

*Original Article*

## Local dynamics in ProUni beneficiaries' strategy for transition from higher education to job market

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**Abstract:** In the last decades, Brazil has been marked by affirmative action policies to reduce inequalities in access to higher education, a persistent social problem in the country. One crucial policy that has that goal is the *Programa Universidade para Todos* (ProUni), offering grants in private higher education institutions for poor students from public high schools (ProUnians). This paper analyzes their trajectories in Law School and their job market expectations. The theoretical framework uses Bourdieu's praxiological sociology to understand ProUnians' *habitus* and strategies. The authors conducted 30 interviews with former ProUni beneficiaries who graduated from elite law institutions in the Recife Metropolitan Area (RMA) and in the São Paulo Metropolitan Area (SPMA), using the approach of snowball sampling, and working from the premise that the competence required to choose the best tactics varies with the possibility of success of the dominant strategy in the field. The results show that because of their lack of social and economic capital, ProUnians cannot choose the dominant strategy, seeking to develop a new one by reinforcing their unique capital accumulation while practicing tactics to balance their competitiveness.

**Keywords:** ProUni; Affirmative Action; Higher Education; cultural capital; symbolic capital.

### *Dinâmicas locais e as estratégias de transição dos ProUnistas entre a educação superior e o mundo do trabalho*

**Resumo:** O Brasil se caracterizou nas últimas décadas pela adoção de políticas de ação afirmativa para redução da desigualdade no acesso ao ensino superior, um problema persistente no país. O programa Universidade para Todos (ProUni) é um importante exemplo deste tipo de política, visto que oferta bolsas em universidades privadas à alunos de baixa renda e alunos vindos do ensino médio público (Prounistas). Este artigo analisa a trajetória destes estudantes, bem como suas expectativas de acesso ao mercado de trabalho. O aporte teórico se apoia em Pierre Bourdieu para entender os *habitus* e estratégias dos prounistas. Os autores conduziram 30 entrevistas com egressos do ProUni do curso de Direito em instituições de elite na Zona Metropolitana do Recife (RMA) e Zona Metropolitana de São Paulo (SPMA). Usando a metodologia de amostragem *snowball*, os autores trabalharam com a premissa de que a competência requerida para escolher as melhores táticas varia de acordo com a possibilidade de sucesso da estratégia dominante no campo. Os resultados apontam que o Prounista, diante do seu déficit de capital cultural e econômico, não pode escolher as estratégias adotadas pelos dominantes do campo e, por isso, buscam desenvolver uma estratégia própria na qual reforçam a acumulação de capitais únicos enquanto buscam táticas para equilibrar as disputas.

**Palavras-chave:** ProUni; Ações Afirmativas; Ensino Superior; capital cultural; capital simbólico.

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The Brazilian public higher education system is usually fee-free and historically attended by students from higher socioeconomic status (SES). Those students come from private high schools and have access to better education. However, private prestigious higher education institutions tend to have expensive tuition fees, meaning that wealthy students are doubly privileged: they are more likely to be approved in the selective process for a public institution, and they can pay for a prestigious private higher institution. Thus, low SES students tend to attend private non-prestigious institutions or stop their education in high school.

Increasing the number of students from underrepresented groups in higher education became a basic requirement for national development. Some responses focus on affirmative action policies to compensate disadvantages related to social and racial backgrounds. The federal government has created two affirmative action programs to increase participation in higher education of Black, Pardo, and Indigenous people (BPI), low-income youth, and students from the public high school system. For public higher education, Federal Law No. 12,711 of August 2012 created the Program of Quotas in Federal Universities and, central to this paper, for private higher education, Federal Law No. 11,096 created the University for All Program (ProUni). The initial condition of these policies is that the candidate must be from a household that earns less than 1.5 minimum wage rates per capita and must have studied in a public high school.

ProUni has already provided more than one million grants and has many alumni in the job market today. However, Mello Neto (2015) has highlighted issues with ProUni's outcomes. The ratio between the number of applicants and available spots in ProUni is much higher than the same ratio for regular spots. Except in a few prestigious institutions, the financial capacity to pay the fees is the main criterion for selection of candidates by private institutions. For this reason, the author also points out that ProUnians tend to perform better than typical students in the private higher education subsystem. However, even performing better, they may struggle to carry out the transition to the job market, since they usually do not accumulate other forms of capital (cultural, economic, social, or symbolic) other than the specific form of educational capital (a subtype of cultural capital).

Another relevant point is that ProUni selection does not consider the regional inequality inside the country, using the standard criteria of per capita household income as a cut-off. ProUnians in different contexts have different perception and access to economic and social capital, as well as different transition strategies from higher education to job market.

This paper discusses the effects of these three issues: applicant/spot ratio in ProUni selection, difficulties with the transition to the job market, and connections between local differences and *habitus* construction.<sup>2</sup> Focusing on the trajectory of ProUni alumni, the paper intends to observe how someone with elevated educational capital and poor accumulation of other types of capital can access the private higher education subsystem and develop strategies for transition to the job market, and to discuss the connections between local differences in the private higher education subsystem and in the job market with ProUnians' *habitus*. To that aim, this paper analyses 30 in-depth and semi-structured interviews about ProUnian trajectory and differences between them and typical students.

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<sup>2</sup> *Habitus* (Bourdieu, 2002) represents a system of dispositions shaped by experiences that guide perceptions, assessments, and behaviors. It bridges individual practices and social conditions, allowing for a nuanced understanding of human actions.

The 30 participants are ProUnians alumni from law courses at two elite institutions, from the São Paulo Metropolitan Area (SPMA) and the Recife Metropolitan Area (RMA). The selection of these two metropolitan areas was made simultaneously, according to (1) their importance in their respective regions; (2) the inequality between the two regions: one of them, Southeast, accumulates more economic and symbolic capital; the other, Northeast, is recognized as one of the poorest in the country; and (3) the authors' access to these metropolitan areas, since the ProUnians are a complex group to access and interview.

The need for extreme cases guides the selection process. Interviewed ProUnians alumni are from a group of prestigious private institutions and courses,<sup>3</sup> wherein the profile of the typical student is primarily from dominant groups that can afford the high fees.<sup>4</sup> They have substantial differences in the accumulation of educational, economic, and social capital.

In such a way, based on Bourdieu's praxiological sociology, this paper shows that ProUnians perceive themselves as owners of a specific capital that is valued in the academic field: educational capital. This capital coexists with disadvantages arising from their socioeconomic profile. Non-accumulation of social and economic capital forces students to transform their specific capital into a "weapon" in job market transition. However, strategies vary greatly depending on the demands of the job market in different contexts and on the available process of capital transformation, from educational capital to other forms.

