

# Career, Class, and Social Reproduction in the Life Stories of Outsourced Cleaners

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we employ the life story method to investigate the multiple boundaries that, visible or invisibly, have influenced the trajectories of outsourced cleaners working in organizations, delimiting their career opportunities. Based on the Bourdieusian framework, we aim to contribute to the expansion of the debate in the field of career studies by emphasizing the influence of the contextual dimension of analysis in the career construction process. Above all, we privilege a social class perspective, scarcely present in career studies, in which the dominance of constructs such as boundary-less and protean careers reflects the typical emphasis attributed to individual agency. Access to the life stories of the respondents enabled us to unveil multiple boundaries interposed throughout their trajectories, associated with family (family disorganization and early transitions: maternity, conjugality, and insertion into domestic work), educational (early school dropout), neighborhood (local ties associated with low career returns), and professional (intersubjective relationships associated with experiences of pleasure and social humiliation) contexts. Taken together, these boundaries ended up circumscribing the topography of their careers by largely limiting them to providing care and cleaning services.



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## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary organizations' continuous quest for flexibility and competitiveness has entailed the reduction of personnel costs, implemented by decreasing intermediate levels of management, transferring production and labor to developing and underdeveloped countries (Callanan et al., 2017), and increasingly adopting atypical arrangements (Spreitzer et al., 2017), such as temporary, part-time, and outsourced work (Kalleberg, 2012). On the other hand, reduced opportunities for career advancement within organizations and the availability of relatively well-paid jobs (Van Maanen, 2020) have generated criticism targeting the traditional notion of career, whose linear, ascending, long-term trajectory in an organization no longer responded to the nascent work dynamics (Baruch, 2004).

To capture this new zeitgeist, career studies have been striving to understand the changing landscape in all its complexity and dynamism to assist career planning and career management (Baruch & Sullivan, 2022). To this end, 'new career' models have been proposed over the past three decades, particularly two that currently enjoy wide acceptance (Gubler et al., 2014), that is, the boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) and the protean careers (Hall, 1996). Defined as a "sequence of work opportunities transcending the boundaries of any single organization" (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996, p. 116), the boundaryless career prescribes the need for individuals to seek inter-organizational mobility, which is a prerequisite for employability. In turn, protean careers summon individuals to take charge of their careers and lead them according to their subjective values and ideals of success (Wolf, 2019). In both cases, continuous learning, usually translated as the acquisition of portable skills, is proposed as a precondition for the adaptive potential of individuals and perceived as paramount for the constant adaptation of their careers to market demands.

For some critics, however, both modalities consist of optimistic and voluntaristic representations of careers whose excessive focus on one's agency (Gander, 2022) corresponds to the legitimization of the neoliberal logic, in which the responsibility for career management is transferred from organizations to individuals, who become responsible for placing themselves in the labor market, advancing their careers, and achieving professional success (Roper et al., 2010; Silveira de Souza et al., 2020). In other words, they disregard the multiplicity of external factors conditioning career placement and development (Anderson et al., 2020). Among other aspects, they tend to mask the overlapping of careers with the domination and exploitation relations inherent in the labor market, implying, for example, the non-rec-

ognition of the fact that careers are crossed by social class, gender, and race markers (Vardi & Vardi, 2020).

As a counterpoint to the emphasis on individual agency underlying new concepts of careers (McDonald, 2018), in the 2000s, a relational perspective of analysis took hold, with theoretical and empirical assumptions grounded on grand social theories (Mayrhofer et al., 2007), particularly the theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1990), able to integrate career research into a broader social and organizational framework (Delva et al., 2021; Gander, 2022; Iellatchitch et al., 2003). Along these lines, a career is perceived as a sequence of positions through which individuals move in one or more career fields, and this trajectory is conditioned by the structure of the field, capital, and career habitus (Schneidhofer et al., 2020). Over the last two decades, the Bourdieusian perspective has contributed to the investigation of multiple contexts in recent analyses of career studies by emphasizing the critical incorporation of gender (Gander, 2019; Jayashree et al., 2021), ethnicity (Joy et al., 2020; Wissman et al., 2021), and aging markers (Tempest & Coupland, 2017).

However, despite the greater attention paid to the contextual dimension according to this perspective, research focused on understanding the barriers imposed on careers from a class perspective is still scarce, with few exceptions (Huppertz, 2009; Hurst, 2018). In this context, the trajectories pursued by individuals from working-class backgrounds, often divergent from the conventional upward trajectory associated with traditional careers, have been subjected to insufficient attention within the realm of career studies. This limitation has motivated the authors of this article to investigate the multiple boundaries resulting from the barriers created by various contexts in the careers of outsourced cleaners in the Brazilian scenario through the life story method.

Overall, this study expands the contemporary career debate into two different directions. Firstly, reconstituting the careers of working-class women allowed us to shed light on the contextual constraints they face in their professional trajectory, which, in turn, jeopardized the optimism underlying the 'new careers,' typically centered on the individual. Adopting the life story method enhanced the critique of the excessive focus on the agency by uncovering material and symbolic constraints that impacted the personal and professional choices of the women workers surveyed in this study. Secondly, this paper aimed to fill the gap in the literature of studies focused on socially marginalized workers (Prasad et al., 2007) situated in the lower social strata (Baruch et al., 2016) whose peripheral treatment in career studies (Guest & Sturges, 2007) seems to ig-

nore the deepening inequality between social classes during the last decades (Van Maanen, 2020).

Hence, we address the rhetorical acknowledgment prevailing within career studies, which posits that “every individual engaged in employment follows a career path” (Arthur et al., 1989, p. 9), proposition that stands in contrast to the actual research conducted in the field of careers, as it tends to exclude laborers from lower socioeconomic strata. In this regard, this study enriches the comprehension of career trajectories, which, despite being marginalized, constitute the vast majority of vocational journeys, particularly within peripheral contexts like Brazil.

## THEORY OF PRACTICE AND CAREER STUDIES

We present below a succinct overview of the theoretical framework underpinning this research, which encompasses the core concepts of practice theory (Bourdieu, 1990), the notion of precarious habitus, and considerations pertaining to the assimilation of the Bourdieusian perspective by career studies. This amalgamation has contributed to formulating a contextualized approach to careers, diverging from the voluntarist perspective advocated by contemporary paradigms such as the ‘boundaryless’ and ‘protean’ careers.

