

Full Length Research Paper

# Meanings of unemployment and industrial restructuring in Lavras, Brazil: A constructionist approach

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This study aimed to investigate meanings produced by workers excluded from the industrial job market regarding unemployment, having focused on the understanding of the socially articulated relationship between industrial and labor restructuring, meanings of unemployment and subjectivity. We grounded our analysis on postulates of the constructionist approach. This theoretical/methodological choice facilitated the identification of two interpretative repertoires that act as a reference for the production of various meanings which in turn maintain strong symbolic ties with the notion of work as a central element in the life of a worker and the notion of unemployment as a social product of the process of industrial and labor restructuring and other specificities of both local and Brazilian society. We believe that the reflections provided here can be a reference for the development of knowledge and management practices linked to the dynamics, public and private, established in the Brazilian industrial system.

**Key words:** Constructionism, labor restructuring, subjectivity, unemployment.

## INTRODUCTION

The changes in the labor world have been marked by a period of modes of production and strict labor relations, known as *Fordism*, until the third Industrial and Technological Revolution, culminating with the rise of new forms of organizing production and new working conditions, known as the phase of *flexible specialization* or period of *industrial and labor restructuring*. These changes not only define new productive practices with direct impacts on labor but also prompt a debate on the role of labor in contemporary society. Unemployment and informal employment are alarmingly high in the Brazilian setting. The average unemployment rate in Brazil, as calculated by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), soared from 3.8% in June 1996 to 13% in June 2003, an increase of 2.5% in relation to December 2002. In March 2004, the unemployment rate was 12.8% whereas in the same period of 2005 the rate was 10.8%. In December 2009, the unemployment rate

dropped to 7.5% of the economically active population, reaching 1.7 million people. Although rates have dropped slightly in the past two years, the rate of unemployment is still considered to be high in Brazil (IBGE, 2009).

This picture calls for emergence of new social values as far as industrial and labor restructuring are concerned. Therefore, we defend the study of the unemployment phenomenon from the standpoint of the unemployed and their subjectivity. We believe that the constructionist approach offers a theoretical/methodological framework by means of which the condition of being unemployed could be explained and analyzed not only but also by the meanings produced by the unemployed themselves regarding their condition. This belief is based on the assumption that the reality is socially constructed through historically and culturally contextualized language.

This study was conducted in Lavras; a municipality in southern Minas Gerais state, taking into accounts not only its historical and cultural peculiarities but also its socioeconomic characteristics in as much as conditions of labor are concerned, specifically in the industrial sector. Our objective was to investigate the meanings produced by unemployed people in the industrial sector

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regarding unemployment as well as to understand the subjective manifestation/expression of such meanings.

## **THE PROCESS OF INDUSTRIAL AND LABOR RESTRUCTURING AND THE DEBATE ABOUT EMPLOYMENT IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

Transformations in the world of employment have been intensified from the second half of the 20th century, permeated by phenomena such as globalization, changes in technological and production patterns and adoption of neoliberal policies. These transformations led to changes both in organizations and in economic, social and political relations. At the organizational level, changes take place in production processes and in the management of the workforce. At the social level, the new conditions affect not only supply and contractual nature of labor but also the qualifications required from workers (Hirata, 1997). Technological advances are a part of this industrial and labor restructuring. Technological changes within the organizations can affect both production level and management level, as they introduce new management patterns. Classic examples of various forms of reorganizing production and labor are presented and discussed by Hirata (1993), among which is the Japanese production model. They address not only new forms of productive arrangements but also *“a new way in which to address the assignment of work and a renewed approach to the place of the individual within the organization”* (Hirata, 1997).

In this reorganization setting, the degradation of labor has been addressed from different standpoints. Baltar and Proni (1996) verified that, as regards formal employment in Brazil, employment ties are short-lived in a large majority of cases, and this transforms the Brazilian workforce in temporary workers. The authors also verified an increase in informal employment, which was interpreted as *“a sign of increasing disaggregation of the socioeconomic structure in most developed regions of Brazil”* (Baltar et al., 1996). Consequently, the topic unemployment is central to the context of industrial and labor restructuring. On one hand, technological advances, the automation process in organizations and the resulting increased productivity contribute to a reduction in job offers. On the other hand, the requirements imposed by the job market regarding professional qualifications along with the new profile demanded from workers prevent a large portion of society from entering the job market. According to Tumolo (2001), this portion would be relegated to a marginalized periphery, resorting to substandard and informal work.

According to Fordist conception of production patterns, employment is associated with the meaning of ‘integrating agent’, in other words, work enabled workers to create or reinforce their social ties (Enriquez, 1999). The crisis in this employment relation model originated new form of worker insertion in the social sphere. Bearing

this in mind, we question the role of employment (*formal employment*, according to Fordist standards) in contemporary society. Some authors, including Castel (1998) and Castells (1999), defended the centrality of employment in society as a key element for social integration.