The paper is structured in five sections, apart from the introduction. The next section presents the theoretical framework, aiming to introduce Bourdieu's praxeology and focusing on the various forms of capital. Following this, we define the methodological procedures and present the empirical approach strategy to justify our methodological choices. Moving on to the third section, we delve into the contextual background. This section comprises two parts: the first part highlights the disparities in the job market, including the value of diplomas, between the two analyzed regions, while the second part focuses on the distinctions within the graduate profiles from the institutions under examination. In the subsequent section, we turn our attention to the results, emphasizing the pivotal role of the local dynamics in the strategies employed by the ProUnians. The results reveal that they cannot adopt the dominant strategy; instead, they strive to develop a novel approach, strengthening their unique capital accumulation while employing specific tactics to level the playing field compared to regular students. In the last section, the discussion and conclusion summarize the paper's main results.

## Theoretical Framework

### Capital and Trajectory

In Pierre Bourdieu's perspective, capitals act as dimensions in the social space. Interactions in this space occur as relations of force: the volume of global capital and the relative weight of private capital in the social space determines the agent's position. Such a position implies a dispute that places the agent in greater or lesser domination/subordination concerning other positions. In each field, the greater the volume of the efficient capital type, the greater the probability that the agent will occupy a dominant position (Pereira and Catani, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> We chose two confessional institutions because they became consolidated as holders of prestige among the private institutions, with high tuition fees and specific student profiles, especially regarding law students.

<sup>4</sup> The institutions and students have no names appointed in this paper.

For Bourdieu (1998), social capital uses interrelationships between groups or individuals to manage existing resources in connection to a durable network of relations and attachment to a group, which not only ensures the ‘filtering’ of group participants by matching properties but unifies the group on behalf of these persistent and valuable links. Social capital is the set of relations that guarantee to a given group, in a specific field, better or worse possibilities of action and perpetuation of recognition, creating dominant and non-dominant groups.

It is important to emphasize that the author does not affirm that there is a necessary social stagnation, since, despite the higher probability of a relationship between the capital of origin and capital of arrival, a fraction of the group is destined to deviate from the most typical trajectory for the group as a whole, undertaking a trajectory that was more likely for members of another group (Bourdieu, 2007). An individual’s class position can never be defined only from the point of view of a relative position (superior, average, inferior) since it is more relevant to observe the meaning of the social trajectory.

At the risk of failing to observe details that define the experience of an ascending or descending trajectory, *“it is necessary to characterize each point by the differential function expressing the curve, that is, by all curves”* (Bourdieu, 1974, p. 8)<sup>5</sup>. Similar positions in specific contexts can bring different meanings, since the sense of the trajectory of the individual or group can mean more than the situation of that group at a given moment.

Different groups and fractions of groups are in a constant symbolic dispute whose final purpose is to impose a definition of the social world according to their interests (Bourdieu, 1989). Symbolic systems will fulfill a political function of legitimizing the domination of one group over others (what the author calls “symbolic violence”), thereby reinforcing the strength of the dominant group and contributing to the “domestication of the dominated” (Bourdieu, 1989, p.11)<sup>6</sup>.

The dominant group can define rules of hierarchization in the field. The dominant fraction, whose power usually rests on economic capital, aims to impose legitimacy on its dominance by placing their specific capital at the top in terms of hierarchy, to which they own their position (Bourdieu, 1989). Symbolic power then becomes a transformed (and legitimized) aspect of other capitals, mainly those closest to the dominant group.

Regarding cultural capital, it is crucial, as Bourdieu says, to understand how different groups may achieve different profits when they are inside the educational field or using educational capital (Bourdieu, 1979). Thus, although ProUnians may have more educational capital in the *“incorporé”* state, since they have better grades at higher educational periods, the typical students access a more diverse educational capital in the same state, since they are prone to have other cultural experiences or capacities. The same goes for the *“objective”* state, which comprehends cultural assets and resources because typical students can afford books and other materials easier than ProUnians.

## Methods

This paper analyses 30 in-depth interviews with ProUni alumni from law courses in two elite institutions.<sup>7</sup> There are 17 ProUnians from RMA institutions and 13 ProUnians from SPMA institutions. The interviews were semi-structured around ProUnians’ trajectories, and differences between them and typical students. The average duration of interviews was 45 minutes. Interviews were transcribed, coded inductively, and then recoded according to main categories (Table 1).

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<sup>5</sup> Translated by the authors

<sup>6</sup> Translated by the authors

<sup>7</sup> From now on called ProUnians.

TABLE 1 - Main categories

Categories	ProUnians/typical students as better students/workers
	ProUnians/typical students as worse students/workers
	Job Market boundaries for ProUnians/typical students

Regarding the professional situation, the RMA interviewees were three lawyers and 14 workers in civil service jobs. Of all those working in civil service jobs, only two were working in the law field. All others were working as public servants unrelated to their law school education. In the case of the SPMA interviewees, all were lawyers. Interviewees were between 23 and 39 years old, with 3.3% under 25 and 6.6% over 28, putting 90% of the sample between 25 and 28.

The sampling method was snowball, decided due to the difficulty of accessing and, therefore, randomly identifying ProUnians. The methodology has the premise that networks of contacts can serve as a tool to identify a population that is difficult to access. Snowball sampling methodology allows the identification of an explanatory sample in restricted universes that can be used to understand that population but has severe restrictions on generalization (Dragan and Isaic-Maniu, 2013; Lopes et al., 1996).

## Background

### Research Sites and Market Contexts

Regional differences inside Brazil are responsible for increasing or decreasing the possibilities of success in the job market. The country has different realities in terms of dynamics of production (Lima & Abdal, 2007), where characterization and need for training gain specific aspects in each region, and each region has a given situation of inequality centered on specific factors (Silveira Neto and Menezes, 2010). One of the determining factors for regional differences is the relationship between income, educational profile, and the job market.

This paper compares workers who benefitted from the same policy, exposed to different higher education and job market realities. The São Paulo Metropolitan Area (SPMA) is the most populous in the country. Responsible for approximately 32% of the national GDP, it has roughly 21 million inhabitants, representing almost 10% of the national population. The Recife Metropolitan Area (RMA), in population terms, is not the largest metropolitan area in the northeastern Brazilian region (occupying the third place, with a little under 4 million inhabitants). However, it has the largest GDP in the region (IBGE, 2018a, 2018b).

Regarding economic potential, São Paulo offers better-paying jobs and more competition for a position. Residents in this area tend to have a higher level of education (IBGE, 2015), which is a distinguishing feature in accessing to the job market. In turn, the metropolitan region of Recife has a massive concentration of low-income inhabitants. It makes access to higher education a determining factor in a career that seeks higher income. In both cases, market dynamics significantly transform the higher education diploma into symbolic and economic capital.

