Black, you have to be the first person in the family, on both sides, to reach the university, a higher education”. [...] with this incentive, I thought, “I have to be the first. I can do it”. And the [popular preparatory] course⁶ too. They say, when we would go to the classes, “this is a public university. This is your place. You have to be here”. (A09.2707).

These experiences reveal a moral resource of motivation developed from the family core, which can be reinforced in other informal and non-formal spaces. Based on their past routines and in incorporated discourses, the individuals form schemes of self-affirmation as subjects with rights in the university. The schemes are updated and expanded in as they find themselves living crises in which they need to mobilize resources in new arrangements, putting into practice reflexivity processes.

Crises and challenges

The first challenge in the higher education trajectory relation refers to university admission. The individuals conceived various strategies based on the calculations over securing a viable placement.

In the meantime [...] I alternated among Pharmacy, Physics, and other courses with fewer candidates per place. Knowing that my “intellectual limitation” or my knowledgeability reached a certain plateau, from then on I needed to adapt to the program that was possible [for me to enter with my entrance examination scores]. (A04.2007).

I tried to enter as a low-income [student]. It was a very taxing process, with that document of provisory enrollment. I felt very affected. I already had financial problems, and problems at home. It was already difficult to pay [the transportation] to go to the university. So, to me, it was a heavy process, I had a provisory enrollment from 2019 to 2020... (A07.2507).

Regarding the program choice, the calculation can be connected to taste. However, other facts are at stake concerning the quota modality for competition. Besides the success in the admission process, there is another challenge to those admitted to reserved places for affirmative action: providing the documents that prove each condition. The tension over their acceptance also imposes emotional barriers, associated with situations of

6- Authors’ note on the English translation: Preparatory courses for the entrance examinations have existed in Brazil for decades, and proliferated from the asymmetries between: the number of students wishing to enter a program and the number of available places; and the education imparted by schools and the knowledge required to be classified in the exam. While these courses have developed as a paid service, in the past decade, a different type of provision expanded: popular preparatory courses, which do not charge fees and aim at low-income students who are the target of affirmative action quotas in public universities.

precariousness that characterize this group of students: family arrangements, material conditions, and limited to citizenship rights bounded by categories such as race and class.

I was denied [enrolment as a low-income student] because I needed my father's death certificate, with whom I'd never had contact. "Oh my goodness, and now what?" [...] It was sad to see that... It was the first time I saw my father's name on paper. (A01.1107).

The activism of the Black movement in the university made three students admitted to my quota to be disconnected from the university. And I was very attentive to this since the start, (...) I said "dude, I'll do everything I can, I know I have the right to this place and that it is rightfully mine", so, I went to the Federal Public Defender Offices [...], I took all my documents and explained everything. And at the time, the public defender sent an extrajudicial communication for the dean here at UFRGS. [...] A week later, I discovered an additional list, and my name was among the approved ones. (A06.2207).

After admission, students need to secure university persistence facing the fears over the maze-like structure of the university, with its environments and procedures. To adjust to the needs of academic life, students must transform themselves, altering their everyday practices and action schemes, notably, their posture and study habits. In this sense, they value the university opportunities to produce abilities and attitudes and identify limits in university practices, pointing out the need for changes.

I took me a long while to go to the university's library. I didn't know how it worked. I was embarrassed: "ah, will I know how to behave correctly there?" [...] In the first day of class, instead of starting with the content, speaking only those things that are more established there in that plan, [the university should] show more the options it offers. (A2.1207).

The student dormitory, I notice, is the first space I have, mine, in my life. I value a lot all this here, I love this place. And I resisted a lot to come. [...] I noticed that, in fact, [I] was not the disorganized one, it was my family, the family context and all the emergencies there. And then, here, I became an A student, I'll even graduate with honors. (A01.1107).

They have to bypass visible obstacles in the incompatibility between urgent life demands and the rigor of requirements imposed by the professors. The answers to the provocations of one context and another also prompt employing different logics. Hence the need to negotiate, acting in everyday life based on topical strategies.

[The professor prescribed] several exercises for us to do during the week, as if his class was the only one and he said "ah, what do you do from midnight to six [o'clock] that you aren't studying?", "If you want to study here, you have to make do". And this was a an evening-shift program, and most students were workers. At that time, I worked the whole day in a drugstore. (A05.2007).