### Theory of practice: General remarks

Developed from a reduced number of concepts, especially the notions of field, capital, and habitus, the theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1990) consists of a relational approach privileging the two-way relationship between agency and structure (Delva et al., 2021). It corresponds to an effort to rescue the centrality of habitual action in structuring social reality, as well as to a frontal rejection of voluntarist perspectives, especially the notion of the rational actor (Friedland, 2009). Conversely, the latter proposes the situated character of the economic habitus, that is, that “calculating dispositions towards work, saving, housing, fertility or education are tightly linked, through the mediation of dispositions towards the future, to economic and social conditions ... of possibility and impossibility” (Bourdieu, 2004). Thus, it acknowledges the unequal social distribution of so-called rational dispositions (Silveira de Souza & Lemos, 2021).

According to Bourdieu (2013), the notion of field is defined as a multidimensional space of positions whose vertical and horizontal coordinates, respectively, correspond to the volume and composition of the capital of individuals belonging to a certain social class. It represents a structure of differences in which dominant and dominated agents mobilize strategies for conserv-

ing or transforming the field rules to monopolize the criteria of symbolic classification (Bourdieu, 2010).

We align the author’s interpretation of the concept of ‘field’ with a domain of forces or contestations (Bourdieu, 2013). In that case, the diverse forms of capital are conceptualized as weapons used in the struggles waged in the fields to impose the principle of their organization (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008) and the primary power source, whose amount and composition order the agents hierarchically in a given field (Joy et al., 2020). Among the various forms of capital, four deserve special attention, namely economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. A more common resource variant, economic capital comprises goods and rights convertible into money and is characterized by a high conversion rate into other forms of capital, high liquidity, and express transmission, particularly through the institute of inheritance (Bourdieu, 2013).

In turn, cultural capital can be found in three states – institutionalized, objectified, and embodied. In the first case, one should speak of academic or professional credentials whose acquisition stems from the conversion of economic capital into cultural capital. These qualifications can be ranked hierarchically and contribute decisively to defining their holder’s relative value in the labor market (Bourdieu, 2015b). Its objectified form materializes into various artifacts such as books, works of art, and scientific equipment. Finally, the embodied state refers to the individual dispositional heritage, which conditions aspects such as body language, pronunciation, and lifestyle as they are slowly assimilated (Moore, 2012).

Usually equated with relatively institutionalized relationship networks of relationships and recognition (Bourdieu, 2015a), the value of social capital is subordinated to the volume of economic and cultural capital that can be mobilized through it (Delva et al., 2021; Joy et al., 2020). Furthermore, Bourdieu adds symbolic capital as the fourth form of capital, defined as a “transformed form, that is to say unrecognizable, transfigured and legitimized, from other forms of power” (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 15). By engendering practices and judgments adjusted to the doxa (i.e., the values and beliefs prevailing in the field), this resource confers prestige and power to its holders (Bourdieu, 2013; Chudzikowski & Mayrhofer, 2011).

Lastly, the concept of habitus was introduced by Bourdieu (2010) as a mediator between social structure and individual action, or rather, as schemes of action, perception, and valuation that mold individuals’ lived experiences according to their social standings. The habitus represents the assimilation of collective

norms by the individual, primarily through experiential and subconscious learning.

### Revisiting Bourdieu: Peripheral modernity and precarious habitus

In 'The social construction of sub-citizenship' (Souza, 2012a), Brazilian sociologist Jessé Souza presents a thesis about the Brazilian modernization process that diverges from the prevailing culturalist viewpoint. The author posits that the primary distinction between dominant Western societies and peripheral ones lies in the reproduction, in the latter case, of a structural underclass, which he named 'Brazilian rabble,' a term employed to denote a social class lacking the psychological and social attributes necessary for participation in a competitive market. Such attributes include discipline, self-control, and forward-thinking.

In the development of his theory, Souza (2012a) critically amalgamates the ideas of philosopher Charles Taylor and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. From the former, he adopts the thesis suggesting that previous moral configurations associated with individuals' perceptual and evaluative frameworks underlie the rise of the modern conception of identity prevalent in the West (punctual self). This identity is rooted in the promotion of individualism, freedom, performance, and reason, forming the bedrock for notions of self-worth, dignity, and citizenship (Taylor, 2013). The latter framework provides the tools to articulate concepts of moral hierarchy, power dynamics, and social inequality.

Souza (2012a) offers a critique of the ethnocentrism inherent in the perspectives of both these thinkers, a result of extrapolating the socioeconomic conditions prevalent in the developed Western nations. In relation to Bourdieu (1990), the author underscores the necessity to transcend the depiction of habitus as a monolithic construct. This view presupposes the universal sharing of a primary habitus, borne from a historical learning process enabling members of a society to internalize a particular sense of dignity, which intersects with notions of citizenship and equality (Souza, 2006). Comprising attributes such as discipline, self-control, and forward-thinking, this primary habitus facilitates an individual's social recognition and productive role within contemporary competitive society (Souza, 2012a).

In contrast, the secondary habitus assumes the incorporation of the primary habitus and introduces aesthetic competence, or 'taste,' as a distinguishing criterion. Consequently, the concept of authenticity supplants that of dignity in terms of a parameter for social recognition within the framework of the secondary habitus. This structure tends to align with occupations

that are most highly esteemed both materially and symbolically (Souza, 2012a).

Conversely, the notion of the precarious habitus aims to delineate a personality structure devoid of the "less apparent dispositions of the modern world: discipline, self-control, and forward-thinking behavior and thought" (Souza, 2012b, pp. 50-51). The precarious habitus is thus theoretically and empirically linked to circumstances of dire poverty and disrupted family dynamics (Souza, 2020).

Another facet challenged by Souza (2012a) is the failure to recognize the origins of inequality in Brazil, primarily due to the valorization of the performance ideology. The exaltation of merit as a justification for individual triumph, integral to the modern moral configuration (punctual self), contributes, according to him, to the concealment of the mechanisms underpinning the "objective and subjective perpetuation of the 'precarious habitus'" (Maciel, 2006, p. 245). As a result, emotions like pride, shame, guilt, and gratitude arise as symbolic mediators of an objective hierarchy of values, emblematic of a process of self-assumed accountability for personal success or failure.

### Bourdieuian praxeology and careers: Bringing context to the fore

In career studies, the appropriation of the Bourdieusian theoretical framework has entailed the acknowledgment of careers as spaces of power, a notion associated with disputes over the imposition of "dominant principles of classification" (Dick, 2008, p. 340). Therefore, contrary to the dominant voluntarism in the field, the power relations that condition the process of career construction are recognized (Schneidhofer et al., 2020). While the career field is defined as a socially constructed environment endowed with a set of rules and practices that assign autonomy to it (Winterheller & Hirt, 2017), career capital corresponds to the portfolio of particular forms of capital to which value is assigned in a given field (Duberley & Cohen, 2010; Jayashree et al., 2021), or else, to the investment of different kinds of resources held by the actors in their professional trajectories, amassed over the long term through socialization in multiple contexts (Iellatchitch et al., 2003). In turn, the career habitus concerns the actions and strategies individuals mobilize habitually and unconsciously in a given career field (Latzke et al., 2015).