Given that this paper is interested in the transition between higher education and the job market in two different places, we decided to analyze the relationship between income, educational profile, and the local job market. To measure this, we used PNAD data: a national household survey conducted annually in Brazil that provides information about per capita household income (IBGE, 2015). We only look at citizens who had attended higher education, whether or not they concluded their study.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> We do not consider households without a declared income in this study. To define workers, we only analyze data from those citizens over 18 years old, economically active, and with a declared wage.

We only observe citizens from three job categories: civil public servants (primary occupation, at any level of government), private workers (primary occupation), and autonomous workers (primary occupation), removing other categories such as informal workers, military, rural workers, and others. This decision about the observed group was based on Souza and Medeiros' (2013) research, due to the need for comparative groups to be more homogeneous regarding remuneration criteria and the nature of the activity.<sup>9</sup> Considering the law field, almost all workers chose one of these three activities: civil public service, private workers, or autonomous workers. After that, since graduate fellows are not considered workers in Brazil (Louzada and Silva Filho, 2005) and do not receive an official salary or pay taxes, they were excluded from the sample.

We observe the monthly wage only as the one declared for the main job. We do not consider different incomes. The calculation of the wage gap between groups follows the example of Foguel et al. (2000). We adopted the average log-wages, denoted here as  $G3$ . The decision to use  $\ln$  was due to the significant differences in the variances according to the chosen sample.

The primary model's average log-wages' is:

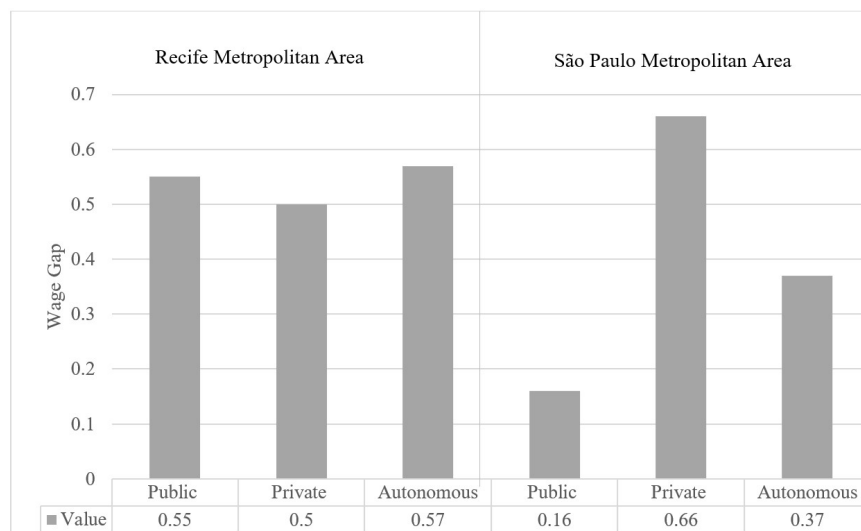
$$G3 = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \ln \omega_{\alpha i} - \frac{1}{m} \sum_{i=1}^m \ln \omega_{\beta i}$$

where:

$\omega_{\alpha i}$  = wage of workers in sector  $\alpha$

$\omega_{\beta i}$  = wage of workers in sector  $\beta$

Three groups of workers comprised the sample: private workers, autonomous workers, and public civil servants. Moreover, graduate and undergraduate workers/jobs will be divided into two major groups.<sup>10</sup> The illustration below (Figure 1) points to the diploma as a vital tool for accumulating economic capital.



**Figure 1** – Average log-wages of graduate and undergraduate workers grouped by type of job in RMA and SPMA |

<sup>9</sup> In the case of the study in question, participants who declared self-employment were not considered workers. However, we include them since many of those working in the law field act this way.

<sup>10</sup> These are workers who have completed higher education and workers who, despite attending higher education, have not yet completed it.

Source: IBGE (2015).

$$Wage\ gap = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \ln \omega_{\alpha i} - \frac{1}{m} \sum_{i=1}^m \ln \omega_{\beta i}$$

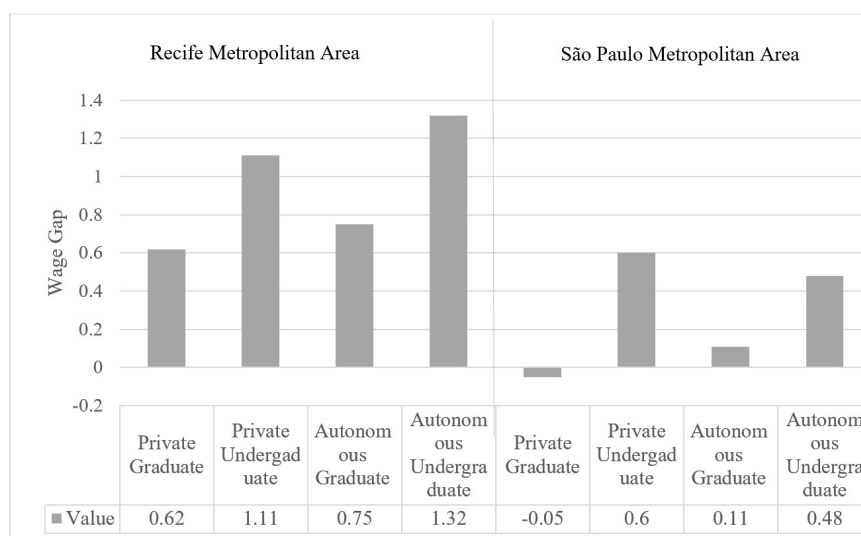
where:

$\omega_{\alpha i}$  = Wage of a graduate worker;

$\omega_{\beta i}$  = Wage of an undergraduate worker.

A diploma acts positively and proportionally to any of Recife's observed job markets. It shows a certain homogeneity in the diploma's value and how it changes into economic capital. In São Paulo, interviewees who hold diplomas and work in the private market perceive a more significant difference in their performance. For those that work in public service, having a diploma or not represents a slight difference in the average income of the group.

Comparing workers' income, with and without undergraduate degrees, in the public service to possibilities offered by other jobs could be an excellent way to perceive possible strategies adopted by young workers. Figures 2 and 3 compare the income of graduate public workers and other groups of workers (Figure 2; Figure 3).