I feel that, in some courses, the professors do not teach at the same level they demand in the exams. [...] Because you study, you do the book exercises, you get them right in the book, and the test is much harder. I understand that the test is normally to test the knowledge as a whole, but it is not fair that one lecturer teaches the classes and three lecturers gather to make the test. (A07.2507).

[...] one time, he [professor] turned his attention to me and was surprised by the fact that I was poor: “how come you are not middle-class?”. I talked about one difficulty or another, and he reacted very snobbishly: “how come you don’t speak English?”. (A01.1107).

The students point out the distance between teachers’ attitudes and the concrete reality of survival and teaching. The indignation with the imbalance between the teaching offered and the learning demanded leads to assertions on justice that unveil structural conditions of university life. They include the lack of attention to the everyday conditions and practices of university actors, the incoherence in the didactic and evaluation processes, and the assumptions about the student profile outlined from class attributes.

Students also perceive the disconnection with other actors that make up the university environment in the social distance from their classmates. There is a shock regarding the disparity of conditions among students of a same cohort.

I notice that almost everyone studying at UFRGS has a very high purchasing power. And [I also notice that] this, especially in my program, is a segregation factor among people. (A06.2207).

I feel that I always have to run more than them, because they already have more preparation from high school and [...] financial preparation. [...] I feel that I fall behind. But this doesn’t discourage me (A09.2707).

The course starts at eight in the morning. At 11, my classmates are already leaving, either to go to the cafeteria, internships, tutoring, or, whatever, I don’t know, to watch Fátima Bernardes⁷. But you never felt this welcome, even in the student center. Many times I went to the student center and there were cliques established there. And you, as a student, as a colleague of this group, screw it, you’re nobody. Like, they shunned you. (A04.2007).

The interviewees were bothered by their classmates’ lack of recognition for the value of classes and classmates. The students feel that dynamics of distinction separate groups of students according to cultural, school, and material requirements. Thus, they need to compensate to reach the same performance. However, the individual’s capacity to produce conditions to face the challenges is hindered by tacit demands of the university’s

7- Fátima Bernardes presented a variety show called “Encontro”, broadcasted on open-signal television from 2012 to 2022. The reference alludes to a preference for idleness and leisure time over university classes. There is also a connotation of taste for mass entertainment, not associated with the erudite culture cultivated in the academic field.

hidden curriculum, such as those involved in the selection processes for undergraduate scientific apprenticeship⁸.

[...] I heard the other interview. They spoke quite loudly, she was speaking English! It was not written that English was a requirement. Then I arrived there and was all confident to make [the selection], and he asked me if I already had experience, how many courses I had been approved in. (A07.2507).

In scientific apprenticeship, I had a heavy informational load. [...] So, there were professors who had their research project [for which they needed to recruit students], but they already had some students they wanted. Those ones could access their research groups, others were not allowed, [as] they created barriers so that you wouldn't participate. And this is bad. We know there are [...] selection [procedures] in which, no matter if 15 people are competing, so-and-so has already won. (A04.2007).

The scientific apprenticeship space is appreciated as an important and distinctive formative element in academic life. The regulation of access to this opportunity is a filter in the reproduction of university cadres. The students perceive the professors to operate this selection according to a logic of privilege multiplication, in which the distribution of academic resources is connected with tendencies to concentrate advantages on individuals from the same social group in the competition for opportunities.

Mobilization

Students derive their conditions to persist in their education from the resources they find to support their learning trajectory. The first element is their lectures' behavior, whether in their didactic competence or in the way they welcome students. They also recognize there is a role of dedication and receptiveness, related to valuing university space, that fits the student.

And the professors are great, I won't complain about anyone this semester. All of them have very good didactics. Most of my teachers this semester are very considerate regarding the pandemic because they understand how we are [doing]. [...] I've spoken to many lecturers, like, "can I arrive late? I may have to leave earlier because of my bus", and they are super understanding. They still give me the attendance, and understand it. (A09.2707).

I saw professors that made an effort and put in a lot of work to deliver us good content. And, maybe, they were underestimated by their own students. [...] If you don't have an interest, that's another story. (A08.2707).