In the past two decades, several contexts have been investigated considering the Bourdieusian theoretical framework to understand their effects on careers. For example, the various barriers impacting careers in the Canadian biotechnology sector have been addressed, and a reduced turnover at the managerial level was



found, contrary to the expectations of boundaryless careers (Gunz et al., 2000). In turn, research aimed at understanding the impacts of national contexts on careers has concluded that these can condition individual motivations underlying occupational transitions (Chudzikowski & Mayrhofer, 2011), as well as on one's conceptions of career paths (Mayrhofer et al., 2016). Similarly, other studies have examined how women mobilize different forms of capital in their careers as resources capable of contributing positively to confronting ethnic (Jayashree et al., 2021) and gender barriers (Gander, 2019). Additionally, the barriers and strategies mobilized by skilled immigrants (Winterheller & Hirt, 2017) and refugees have been investigated regarding their placement and professional development (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018). Finally, a study framed by a class perspective concluded, based on a survey of young Icelandic adults, that one's choice of career is associated with the practice of cultural and leisure activities, which are, in turn, related to one's social background (Vilhjálmisdóttir & Arnkelsson, 2013).

However, despite the wide range of contextual dimensions evaluated, the residual presence of the social class marker in these studies motivated the approach adopted herein. We argue that social class, through the imposition of numerous barriers along career trajectories, plays a pivotal role in sculpting careers that inherently encompass fragility and social immobility as defining features and most likely outcomes.

## METHODOLOGY

The adoption of a narrative approach is explained by our understanding that individual experiences constitute a privileged access route to systems of perceptions and individual meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), as well as the objective structures and processes that condition "particular forms of material life, production, and reproduction, labor, and consumption" (Bertaux, 1999, p. 6). To follow the respondents' careers through multiple times and spaces, we chose to employ the life story method, which is suitable for investigating phenomena such as social mobility, marginalization and exclusion, and sociability (Barros & Lopes, 2014).

By reflecting the impacts of multiple socializations performed by institutions such as the family, organizations, religion, and education, life stories situate social actors in a broader collective story (Barros & Silva, 2014), thus constituting a "non-linear access to scientific knowledge of the social system" (Bueno, 2002, p. 20). A Bourdieusian approach to life stories allows the unveiling of the generative structures present in the field and the habitus, which are conditioning factors of an unequal structure of possibilities (Barrett, 2015).

As for the research subjects, outsourced workers in the cleaning sector were selected for reasons such as the importance of the services provided by organizations and workers in the sector; the sociodemographic profile of workers, mostly women from the lower classes; as well as the relevance of the cleaning sector in terms of job creation. In the first 20 years of the 21st century, for example, this sector ranked fourth in the generation of jobs in the Brazilian market, creating approximately 992,000 jobs, according to data from the General Register of Employed and Unemployed of the Ministry of Labor and Employment (Ministério do Trabalho e Emprego, 2023).

At first, the respondents were selected from the relationship network of one of the researchers. However, the initial plan to conduct three interviews with each participant to investigate family, educational, and professional contexts proved to be an obstacle to the conclusion of the interviews, as they were usually terminated after the first or second round, due to the unwillingness of the interlocutors to carry on with the process. Consequently, we opted to use a research company specialized in recruiting informants, in this case, lower-class individuals living in *favelas* or suburban neighborhoods in the north and west zones of Rio de Janeiro. Two to three interviews, lasting one hour each, were conducted with each participant, preferably in their residences, for it enabled us to directly assess the living conditions of the respondents and created a more conducive environment for them to share their life histories comfortably.

Table 1 presents the profile of the eight respondents and highlights information relevant to this study referring to the major contexts of analysis investigated: family, neighborhood, educational, and professional. To ensure the anonymity of informants, fictitious names were assigned to them. It is noteworthy that despite the lack of a prior definition of gender and ethnicity in the selection process of the participants, the respondents' profile reveals a research focus combining class, gender, and ethnicity markers, in line with data from the Conservation and Urban Cleaning Union (Siemaco, 2011), according to which cleanliness and conservation activities (provision of cleaning services for commercial, industrial, and service establishments) are composed of a majority contingent of Black women with low educational levels.

It is important to note that this article represents a segment of a more extensive study encompassing various other contexts such as leisure, morality, and religion. However, due to space constraints, these aspects have not been included here. We have thus opted to concentrate on those aspects that exhibited a more significant impact on shaping the respondents' careers. Following

the methodological framework proposed by Bertaux (1999, p. 10), which advocates for a blend of attentive listening and effective questioning when delving into socio-structural relations that influence individual and col-

lective histories, we employed a semi-structured script for our research approach. This strategy aligns with the guidelines outlined by Lahire (2004) and MacDonald et al. (2005).

**Table 1. Respondents' profile.**

Respondents	Age	Education level	Occupation(s)	Age of entry into the labor market	Age of first pregnancy
Alessandra	29	Some high school	Outsourced cleaner/Housekeeper	16	19
Monique	33	Elementary school	Outsourced cleaner/Housekeeper	13	17
Nazaré	56	Elementary school	Outsourced cleaner/Babysitter/Artisan	14	29
Bruna	29	Grade 8 or less	Outsourced cleaner/Candy-maker	14	13
Georgette	59	Elementary school	Outsourced cleaner/Housekeeper/Store clerk	18	16
Regina	52	High school	Outsourced cleaner/Housekeeper	40	21
Andrea	40	Grade 8 or less	Outsourced cleaner/Housekeeper/Babysitter	12	17
Adriana	37	Grade 8 or less	Outsourced cleaner	19	17

Note. Developed by the authors.

Incorporating Bertaux's (1999) methodological framework, we adhered to two additional aspects. Firstly, we based the number of respondents on the saturation criterion, aligning with the author's proposition. Furthermore, we followed the recommended chronological sequence for gathering, transcribing, and analyzing the life histories. In accordance with Bertaux's approach, we promptly transcribed and preliminarily analyzed each interview's information at its conclusion. This method facilitated the timely identification of saturation, indicating the point at which the inclusion of new participants becomes superfluous due to redundancy in acquired data, adding minimal value to the existing material (Bertaux, 1999, p. 11).

