

Intergenerational Educational Mobility of PhDs and the “Plafond” Effects: A French-Argentine Comparative Study

Miriam Aparicio

CONICET- National Council of Scientific Research
CCT, Parque General San Martín,
Mendoza (5500), Argentina
Universidad Nacional de Cuyo
Parque General San Martín
Mendoza, (5500).Argentina

Abstract

We analyze educational mobility at the third generation for a population of PhDs in the humanities and social sciences and, particularly, in Education at both an Argentine university and a French provincial university. Our theoretical framework fits within the context of interactionist theories versus reproductivist theories (hyperfunctionalism), on the one hand, and within the issue of the University of the elite versus the University of the masses in both developed and developing contexts and their relation to the “plafond” effect, on the other. Our hypothesis is that diploma saturation at the doctoral level in countries that were once the birthplace of this academic degree results in decreasing processes of intergenerational educational mobility. The methodology used was quantitative-descriptive and explicative and qualitative. We carried out a comparative study of the mobility observed in both an important Argentine province and an important French province. Our findings show that said mobility remains in force, with all of the implications that this has at the social and professional level.

Keywords: Educational Mobility, Intergenerational, PhDs, Comparative Study

1. Introduction

This research on Mobility is longstanding (spanning from 1980 to the present day). Within this framework, the study of PhDs fits within the Program of Incentives for Professors-Researchers (2013-2015) and is part of a line of research implemented by Aparicio since 1995 (National Council of Scientific Research CONICET). Its main focus is the issue of Quality of education/instruction, whose criteria include efficacy (pedagogical), efficiency (economic), effectiveness and pertinence or response to contextual needs. Our studies respond to this last criterion.

Nevertheless, in this paper we wish to analyze an additional aspect which, from our perspective, concerns the University from a socio-cultural point of view, touching on the processes of self-selection and institutional selection as well as on university policies and the democratization of teaching. It deals with the University of the Masses versus the university of elites, an issue which has sparked and continues to spark, important debates. Opting for one model or another according to country and politics is associated with the possibilities for personal, institutional and national achievement and with Identity, if one takes into account that education is the main “tool” for development, even more so in this “era of knowledge” (Silva & Aparicio, 2015d). The issue is also related to psychosocial factors/dimensions such as prejudices, stereotypes, intercultural openings, and discrimination/acceptance of the other, of difference, and of diversity, among other factors.

It is essential to point out that this issue has captured Aparicio’s interest since the 1980s when she translated into Spanish *L’inégalité des chances. La mobilité sociale dans les sociétés industrielles* (1973), work by the eminent sociologist R. Boudon, published by Laia (Barcelona, 1983); a work which would mark the last decades (see also Boudon, 2001).

Within our framework, Cultural Mobility is considered to be a factor in social and professional achievement, a consideration which appeared in the 1960s, especially in the US, and which are very related to Aspirations or n-Ach (here we refer back to the founding fathers: Keller & Zavalloni, 1964; Sauvy & Girard, 1965; Krauss, 1964; Chinoy, 1952; Duncan, 1965; Elder, 1965; Mir, 1972; Levy-Leboyer, 1971; Jencks & Brown, 1975; Beneton, 1975; Thuillier, 1977).

The issue has been addressed in two instances over the years.

In the first instance –coinciding with the start of Aparicio’s research at CONICET and working within the fields of sociology-politics-economics– Intergenerational Mobility was addressed with university graduates with the objective of observing the role of Education in the process of national and personal growth (Solari, Campiglio & Prates, 1967; Germani, 1955; Germani, 1963; Germani, 1966; Germani, 1972; Aparicio, 1981; 1984^a, 1984 b, 1984 c, 1985, 1987, 1988, 1990^a, 1990 b, 1992, 1992/93; 1993, Rajneri, 1990).

We worked with 1,152 family groups, with the help of collaboration from INDEC¹. This allowed us access to a representative sampling from the Greater Mendoza area. We carried out a descriptive-percentage analysis which showed the advances in sociocultural and economic variables as well as their impact on psychosocial factors¹. Additionally, we applied mobility coefficients (Bartholomeu’s coefficient, 1973; Yasuda, 1964; Matras 1960). We then carried out a mathematical analysis (Aparicio, 1984e, 1984f, 1985). Our findings –beyond the methodological problems detected which would progressively lead us to systemic models– brought to light a very marked educational and socio-professional mobility, which at the same time had an impact on the psychosocial level (Ellis, 1952; Germani 1965; Heintz, 1965, 1970; McClelland, 1961; Aparicio, 2001).

The second instance (1995 and beyond), more focused on the impact of psychosocial factors and not just sociological factors, addressed –without leaving aside Intergenerational Mobility– Professional or Career Mobility. Professional pathways become the focus of the study. This variable had been cast aside in research practice for various reasons, among them the growing importance of the issue of workplace insertion with the new demands of the working world, in addition to other problems, including company delocalization and growing competition within the context of globalization. This impacted and fractured the actors’ identity (Dubar, 1991, 1992, 2000). (A synthesis of empirical research in four countries, starting in the 1990s particularly, in E. Chávez Molina (comp.) (2013).