8- Authors' note on the English translation: In this context, scientific apprenticeship [*"iniciação científica"* in Portuguese] defines an activity by which undergraduate students engage in research by assisting professors in their projects. This is considered to be a part-time commitment, usually remunerated with a scholarship of around half a minimum wage. This kind of engagement is consolidated in Brazilian academia, foremostly in research universities, and plays a significant role in preparing undergraduate students to pursue a postgraduate degree.

A second element refers to the use of resources offered by the university, such as student assistance, infrastructure, and potential social capital that permeates academic spaces. Leveraging all these factors depends on students' agency, connected to an individual style of action.

I also sought the program of student assistance, right? Also to survive, see what the university had. And then I saw that UFRGS had many things through the program of the Dean's Office for Student Affairs, had the cafeteria [free meals], , [gratuitous] student dormitory, transport aid, didactic material aid, and so on. I said "oh, at least I can subsist there as difficult as it may be, at least I'll have some support". (A03.1407).

What I like best are the facilities, like the library. For me, it is much better to study at UFRGS's library than at home. There is no noise, I have access to a computer, to books, I can focus more. (A09.2707).

To have experienced academia, beyond the classrooms, the hallway experience, the conversation, the real interest for people, this gave me an advantage: if I don't know how to solve something, I know who does, I discover, I do ask for things. (A01.1107).

The third element is the penchant for the academic experience. In this case, the university space is valued beyond its instrumental aspect. It is considered a place to weave affective connections of belonging, fruition, and taste. There is a desire to stay, discover, and know, as forms of individual expression and realization connected to the *illusio*.

I really like the library. I think it is very cozy to study there. I liked going there. [...] There's that space, you know, close to those Chinese houses, right? It's very good there. When I arrived there on Saturdays, I would sit there under the trees. The environment around is very nice. I know there are many lectures, but normally they take place during the day and things like that. Actually, I accepted to participate in this research because I wanted... I felt I needed to live the university a bit more. (A07.2507).

I started to search about environmental philosophy, environmental ethics, and this kind of thing. And then, when I was reading a book, I saw the term eco-feminism. I'd never heard about it in my life. I said, "what is this?". [...] I kept going and going, and I liked a lot this association, the coming together of two struggles. (A2.1207).

People are very critical. They use the word "academicism". [...] I think that a university is a place of knowledge indeed, of science and all. So, some distinction is kind of necessary. [...] Law has this prestige. Then, I reach belonging: it is much easier to create this bond because you have a rewarding relation, like: "Ha, I study Law at UFRGS [...], bah, I am at a fucking great place". (A10.2807).

The rewarding relation that motivates students to keep attending university encompasses pragmatic calculations. However, there are also affective and moral grounds connected to the sense of identity and purpose.

So, 90% of the time I feel I don't belong [in the university], but that 10% when you are in class, understanding the subject, dealing with the things I always wanted to deal with, you feel you belong here, you think "this is where I should have been all the time". (A09.2707).

This statement synthesizes the connection between the resilience efforts in everyday practices and merges the different reflexive processes that permeate them.

Reflexivity

In everyday contexts, the critical situations that remove individuals from their incorporated action forms provoke the reorganization of interpretative schemes. It is possible to retrieve in students' testimonies a series of markers of reflexive processes, seen in the following excerpts.

Then these crises began, seeing how the scientific field works from within, also because I created very high expectations [...]. I started to create this network, student groups, to talk about qualitative persistence in the university, thinking now not about money, thinking about mastering codes and accessing spaces of research and outreach. Like, it took me ten months to understand how to write an abstract. You don't need ten months to write an abstract, so "let's learn together"? [...] I'm always anticipating things and seeking an array of solutions. The university has taught me to be organized [...] problems arise, first you despair and then, "wait, I know so many people" [...], [I am] always supporting everyone [...]. One creates a network, so every time a problem arises, there is somebody to move something here or there. (A01.1107).

I was admitted through socioeconomic quotas, right, and I had a certain prejudice, long before entering university, against the quotas. And today I see [...] there really is a disparity [...] Do you want to compare the experience of a person that speaks I don't know how many languages and traveled... with people who studied in public schools? [...] This thing we have stuck in our minds is that everything is through merit alone. This doesn't exist! It really doesn't. And this is one of the things I have to thank the public university a lot, it opened my mind to these things. Because it is different to hear this from the outside, from the people who have never been inside it, as I'm telling you now. Then you have these preconceptions, you know, and you also believe that. Once you are inside, you see the reality is completely different. (A2.1207).