**Figure 2** - Average log-wages of graduate public workers and other workers in RMA and SPMA. |

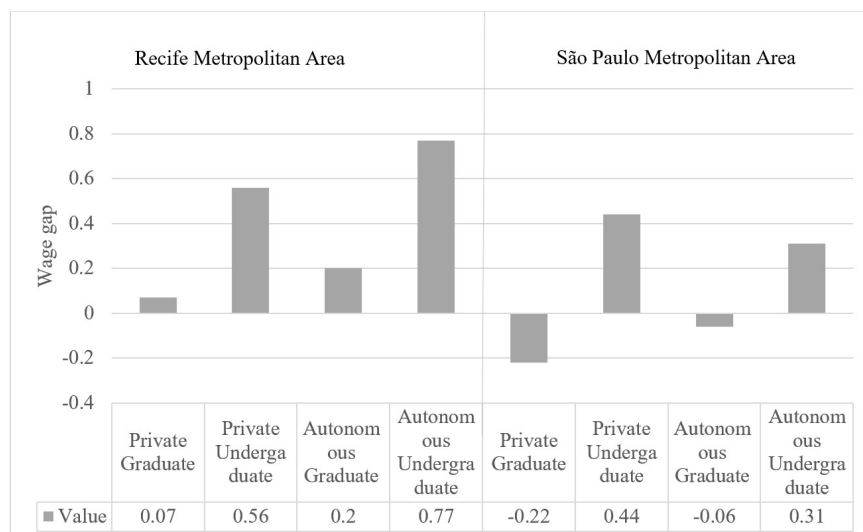
Source: IBGE (2015).

$$Wage\ gap = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \ln \omega_{\alpha i} - \frac{1}{m} \sum_{i=1}^m \ln \omega_{\beta i};$$

where:

$\omega_{\alpha i}$  = Wage of a graduate public worker;

$\omega_{\beta i}$  = Wage of other groups of workers.



**Figure 3** – Average log-wages of undergraduate public workers and other workers in RMA and SPMA |  
Source: IBGE (2015).

$$Wage\ gap = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \ln \omega_{\alpha i} - \frac{1}{m} \sum_{i=1}^m \ln \omega_{\beta i}$$

Where:

$\omega_{\alpha i}$  = Wage of an undergraduate public worker;

$\omega_{\beta i}$  = Wage of other groups of workers.

Results point to substantial differences in the job market between the two regions. In the case of graduate public workers in SPMA, they are paid on average a little more than the self-employed and less than the private workers. In the RMA, a graduate public job means a potential career with the highest income among all those observed.

In contrast, an undergraduate public job in the SPMA has a lower average income than all graduate careers. Contrariwise, in the case of the RMA, an undergraduate public job generates a higher average income than all private occupations (with or without a university degree). In Recife, public service has the two best possible careers in terms of income, despite the job level.

### ProUni: Law Course Graduates' Profile in the RMA and in the SPMA

These two regions have different profiles regarding the higher education system. For this paper, it is crucial to demonstrate that law courses tend to have their characteristic features in each region and each institution analyzed. This can be seen by observing data from the 2015 *Exame Nacional de Desempenho de Estudantes* (Enade) (Inep, 2018a).<sup>11</sup> We divided the students<sup>12</sup> into three groups<sup>13</sup>: typical students (those who paid regular tuition fees); ProUnians (those who had full grants provided by ProUni); and students with another financing system (from now on, called 'other students').<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Enade is a standardized test score for senior undergraduate students (students in the last year of the degree).

<sup>12</sup> We only consider senior students in law programs at private institutions in the two metropolitan regions studied.

<sup>13</sup> We removed from the sample: students who did not have regular status; who did not state the type of funding obtained in higher education; and those whose declarations showed conflicts (i.e., declared a fee-free course in private institutions).

<sup>14</sup> Since the interviews were conducted only with full grant recipients, students who received partial grants were placed together with 'other means of financing'.



ProUnians represent a minority group in both regions and institutions (Table 2).

TABLE 2 – **Percentage distribution of senior students at law school in private institutions of RMA, SPMA, and selected institutions**

<b>Metropolitan Area</b>			
<b>Recife</b>		<b>São Paulo</b>	
<b>Group</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Group</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
ProUnians	8.0	<b>ProUnians</b>	8.0
Other students	33.2	<b>Other students</b>	40.7
Typical students	58.8	<b>Typical students</b>	51.3
Total	100	<b>Total</b>	100

<b>Higher Education Institutions</b>			
<b>The selected institution from RMA</b>		<b>The selected institution from SPMA</b>	
<b>Group</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Group</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
ProUnians	8.1	<b>ProUnians</b>	11.8
Other students	19.1	<b>Other students</b>	19.9
Typical Students	72.7	<b>Typical students</b>	68.3
Total	100	<b>Total</b>	100

Source: INEP (2018a).

ProUnians tend to have a different profile when compared with the two other groups, regarding parent education (Table 3), race (Table 4), and income (Figure 4).

TABLE 3 – **Percentage distribution of at least one of the parents with a higher education degree between senior students at law schools in private institutions of RMA, SPMA, and selected institutions**

<b>Metropolitan Area</b>				
<b>RMA</b>			<b>SPMA</b>	
<b>Group</b>	<b>Graduate</b>	<b>Undergraduate</b>	<b>Graduate</b>	<b>Undergraduate</b>
ProUnians	24.5	75.5	22.7	77.3
Other students	42.3	57.7	31.5	68.5
Typical Students	59.9	40.1	57.2	42.8

<b>Higher Education Institutions</b>				
<b>The selected institution from RMA</b>			<b>The selected institution from SPMA</b>	
<b>Group</b>	<b>Graduate</b>	<b>Undergraduate</b>	<b>Graduate</b>	<b>Undergraduate</b>
ProUnians	30.2	69.8	30	70
Other students	77.2	22.8	68.5	31.5
Typical Students	85.4	15.6	88.9	11.1

Source: INEP (2018a).