In light of the statistics, we can state that the country moved from very high levels of social and educational mobility –one of the highest levels in the world, relatively– to a process of sclerosis (Panettieri, 1966). That is, the rapid mobility observed (Bertaux, 1977, 1985a, 1985 b) –intergenerational, educational, social and economic– followed a process of stagnation. The 1990s were, for many, the “lost decade,” while the 2000s set the country on a course of falling employment, the largest in its history. Our research found 20% of graduates to be unemployed (Aparicio, 2003). Unemployment, and particularly structural unemployment, reached a ceiling difficult to imagine (Aparicio, 2000). University programs of study were threatened by the socio-political and economic situation and, with it, possibilities for employment mobility (We refer here to publications of this second instance, more focused on the biographical/professional pathways –observed mobility– in each of the populations studied: Aparicio, 1995, 1996^a; 1996 b, 1997, 2001^a. 2001 b, 2001c, 2002, 2004^a, 2004b).

Likewise, the idea that Intergenerational Mobility had stopped with the great influx of immigrants produced during the last century, one of the most marked influxes in the world, spread. In fact, the number of European immigrants decreased notably, though this was not the case with immigrants from neighboring countries.

The idea that the University was an institution open to the elite, despite being free of charge and –in most cases and during most political terms– with unlimited entrance also spread (Rajneri, 1990). Some make reference to the fact that unlimited entrance does not ensure that students from the lowest and mid-to-low social sectors will remain at University. Even when they manage to access the University, they may not remain due to schedules which are incompatible with work schedules or due to the fact that working becomes impossible with the practical demands of their program of study, or even still due to difficulties related to transportation and associated costs, among many other factors. There were many arguments in favor of a University of the *elite* and not of the *masses*; as was the tendency in many countries.

Particularly, we highlight here the theories related to reproduction which took hold in the 1970s and beyond (Bisseret, 1968; Passeron, 1989; Giroux, 1983); theories that also found a place in Latin America and, particularly, in certain academic circles (the National University of Buenos Aires, UBA; the Latin American College of Social Sciences, FLACSO; the Gino Germani Institute), where there is a great concentration of researchers and students (the UBA currently has over 350,000 students in a country of 40 million inhabitants).

Other theories, on the other hand, continued to make reference to statistics that bring to light the fact that Argentine universities still remain open to the lowest social sectors. In fact, the Rector of the University of Buenos Aires, Dr. Barbieri, stated in July 2017 on Radio Mitre that “*According to data from the University of Buenos Aires, half of its students are the first in their families to go to university*” (...) “*The job of the university is to reach all sectors. There are more and more students attempting to reach the university level of education.*”

In other words, their parents or grandparents did not reach the university level. This fact confirms our findings with PhDs.

This does not mean that the change in the global situation which had taken place before the last few decades has not had an impact on individuals and their psychology: phenomena such as status inconsistency (Jackson & Curtis, 1972; Jackson, 1962; Jackson & Burke, 1965; Segal, 1967) and anomie (a perception of being far from the possibility of reaching one’s goals due to a lack of institutionalized means, an increase in fatalism and in the meaning of effort in light of diploma devaluation) (Aparicio, 1984d, 1985c, 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 2014). Authors such Hollinshead, Ellis & Kirbb, 1954; Jackson, 1962; and Benoit-Smullyan, 1969as had already made reference to these facts in other social frameworks; in Argentina, the contributions of Heintz (1965) and Germani (1955, 1963, 1965, 1972) were fundamental. The situation also had an impact on the University as an institution: in light of the socio-economic and labor market difficulties, where it became increasingly difficult to find a job, individuals who entered university begin to use other strategies in order not to abandon the academic system nor the workplace. This translates into delaying studies (we have found individuals who remained at university for 23 years before graduating) (Aparicio, 2009 a and b, Establet, 1987). These students, in contexts of conflict, seek so-called “deferred gratification” [*Deferred gratification pattern*], postponing their degree in a market that does not offer many opportunities for workplace insertion and in light of diploma devaluation (Schneider & Lysgaard, 1953; Levy-Garboua, 1976).

General Objectives

- 1 Comprehend the level of intergenerational educational mobility for PhDs from social science and humanities programs, within a framework in which it is frequently maintained that Argentine universities are for the elite.
- 2 Comprehend said levels of intergenerational educational mobility by program of study, that is, contextualizing them. This allows for identifying “institutional and personal identity/identities”.
- 3 Clarify, on the basis of empirical studies, the issue of a predominance of a university of the masses or of the elite, many times confused by ideologies or belief systems present at certain moments in society and in different contexts.

Hypothesis

Diploma saturation at the doctoral level in countries that were once the birthplace of this academic degree results in decreasing processes of intergenerational educational mobility.