Castel (1998) outlines the historical setting of modern ‘wage earning society’, focusing on the social issue in the face of the crisis in this society model. The author presents proletarian condition, working class condition and wage earning condition as being a representative of the evolution of the relationship between worker and employment and consequently expressing the forms of inclusion in society. For the author, the current *social issue* would be employment degradation and exclusion. For the author, the most disturbing feature of the current situation is the comeback of the profile where workers have no jobs and are ‘useless to the world’. This context includes the ‘excluded’, which are not qualified for new work demands and the ‘dissociated’, that is, qualified workers who become transient.

As a counterpoint, other authors decentralize work as being a social issue and refer to alternative forms of constructing social ties (Meda, 1996; Offe, 1999, 1989; Singer, 1999). Meda (1996) defends that, in contemporary society, there is no differentiation between discourses on the various dimensions of employment. Employment becomes synonymous with social belonging. To the author, it is necessary to devise new ways of constructing social ties and identity for that matter, beyond employment according to modern capitalism. Along these lines, Singer (1999) focuses on alternative employment proposals against the backdrop of industrial and labor restructuring and calls for integration between market, state and community. In other words, he recommends that the relevant action sources be encouraged into social partnerships such as labor unions and development of the tertiary sector.

Bearing all that in mind, we verify that the new configurations of employment should be analyzed as if bounded by an economic, political, social and cultural context. To understand these transformations means to expand the focus of analysis of labor processes further beyond the technological implications resulting from restructuring. We should consider, for instance, how this reflects on employment practices, on conditions of employability and increase in unemployment. We believe that, by focusing on the relationship between subjectivity and unemployment and regarding the unemployed as being the creators of such reality, we can better understand the phenomenon of unemployment.

## **UNEMPLOYMENT AND SUBJECTIVITY**

Overall, in various research studies the topic work and unemployment in contemporary society has been found to relate to subjective aspects of job loss (Caldas, 2000a;

b; Jahoda, 1982). Some studies propose analysis of the subjective dimension of unemployment, focusing on its implications for the unemployed (Caldas, 2000a; Fryer et al., 1988): *"It seems natural that job loss should affect the individual dismissed more than anyone else involved"* (Caldas, 2000a). This author discusses the job loss in the Brazilian context and its subjective effects, based on the meaning of employment for the individual affected. Caldas (2000a) presents some dimensions of unemployment, including loss of identity and self-esteem. Caldas (2000a) attempts to demonstrate that individuals establish a relationship of identity with their job or organization that confer them a social bearing. By losing their jobs, workers lose this identity and consequently their self-esteem.

Pagès et al. (1987) focus on the rupture of the bond between individual and organization. According to this view, unemployment would be the dissolution of a psychological connection that workers maintain with their job or organization. From this perspective, employment is regarded as a key source of self-esteem and social recognition. In his study about the connection between unemployment, depression and sense of coherence, Gomes (2003) argues that this belief of employment as a key source of recognition and self-esteem can aggravate the psychological consequences of its loss, including depression, for instance. Pagès et al. (1987) points out that that the connection established between individual and organization is a strategy (an implicit contract) that attenuates the uncertainties and insecurities about employment stability.

This insecurity about the condition of a worker or member of an organization can be ascribed to new employment configurations ignited by the industrial and labor restructuring process. In his investigation into the route followed by Brazilian workers in specific periods of the 20th century, Sargentini (2001) verified that in the 1990s workers tried to secure the right to sell their labor. Contemporary discourse urges every worker to specialize in the hope of standing out from the massive crowd of ordinary people. This involves specialization and individualization strategies to secure employability but not necessarily employment.

Sorj (2000) presents the consequences of production and labor restructuring, pointing to the new forms of social strategies in face of conditions of employability. Other than seek professional training, Sorj (2000) cites the high regard for social networks as an element of employability in Brazil. This issue bears a close relationship with the economic context. The author argues that, in times of economic expansion opportunities arise for climbing the career ladder on merit, regardless of social origin factors. Contrastingly, the deterioration of the economy, the technological changes and rapid decline in the number of jobs regardless of increasing demands regarding competence also restate social networks as mechanisms of filtration and selection: *"high regard is*

*given to the individual and family social capital of the candidate (as main criterion for selection, given the large number of candidates for a small amount of positions)"* (Sorj, 2000).

The forms of subjective manifestation/expression are therefore influenced by the social and cultural context. While addressing the unemployment phenomenon and its manifestation/expressions in the subjectivity of the unemployed, we should consider the peculiarities of the Brazilian setting. In order to investigate unemployment and its reflections on subjectivity, we adopted a constructionist approach whereby unemployment could be analyzed as a process of meaning production.

