

## **The Imaginary of Brazilian Adolescents in Relation to University Entrance Exams: A Psychoanalytic Study<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** Each year, thousands of Brazilian adolescents sit the *vestibular* (university entrance exam). This process often results in clinically significant levels of anxiety and insecurity. This study consists of a psychoanalytic investigation of the imaginary of middle class adolescents in relation to the vestibular. A group interview was conducted with nine students in the last year of high school using the Thematic Story-Drawing Procedure. An examination of the participants' manifestations resulted in the interpretive production of two affective-emotional sense fields or relative unconscious: "individual responsibility" and "the key to success". The findings show that there is a general belief that the ability to pass the *vestibular*, and thus guarantee a successful professional life, is directly related to the candidate's academic skills and capacity. This oversimplified view ignores the importance of the social context.

**Keywords:** adolescents, university entrance examination, collective imaginary, qualitative research, psychoanalysis

### **O Imaginário de Adolescentes Sobre o Vestibular: Um Estudo Psicanalítico**

**Resumo:** Um grupo significativo de adolescentes brasileiros, em sua maioria de classe média, realiza o processo de vestibular visando a ingressar no ensino superior. Tal processo pode provocar ansiedade e insegurança clinicamente relevantes. O presente estudo tem como objetivo investigar psicanaliticamente o imaginário de adolescentes em relação ao vestibular. Foi realizada entrevista coletiva com nove estudantes do último ano do ensino médio, mediada pelo uso do Procedimento de Desenhos-Estórias com Tema. As manifestações dos participantes sustentam a interpretação de dois campos de sentido afetivo-emocional ou inconscientes relativos: "responsabilidade individual" e "chave para o sucesso". O quadro geral revela que a aprovação é concebida como fruto direto da competência e talento do jovem, que lhe garantiriam uma vida de sucesso profissional, segundo uma visão simplificadora, que desconsidera a importância do contexto social.

**Palavras-chave:** adolescentes, vestibular, imaginário coletivo, pesquisa qualitativa, psicanálise

### **El Imaginario de Adolescentes Acerca del Examen de Ingreso a la Universidad: Un Estudio Psicoanalítico**

**Resumen:** Un grupo significativo de adolescentes brasileños, pertenecientes en su mayoría a la clase media, completan el examen de ingreso a la educación superior. Este proceso puede causar ansiedad e inseguridad clínicamente relevantes. Este estudio tiene el objetivo de investigar psicoanaliticamente el imaginario de adolescentes acerca del examen de ingreso a la universidad. Se llevó a cabo entrevista grupal con nueve estudiantes de la enseñanza secundaria, mediada por el uso del Procedimiento Dibujos-Cuentos con Tema. Las manifestaciones de los participantes apoyan la interpretación de dos campos de sentido afectivo-emocional o inconsciente relativo: "responsabilidad individual" y "clave del éxito". El panorama general muestra que la aprobación se concibe como un resultado directo de la experiencia y el talento de los jóvenes, que garantizarían una vida profesional exitosa, según una visión simplificada que no tiene en cuenta la importancia del contexto social.

**Palabras clave:** adolescentes, vestibular, imaginario colectivo, investigación cualitativa, psicoanálisis

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Each year, thousands of Brazilian adolescents sit the vestibular (university entrance exam), a process which often results in clinically significant levels of anxiety and insecurity. In a context marked by deep social inequality, the majority of children from wealthier classes study in private schools, where they receive an education that enables them to compete successfully for entrance to university, while those from the

less privileged classes study in state schools, the majority of which fail to adequately fulfill their function, thus tending to perpetuate the current social order. As a result, the vast majority of people who depend on state education, which is the majority of Brazil's population, fail to gain the necessary academic skills and knowledge to get a place at university and are forced to enter the job market early, invariably occupying low-paid unskilled or semi-skilled positions. In 2001, the government introduced measures designed to improve access to higher education among this segment of the population known as the social and racial quotas system. However, several studies have questioned how much these measures really contribute to reducing inequalities between students from high-income and low-income families and white and black students and suggest that they run counter to the meritocratic principles of university admission (J. C. F. Araújo & Leite, 2014; Griner, Sampaio, & Sampaio, 2015; Guarnieri & Melo-Silva, 2010; Lima, Neves, & Silva, 2014; Passos, 2015; Piotto & Nogueira, 2016; Santos & Scopinho, 2016; Silva & Silva, 2012).