Regarding the structuring of the life story analysis process, we chose to employ thematic analysis; that is, the themes were structured from the combination of previously defined (first-order codes) and emerging categories (second-order codes) throughout the research process, segregated according to Table 2. While the first-order codes indicate the target contexts of the investigation, the second-order codes indicate the most relevant aspects of the contexts that emerged from the reports, sometimes associated with turning points, such as early pregnancy and school dropout.

Every interview underwent several readings, and the coding process was initially facilitated using the proof-reading tool within the text editor (Microsoft Word®). During this phase, passages deemed particularly pertinent to the study's objectives were identified, resulting in the assignment of first- and second-order codes. To facilitate a holistic examination of the interviews, a spreadsheet comprising four tabs was designed, each corresponding to a first-order code. Within each tab, excerpts from the interviews were meticulously associated with the corresponding second-order codes. This

approach enabled a comprehensive visualization of the manifold narratives linked to each code. This systematic mapping procedure, in conjunction with the theoretical framework, served as the foundational structure for shaping the subsequent analysis and discussion of the findings.

**Table 2. Analytical categories.**

First-order	Second-order
Family context	Family disruption
	Economic precarity
	Early domestic work
	Early adulthood
Educational context	Early pregnancy
	School dropout
	Early and precarious placement in the labor market
Neighborhood context	Social capital
	Local networks
	Inequality
Professional context	Interpersonal distancing
	Social humiliation
	Career habitus

Note. Developed by the authors.

Finally, we believe that adopting the life story method allows us not only to analyze the process of construction of the respondents' careers but also to privilege its constitutive dimensions — space, identity, and time (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2017), translated in the Bourdieusian framework to the concepts of field/capital, habitus, and trajectory, respectively.

## RESULTS

The operational logic proposed for presenting the results was to organize them based on the concepts of family, educational, neighborhood, and professional contexts — the first order codes —, thus illustrating how multiple spaces and times conditioned their careers. It should be noted that the relational epistemological

approach adopted in this study emphasized the interface between the individual, contextual and structural spheres, thus privileging the micro, meso and macro dimensions of investigation.

### Family context: Early domestic work and early adulthood

When combined, the life histories shared by the participants and the observations made by the first author during his home visits to conduct interviews collectively depict a landscape of profound fragility. One exception stands out: Monique's circumstances, residing in a three-bedroom rented dwelling situated in a Rio de Janeiro suburb. This setting contrasts starkly with the norm, where homes are typically smaller and nestled within slums. At the far end of the spectrum lies Bruna's situation. Presently, she cohabits with her two children and her mother in the very house that encompassed her upbringing. The dwelling, a mere 15 square meters in size, devoid of wall plaster and featuring a bathroom door, now accommodates five individuals. In times past, it contained not only Bruna but also her parents and an additional six siblings. Analogously, with few exceptions, the other respondents spent their childhood and adolescence in densely populated slum dwellings.

The narratives of Nazaré, Andréa, and Bruna are emblematic of pronounced levels of economic precarity. These accounts mirror the landscapes of food instability, homelessness, and instances of familial mental health disorders. "We used to play, but times were tough. I'd head over to my aunt's place, and there wasn't even any lunch sometimes. I still remember my aunt tossing a bunch of bananas on the fire, and we'd munch on roasted bananas, you know?" (Nazaré). "You know what really sticks with me about those hard times? It's when my dad just woke up and disappeared. He was kind of messed up in the head and even got himself sent to the

hospital once. He'd talk about folks wanting to off him, so he hopped in his truck and took off. And my mom, she was out of work at the time." (Bruna)

Out of the eight cases, six had the participants growing up in single-parent households, where their moms handled both the breadwinning and nurturing roles. Similar to what Bruna shared, the life paths of Monique and her sisters Regina and Alessandra all mirrored a common theme: their fathers struggled with alcoholism. "My father, he was always... Well, he was an alcoholic, you know? He'd wreck the whole house sometimes ... When I was 15, I met my first husband. I thought I'd escape the torment I faced with my dad. He'd lash out at us. I might even need a hearing aid in this ear from all the blows to my head. We had to live through such a rough life." (Regina). "My dad even tumbled into a ditch once while drunk. We'd hose him down in the backyard because he'd come home covered in mud ... He ain't working anymore. Booze got the best of him, and now he's out on the streets." (Monique)

As evident from these accounts, these situations highlight instances of family disruption and heightened levels of material precarity. These attributes align with the characterization of the formation of a precarious habitus and entry into low-skilled roles within the job market proposed by Souza (2012a; 2020). Although in this study, the class condition is not restricted to the position occupied by an individual in the occupational structure, we acknowledge the conditioning of the trajectories of children by the occupational and educational status of their parents. Indeed, Table 3 presents information concerning the professional activity and educational background of the respondents' parents, which attests to the objective correspondence between social origin and destination conditions, represented, respectively, by the educational and occupational status of parents and children.

**Table 3.** Social background of parents' respondents.

Respondents	Education level		Occupation(s)	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Alessandra	Grade 8 or less	Some high school	Deceased (offender)	Janitor/Garbage collector/Papergirl
Monique	Grade 8 or less	Elementary school	Unemployed (plasterer)	Janitor/Cook
Nazaré	Grade 8 or less	Elementary school	Deceased (farmer)	Farmer/Housewife
Bruna	Elementary school	Elementary school	Transport clerk/Garbage collector	Janitor
Georgette	Illiterate	Illiterate	Foreman	Housewife
Regina	Grade 8 or less	Grade 8 or less	Auto mechanic	Housewife
Andrea <sup>1</sup>	NA	NA	NA	Cleaner
Adriana	Grade 8 or less	Grade 8 or less	Janitor	Housewife

**Note.** Developed by the authors. <sup>1</sup> The respondent failed to inform data regarding her father's occupation and her parents' level of education precisely. She partly justified such difficulty by not having lived with her father.

Regarding the reproduction of the occupational activity, the fact that the respondents' mothers have followed occupational paths reflecting different com-

binations of the following activities stands out: janitor, cleaner, and housewife. In addition, the early involvement with domestic chores and the support for the sib-

lings' education were present in many of the narratives collected. According to Regina, she "had no childhood. [Her] mother had many children, and [she] had to look after [her] sisters and [her] younger brothers and clean the house." A similar experience was portrayed by Georgette: "The way I see it, I started working when I was little. ... When I was little, five or six years old, I was already working at home, because my mother had bronchitis. People who have bronchitis can't go around dusting things, can they?" (Georgette)

As for schooling and educational background, we found that most of the respondents' fathers and mothers did not complete elementary school. Therefore, like their daughters, as we will see below, they did not complete the minimum education required to occupy more valued positions in the competitive labor market, materially and symbolically.