### **SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND PRODUCTION OF MEANING: A THEORETICAL/METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

From 1960 onward, studies in the field of psychology, especially in social psychology, have expressed some criticism to empiricism and focus on social interaction and the processes involving the production of meaning in daily life. Some studies worth mentioning are those of Gergen (1985), one of the first social psychologists to address knowledge from this critical standpoint and Ibáñez (1993), who pointed to the need for rupture with institutionalized concepts in the process of social construction.

Gergen (1985) defines the constructionist investigation as one concerned with *"[...] explaining the processes through which people describe, explain or interpret the world they live in (including themselves)"*. This approach to knowledge entails an effort to detach from what is institutionalized, the collection of available repertoires to give meaning to the world, exposing knowledge processes to continuous reformulation. Knowledge would be the product of a historically situated interaction process whereby both subject and object are sociohistorical constructions (Ibáñez, 1993).

Given this theoretical/methodological approach, we assume the production of meanings through language. We believe language is an important vehicle for producing meaning, since through it individuals demonstrate their understanding of the world. Bearing this in mind, Spink (2004) indicates qualitative research as the epistemological approach of constructionist research. Qualitative research allows immersion in the phenomenon in order to understand the difference and this allows room for subjectivity. Thus, in this study we used qualitative analysis to deal with information and unstructured interview (recorded), based on a guideline, as a tool for data collection (Alencar, 1999).

The study consists of unemployed people in the industrial sector of Lavras, a municipality in southern Minas Gerais state, who are registered with the local National Employment System Service (SINE-Lavras). For

purposes of this study, unemployed people in the industrial sector means people who had worked in the industrial sector for at least 6 months, at any period of their lives and who were looking for a job in that sector. Considering these characteristics, we identified 319 unemployed people, which makes up the research total. From this total of unemployed, we (intentionally) selected 28 informants to conduct the interviews, seeking maximum coverage in terms of age, gender and education. The research was conducted in 2005. We wish to point out that the number of interviewees suits the theoretical/methodological assumptions of the research. Based on this concept, each unemployed person was assigned the letter “U” (unemployed) and a sequential number from 1 to 28, according to the order of interviews.

Spink (2004) proposes the analysis of production of meanings through analysis of discursive practices, divided in the following stages: (a) identification of interpretative repertoires (b) construction of analysis categories; and (c) construction of an idea association diagram. Interpretative repertoires can be defined as linguistic devices used for constructing accounts of actions, events and other daily phenomena. They are not explicit or stated expressions in discourse; it is a case of analyzing the unsaid and identifying how the unemployed interpret their reality. Reality can be interpreted in various ways; therefore one can identify various interpretative repertoires and construct multiple analysis categories (Spink, 2004). In order to identify the repertoires, we performed a qualitative analysis of discursive practices and then we organized the interpretative repertoires into categories, allowing a discussion of the meanings of unemployment. Finally, we constructed an idea association diagram (Spink, 2004), which enabled an understanding of the network of production of meaning and how these meanings are expressed in the subjectivity of the unemployed.

## **ANALYSIS OF DISCURSIVE PRACTICES OF THE UNEMPLOYED AND IDENTIFICATION OF INTERPRETATIVE REPERTOIRES**

Through qualitative analysis of the discursive practices, we identified two interpretative repertoires, each of which contains subgroups:

- (a) Interpretative repertoire of employment: I - Repertoire of the industrial and labor restructuring process in Lavras; II - Repertoire of the worker’s condition.
- (b) Interpretative repertoire of unemployment: I - Repertoire of the conditions of employability; II - Repertoire of the condition of the unemployed.

We chose to provide a parallel between unemployment repertoire and employment repertoire. For instance, where we present the subgroup of conditions for employability, we compulsorily include the subgroup of the

industrial and labor restructuring process in the municipality. All 28 interviews included interpretative repertoires of employment and unemployment. Next we present excerpts from statements to illustrate the analysis of discursive practices and the identification of repertoires.

### **Repertoire of the industrial and labor restructuring process in Lavras and repertoire of the conditions for employability**

(1) “[...] Today it’s all about experience, is not it? I see people working as sales assistants, for some jobs you do not need experience I think, er... in these areas they are more flexible (...) a big company [manufacturing business] (...) with only one-year experience in my records, I think that counts. I think they prefer people with more experience (...) they give us no opportunity” (U1).

The unemployed U1 (01) expressed the idea that, in the industrial sector experience requirements are stricter than in other sectors, as sales for instance. We understand that the comparison made by U1 (01) as to experience requirements refers to the industrial sector. U1 then used the expression “a big company” referring to the manufacturing industry and connected it to the following statements “my one-year experience (...) that counts” and “they give us no opportunity”, implying that he lacked experience and for this reason no-one would give him a job in the industrial sector.

(2) “When I started there, they did not ask for it. Even without elementary school it was ok. But now they are asking, you see, in that place people without elementary school feel very insecure, they really are asking for it now” (U15).