Another aspect of this issue is the fact that higher education means significantly higher salaries and greater prestige (Barros, 2014). As a result, it is valued over and above secondary education, leading to a lack of recognition of the importance of jobs that only require a high school diploma. This situation may be regarded as perverse, since it fails to meet the needs of society and the country, as citizens without higher education carry out "less important" low-responsibility and low-paid tasks.

In various sectors, the demand for low and semi-skilled workers considerably outstrips that for workers with higher education and the gaping pay differences between the two are taken for granted (Franco & Novaes, 2001; Moura, 2013). Despite this, a careful examination of this issue shows that the current system is set to become even more problematic. In our view, this situation calls for improved primary and secondary education, including technical capacity building and cultural education to promote personal autonomy and citizenship (Ciavatta & Ramos, 2011; Franco & Novaes, 2001; Moura, 2013) and a review of ideas related to the earnings gap between graduates and nongraduates in order to overcome differences that threaten workers' dignity.

However, the government's attempts to facilitate access to higher education among young people from the underprivileged classes have favored populist measures over policies designed to improve the quality of education, perversely leading to a proliferation of private universities, most of which are not committed to offering quality education. Consequently, there are a large number of universities of questionable quality and places at good universities are in fact relatively scarce (Chaves & Amaral, 2016; Ribeiro & Guzzo, 2017; Sguissardi, 2015). As a result, middle-class school leavers from quality private schools are likely to become psychologically uncomfortable, which can lead to feelings of insecurity and anxiety that may eventually require psychotherapy. Many school leavers undertake preparation courses to prepare themselves for the *vestibular*, some over a period of several years until they obtain the grades needed

for their desired university course (Terra, Vieira, Costa, Terra, & Freire, 2013).

Adolescence is marked by important experiences that can be influenced by socioeconomic status. While for some adolescents this passage involves first dating experiences, completing high school, undertaking the *vestibular*, and going to university, others are forced to abandon their studies, enter the job market, marry, and can quickly become parents (Melsert & Bock, 2015; Patias, Fiorin, Lima, & Dias, 2014). It is evident, therefore, that the way one experiences adolescence is strongly influenced by social, economic, cultural, historical, and geopolitical contexts (Montezi, Barcellos, Ambrósio, & Aiello-Vaisberg, 2013; Tachibana, Montezi, Barcelos, Sirota, & Aiello-Vaisberg, 2015).

Considering the specificities of the *vestibular* process in Brazil, we carried out a search of studies conducted in country since 2012 using the following databases: Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), *Periódicos Eletrônicos de Psicologia* (Electronic Psychology Journals – PePSIC), and *Literatura Latino-Americana e do Caribe em Ciências da Saúde* (Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature – LILACS). The search was undertaken using the key-words *vestibular e estudantes* (*vestibular* and students) and *vestibulandos* (*vestibular* candidates). The search of SciELO yielded three papers written by the following authors: Cervi (2013), who discusses undergraduate course admission processes that adopt racial and social quotas; Barros (2014), who explored the effectiveness and legitimacy of university selection processes; and Beraldi, Gagliardi Filho, Nunes, and Gannam (2015), who investigated whether gender was a determining factor in graduate admission to an undergraduate medical program. The search of PePSIC resulted in one article based on a study conducted by Baccaro and Shinyashiki (2014) investigating the relationship between performance in the *vestibular* and student academic performance. The search of LILACS yielded three articles produced by the following authors: M.C. Araújo et al. (2012) and Terra et al. (2013), who examined anxiety, depression and stress among *vestibulandos*; and Valore and Cavallet (2012), who explored the determining factors in the career choices of disadvantaged young people.