### **Educational context: Early pregnancy, school dropout, and precarious placement in the labor market**

Some critical events or turning points (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997) were present in a significant share of the narratives regarding the family dimension, especially in what concerns early maternity and conjugality that led, as a rule, to the respondents' transition from their parents' home to a home of their own. One of the frequent implications of this was the interruption of their educational trajectories. Consequently, the respondents found themselves wholly 'removed' from school to cope with maternal and domestic responsibilities or toward precarious placement in the labor market.

Like their parents, the respondents' schooling is far from being an irrelevant aggravating factor: in most cases, since they did not finish elementary school, they became unable to apply for most jobs, including similar but better paid positions with higher levels of benefits and a stable employment relationship, such as waste collectors working with the Municipal Company of Urban Cleaning (COMLURB).

Alessandra, for example, associated her job as a cleaner with her low level of education, like what happened to her mother, who, among the various precarious manual occupations she held, found her most likely alternative in providing cleaning services. However, perhaps from personal experience, Alessandra's mother did not want her daughter to follow in her footsteps. "Look, [to be] a janitor. ... My mother never wanted me to do this. She wanted me to do something else, go to school, and get a job, but a janitor's job is as good as any other. ... It happened because I didn't graduate from school. If I had, maybe I wouldn't have this job. I'm

proud of this occupation, though. I'm not ashamed of it." (Alessandra)

Although unique, these women's educational trajectories hold certain similarities, such as their non-linearity, increased school dropout rates, and the long hiatus between their dropout and school resumption. No less relevant was the fact that school dropout corresponds not only to early motherhood but also to premature and precarious placement in the labor market.

A turning point in the trajectory of all respondents (except Nazaré), the early pregnancy portrayed by Monique was an unplanned event in six of the eight life stories. According to her, she got pregnant "when [she] was changing [her] medication ... from shots to contraceptives, to pills."

Furthermore, we highlight that on five occasions, pregnancy occurred at the age of 17 or younger; more specifically, in the case of Bruna, the pregnancy occurred at the age of 12. Consistent with the strongly patriarchal culture dominant in Brazilian society, the narrators took full responsibility for the care of their children, relying on little or no help from the children's fathers. When questioned about the involvement of their partners in the domestic routine, Bruna declared: "No way, boy! He got nothing done; he barely washed the dishes. ... He only took my daughter to school and back because he only worked weekends. He is a DJ" (Bruna). For Nazaré, her former partner "helped a little with the children, but [she] was the one who prepared the food and dinner. [She] did everything" (Nazaré).

It should be noted that the negative consequences often associated with an unplanned pregnancy, such as the eventual interruption or even a definitive school dropout, with potential repercussions on future professional development, vary according to one's social class (Taborda et al., 2014). Indeed, this factor penalizes young women from the lower social classes more severely, as illustrated by the participants in this study. Once again, we notice the impact of the intersection of class and gender markers in the configuration of careers.

Another element that emerged from the participants' narratives was self-blame, manifested through emotions of guilt and shame. This is clearly illustrated in Alessandra's story of her teenage pregnancy and how it influenced her educational journey. "We sort of feel a bit embarrassed, you know? Like we're not that strong for not making it. I had to stop my studies because I got pregnant. It was around September, and I could have actually kept going because the pregnancy wasn't too far along. I could've at least finished my sophomore year."



"I always had my goals straight in my head. The only reason I didn't keep going with my studies was because I messed up. ... Sometimes you end up reaping what you sow." (Alessandra)

Similar to Alessandra, Georgette depicts her life journey as an outcome of personal responsibilities that she consciously did not meet, thereby distancing herself from the various tangible and symbolic limitations intertwined with the shaping of her life trajectory. "But you know, if I had been younger, if I'd had the perspective I have now, I think I would have had the determination, I would've pursued my studies... aiming for a better income today, you know? To get into old age standing on a more solid ground."

### **The neighborhood context: Social capital, local relational networks, and inequality**

The configuration of respondents' network combines a restricted number of local contacts and is established, above all, with relatives and neighbors. This social capital is mobilized, among other things, for professional purposes, according to some respondents' reports. "[My first time working] in a family home was a referral by my mom's coworker ..., who lived nearby and told my mother about it. ... My cousin took me to work at an apartment. ... [As for] my first [job] with a signed contract, it was my ex-husband [who found it]. At the hospital, it was his niece, who was the boss and got me a job." (Monique)

A similar situation was experienced by Georgette, who declared: "The person who referred my first [job] in a family household was my sister-in-law ..., and the second was a neighbor because I was out of a job. ... He is my husband now [laughs]." In another case, we noticed the overlapping of interpersonal, organizational, and institutional dimensions since the religious institution attended by Adriana in the community where she lives was related to one of her professional placements. "It was a friend from church. He owns the company; his name is Marcelo. He said he needed a reliable person to work with, so my friend said, 'How about Adriana?' He called me [and said], 'Can you bring your employment record card tomorrow?' and I said, 'Yes, of course.'" (Adriana)

Similar to the results found by Perri (1997) and MacDonald and Marsh (2005), the social capital held by the respondents proved to be a not very permeable frontier, hindering the possibility of inter- and intra-generational mobility. Their search for job positions was usually associated with informal strategies based on referrals from relatives or neighbors, constituting an additional frontier interposed along their professional trajectories.

### **The professional context: Interpersonal distancing and social humiliation**

Perhaps the most frequent element in the respondents' statements regarding their working conditions throughout their careers concerns the relationships they formed in the workplace. For the purposes of this research, the intersubjective relationships maintained by the respondents in their work environment were subdivided according to whether they were established with their peers, superiors, or customers. It is worth pointing out, in advance, that varied experiences among the respondents were identified. For example, in the cases of Bruna and Andrea, on some occasions, social interaction with coworkers proved to be a crucial and positive element in their careers. For the first one, what she like most were "the friendships. ... To go out and get to know other places." The second mentioned that she liked "to stay at the client [with her counterparts] ... when [they] went for coffee and were always chatting."