Now, I'm focusing on studying to try a master's scholarship in the United States. [...] I know that here in Brazil is kind of complicated in the long run, to stay here, you know? So, I had this idea that maybe I could go abroad, but this was still a very far thing. Then I met these two girls who studied abroad, did the master's and doctorate overseas, and they explained how to get a scholarship. Because the system there is different from here, right? [...] It's a long path, but it's not impossible (A05.2007).

Living here in Porto Alegre, I was forced to understand racial literacy. Because I may have gone through many potentially racist situations in the Northeast [region of Brazil], but it was never this clear to me that that was racism. When I started living here, this became very clear because I think there is this strong racial component as well, racial prejudice. [...] And each time, there are more students to speak about this. [...] When I joined the Faculty of Medicine, I felt I didn't deserve to be in that space. It's such a privileged space, you know? I didn't feel that it was a space for me. But not today. In time, I completely owned the space of the Faculty of Medicine, all the opportunities that appear. And I know how much this space belongs to me and to other people like me. (A06.2207).

There are very few low-income students at UFRGS [...] you look around, there are many people different from you. They are not financially equal. There are different statuses and different questions. I have classmates that understand much better the subjects I never saw in upper secondary education. Then you ask for aid and they say "how come you didn't see that in High School?". It's not their fault, but there is a social bubble [going on] with many UFRGS students that they can't look [beyond it]... (A09.2707).

And I also think that it would be very interesting if the school could at least improve access to materials, because the classmate has an extremely expensive lab coat, I don't. The classmate has a scientific calculator. Yesterday, I did an exam asking people for a scientific calculator because mine wasn't working and I had no means to buy [a new one], can you understand? This is a matter in which I think the university should pay more attention to the students. (A09.2707).

The everyday practices perceived in the testimonies show that the students' experiences of academic socialization have a radical relation with the possible trajectories in their material and cultural life. On the other hand, they express the ability to reflexively problematize crises and challenges that mark these experiences, as well as to mobilize resources toward their persistence and affirmation in the university context. These traits allow us to detect agency in the re-articulations among life stories, conditions of *habitus* production, and adaptation of dispositions. Sensemaking occurs mainly regarding the mismatches between first-generation students and their classmates, their objective conditions of student life, and the expectations imposed by the university.

Discussion

Some patterns emerge from assembling the components of reflexivity detected in the everyday practices reported. These elements can be classified according to the dimensions of pragmatic focuses – instrumental, moral, political – or, yet, as meta-pragmatic procedures (BOLTANSKI, 2014). They appear associated with criticisms resulting from the perception of a mismatch between norms and experience or between the possibilities of institutional integration and internal disputes.

The pragmatic focuses are responses to practical events: through them, individuals modulate their actions based on their classifications of the factors found in challenging

circumstances. We found an instrumental approach guided by results such as: changing the economic standing of the family; acquiring a profession; earning money; and gaining social status. It involves calculations regarding: viability of being admitted in different programs depending on the competition; responsibility in devoting time to the classes' workload; and financial organization to continue with institutional allowances and benefits or conciliating studies and work. Another approach, with a moral character, refers to values, and encompasses serving as a role model in a social group; conquering space for the family group; valuing academic knowledge and the pleasure involved in its exercise; judging merit; and acting based on emotional mobilization through feelings of gratitude and honor. Finally, the political approach can be associated with affects of indignation, resentment, and injustice in the face of elitist class-based behaviors. It also emerges when students are faced with the lack of recognition and integration in the courses, amidst perceptions and actions based on color or race that reinforce the pattern of racial segregation in society. It is further related to incongruences of the pedagogical contracts and conflicts with the bureaucratic antinomies. In this political record, actors perceive a need for change and identify key points in university performance that make students vulnerable and come up with possible solutions.

The senses construed with these focuses, resulting from dislodgment situations, are elaborated in reflexive moments that organize previous answers through meta-pragmatic procedures. The latter are related to interrogating manners of knowing and interpreting reality, leading to the revision of classification strategies and action production. Table 2 summarizes examples of these forms of reflexivity detected among the interviewees, relating to the terminology established by Boltanski (2014).