It is interesting to note that only two articles address the emotional aspects of adolescents who are preparing for or undertaking the *vestibular*. On the other hand, a large amount of research focuses on the implementation of the university admissions quota system. When we used the key-word "quotas" for example, the number of results increased significantly in each of the three databases, indicating that current research interest is directed at the issue of differing opportunities of access to quality higher education institutions.

We believe that adolescents' emotional experiences linked to the *vestibular* are influenced not only by their life story and parental and family bonds, but also by beliefs, ideas and fantasies that circulate in the social environment. The present study consists of a psychoanalytic investigation of the imaginary of middle class adolescents in relation to the *vestibular*, considering that this group tends to enter higher education through both public and private institutions.

## Method

This study consists of a qualitative research, insofar as it investigates the significations of experiences and human acts, understood as phenomena that occur in an inevitably contextualized manner. As we know, this type of research demands the adoption of a theoretical and methodological framework that should be clearly articulated by the researchers (Gale & Bermudez, 2008).

With regard to the present study, it is important to clarify that we worked within a psychoanalytic framework. This, however, is insufficient information, given that the term psychoanalysis covers a wide range of theoretical and methodological perspectives. It is important to mention, therefore, that we adopted Bleger's (1963/1984) dramatic and intersubjective perspective of psychoanalysis, which, by using the psychoanalytic method of investigation, develops comprehensive models of human phenomena that encompass the unconscious dimension. Drawing on this theoretical and methodological perspective, we used a precise form of operationalizing the psychoanalytic method that allows its use outside the therapeutic setting, in individual and group interviews and the study of cultural production (Bleger, 1980; Gallo-Belluzzo, Corbett, & Aiello-Vaisberg, 2013; Schulte, Gallo-Belluzzo, & Aiello-Vaisberg, 2016; Simões, Ferreira-Teixeira, & Aiello-Vaisberg, 2014).

The concept of collective imaginary has permeated the human sciences and philosophy for several decades, to such an extent that there is copious literature on the topic. Thus, the precise meaning of this notion depends on the theoretical context in which it is being employed. For the purposes of this study, the term is defined as conduct, where, in the Blegerian sense, conduct is an inherently binding human manifestation endowed with meaning, even when it may conceivably not be conscious. It ranges from imaginative activity, a psychic phenomenon, to concrete acts, which express how interhuman situations are experienced (Bleger, 1963/1984; Gallo-Belluzzo et al., 2013).

As with all forms of human conduct, the collective imaginary emerges from intersubjective fields that we call here "affective-emotional sense fields" (Aiello-Vaisberg, 2003). According to Bleger (1963/1984), apart from being endowed with meaning, all human manifestations correspond to intersubjective, interhuman events. The notion of affective-emotional sense field is derived directly from Bleger's formulations, which distinguish between the following three fields: the geographical or environmental field, which refers to what perceives an observer relatively external to a given happening; the psychological field, which is eminently experiential; and the field of consciousness, which is the part of the experiential field that is consciously apprehended. All forms of conduct emerge from the psychological-experiential fields, that is from the affective-emotional sense fields (Corbett, Ambrosio, Gallo-Belluzzo, & Aiello-Vaisberg, 2014; Tachibana, Ambrosio, Beaune, & Aiello-Vaisberg, 2014).

Using a qualitative approach based on psychoanalytic methods, we defend that the concepts of conduct and field are solidarity-based (Aiello-Vaisberg & Machado, 2008), insofar as we subscribe to a way of thinking, which propagated as an

Argentine tradition of thought that developed in the 1960s, stemming from Merleau-Ponty phenomenological bases (Bernardi, 2009; Civitaresse, 2014; Churcher, 2008). Within this tradition of thought, the field was proposed practically simultaneously according to two points of view: (1) as something that is configured in the analytic setting (Baranger & Baranger, 1962); and (2) as a phenomenon underlying all human conduct (Bleger, 1963/1984).

## Participants

We invited a senior year class from a private school in the State of São Paulo comprising 14 students aged between 16 and 19 years to participate in a group interview. It is important to highlight that participation was voluntary and refusals to take part in the study were respected and did not affect the students in any way. Nine students accepted with their parents'/guardian's consent. Considering the context, this sample size was shown to be significant and sufficiently large for the exercise of associations and interpretations, as required by the psychoanalytic approach to qualitative research (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012).