2. Methodology

2.1. Population

We worked with PhD students and PhDs in the social sciences and humanities in Argentina (UNCuyo, PhDs in Education and Social Sciences) and France (one university located in Paris and one located in the provinces). We took as our sample students who had entered starting in 2005 and later. In this paper, we refer to results found in our Argentine context, with only mentions made to similarities found respect to studies carried out in France.

2.2. Techniques

Among the quantitative techniques used was a semi-structured interview of PhD students and PhDs (2005-2014). Among the qualitative techniques utilized were a semi-direct interview, word association (Doise, Clemente & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1992; Wagner & Hayes, 2005; Wagner, Valencia y Elejabarrieta, 1996) and hierarchical evocation. In this paper, we will focus on the descriptive-quantitative segment.

3. Results

1. We were able to access our object of analysis in the various institutions, finding strong similarities between them (the percentages of mobility of grandparents to PhDs and of parents to PhDs in the Education PhD program in Argentina are very similar to those found in the French provincial University).
2. The relevance of our findings also emerges because these comparative studies –though here we only address the Argentine case– have been carried out with PhDs enrolled in social science and humanities programs. These fields, as is well-known, are not associated with prestige, power or income (Aparicio & Cros, 2015). According to the international literature, individuals from unfavorable socio-cultural sectors frequently study in these fields and, in particular, Education and Social Science or Social Work, not by choice but through self-selection or processes of institutional selection. Despite the difficulties that present obstacles to completing the PhD, these students enroll and graduate. Faced with this fact and with the widespread idea of a stagnation in mobility, one question stands out in the Argentine case: Does there exist among these sectors the “My son, the doctor” principle rooted in the cultural *ethos*; a principle which reflects the aspiration of immigrants to see their descendants reach high levels of education? (Mc Clelland, 1961; Levy-Leboyer, 1971).
3. The following results were obtained for Argentina (National University of Cuyo); we will briefly highlight those results obtained at the French provincial University.

In Cuyo, for PhDs in Education, there are students whose parents have no formal education (4.7%), while 32.6% have parents who finished primary education, 18.6% secondary education and 44% university education. That is to say, almost 50% of students do not have parents who reached the university level. The figures found at the PhD level –the highest educational level in Argentina– are very similar to those found at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) among undergraduate students, in line with the Rector’s recent comments.

Also in Cuyo, but for PhDs in Social Sciences, there are no students with parents with no formal education and there is a lower percentage of students who have parents with only a primary level of education, as compared with the Education PhDs. Here, the majority of parents (42.9%) completed secondary education, while 28.6% reached the university level.

At the French provincial University, whose identity we protect, we recorded the following percentages by level:

There are no parents with no formal education, while 37.5% completed primary education and another 37.5% completed secondary education. 75% of the students’ parents can be found within this range. Only 25% of parents had reached the university level.

4) Discussion and Conclusions

4.1. The results invite us to analyze what happens in the case of educational mobility for PhDs in the exact and natural sciences, fields more associated with models of “investment” and which are, according to the literature, chosen by individuals from higher social sectors, with fewer financial difficulties and a family history in the same program of study (which facilitates subsequent enrollment) (see Becker, 1964). Moreover, these individuals would have better previous academic files and a less fatalist outlook on the future. They would also more positively view their own abilities/competencies and would have a stronger personal identity (Dubar, 1985; 1992; 2000 a, b).

4.2. The findings do not cease to amaze us, in the face of that which is frequently maintained in the media and even in the scientific literature: educational mobility exists and is even more marked in France (we repeat that only 25% of the parents of PhDs had reached university).

Though it is true that in France it is not the universities that attract the economically privileged public, as within their system there exist the Hautes Écoles, we consider it interesting to contribute data on so-called “promotion” in a country where stratification has always been marked and where theories of reproduction have emerged, theories according to which origins mark social and educational destiny, and in which schools are the greatest filter preventing socially disfavored individuals from reaching University.

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Highest educational level reached by parents

Table 1: Degree Program *versus* Highest Educational Level Reached by Parents(UNCuyo, Argentina) (q11)

			Degree Program	
			UNCuyo - Education	UNCuyo –Social Sciences
Highest educational level reached by parents	None	Effective % in the program	2 4.7%	0 0.0%
	Primary	Effective % in the program	14 32.6%	2 28.6%
	Secondary	Effective % in the program	8 18.6%	3 42.9%
	University	Effective % in the program	19 44.2%	2 28.6%
Total		Effective % in the program	43 100.0%	7 100.0%

Table 2: Degree Program *versus* Highest Educational Level Reached by Parents (French University) (q11)

			Degree Program	
			Education Sciences	
Highest educational level reached by parents	None	Effective % in the program	0 0.0%	
	Primary	Effective % in the program	9 37.5%	
	Secondary	Effective % in the program	9 37.5%	
	University	Effective % in the program	6 25.0%	
Total		Effective % in the program	24 100.0%	