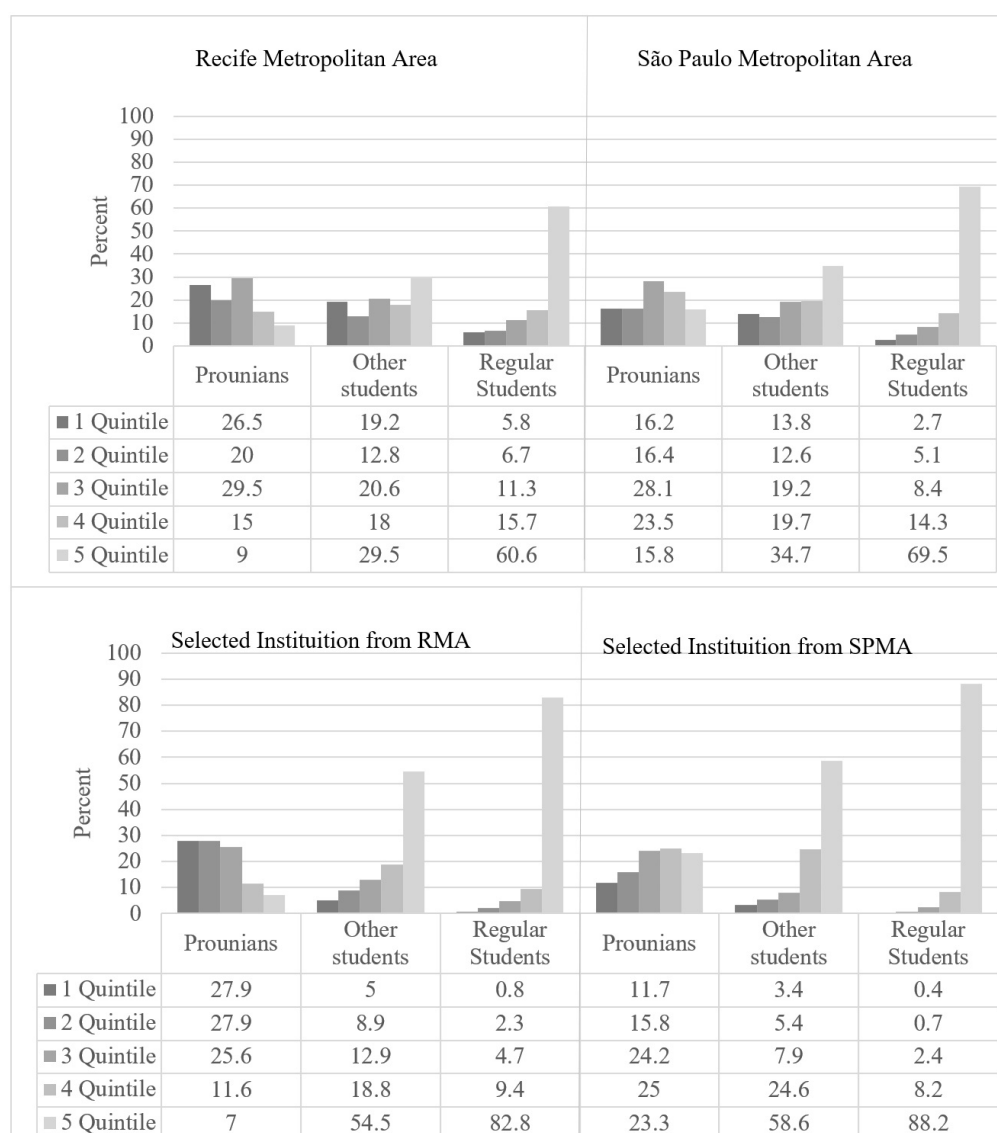
TABLE 4 – **Percentage distribution of black, pardo, or indigenous (BPI) students between senior students at law school in private institutions of RMA, SPMA, and selected institutions**

<b>Metropolitan Area</b>				
<b>RMA</b>			<b>SPMA</b>	
<b>Group</b>	<b>BPI</b>	<b>Non-BPI</b>	<b>BPI</b>	<b>Non-BPI</b>
ProUnians	76.5	23.5	42.1	57.9
Other students	56.6	43.4	35.2	64.8
Typical Students	41.4	58.6	19.7	80.3

<b>Higher Education Institutions</b>				
<b>The selected institution from RMA</b>			<b>The selected institution from SPMA</b>	
<b>Group</b>	<b>BPI</b>	<b>Non-BPI</b>	<b>BPI</b>	<b>Non-BPI</b>
ProUnians	76.7	23.3	39.2	60.8
Other students	38.6	61.4	21.2	78.8
Typical Students	27.1	72.9	7.5	92.5

Source: INEP (2018a).



**Figure 4** – Percentile distribution of national household income per capita quintile<sup>15</sup> between senior students at law schools in private RMA, SPMA, and selected institutions | **Source:** INEP (2018a).

The data indicates the expected profile of a ProUnian. On the one hand, they represent a small percentage of overall enrolled students, and a substantial percentage amongst the lowest socioeconomic strata. On the other hand, typical students occupy most of the spots in private higher education and demonstrate opposite characteristics, with a smaller percentage being BPI and the majority being from families with a background in higher education. So, typical students start with more social, economic, and symbolic capital than ProUnians.

Although, at the point when ProUnians and typical students are in higher education, the first group managed to accumulate more educational capital, according to the observed student scores on national evaluations (INEP, 2018a) (Table 5).

<sup>15</sup> Level 1 = R\$ 300 per capita; level 2 = R\$525.00 per capita; Level 3 = R\$800.00 per capita; Level 4 = R\$1350,00 per capita. The ratio of the middle point of the scale of households' total income and the number of household members presented considers the household income per capita data from PNAD (IBGE, 2015). It adopted the top value in the case of a higher scale level with no middle point.

TABLE 5 – The average score on Enade between senior students at law school in private institutions of RMA, SPMA, and selected institutions

<i>Metropolitan Area</i>				
<i>Recife</i>			<i>São Paulo</i>	
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>ST Deviation</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>ST Deviation</b>
ProUnians	53.691	13.0964	51.538	12.4830
Other students	43.029	13.1507	43.327	13.3647
Typical Students	44.618	13.5653	45.519	13.3823
<i>Institution</i>				
<i>The selected institution from the RMA</i>			<i>The selected institution from the SPMA</i>	
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>ST Deviation</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>ST Deviation</b>
ProUnians	53.047	13.3424	52.257	12.9230
Other students	46.742	14.2103	46.851	13.6779
Typical Students	46.852	13.6407	46.466	13.9246

Source: Inep (2018a)

ProUnians have the best average scores in all observed groups. It is also important to highlight that typical students from selected institutions have the second highest average scores.

## Results

The finding that ProUnians perceive, as soon as they enter higher education, that competition based on economic, social, or cultural capital would put them at a disadvantage in accessing the job market (Mello Neto et al., 2014) is the basic assumption of this paper. Given the temporality of their student status, they need an objective strategy and capacity to apply creative practices to increase their success in just over five years.<sup>16</sup> That is, they have the chance to change the route of their probable trajectory by optimizing efficient capital in the field, which they need to operate before entering the job market.

They link the different perceptions about what professionals perceive as disadvantages to their place of origin, which could be a fault in their overall strategy. This paper demonstrates that, given the premise that ProUnions feel different and unique in terms of their personal history and accumulation of capital, the impact of this difference is perceived and measured differently depending on the requirements and efficiency of the capitals they possess, considering a specific job market.