## Instruments

A group interview was conducted (Duchesne & Haegel, 2008) using the Thematic Story-Drawing Procedure, developed by Aiello-Vaisberg (1999) based on a diagnostic instrument designed by Trinca (1976). In this approach care is taken to avoid exclusively verbal exchanges characterized by rational and politically correct communication that does not necessarily reveal important aspects related to affective-emotional manifestations (Ávila, Tachibana, & Aiello-Vaisberg, 2008; Gallo-Belluzzo et al., 2013). After the group meeting, a transference narrative was elaborated based on memory. This is a modality of recording information that, starting from the idea that what is more significant generates important countertransference impacts, dispenses the notetaking during the interview and demands a state of evenly-hovering attention (Gallo-Belluzzo et al., 2013).

## Procedure

**Data collection.** We operationalized the psychoanalytic method using the following investigative procedures: interview configuration, register, and interpretation. Finally, we revisited our interpretations in light of the contributions of other authors from and outside the field of psychoanalysis. This complementary method is not psychoanalytical, insofar as it is a dialogic and reflexive process that dispenses evenly-hovering attention and free association. Data collection consisted of the first two procedures: interview configuration and recording. The interview configuration investigative procedure consisted of a group interview, organized around the use of the Thematic Drawing-Story Procedure. During the interview, each participant was asked to draw "an adolescent who is going to take the *vestibular*". On the other side of the paper, they were invited to write a story about the character they had

drawn. The registering procedure comprised the elaboration of transferential narratives. The drawings and stories, through which the participants were able to objectify and imagine in relation to the proposed theme, constituted an important record.

**Data analysis.** Data analysis consisted of interpretation and reflexive interlocution. In the first procedure, the transferential narratives, drawings and stories were examined by the researchers in a state of evenly-hovering attention and free association. It is important to note that the productions of individual participants were taken as an expression of the collective personality of the group, in this case the adolescent from the perspective of the transindividual subject as proposed by Goldmann (1971), which is conducive with the notion that the phenomenon of conduct can be addressed at both the individual and group level (Bleger, 1963/1984). The interpretive production of affective-emotional sense fields, or relative unconscious, can be achieved by adopting the recommendations proposed by Herrmann (1979), "let it emerge", "take into consideration", and "complete the configuration of sense". In the reflexive interlocution stage, evenly-hovering attention and free association give way to conceptual thinking and theorizing, considering ideas, theories, and thoughts that can help understand the interpretations made by the researchers. This investigative procedure corresponds to the discussion of results.

### Ethical Considerations

The study proposal was approved by the Research Involving Human Beings Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Jaguariúna (CAAE: 31095814.0.0000.5409).

### Results

An examination of the drawings and stories and transferential narratives resulted in the interpretive production of two affective-emotional sense fields, which we called "individual responsibility" and "the key to success".

"Individual responsibility" is organized around the belief that career choice and obtaining a place at university depend solely on the young person. An example of production in this field is a drawing that shows a three-story building with a large open door on the ground floor with some people inside the doorway. Above the door there is a sign with the word *vestibular* written in large letters. Through the windows, we can see people sat, in what looks like a school setting, while one young person remains outside. There is a question mark above the head of each figure, while the girl outside the building has a thought bubble coming out of her head with two hands clutching a piece of paper with "passed" written in capital letters. This drawing is accompanied by the following story:

The drawing shows an insecure, hard-working girl who believes she will manage to pass the *vestibular*. After years of study and trying harder and harder, she believes that her dream will come true – to get into the university of her dreams. Whatever the situation, we have to believe in ourselves, and

always believe that we are capable of getting what we really want. And this summarizes the drawing; anxious, she is confident that she will manage and be able to change her life.