In the repertoire of changes in the industrial sector we observed an evolution in the industrial sector in terms of qualification requirements. By the expression “when I started there”, unemployed U15 (02) alluded hinted at the early 1990s (when she started working in that company); the word “there” indicates the company U15 worked for. With the word “now” alluding to the period after 1995, the unemployed defined qualification requirements in the industrial sector at different points in time in Lavras. U15 also expressed her condition as unemployed with the word “there”, the company she worked for, expressing a sense of detachment between her (U15) and the organization, as she mentioned insecurity as to qualification.

(3) “[...] sometimes people are trained in their trade but do not have education, and because they lack education sometimes people cannot find [work]. So, I think they should consider experience more, because (...) for instance, in [company name] you won’t need to speak English or other languages (...) There’s too much red tape today; before if someone said they knew a person available to work etc, all that person had to do was turn

up, make the arrangements and start, but not today" (U9).

This qualification issue seems to have been internalized by U9 as he mentions other languages, which hints at globalization etc. However, for him these qualification requirements are not justifiable where industrial workers are concerned and may stand in the way of people "*trained in their trade*" (experience only) and trying to find a job. U9 defended his opinion with the expression "*red tape*" but adverted that it (red tape regarding qualifications) is a thing of "*today*" rather than "*before*", referring to new conditions of employability.

(4) "[...] I think if you know someone who can introduce you, a sponsor (...) who is already in, then it's easier (...) I've been told that in [company name] you have to know someone working there already who will hand in your CV, because just taking it there yourself does not work (...)" (U12).

Excerpt 04 alludes to referral practice as a drawback for people trying to find work, and U12 used the figure of a "*sponsor*". This figure alludes to some characteristics of Brazilian culture, including paternalism. U12 defended his idea illustrating that the "*sponsor*" was "*someone working there already*", which alludes to a company employee who would refer an unemployed person as prospective candidate for a vacancy.

(5) "You see, I was working in the factory and... by the way I was hired for 90 days. I thought ok. I started and worked only thirteen days and they said they were gonna change firm. I lost my job contract. They got away with paying me only thirteen days worth. There was no contract breach, they didnot pay me all that. They said: 'if you donot want it just leave it there'. I overcame that, took the check and I am now gonna pay my bills. Traitors! But I couldnot go on because they might make my job a nightmare" (U14).

U14 (05) alluded to a flexible contract scheme to convey the industrial and labor restructuring process. The expressions "*I thought ok*", "*I overcame that*" and "*I could not go on*" hinted at the condition of the worker, who was subjected to precarious employment conditions. The idea is permeated by the relationship between worker and organization. With the expression "*Traitors*" he reveals the extent of conflict in this relationship. It involves aspects of social ties, as it denotes that in order for treason to exist a social tie must exist and, especially here, one of submission. With the expression "*they got away with*" U14 alluded to the organization as a whole.

### **Repertoire of the condition of being employed and repertoire of the condition of being unemployed**

(6) "I am unemployed and married, and I pay rent, so how am I gonna make ends meet?" (U2). By declaring "*I pay rent*" and "*make ends meet*" in excerpt 06,

unemployed U2 made clear that he has responsibilities and hinted that he is the breadwinner in his household, not his wife. So, by his condition as unemployed and by being married, we understand that U2 relates work with the need to fulfill his duties as regards household expenses.

(7) "My wife works too but it's embarrassing for a man... not that I am a chauvinist, but I donot like to depend on my wife's income (...) she is playing the man's role in my household" (U6).

The topic responsibility, according to the interpretation of the worker, permeated several discursive practices. In fragment (07), unemployed U6 described himself as someone who "*depends on his wife's income*" and mentioned how much this situation embarrassed him, that is, the fact that his "*wife*" supports him financially. Although U6 stated he is "*not a chauvinist*", he is uncomfortable with such situation. With the statement "*she is playing the man's role in my household*" he implies that his condition as unemployed prevents him from fulfilling his role as the breadwinner of the household.

(8) "When I was working, I was able to pay my bills, I've always tried to be independent (...) I want to be independent" (U1).

The discursive practice of unemployed U1 was almost entirely in first person, conveying his subjectivity and pursuit of independence. These statements denote the condition of U1 as unemployed and dependent. To reinforce his condition as dependent and desire to get out, the unemployed illustrated with an example of the time he had worked in order to explain what "*to be independent*" meant. In his discursive practice this dependence also hinted at an upward relationship which in most cases is about parents (unemployed) dependent on their children, who in turn often had to drop out of school to help their household. From this standpoint work would be synonymous with freedom, as it helps the person to perform a social role, fulfill his/her duties and be independent. Consequently, unemployment is seen as imprisonment.