On the other hand, in other cases, this relationship proved to be more ambiguous, oscillating between positive and negative valences, with a strong predominance of the latter, especially due to the presence of intrigues and gossip in the workplace, as can be seen in excerpts from Regina's narrative. "Employees are not friends, you know? You are dealing with someone now, and they will later stab you in the back. They'll go to your boss and ruin your reputation. It's a very strong burden, and there's a lot of gossiping. By the way, when I met my husband, the person in charge got very angry. ... She started to assign me to terrible tasks. I cleaned basements, sewers, and all kinds of men's work! It sucked, but when I worked there at the hospital, it was good. The work was calm, and the people in charge also treated me well, you know?" (Regina)

Such ambivalence can indicate a sense, albeit ambiguous, of belonging to a certain group of stigmatized workers. The same ambivalence was present in the relationship with hierarchical superiors, favoring, in some cases, relationships of friendship and camaraderie. As Bruna puts it: "In all my jobs, I always got along well with my boss and coworkers. I still have friends [from work] to this day." However, in most cases, the reports revealed signs of physical and symbolic interpersonal distancing, representing a clear segregation between hierarchically superior operational functions — supervisor and foreman — and those performed by subordinate workers — leaders and janitors. Adriana's representation of the training she received to perform leadership functions in a previous job proved to be unusual, to say the least. According to her, it consisted of "training on how to mistreat people." "The difference is

that the leaders are almost like janitors. They take part in the same training. The foremen, however, participate in the training with the supervisors. It's a separate, differentiated training. ... The training teaches how to talk to the employees, and what our attitude should be. You can't discriminate against them, but you can't laugh, have coffee with them, or even eat with them. It's like informal discrimination, you know?" (Adriana)

This paradox reaches even more significant levels when the focus of the investigation shifts to the interpersonal relationships that the respondents maintained with clients during their professional trajectories. The notion of interpersonal distancing, defined as "dominant response to poor people from those who are not poor" (Lott, 2002, p. 100), seems appropriate, to a greater or lesser extent, to deal with the scenario portrayed by the respondents when referring to the interpersonal relationships maintained with clients. Once again, the experiences lived and/or represented varied from case to case, reflecting not only the diversity of the work contexts experienced by these women but mainly the intrinsic relationship of such contexts with the nature of interpersonal relationships. Two clear tendencies were identified, highlighting, in the first place, the feeling of gratitude expressed by the respondents when they were treated with a minimum degree of attention and respect. "[They were] very polite. I had nothing to complain about the clients, none of them. It's like when I worked at Locamérica [car rental] in Penha: ... they even allowed us to use the bathroom that was exclusive to the clients." (Andrea). "Marcos [the boss at the time] threw parties just for us; he would do everything for us. Sometimes during the weekdays, he bought snacks with his money for those of us who did the cleaning. It was like that; he focused a lot on us." (Bruna)

Second, experiences revealing variations of what was conceptualized as interpersonal distancing prevailed. The following accounts were ordered to depict increasing levels of intersubjective alienation perceived by the respondents. "It's all right [with the clients] because we are service providers. So, we must be careful about the sectors we go to, you know? We can't be too close to them. We must avoid this as much as possible ... because they are watching us." (Georgette). "The clients don't pay too much attention. Sometimes, you say "good morning" to someone, and the person won't even reply. ... I am always the first one to talk. If the person answers by any chance, I'll say it a second time. But if the person doesn't answer, I won't say anything else. ... These people think that cleaning jobs are inferior, you know?" (Bruna). "There is a lot of discrimination, and the demand is quite high. It gets to the point where people say: "I pay you, so you must clean." ...

Imagine what it's like to hear that every day. ... I know I must clean, but you don't have to say that to my face. ... Some people put us down. They don't see outsourced workers ... with very good eyes." (Regina)

Some of these statements show that the condition of outsourced workers may imply a possible reduction in the sense of vertical solidarity that may exist between employees of different hierarchical levels. In a diverse organizational framework, those they refer to as 'customers' or 'clients' in the current scenario could correspond to employees of the same organization, although occupying different positions and functions.

It seems that this separation occasionally resulted in setting less permeable boundaries. Indeed, in a specific episode, they were represented by the walls of a room in which outsourced cleaners would be confined so as not to cross paths with clients during their work routine. The spatial segregation experienced by Adriana was interpreted here as a significant boundary in terms of interpersonal distancing, in which the relationship manifests itself through the interdiction of one's presence. "We used to get in in the morning. The school opens at seven o'clock. We arrived at six o'clock, then cleaned and tidied up the rooms. When it was time for the children to come in, we went into a little room. It was the room where the cleaning staff stayed. ... There was a folder that had the class schedules so we could clean the rooms for the afternoon shift. ... As for the restrooms, we wouldn't go in there. Only during the children's break. ... When they went to the classrooms, we went to work in the yard or the restrooms." (Adriana)

Concerning the cleaning activity, the respondents clarified the remarkable influence exerted by the context in which they provided services both on their physical and emotional health and on their sense of dignity. Placement in small commercial stores, university departments, and car dealerships was usually associated with a more positive sense of duty due, above all, to a functional scope dissociated from the undesirable task of cleaning toilets in busy settings such as shopping malls, schools, and supermarkets. The following narratives attest to a very specific type of demeaning operated through disregarding the consequences of certain individual practices on the well-being of another human being. "Some people defecate all over the bathroom, but I don't feel sick or anything. ... We had these five-liter gallons: we'd pour the cleaning product all over and scrub everything with the broom. We wore gloves, masks, and goggles and had all this stuff to work with." (Bruna). "[It goes] from lowering the toilet seat to defecating on the toilet seat and [smearing] poop on the walls. Some women leave ... their stuff, their bloody absorbents on the floor, you know? That kind of stuff.

And they'll say, "You must clean that up." ... [And] you can't say anything ..., you must look at the customer, and sometimes you must laugh. But I didn't laugh because I am what I am. I'd frown instead." (Regina)

To some extent, these manifestations of the non-recognition process are interpreted by some respondents as a symbol of a feeling of repulsion targeted at them by other people. "People think we're nasty, you know? Once, I touched a guy, and he went like this: [she makes an expression of disgust]. I said to him, "Listen, I'm not dirty." ... They think cleaners are nasty. There is discrimination, you know? There are places where you can't get in. ... [That is, outsourced] cleaning workers can't get in because we handle waste and garbage. It's not because we are working with the trash that we are dirty. Do you think I smell bad? I've been cleaning this whole place, but I don't stink. It happens a lot, though." (Regina)

The fact that these workers are associated with a stigmatized and poorly paid occupation makes the respondents not want their children to follow the same path. When asked about her aspirations, Alessandra did not hesitate: "I always want the best for my children, you know? I want them to grow up knowing the value of things and that everything comes from the sweat of our work. I want them to have a good job, a good house, and not go through what their father and I had to endure." However, Alessandra does not envision a better future only for her children: encouraged by the teachers at the school where she currently works, she has gone back to school and now dreams of attending nursing school when she finishes high school.