In another design that emerges from the same field, there is a girl with two thought bubbles. In one bubble there is a computer screen displaying the word "Facebook" and a television with a remote control, while in the other the following is written: "study + study = pass the *vestibular*". The drawing is accompanied by the following story:

School has always been difficult. Even so, I have always managed to get decent grades. Everyone says the *vestibular* is really hard and if you don't study at least 2 hours a day you won't pass. It may well be possible to pass the *vestibular*, but all the pressure everyone puts on us makes it seem impossible. Despite all the tension of the *vestibular*, we have to think that *yes* it is possible (to pass) the *vestibular*. More and more distractions will appear, but we have to resist and make the effort to study more and more and try to get into the university of our dreams.

The affective-emotional sense field "the key to success" is organized around the belief that a degree is a guarantee of professional success and moving up the social ladder. An example of production from this field is a drawing of a boy in front of a road that branches into three separate roads each ending in a door. On first door is written "university for overachievers", while on the second and third door is written "university for geniuses" and the dollar sign ("\$\$"), respectively. This drawing is accompanied by the following story:

A 17-year-old boy is about to take the *vestibular*, which for him is going to change his life, since he is from a poor family that can't afford to pay for a private university. His only option is to get into a government university, but he knows it will be very difficult and that if he passes he will probably earn a good salary and be able to support his family.

The following is another story that emerges from the same field:

If someone asks me why I want to go to university, hmm . . . It's one of my biggest dreams! Maybe the biggest. I need it to be able to make my other dreams come true. I also want to be somebody in life. I want to be successful, be fulfilled in my job and so many other good things that university brings us throughout life.

### Discussion

The affective-emotional sense fields that we produced from the drawings and stories and transferential narratives

paint a picture of the imaginary of the adolescents in relation to the *vestibular* that expresses feelings of doubt about personal capacity, which in turn causes anxiety and suffering.

One particular aspect expressed in the first field, “individual responsibility”, which is related to career choice, deserves attention. The fact that the adolescents are from middle class families means that the *vestibulandos* are hurled into a paradoxical situation, insofar as they are uncomfortable with being free. This liberty actually corresponds to the need to find a healthy balance between their wants and acquiring the capacity to support themselves and possible future children. It therefore comprises the fear of making the wrong decisions. In fact, the situation as a whole, encompassing choosing a profession and the capacity to obtain a place, learning, and getting a good job, ends up causing anxiety and being expressed in the imaginative productions, such as the belief that they can only count on themselves and their intellectual and disciplinary resources to conduct their own lives. Barros (2014) argues that the low level of schooling and unequal access to quality education favors early elimination from university among students who studied in poor quality secondary schools. According to this author, the legitimacy of merit performs a double function: the result is regarded as fair for those who were selected and have gained recognition, while a bad result is deserved for those who were not successful, since the belief that the candidates had equal opportunities circulates and “only the best knew how to take advantage of them, prepare themselves adequately and work hard” (p. 1084). We agree that uncertain and unequal conditions during secondary education cause insecurity and anxiety among students.

The second field, “the key to success”, manifests the belief that higher education is essential to a successful professional life and will in turn open the doors of happiness in other realms of life. Passing the *vestibular* and success are therefore intrinsically bound, resulting in the terrifying prospect that failure will seal a very unhappy fate. The importance of higher education as a condition of employability and insertion into social life is highlighted by Santos and Scopinho (2016) in their study of affirmative actions to correct social and racial inequalities in higher education. The authors discuss the belief in individual merit as a measure of performance, claiming that individual performance-based merit should only be regarded as a measure of performance when subjects with similar backgrounds in terms of the *vestibular* preparation process are compared. Differences are found not only between private school and state school students, but also between private school students, given the differences in quality between private schools.

A more precise measure of what it means to inhabit these fields could be obtained if we were to consider that such beliefs are rooted in the unconscious psychic level, remembering that psyche is defined not as an individual internal device, but rather a meaning production process (Herrmann, 1979). That is why psychoanalysts often talk of fantasies, which tend to be dramatically radical, transforming “no” into “never” and “difficult” into “impossible”.