## Local dynamics as an important factor for economic accumulation and profit

It is common for both groups of ProUnians (from the RMA and from the SPMA) to perceive that economic capital functions as a symbolic boundary between groups. Students soon realize that the wealthier students have access to spaces and goods that ProUnians never had and will only have if they successfully change their trajectories. Consequently, typical students are not subjected to a higher need for personal investment.

<sup>16</sup>In contrast to other countries like the USA, law programs in Brazil are equivalent to a bachelor's degree and last five years. Students must complete the program and pass the bar exam to practice law in the country.

Quotes like *"They already had a car, job, and gym [membership], so they were not worried about the course"* (ProUnian Av., RMA); and *"It is that person who has no responsibility to work, and if he works, it is in the father's office."* (ProUnian D., SPMA) are present in all interviews, meaning that, for ProUnians from both groups, the typical student is someone who does not have to strive to have everything.

However, the ways ProUnians perceive the operationalization of economic capital in favor of typical students gain specific nuances in each place. Here is an addendum on the physical structure of the two metropolitan areas. SPMA is a region in which the infrastructure, within the limitations imposed by the region's inequality, places the participants of the low and middle sections in a similar condition regarding the mobility in the city. Like most of the world's metropolises, the city has a subway system that, given its practicality, is used by almost the entire population. RMA relies on a precarious public transportation system, making car ownership a differential characteristic for job opportunities.

For RMA's ProUnians, when reflecting on the powers of economic capital in the differentiation of groups, the relevance of the automobile as a differentiator factor in access to the job market emerges almost instantaneously. In addition to other capitals – especially the social – having no car is a vital delimiter of market entry possibilities.

Some friends said that when they went to the trainee selection process, someone would say: those with a car in this line, the others in that one. They need it a lot. Those who were trainees initially said they were more office boys than trainees. I believe that for you to work as a lawyer is not easy here. Imagine you carrying lots of processes, folders, by hand, on that public transport that we have, with those integrated terminals, with that clothing. There is a judge who does not admit that you present yourself even without a tie (L. ProUnian, RMA).

According to them, it is common for law firms to cite a car as an essential requirement when they are applying for a job. Grant-recipients argue that many firms require the intern to have a car. So, given the apparent impossibility of having a car during undergraduate studies, many understand internships and office jobs as inaccessible or at least unequal spaces.

In the city, a car is a working tool for lawyers. Because of the car, I bet on a public internship. I was an intern in the Federal Saving Bank [public bank] for a year. After leaving, I participated in another internship selection process and stayed in the public defender's office for a year. I even tried a private practice internship, but I confess it was not something I insisted on. When I realized the obstacle of the car, I gave up trying: if I could not go one way, I would go for another (A. ProUnian, RMA).

In SPMA, having a car is not presented as an asset in itself. The offices rely on the public transportation service in the locomotion of their employees. On the one hand, none of the interviewees mentioned a car as a factor of differentiation between the groups. On the other hand, practically all SPMA participants mentioned school experiences as a differential, due to the non-accumulation of economic capital. The impossibility of financing extra courses, internships abroad, and especially foreign language courses was the main economic obstacle that would keep them out of the job market.

I think the firms ask for a surreal qualification. We used to play like that, 'if I am a minister of the STF [Brazilian Supreme Court], can you count as a differential?' We talk about it jokingly because they ask for solid experience, an exchange period abroad, MBA... [...]. Some things like that are out of the ordinary. For an internship, you have to have experience in civil law, tax law, and legal English; if I had French, it would be a differential. Surreal. For a ProUnian, this is inaccessible (D. ProUnian, SPMA).

Unlike the RMA ProUnians, who see the impossibility of competition due to material goods (in this case, a car) being a limitation, the SPMA ProUnians believe that investing in courses (especially language courses) during the undergraduate studies is a good tactic that can attenuate the distance to their colleagues. Despite limiting the early career stages – in terms of accessing internship opportunities – the barrier imposed by extracurricular experience requirements could be overcome with much effort and dedication. Not uncommonly, despite their non-fluency in English, most of those who could gain access to an internship in an office took advantage of the money they received from the internship to invest in out-of-school training. After the initial barrier of this first stage, it would be up to the ProUnians to devise ways of bridging the gaps in inequality that make them less appealing in the job market.

You must have fluent English. English, if you do not have an English course, you will hardly be hired for an internship. Then the solution is to chase after it. Some people do not fill the gap, but most take English courses and study independently. It is a challenge, but you can. (T. ProUnian, SPMA).

The SPMA ProUnians know that their competitors for a position in the job market, at least the stronger of them, masters more than one language and will have access to extracurricular courses (MBA, for example) that they will not have. However, they believe that being a full grant-recipient student in a prestigious institution naturally puts them in a prominent position and that, therefore, investing in basic skills can bring them closer to their competitors.

I was there as a law student at [institution name]. I have always been pre-selected. They always asked for an essay in Portuguese, an essay in English, or something about the work area, and the selection processes were always fair and saw no difference. Until one day, in an interview, telling of my life and how I had come here, the person interviewing me, from a very famous bank here in São Paulo, asked me if I was ProUnian and she told me that I should put it on my resumé. According to her, when people see that I am a ProUnian, they first know that you need the job, and they know how difficult it is to have a full grant at [institution name]. It opens many doors. She suggested that I put it on. Since then, that only gave me good points. When I say that I have had a 100% scholarship at [institution name], that glim in the eyes of the interviewers arises. [...] I feel I have not had access to things that other people have had – for example, an international exchange. [...] I'd like to have much more access to professionalizing things – English, international experience [...] São Paulo, specifically, is a fluid place. You can be who you are in the job market. People are willing to understand the professional that you are when you go on an interview (An. ProUnian, SPMA).

None of the RMA respondents even mentioned training as a differentiation factor between groups. Here, there is a hypothesis to be investigated in the future.<sup>17</sup> The two metropolitan areas have traditional public institutions offering the country's two oldest law programs (the Federal University of Pernambuco and the University of São Paulo). However, given the dynamics of the market configuration, different valuations were constructed for them in their respective regions. If in the RMA the observed institution stands out as the most prestigious among the private institutions, but at a level below the public institutions, in the SPMA, the institution observed is one of the three (amongst two private and one public institutions) considered as the best in the entire metropolitan area. While in the SPMA, given the volume of jobs and the robustness of the market, graduates from a single institution cannot hold prestigious position, in the RMA, because of a less dynamic market and a smaller volume of jobs, this possibility exists.