The following topic addresses how the habitus of class, developed throughout these women's trajectories, translated into (and being homologous to) the career habitus, acts as a central component in the process of sedimentation of ways of acting, thinking, and perceiving, which prove to be effective mechanisms of practical learning.

### **The professional context: Habitus, career boundaries, and social reproduction**

Finally, we must ask how these women find the strength to endure a professional trajectory combining physically exhausting work, low wages, limited benefits, and eroded labor rights. Bourdieu (1990) is perhaps one of the authors who have paid the most attention to this question. He proposed an answer based on the process of habitus incorporation throughout one's entire life. As for work, when asked about what they like most, the participants all answered, almost in unison: "I like to clean." According to Georgette, "[she doesn't] like jobs where [she] must stand still. [She] like to clean," while

for Monique, her favorite part of the job was washing: "I liked it. I love to use the washing machine. I still love it to this day." Another participant agreed, associating the work routine with that of a housewife. "I really like cleaning things. I like it because I like to be a housewife. I get a kick out of it, you know? I cleaned this room here with pleasure just because I was feeling it. "Well, I'm going to clean it." I didn't even know you would be here and use this room. But I did with all my love, you know? ... I like it, you know? Splashing water on the wall is my thing, using the squeegee and all, it's a piece of cake." (Regina)

The respondents have a practical way of living life inscribed in their bodies, as opposed to the school way of learning, consolidating their willingness to perform manual labor and their alienation from more intellectualized activities (Souza, 2020). "I was never much of a reader. I only read at school. Our teacher was good at reading books to us, but I was never a person who got books to read. ... The only thing I bought from newsstands was *Ponto de Cruz* (a magazine that teaches readers how to crochet). ... I learned how to do that, and then there was a time that I started to do cross-stitch and didn't want any other life for myself." (Bruna)

## **DISCUSSION**

The present section is dedicated to discussing, in light of the theory of practice proposed by Bourdieu (1990), the key contextual aspects underlying the respondents' life and career trajectories that operated as boundaries circumscribing their professional opportunities and choices. The discussion of these aspects allows us to reflect on the limits of the agency, especially in the case of individuals who hold low amounts of economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 2013). As illustrated in the previous section, the barriers faced by the respondents in their personal and professional trajectories were numerous.

Initially, in the family context, the findings reveal that social reproduction, even today, is the most likely outcome (Atkinson, 2012). In turn, this highlights the substantial conditioning of life opportunities by opportunity structures (Roberts, 1975). The cleaner's job reproduces the occupations of their mothers, who also devoted their time to similar activities, such as janitor, cleaner, or housewife. Moreover, the early placement of mothers and daughters in a domestic work routine — present in most of the reports — is interpreted by some authors as a learning mechanism for these subjects, imbricated with a patriarchal ideology that associates femininity with the private sphere and masculinity with the public one, hence reducing these women's occupational choices. In this context, the financial restric-

tions are further intertwined with symbolic limitations stemming from the ingrained patriarchal hierarchy. These constraints shape the 'vocational trajectories' of women hailing from working-class backgrounds.

In addition to inheriting their mothers' 'vocations,' the respondents were forced to reconcile work and school from an early age. Indeed, this is a specificity of children and young people from poorer economic backgrounds, and this tends to subtract the available time not only from leisure activities but also from educational practices (Souza, 2020). This can be interpreted as a sign of early adulthood, reported by some authors as a potential negative influence in the transition processes, especially from school to the labor market (Kendig et al., 2014).

Early motherhood was another common aspect in the respondents' trajectories. It can be associated, in the light of the Bourdieusian framework, as a particular manifestation of a more general disposition of the less privileged classes related to the lack of planning of activities, daily or otherwise (MacDonald & Marsh, 2005). This event operated as another barrier to engagement in school activities and obtaining the minimum education required to grant the respondents access to better quality jobs. Studies addressing the relationship between the probability of continuing studies during early pregnancy and one's social background (Taborda et al., 2014) revealed that, in the case of Class A, only one of every five young women interrupted her studies during pregnancy and resumed their schooling soon after the birth of their babies. On the other hand, when it comes to members of Class D, all the young women dropped out of school during pregnancy, and none of them resumed their studies after the birth of the child.

Furthermore, the necessity to halt education due to early motherhood underscores not only the influence of social class but also the impact of a patriarchal culture that ascribes child-rearing duties to mothers. In simpler terms, the responsibility of childcare often falls on young women rather than being a shared responsibility with their partners. This norm has the effect of normalizing the decision for women from less privileged social strata to discontinue their education.

In spite of the economic and cultural factors contributing to the choice of discontinuing education, the respondents hold themselves accountable for this 'decision' in their accounts. They attribute their current precarious professional status to the fact that they 'dropped out of school.' Nevertheless, we contend that by assuming ownership of this decision, the respondents inadvertently propagate the contemporary neoliberal narrative that assigns individuals complete responsibility for the paths their careers take. Consequently, the

systemic constraints that push them into making this decision are obscured by the perception of a supposed agency.

Regarding the neighborhood context, in dealing with materially and symbolically precarious living contexts, we argue that early placement in locally embedded relationship networks, materialized in family and neighborhood networks of solidarity, as observed in the respondents' accounts, constitutes a generative mechanism for the reproduction of social inequalities (Oinas et al., 2020). Moreover, the habitus developed in these contexts is strongly associated with occupational perception and the eventual 'choice' of an unqualified career (Vilhjálmsson & Arnkelsson, 2013). This scenario can also be examined from the perspective of network analysis; according to Rayder and Burt (1996), one's individual relationship networks significantly impact career performance, given their relationship with the generation and realization of professional opportunities. Influenced by Granovetter (1973), the authors propose the socio-professional superiority of networks whose configuration is characterized by the existence of disconnections between contacts, corresponding to the notion of 'structural holes.' In other words, the respondents' social capital and socialization in an environment where the majority of individuals are engaged in precarious employment proved to be yet another boundary limiting the possibilities of inter- and intra-generational mobility (MacDonald & Marsh, 2005; Perri 6, 1997).

The professional context reflected experiences characterized by ambiguities typical of this occupational group (Lara et al., 2020); interpersonal relationships emerged both as a source of pleasure and as the occasion for experiences permeated by intrigues and psychological pain (Diogo & Maheirie, 2007). The ambiguity inherent in the professional identity of respondents — i.e., workers in the cleaning sector — was reflected in the alternating significance they gave to their work context, sometimes as a 'place' or a 'non-place,' sometimes as a source of symbolic belonging or a mere physical environment (Teixeira et al., 2015). Ambiguities also characterized their relationship with clients: some experiences reported by the respondents denote a certain level of interpersonal recognition, while others reveal recurrent episodes of social humiliation, defined as a form of "suffering long endured and chronicled by people of the poorer classes ... that, in the Brazilian case and several generations ago, was sparked by the spoliation and servitude that fell heavily on natives and Africans, and later on low-wage immigrants" (Gonçalves Filho, 2004, p. 22).