(9) "I think unemployment is (...) let me think (...) umm I think (...) canot explain. I think it's everyone's right to have a job, it's the least. This family stipend and this school stipend stuff, I think it's (...) people should be able to support their family without the need for all that. They need jobs" (U24).

This excerpt implies that, as everyone should be entitled to a job, by being unemployed people are denied this right, right to be free and live by their own means. The unemployed defended her view with an illustration to reinforce her idea and made mention of governmental programs that assist families in need. The discursive practice of U24 denotes the charitable nature of such programs, almost as a denial to the right to employment.

(10) "[...] I was very upset because the company... after working there for a long time you develop a strong tie,

almost a family tie, even with the bosses" (U1).

(11) "I felt undervalued, you know, very much so, they did not value me for all I did while working there, I was worth nothing. I got sick last year and went on sick leave for two months, and that's where I felt insecure. I think that's the only reason [she got the sack] (...) While I was ok and healthy, they treated me nice, but after I got sick they said they needed fit people to work there [company name]" (U15).

Here the discursive practice denotes that the unemployed lost his bearings as a result of losing connection with the organization. In excerpts 10 and 11, unemployed U1 and unemployed U15 respectively conveyed their condition of being unemployed by referring to their lost connection with the organization. Unemployed U1 used the expression "*family tie*" to illustrate the connection he had maintained with his company. Unemployed U15 expressed his close connection with his company by mentioning she felt undervalued. U15 had hoped to be valued in terms of social ties: "*for all I did while working there*", since the company had already fulfilled its role financially.

(12) "There is a saying that: a man is worth the amount he carries in the pocket. If it's one dollar, he is worth one dollar, if it's fifty dollars, he is worth fifty. If you have no money, you are worth nothing, you are only worth something if you have a job" (U6).

(13) "You see, if you try to buy something in a shop you know what happens: er, first they want your details, and, ah of course... they'll ask you your work details and this comes first. It is your purchasing power that counts (...)" (U11).

Unemployed U6 (12) and U11 (13) referred to the position of both the employed and the unemployed according to capitalist standards. Unemployed U6 used figures as illustrations: "*one dollar*" and "*fifty dollars*" to explain how social relations function in a capitalist society. The discursive practice of U11 complements this idea with yet another example.

Overall, these repertoires illustrate the idea of isolation, depression and violence as a consequence of unemployment: (14) "We kind of lose our bearings. And this brings your spirits even lower (...)" (U18). Unemployed U18 declared to have lost his way through the expression "*lose our bearings*".

Contrastingly, the condition of being unemployed and informality were interpreted as an "*opportunity*", hinting at the possibility of going self-employment, entrepreneurship, cooperative work, among others: (15) "(...) *I make picture frames that kind of stuff, and sell them here and there (...)*" (U23). Unemployed U23, for instance, declared she is a craftsperson as an alternative to unemployment.

Through analysis of discursive practices we were able to visualize the process of production of meanings by discussing the repertoires, their categories and by constructing a diagram of idea association.

## **Industrial and labor restructuring, subjectivity and meanings of unemployment in the industrial context of Lavras-MG**

Based on analyses of the discursive practices, we identified 15 categories with which to illustrate how the unemployed interpreted their condition. The categories are as follows: (1) new qualification concept, (2) destruction/obsolescence of worker knowledge, (3) referral practice as an element of employability, (4) change in the organization of labor, (5) increasing competitiveness, (6) exploitation, precariousness and informality, (7) undervalued labor, (8) worker fulfill his/her duties, (9) worker is free and independent, (10) worker exercises his/her right, (11) unemployed worker is dependent and imprisoned by this very condition, (12) unemployed worker finds no place in society/lost citizenship/marginalization, (13) unemployment leads to isolation and symbolic death of the self, (14) unemployed worker is deprived of his/her rights and subjected to informality, (15) unemployment and informality can generate opportunities. Although the analysis and discussion of these categories based on work and unemployment repertoires follow a predefined order, we should note that they overlap as to the meaning of the condition as unemployed.

Categories 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 reflect the concern in the discursive practices of the unemployed about new conditions of employability in the industrial sector, portraying unemployment as a social product of lack of qualifications and illustrating the relationship unemployment x qualification requirements in the job market. This reinforces the picture presented by Sargentini (2001) and Tumolo (2001) regarding the individualization of the 'employability construction' process and the birth of a periphery of marginalized workers and unemployed people who are unable to adapt to the new demands, resorting to undervalued casual work as a survival alternative. Through analysis of the categories adapted to the particularities of Lavras, we visualized qualification as a critical element of unemployment, especially with regard to 'qualification access channels' in the municipality. The local unemployed showed awareness of these market requirements and the need to invest in employability in order to become 'employable' again. In this case, Sargentini (2001) and Sorj (2000) refer to a transfer of the hiring responsibility from organization to worker. Still on the conditions of employability, the unemployed referred to qualification as yet another form of 'red tape', refer to the power and social control of organizations on the supply of vacancies.