On the other hand, it is particularly important to remember that fantasies are not a realm detached from shared

reality. It is important to admit therefore that young people in Brazil do indeed have to deal with relative uncertainty over their performance in the exam. They often defend themselves through conduct that is reminiscent of high-performing athletes in competitions and politicians on the election trail, who when interviewed always claim they are fully confident that they will obtain good results. Thus, phrases such as “we have to believe in ourselves”, “we think we are capable of getting what we really want”, or “we have to think that it is possible to pass the *vestibular*”, seem like defenses through which success can be conjured up and bad luck averted. This picture leads us to confirm that the field “the key to success” is organized as a hypomanic defense against persecutory anxiety. Adolescents imagine a successful future as a way of warding off the anxiety that prevails in the present.

The analysis of the material that pertains to this field shows that adolescents practically ignore an important phase of their training and professional development – university experience. They spring imaginatively from the *vestibular* to adult life as a graduate with the money and material conditions to look after a family. After all, the learning process, years of study, and university training were not touched on by our participants. We therefore have an imaginary in which two powerful times are manifested: an “almost now”, which, because it is lived as if it was decisive, causes fear and anxiety; and the “long-term future”, which seems to be homogeneously defined through either rose tinted spectacles or dark glasses. The objective time of the next four or five years practically vanishes as a “non-happening”.

We can therefore conclude that we find ourselves with a collective imaginary that tends to express suffering and personal discomfort rather than enthusiasm with the coming of a new phase of life. Using the same methodological design, the findings of Camps, Barcelos, and Aiello-Vaisberg (2014) paint a similar picture to the one revealed by the present study, indicating that deep social inequality may well have a harsh impact on young people from the lower classes, but does not spare middle class youth. A study by Camps et al. (2014) demonstrated that young people showed anguish in the face of doubts about what it is necessary to have and/or be to grow, marry, and become an adult. One of the central issues raised by this study were financial concerns and the belief that escaping poverty and becoming rich were essential elements of a “respectable” life.

In a study that explored the social representations of secondary school students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, Franco and Novaes (2001) also found a scenario similar to that shown by our findings, revealing that young people felt anguish about the future. The interviewees stated that school affords better opportunities of “being someone in life”, “having a better future”, and “obtaining a privileged social status”. Young people from both higher and lower-income families believe that schooling is directly related to the possibility of gaining prestige and climbing the social ladder, conditions considered necessary for a dignified life.

As in studies conducted by Camps et al. (2014) and Franco and Novaes (2001), the affective-emotional sense fields that we created/found reveal that adolescents feel that

they lack support, insofar as the social system in place in Brazil is unlikely to adequately meet their needs as citizens if they are not successful. There are therefore two possible future scenarios: success, whereby young people manage to get into a good university and become successful, respected and valued professionals; or failure, whereby they feel unable to meet the basic needs of survival. Their fate depends on their sole belief in individual effort. Underlying the imaginary of these young people is the prospect of poverty, lack of support or humiliation, which leads us directly to the issue of social suffering. Following the same line of thought as Kleinman, Das and Lock (1997) and Renault (2010), we understand that social suffering results from situations of oppression, discrimination and exclusion, causing feelings of helplessness, humiliation, and injustice (Schulte, 2016). This kind of suffering cuts across the different social classes, thus affecting all young people, albeit in different ways (Franco & Novaes, 2001). It is evident that young people from higher-income families have better access to good schools and can dedicate themselves to study without having to work to help support their family. However, even this group are concerned about lack of support and doubt their own capacity to earn enough money to realize their dreams and life projects. It is apparent that the current social context in our country, marked by deep inequalities and the lack of effective institutions, intensifies feelings of doubt and anguish about the future.

Our analysis of the imaginary of young people in relation to the *vestibular* and its impact on their conduct is by no means exhaustive. However, the findings reveal important issues that deserve further research, such as the imaginary of students from state schools in relation to the vestibular and the differences between adolescents from different social classes.

One of the limitations of this study is the fact that we used a specific sample consisting of a single senior year class from a private school. However, the findings show that the suffering caused by uncertainty regarding the future, fear of poverty, lack of support, and social exclusion affects not only young people from the underprivileged classes, but also those from the middle classes, given their belief that their fate depends solely on individual effort and merit. It is hoped that the insights provided by this study will provide the basis for further research on this topic with a view to widening the debate on this important issue.

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