Ambiguity also emerged from the participants' representation of the cleaning activity; although some of them claimed to be proud and appreciative of what they do, some reports referred to the negative social value attributed to this activity, expressed in these women's low self-esteem (Diogo & Maheirie, 2007; Lara et al., 2020) and the experience defined as a form of social invisibility (Gonçalves Filho, 2004). Like the invisible men portrayed by Costa (2004) in a study with garbage collectors in a university environment, the respondents revealed themselves, in some circumstances, as invisible women, victims of a perverse mode of sociability. Such perception is in line with the propositions by Goffman (2019) about the phenomenon of stigmatization, whose cruelest face would reside in its capacity to extend, to the completeness of the discriminated subject, a specific depreciative aspect.

The inherent precarious material conditions typical of such endeavors, characterized by low-skilled, manual labor lacking social recognition, inadequate compensation, and instability, often coupled with the violation of labor rights and minimal prospects for career progression, play a significant role in eroding the respondents' self-esteem and inducing uncertainty about the paths they have managed to pursue.

Finally, the notion of habitus contributes to understanding the paths and processes that lead these women to conform to the vicissitudes of their professional lives, marked by deprivation, exclusion, and lack of career prospects. According to Teixeira et al. (2015, p. 166), these individuals' identities can be interpreted as "spaces of confirmation of social structures;" indeed, these women have been accustomed, throughout their life stories, to exercise survival as a way of life, and have been building, throughout their trajectories, dispositional assets — or habitus — that have allowed them to develop ways of thinking, acting, feeling, and appreciating coherent with the demands imposed on them socially.

## FINAL REMARKS

This study investigated the multiple boundaries that, visible or invisibly, have influenced the trajectories of low-skilled women, delimiting their career opportunities, to carry out a critical dialogue with the assumptions underlying the 'new careers,' especially the accentuated centrality typically conferred to individual agency, to the detriment of the importance exerted by contexts in the process of the social construction of careers. The reconstitution of the researched workers' life trajectories allowed us to reveal multiple boundaries faced in their professional path, which questions the optimism underlying voluntaristic career approaches.

Furthermore, this study has uncovered the distinctiveness of a career trajectory frequently overshadowed within this research domain.

Analyzing the reports allowed us to identify the decisive impact exerted by the intersectionality of class, gender, and ethnicity markers (Collins & Bilge, 2021) in the process of building the respondents' careers, characterized by early involvement with domestic work, either in their own homes or as maids in other family homes, by reproducing their mothers' 'vocation' for subaltern labor. Therefore, we argue that the multiple blows dealt to them over time have created real barriers to the possibility of building a self-reliant personality, taken as a reference by most mainstream organizational and career studies that overemphasize the role played by agency in the construction of a successful career.

In line with the theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1990), we argue that the unfavorable conditions experienced by the respondents cannot be dissociated from their career trajectories: these proved to be precarious, non-linear, and unstable, alternating, in most cases, periods of work as outsourced cleaners and housemaids with occasional periods of unemployment. The fact that most of them did not complete elementary school, primarily due to early pregnancy events, emerged as the most formidable barrier to qualified placement in the labor market. The social capital locally embedded in the communities where they live is associated, on the one hand, with family and neighborhood networks of reciprocity and solidarity, and on the other, with social ties, whose career returns are poor, both qualitatively and quantitatively, combined with the precarious habitus (Souza, 2020) developed in this specific context, acting as invisible mechanisms of social reproduction. In turn, their careers proved to be marked by ambiguities; interpersonal relationships emerged as a source of pleasure and humiliation.

As Blustein (2011) reminds us, relational approaches offer an alternative discourse to perspectives that, like boundaryless and protean careers, articulate an optimistic worldview based on the generalization of a specific view on human nature, corresponding to autonomous individuals who consciously pursue their goals and are guided by substantive values. In contrast, this author argues that the real world consists of most subjects lacking the social and symbolic conditions that allow them to cross the physical and psychological boundaries that limit their trajectories. Along these lines, Pontes (2015) defends the tendency, even today, to perpetuate structural inequalities, translated either in terms of processes of social immobility/reproduction,



as this work has shown, or in the form of ascending mobilities of restricted scope.

The phenomenological approach to the reality experienced by the respondents proved sufficient to show that the combination of the multiple boundaries faced by these women in their life trajectories ended up circumscribing the topography of their careers, which have become largely limited to the provision of care services. Contrary to the centrality of agency in their careers, the clash with boundaries erected in an increasingly selective and exclusionary world of work stands out in their trajectories. However, it is important to note that despite the structural limitations they have encountered, the respondents tend to internalize responsibility for their uncertain professional destinies, often attributing them to their decision to discontinue their education. This self-blame, combined with the development of a precarious habitus (Souza, 2020) over a life marked by deprivation, contributes to a sense of resignation and diminished self-worth present in the statements made by the respondents.

Our findings deepen the criticism of the models in vogue in the field of career studies in recent decades, which, by emphasizing the role of individual agency, have assigned little relevance to the contextual aspects that condition one's professional trajectories.

The study also contributes to expanding the debate sparked in career studies by the contextual approaches by illustrating, based on accounts obtained through life stories, the multiple barriers in the professional paths of workers from vulnerable social backgrounds. This study also helps fill the research gap on socially marginalized, lower-class workers careers and contributes to an enriched understanding of professional journeys that are commonly marginalized in the realm of career studies. It brings to light the existence of precarious careers, hemmed in by multifaceted barriers, as a contemporary phenomenon that coexists alongside the touted concepts of boundaryless careers and other novel models often praised within this field of inquiry.

In practical terms, this research, by revealing the difficulties faced by cleaners in their work routine, can help organizations reflect on ways to ensure that their workers have the most dignified job possible.

Regarding the cleaning sector, future studies can be directed to investigate the individual and collective strategies adopted by cleaning workers to improve the conditions and organization of the work process. To expand the debate that incorporates contextual aspects into career studies, future research can focus on unveiling, according to a class perspective, the various boundaries interposed in the career paths of professionals who practice both skilled professions –

such as medicine, engineering, law, and others – and low-skilled occupations like those addressed herein. Forthcoming studies can delve into the exploration of other marginalized career paths, with the aim of validating, as careers, the professional trajectories of their members.

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