Given this investigative hypothesis, the RMA ProUnians would see the worker leaving the public university as someone better prepared but also as someone who is an outsider to the system. They would consider that all the other students have a history of training and access to higher education, much like them. Otherwise, they would be in the public institution. They assume that all real competitors (that is, excluded from public institutions), despite having access to economic capital, also did not attend specific courses or do not speak English. Therefore, material goods such as having a car would be more relevant.

### Social Capital: Between Heritage and Difficulties to Access Higher Education

The social capital operationalized by the network of contacts of students is a determining factor of a greater or lesser failure in the transition to the job market. Not having relatives or contacts in the field is a determining factor for both groups.

Suppose you are someone's son or nephew if you have a person in your family who already has a history [in law]. The law firm is also built on history. If you already have someone in your family who is a lawyer, you create a story. The lawyer, the person who is in the world of law, has built a name. If your family has a history, an office, or some influence, it will be easier for you to enter the job market (A. ProUnian, RMA).

<sup>17</sup> Since the purpose of the coding was not this, we decided to leave only the explanatory hypothesis in the current text.

The prosecutor's father has a lawyer friend who is a friend with someone in a firm – which does not happen with a ProUnian. [...] What I will take half of my life doing, some people have already left university having it. He already has an office and a portfolio of customers ready. I need to do this throughout my entire life. He will not even need to look for a job, and he already has one (G. ProUnian, SPMA).

The RMA ProUnians perceive these contacts as determining the impossibility of their access to the private market of law. The weight of the nomination will mark any competition for a vacancy in the private market. Many consider the small size of the market, thinking that being the best student will not be enough to overcome the barriers imposed by the professional nomination. For ProUnians who risk themselves in the private market, only the positions of less prestige and low remuneration are left to them.

Those who keep trying life in private practice do not necessarily have opportunities. [...] Working as an 'associate lawyer' in a consolidated office often happens. [...] He is an employee with fewer rights than an employee with a formal contract. Not having labor rights, he enters as an associate. It is associated with 0.0000001% of the company's shares. He ends up having to work ten hours a day, with a car requirement; he needs a suit jacket – an expense to keep this type of clothing – without any labor guarantees. If he gets into an office, it will be to live in shameful conditions: he will earn a low salary and will not have health insurance, food assistance, FGTS [workers' benefits] ... no labor law is applicable. [...]. He will live below the person with CLT [labor workers' law guarantees] (A. ProUnian, RMA).

In SPMA, despite having the same perception of family relations, ProUnians understand that the market is broad and that the nominees will not be able to fill all available positions. They believe they come from a good institution and will occupy the best places. Selling themselves as a unique person, they have an opportunity to use the network of contacts created in higher education [and in the internships] as a way to the job market. They know that being the best student is a way to sell themselves to employers, so they rely on their privileged colleagues (professors, classmates, internship coworkers) to reference them in the market. So, while knowing that peers will have priority in the best offices, ProUnians know they can count on their colleagues' early access to open doors for them.

The difficulty for a ProUnian to enter the job market is to meet people. People who work in firms. The world of law is a lot of personal references, right? Nominations from people who work in an office. Professors recommending, lawyers recommending, people who worked with them giving references. The main point is to meet people because those from a family of lawyers, prosecutors, and judges already have access to this. ProUnians need to build this network (T. ProUnian, SPMA).

While for the RMA ProUnians, the barrier imposed by social capital appears to be insurmountable, causing almost all respondents to give up on the private job market, in the case of the SPMA, this appears to be workable by building a network of contacts in a prestigious location. The SPMA ProUnians realize that they work and study with influential people and commonly invest time to expand their network of contacts, seeking to be part of a group of people with power of giving nominations in the field. The viable way to overcome the limitations imposed by social capital is to use the dominant peers' social capital in their favor. Having influential contacts, usually conquered by the discourse of hard work and competence for receiving the scholarship, serves the purpose of including them in the job market.

### **Ideal Markets for Ideal Individuals: Opening Market Doors**

ProUnians dedicate more than four years to operationalizing capitals that enable them to survive in the field. It is the focus that defines the trajectory of ProUnians. Adapting to the market's demands requires the construction of an ideal candidacy for this market. As soon as they realize the specific local demands, they try to break down barriers that keep them away.

The RMA ProUnians realize throughout their trajectory that the way through the private market is impracticable. There is no way to have a car or get car-free internships. Even when the car is not a hindrance, selective processes skewed by personal nominations will not allow them to practice in offices. They soon understand that the only viable way is to invest in public internships.

They are two completely different [job] markets, the public and the private sector. In the private market, I could not get in, firstly because I do not have the profile, and secondly because I do not have a family to support me. In the public [job market], only studying is enough; maybe that is why I went to the public [job market] with my profile. It is more isonomic and fairer and requires a series of factors that everyone can overcome on equal terms. The only requirement is to study (J. ProUnian, RMA).

Given their – and the market's – unwillingness to build a career focused on law firms, they start investing in and relying on public service positions – looking to obtain internships that allow them to prepare for a public contest.<sup>18</sup> To do so, from the beginning of the law degree, they seek internships in public offices. Also, the internship amounts paid by public agencies far exceed those paid by private offices. They ignore the search for private internships and dedicate themselves to the competition for a public internship. Public internships effectively function as internships – the student will take up a position as an apprentice, having a low workload and dealing with the routine of a public agency. Private offices, not uncommonly, hire interns for general services – they act in the transportation of documents or in tasks that require hours of dedication. For them, *"in public advocacy, I had experience. I learned to do the tasks and switched my mentor to learn more. Unlike colleagues who entered the private internship, I did not have to go all the time to the court to pick up case files. The defendant had someone to do this"* (A. ProUnian, RMA).

In reverse, the SPMA has a solid private market wherein salaries outnumber public positions. Overcoming barriers imposed by the pre-accumulation of capital is feasible: objective strategies can give them competitive access to the job market. They shape their development according to experiences in the private market, using this experience to consolidate and build their network of contacts and invest in extracurricular training. Access to internships in office functions effectively works as a gateway to the career chosen by all the interviewees. It is the way ProUnians find to survive in a city with a high cost of living, as well as to support the expenses of school materials up to graduation.

since I had no English and had no experience, I had never worked at anything; I did an unpaid internship. It was the way I was able to get into the market. [...] When I went to the first firm, a friend of mine who was already there told me to go. [...] And as they had this policy of hiring people recommended by good employees, I was nominated. I cannot say that I arrived with no help (Jg. ProUnian, SPMA).

In summary, the strategies adopted by the two ProUnian groups reflect the objective chances of success. When the public job market (RMA) sounds affordable and offers greater financial returns, ProUnians invest in public internships away from the private market. When the private job market shows greater financial returns, ProUnians invest their training to open doors to this market.