Table 2- Elements of reflexivity according to focuses and procedures

Pragmatic Focuses			Metapragmatic Procedures
Instrumental	Moral	Political	
Development of practical competences Planning Composition of social capital Mapping of opportunities through networks Insatrumentalization of change	Affective relation: gratitude, honor Change of perception and in sensemaking Emotional control Evaluation of past behavior Disposition to devise alternatives	Racial consciousness Class consciousness Change in the assessment of self-worth Perception of the effects of inequality and social distinction over the peers' consciousnesses Perception of the institution's responsibility to act on inequality	Criticism of the sources used to know and judge reality Perception of the hiatus between the assumptions that guide intersubjective arrangements and the reality of symbolic exchanges Acquisition of diverse codes to translate and re-elaborate action Identification of the scale of phenomena and possible boundaries to action Detection of differences among the contexts to reorganize practical schemes

Source: Created by the authors.

The interviewees' testimonies confirm Zago's (2006) observation that social distance compromises integration to academic life and Piotto's (2008; 2016) remark about the activation of resources from other spaces to continue at the university, mainly in the moral

dimension. The relationship with the institution itself is affected by difficulties already observed by Grisa, Neves, and Raizer (2020) about initial inequalities, as well as Nogueira (2015) and Rodrigues (2017) on the elitism in the traditional university environment. Notwithstanding, as observed by Silva (2019), the trajectory at UFRGS represents the expansion in horizons of possibilities regarding the individuals' life projects. In some cases, this expansion is related to political reflexivity that also unfolds over possibilities to influence the institutional workings, as analyzed by Santos (2017).

In the terms of Bourdieu (2001) and Colombo (2021), individuals perform symbolic work to deal with the association between differences and barriers, as well as to interpret and justify their presence and persistence in the university. Here reflexivity plays its mediating role, intertwining action with meanings that connect both with students' trajectories and broader social structures. The instrumental academic success is linked to the moral perspective of overcoming inequality and involves examining political repertoires for producing knowledge about the social sphere through practice, mixing the desire for belonging - *illusio* - and the struggle for recognition.

In many cases, acquiring a university diploma is a conquest with a broader social meaning than the title itself: it breaks away with class and race subordination, representing the students' capacity to impact the structure, re-establishing the horizon of possibilities of their origin groups. The dislodgment of possibilities projected by the individual concerning the determinations of their social condition, in search for autonomy in the face of vulnerability, provokes individuation dynamics (COLOMBO; REBUGHINI; DOMANESCHI, 2021; REBUGHINI, 2019).

Finding these dispositions for action, we reinforce the proposal of Reed *et al.* (2019) to advance in the characterization of groups of first-generation students from positive elements related to the resources that they mobilize in their everyday practices and the reflexive processes developed in this exercise. In this interpretation, the diversity that composes the category of first-generation students can play a role beyond individual academic success and acts over the re-elaboration of institutional practices and, even, the university *eidos*. Academic socialization can be seen as a process not limited to the inculcation of an *habitus* in novices, but can be permeated by conflict situations with creative results. In moments of crisis, the discontinuities of *habitus* are associated with the suspension of *doxa* and *illusio*, forcing the recomposition of action schemes and, therefore, the recoding of agency possibilities (BOLTANSKI, 2014; PINHEIRO; COLOMBO, 2021).

Final remarks

As documented in the scientific literature, the integration of first-generation students to university is marked by processes of distancing and mismatch. However, these individuals persist, showing that the motivational elements are strong enough to face the challenges aiming to acquire the title, the experience, and the knowledge that a higher education degree represents. In the words of A09.2707, there is a 10% of university experience that makes the other 90% worthwhile. This valuation exemplifies the symbolic construction, the series of transactions, commitments, and socially-supported operations

that allow for adjustments and detours in individual trajectories (BOURDIEU, 2001), reorganizing the horizons of possibilities.

The elements that compose undergraduates' individuation, connected to the meanings they produce about the challenges they face, shed light on aspects of academic socialization related to individuals' agency before social contradictions. Interpreting everyday practices (COLOMBO, 2021) allows us to recognize the discrepancies between the reality experienced by university students and the normative prescriptions of institutional authorities, seeking greater coherence and efficiency to fight off social inequalities through public policies of affirmative actions.

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