Pagés (1987) also draws attention to the power that contemporary organizations exert on their employees. As for referral practices as a 'personalist' channel to find work, this reflects a cultural influence. Here the unemployed used the metaphorical expression 'sponsor' alluding to the existence of personal ties, such as family

ties, as a channel to find work. According to the interpretation of the unemployed, this type of 'channel' is common in small towns like Lavras, where relations favor personalism.

Categories 5, 6 and 7 illustrate automation and increase competitiveness as key elements to the birth of a mass of marginalized workers in Lavras which, according to Tumolo (2001), characterizes a "*marginalized periphery*" or, according to Castel (1998), increasing numbers of "*excluded people*". Another reference to this increasing marginalization of workers was the decline of labor unions in connection with undervaluation of labor.

Categories 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15 allude to source of employment and worker's role. These categories reflect the unemployed as being unable to perform certain roles, in addition to relating unemployment to imprisonment. The subjects of this study connected their condition as unemployed to their inability to fulfill their social role as breadwinners of the household. Male interviewees alluded to manhood by portraying the idea that it is a man's responsibility to support his household.

Unemployment was also interpreted as "*imprisonment*" and the unemployed conveyed the idea that they were prisoners of their own condition. This interpretation as someone dependent and imprisoned denoted various perspectives: children depending on parents; parents depending on children; husbands depending on wives; the unemployed unable to satisfy their personal needs or desires. The unemployed declared to be subjected to this world of informality, even being aware of their rights and duties. In some cases we noticed submission in connection with the belief that the informal and relational, the wait for referral, are legitimate procedures and justifiable if you are unemployed.

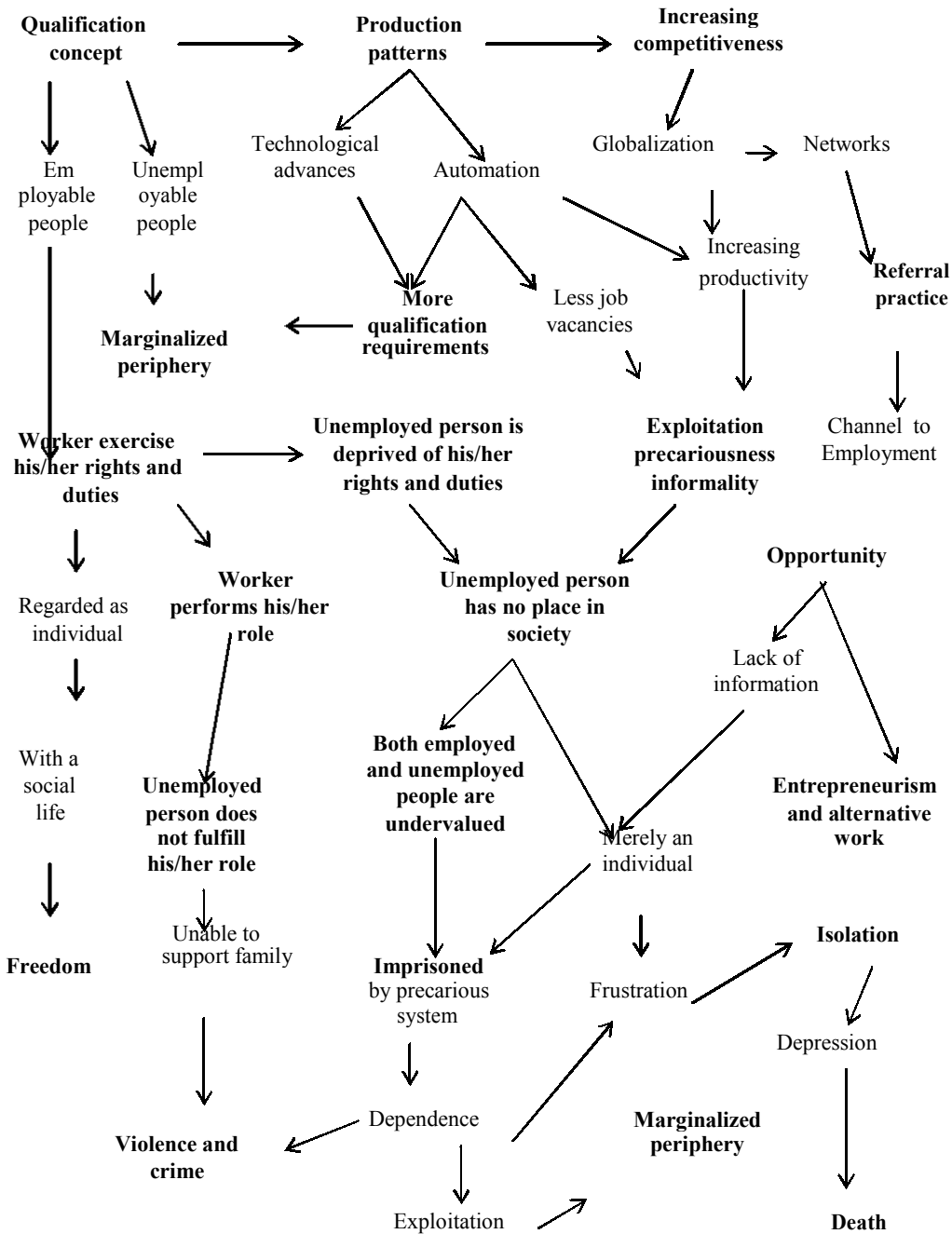
The identification with the organization was a recurring theme in the discursive practices, especially those who had worked for more than one year in the organization. This relationship bring to mind the considerations of Pagés (1987) as to the 'power' exerted by the organization and this power involves the employee, who believes to have established personal ties with the company. Given that, the unemployed not only lose their bearings before society and themselves but also find themselves unable to function and perform their roles in the capitalist system and attempting to perform their roles would touch themes such as embarrassment and frustration. These interpretations reinforce the assertions of Castel (1998) and Enriquez (1999) as to the centrality of 'wage-earning' labor as an integrator of social relations. Despite these interpretations, we should also consider the condition of being unemployed as an opportunity. Here, the condition of being unemployed was interpreted as a bridge to try and venture into alternative work such as organize a group to sell handmade products (e.g. cooperatives) or go solo and open their own business (entrepreneurism). Some interviewees mentioned these