Such decisions do not restrict the training process. ProUnians operationalize their strategies to adapt to a given job market while building their bridge to the ideal market. In this sense, the SPMA's ProUnians' trajectories is more linear – by dedicating their training to constructing a network of contacts that allows them to enter the job market, it automatically opens the doors to this job market.

In the case of the RMA, this linearity is not allowed. Regardless of curriculum or contacts built, ProUnians must pass a selective process with a public agency. Indeed, even when considering the potential for increased income after completing higher education, ProUnians often find it challenging to engage in internships during law school and patiently await being able to reaching this potential. The public market demands a long period between approval, hiring, and entry into workforce. While realizing that the public internship allows a better quality of life, with less time spent and higher remuneration, they also realize that it is necessary to guarantee some automatic income at the end of higher education.

<sup>18</sup>In the Brazilian case, besides stability, public service offers attractive initial wages. However, with the massive number of graduates in law, the ratio between candidates and spots in this competitive environment has reached very high numbers.



The expected trajectory for 85% of them was to have searched for public jobs early in the graduation period: reconciling public internship and law school, they seek public jobs that do not require a higher a post-secondary degree. They often do so in contexts that deviate from the law area. Among the interviewees who worked in public service, only two worked in the law area, and yet they worked in a middle-level job. All others who worked in public service did so in positions confirmed before the law degree ended, and none worked in law. Common to all was the dream of acting in an area closer to their aspiration.

I want to practice law. I know that this is my life. If we meet one day, I know you're going to interview me and say, 'I interviewed you when you had recently graduated.' I want to practice law. It is my life. I have found myself professionally. Today I carry out my main economic activity as a bank officer for financial reasons. Not because I have not discovered my dream, but because I find it difficult to devote myself to this. I do not have financial support. As a bank officer, I have a reasonable financial return. And I know that the reality [practiced by a lawyer] is the opposite. Even with banking being a mid-level job, I am paid better than the staff working as lawyers in the private sector. And I would not accept that at this time (Ba. ProUnian, RMA).

For the RMA ProUnian, the salary difference imposed by the public market makes it impracticable to give up a position, even at a medium level. The salary difference makes practically all graduates of higher education in law seek public service in the city. Because of the stability of public employment and the low wages in the private sector, the career path is attractive even to high-income youth, especially those with high incomes in the legal world. Therefore, the competition for higher-level public office in law often exceeds the barrier of 100 candidates per job. It is not uncommon for typical alumni to devote a few years of extra training toward seeking approval in one of these positions, a dedication that, to ProUnians, is not feasible since they cannot stay without income for so many years.

For a law student, without this family contact, it will be complicated for them to achieve a quality position. [...]. So, students in law school are getting ready for competition. That is why they often decide to just study. He [the rich student who devotes years of extra training] does this because the family does not want him to be subject to this minimum work condition [in firms] – being an associate and living poorly. So, they would rather pay him to stay home studying and get a better job. The student who does not have this favorable condition will need to commit to it, or else he will have to agree to work in an entirely different area of his training. Being educated in law will not mean anything. He will have graduated but will work in another area (Av. ProUnian, RMA).

In the case of the SPMA, ProUnians, from the beginning of their formation, do not see public service as a viable alternative, or at least not as viable in the early stages of work. For them, the higher salaries, and the advantages of accessing the best jobs make the private road more attractive. Applying the symbolic capital acquired by being from an elite institution and being a better student becomes a remarkable asset in their eyes. Presenting oneself as someone who has overcome barriers, who is proactive, who has achieved something difficult, emerges as a bonus, at least in their eyes, of a salary advantage.

While in the RMA, young people adapt their training to what is possible, seeking stability in public service even when they dream of being lawyers, the perfect opposite occurs in the SPMA: workers who dream of public service submit to private work because of the better salaries.

I will continue to be a lawyer for a while, but that has a deadline. I will want to work in the public defender's office. I went into the law degree wanting to be a public defender, [to take] a [public service] contest. The supply and job market valuation as an intern and lawyer is much better than in a public office. And I needed to support myself in São Paulo, which somewhat distorted my desire to take a public contest. But I think, further on, I am going to rest and study (An. ProUnian, SPMA).

As the RMA ProUnians perceive their educational capital as an asset in automatic transfer to the job market through public contests by investing in turning this asset into a guarantee of financial return at graduation, the SPMA ProUnians perceive the symbolic capital deriving from their history as a bridge to build a network of contacts and openings to the job market with better remuneration following graduation.



## Discussion and Conclusion

If ProUnians early on realized that the differences in capital accumulation work as a barrier to the job market, they also soon perceived the need for self-defense. They aim to protect themselves in the future job market and to survive competition for positions in the current field, since, in the face of a better social and financial structure, typical students will continue to have a greater range of opportunities. With this, increasing the power of the school performance became a triumph for them. They are the best students from an elite institution, and they know it. Through the specific and essential accumulation of capital in the field, they strive to break from an educational trajectory without great chances of success (due to the deficit in other capitals). The aim is to increase the chances of success by accumulating educational capital – part of the cultural capital that is highly appreciated in the field. There is an excellent notion of the temporary aspect of the period of experience in higher education, giving urgency to the need for a more significant and faster accumulation of dominant capital in this field.

They try to bring the battle to the fraction of educational and cultural capital, increasing their capital with a discourse of worthiness. With this, they intend to transform this accumulation of dominant capital in the field (educational capital) into a consolidated tool of conversion to accumulate other capitals. They put in motion several tactics to compensate for their lack of capital: the tactics of evasion or avoidance concerning jobs that require cars; the search for skills in a second language; the pursuit for jobs in public offices, and so on. This strategy mainly happens because they know that, despite their plans of demeaning the regular capital structure, the job market tends to sustain its rules. So, future research could look to perceive the relationship between their strategy and tactics,<sup>19</sup> comprehending their small power to change the traditional structure of capitals.

Another important thing is that despite the capital distribution and social positions being similar and the primary strategy being the same for all ProUnians, there are substantial differences regarding available choices and potential limitations due to characteristics such as region, city structure, and city services, etc.

Considering all this, we can say, in short, that this paper contributes to the field by reinforcing the core comprehension of the *habitus* of students that benefit from affirmative action policies to reduce inequalities in access to higher education. However, it is also essential to add that this paper found shreds of evidence for a new hypothesis: it is nearly impossible for subjugated agents or groups to build effective strategies of acquiescence when the deficit of capital surpasses a specific limit, making it necessary to create new strategies of embattlement and try to change the traditional structure of symbolic capitals.

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