alternatives, referring to 'wage-earning' work as not being central to the establishment of social ties or to the fulfillment of rights and duties, according to Meda (1996) and Offe (1989).

On the other hand, the interviewees stated that lack of technical and professional information along with lack of support by the local government can be a barrier to the progress of alternative work such as cooperatives, or entrepreneurship. Here, the interviewees expressed a sense of frustration over the lack of information and support at the local level. Exclusion, pursuit of a social place and sense of frustration over trying new alternatives to make a living reflected the interviewees' discouragement and hopelessness of finding a job. This sparked the theme of isolation, as the unemployed tend to keep away from social conviviality. Isolation was a recurring theme in their discursive practices, regardless of background or personal characteristics. Gomes (2003) depicted this as a trigger of depression. Depression was also expressed as a reflection of guilt (usually of parents depending on their children), often culminating with displays of violence, criminality and death. Thus, despite the work of Caldas (2000a), we observed subjective aspects inherent to the unemployment phenomenon based on the interpretation of the condition of being unemployed, considering other dimensions attached to unemployment. The mapping of the analysis categories provides an association of these categories with the interpretation of the meanings of unemployment as produced by the unemployed. Figure 1 shows the analysis categories in bold. These categories represent the interpretations of the unemployed regarding the unemployment phenomenon, considering their own condition. The interpretative repertoires are the 'routes' followed by their discourse in order to express the categories. These 'routes' are indicated by arrows, which express relationships and connections between the meanings produced.

Finally, the shaded rectangles refer to 'ultimate meanings', the meanings ultimately conveyed in the discursive practices. It should note that 'ultimate meaning' was implied, subjectively expressed rather than being textually expressed and could be better interpreted as the analysis categories were gradually constructed and organized. It is not our intent in this study to argue that the 'ultimate meanings' presented in the association diagram (Figure 1) are a consequence or a cause of the condition of being unemployed. We only provided a graphic representation of the meanings ascribed by the interviewees concerning their condition as unemployed. Therefore, we can affirm that the meanings and 'ultimate meanings' represent a logical possibility of probing into unemployment, considering the condition of being unemployed and the theme of this study.

Figure 1 depicts the interpretative repertoires of work and unemployment, as well as their subgroups: industrial and labor restructuring process in the municipality of Lavras



**Figure 1.** Diagram of idea association for meanings of unemployment in the industrial sector in the Municipality of Lavras. Source: the authors

Lavras, condition of being employed, conditions of employability and condition of being unemployed. The repertoire of the conditions of employability can be viewed based on the 'qualification concept' category and relevant connections between the meanings in this category. Likewise, the repertoire of the industrial and labor restructuring process in Lavras is observed in the categories 'production patterns' and 'increasing competitiveness'

followed by interconnected meanings. However, the repertoires of the condition of being employed and of the condition of being unemployed appear to intersect with various categories and hardly disconnected. For instance, the categories "worker exercise his/her rights and duties", "unemployed person is deprived of his/her rights and duties" and "worker performs his/her role" contain the repertoires of the condition of being employed and the



condition of being unemployed interconnected.

The meanings of unemployment from the viewpoint of the unemployed appear in-between categories that were identified during the construction of the categories and gives rise to various interpretations on the subject of unemployment, noting that these interpretations are permeated by a historical and cultural context and by personal background. The 'ultimate meanings' as defined previously culminated with the elements 'marginalized periphery', 'violence and crime', 'death' and 'entrepreneurism and alternative work'. These elements are crucial as they are expressions of the condition of being unemployed and consequently, they are an interpretation of the unemployment phenomenon.

In reality, 'ultimate meanings' are theoretical elements for the study of the unemployment phenomenon. The element 'marginalized periphery' represents the meaning whereby the condition of being unemployed can be interpreted as the result of a periphery of marginalized people but can also be the cause of this increasing 'mass of marginalized people'. In the first example, the lack of opportunity to improve the conditions of employability in the municipality of Lavras would be main indicative factor of unemployment, given the demands of the local industrial sector. In the second example, the condition of being unemployed, lack of financial resources and inactivity period (no experience) would themselves be the cause of increasing numbers of marginalized people in the region. This 'ultimate meaning' reflects a form of analysis based on the social consequences of the qualification requirements in Lavras.

As regards the element 'violence and crime', it refers particularly to the condition of being unemployed as someone without a place in the society, without bearings and inactive. As far as Lavras is concerned, we verified that these meanings take on considerable dimensions as it is a small town where, according to the unemployed themselves, relational networks prevail and the unemployed are seen as 'idle' and socially excluded. This approach to the unemployment phenomenon in Lavras considers local cultural characteristics and points to the consequences of such characteristics, which are tied to the condition of being unemployed. Here we identified violence (domestic and social) and crime (stealing and default) as ultimate expressions of the anger by the unemployed.

The elements 'death' or 'symbolic death of the worker' also allude to the unemployed and their condition of isolation and idleness. However, similarly to 'violence and criminality', we verified that these characteristics peculiar to Lavras can exacerbate this meaning. The category 'isolation', even if in a small town where people cultivate personalist ties, gives rise to 'depression' and consequently, to the meaning of 'death', expressed as the end of this anonymity and isolation from people considerably close. Bearing this in mind, the study of the unemployment phenomenon in Lavras can consider psychological

dimensions.

Finally, the element 'entrepreneurism and alternative work' reflects the meaning whereby unemployment can generate alternative opportunities of 'wage-earning' employment. These opportunities were expressed as attempts to start a business and prospects of organizing cooperatives to sell craftwork. Here the study of the unemployment phenomenon alludes to the decentralization of wage-earning labor as a former central element of life or social relations. By seeing unemployment as an opportunity, the unemployed could focus on organizing cooperatives, creating incubators and partnerships with the local government, in other words, find other alternatives that, as described in this study, can confer another meaning on unemployment.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study aimed to investigate the meanings produced by unemployed workers in the industrial sector of Lavras, a municipality in southern Minas Gerais state, regarding unemployment and to understand the expression of these meanings in human subjectivity. Based on this epistemological approach, we outlined the analysis methodology of discursive practices, based on identification of interpretative repertoires, identification of analysis categories and construction of a diagram of idea association. To that end, we used some fundamental concepts, originated in the analysis of the discourse, which grounded the identification of the interpretative repertoires through solid theoretical concepts. Through analysis of the discursive practices of the unemployed, we were able to identify two interpretative repertoires concerning unemployment, considering the condition of being unemployed. The first repertoire was work, containing the subgroups: repertoire of the industrial and labor restructuring process in Lavras and repertoire of the condition of being employed. The second repertoire was unemployment, containing the subgroups: repertoire of the conditions for maintenance of employability and repertoire of the condition of being unemployed. While studying the meanings of unemployment, we noticed there are alternatives for studying this phenomenon. If one is to analyze unemployment based on the social consequences and the qualification requirements locally, we recommend an in-depth study of the unemployment phenomenon associated with the local conditions of employability.

Another proposal is to investigate the unemployment phenomenon considering the cultural characteristics of local reality, probing into the consequences of such characteristics while related to the condition of being unemployed. We believe any initiative to study unemployment reviving the local history and cultural characteristics are a legitimate endeavor. The possibility of studying the unemployment phenomenon under the viewpoint of the

rupture of centrality of standard wage-earning labor, probing into other elements such as alternative work, partnerships between local government, education institutions and businesses could also be explored by future research.

By exploring the unemployment phenomenon from a constructionist approach we stressed the importance of interdisciplinarity in scientific investigation. We believe this study is extremely important for the field of business administration, as it presents a theoretical/methodological proposal for the study of the unemployment phenomenon and consequently, for other potentially useful studies in the field, for instance, to help develop public policies to create jobs. Finally we verified, despite its other dimensions, that the study of the unemployment phenomenon can consider the actual unemployed, his/her subjectivity and particularly language as a form of mediation between the individual and the world of employment marked by precariousness and unemployment.

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