**PRIVILEGE ACCUMULATION AND THE TRANSMISSION OF SOCIAL CLASS IN MEXICO**

**Minor Mora-Salas and Orlandina de Oliveira**

1. **Introduction**

This chapter demonstrates how middle-upper class Mexican families mobilize a vast array of social, cultural, and economic resources to expand their children’s opportunities  in life and transfer social class between generations. To do so, we analyze salient characteristics in the life histories of a group of middle-upper class, young Mexicans.

Our analysis shows that these young people accumulate social advantages over time and that these advantages contribute to the job success many of them enjoy when entering the labor market. To arrive at that conclusion, we analyze families’ socio-demographic composition, the resources they have available to them, and the decisions that influence their children’s educational trajectories. We also examine the growing importance these families place on involving their children in extra-curricular activities; by doing so, they hope that their children will develop a broad range of skills and resources that happen to be out-of-reach for other social classes. We look at the support systems these families activate when their children face crises or personal difficulties that threaten their ability to sustain their social status in the future. Finally, we analyze the process through which these youth enter the labor market and look at the strategies they use to find work once they finish college. Of particular interest are the factors that facilitated and obstructed their efforts to become high-quality professionals in a labor market that offers limited job opportunities for doing so.

1. **Accumulating social advantages: three working hypotheses**

Many researchers point out that micro-social processes are key to understanding how upper-class families mobilize economic, social, and cultural resources to shape their children’s life trajectories (Lareau, 1987; Devine, 2004; Kaufman, 2005; Barg, 2015). Studying the day-to-day practices that families from different social backgrounds and racial groups use to raise and socialize their children has become a popular method for understanding the processes through which social inequalities are reproduced (Lareau, 1987; 2000; 2015; Gorman, 1988; Brown, 1995; Chin and Phillips, 2004; Sherger and Savage, 2010; Barret and Edgerton, 2016).

One fashionable hypothesis suggests that families with greater resources often socialize their children in ways that build an extensive set of cognitive, emotional, and social abilities from a very young age. These skills, in turn, help them accumulate a constellation of social advantages. Their privileged access to such resources is one of the key reasons that families from this social group are able to position their children in occupations held, in large part, by middle-upper class individuals when they begin their working lives.

Other academics claim that, in recent phases of global capitalism, the middle classes are immersed in social changes that produce even greater uncertainty and social risks (McCleand, 1990; Devine, 2004; Brown, 1995, 2000). The growing uncertainty they face stems from two processes. On one hand, the middle and upper classes no longer enjoy monopolistic access to university education.[[1]](#footnote-1) Once higher education became available to the masses working class youth also became able access a university degree; supposedly, this could lead to disputes for occupations that are typically middle-upper class. On the other hand, middle-upper class occupations expanded more slowly as a result of the labor market restructuring that came along with neoliberal practices and globalization (economic, technological, and productive); these processes also introduced precarity into many segments of the professional labor market (Brown, 2000, De Wille, and Edgerton, 2016; Burgos and López, 2010).

Other authors insist that the above perspectives continue placing too much emphasis on structural factors because they emphasize resource mobilization connected to families’ social position. They also do not account for the fact that young people take on a large role in converting the resources they receive from their families into benefits that help them gain an advantageous social position in the job market. Therefore, the intergenerational transmission of social class is not an automatic process when considered from this point of view. Instead, it requires a strong dose of human agency, which subsequently necessitates an analytical perspective that considers the interplay between the web of resources middle-upper class families possess, the institutional conditions that regulate their children’s life trajectories, and the choices, actions, and horizons that orient young people’s life course.

1. **Accumulating social advantages: mobilizing family resources**

*Composition of study group and their families*

Our study group includes twelve cases, seven young men and five young women, who live in Monterrey City, Mexico. They are between twenty-three and thirty years old, and the average age is twenty-five. Ten of them were born in Monterrey City, and nine of them have lived there their entire lives; one lived outside the city for a year. The other two are women from the neighboring states of Chihuahua and San Luis Potosí. They moved to Monterrey City at age eighteen to finish their bachelor’s degree and ended up staying.

The youth in this group are from nuclear, two-parent families. In nine of these cases both the mother and father are professionals. In the other three, the father is a professional and the mother finished high school. Some fathers have a bachelor’s degree in engineering, while others have a degree in health sciences, social sciences, humanities, and economics. The mothers’ professions are largely linked to education, the humanities, and the arts.

They describe parents’ occupations as follows. Fathers have held upper-level positions at the companies where they worked, high-level directors in public institutions, and managers in well-known private business consortiums. A minority reported that their fathers owned businesses. Mothers have worked as salaried professionals in the public and private sectors, and several have held executive positions. Other mother are professionals who work independently; they have either set up their own business or share the responsibility of managing their parent’s or husband’s business.

Based on their accounts it is also clear that the youth in this group have enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle. They live in family-owned homes in exclusive parts of the city, have a family car, a maid, a wide range of electronic appliances and household possessions, cable television, internet, access to private sports and recreation clubs, and take vacations within Mexico and abroad. They go to private doctors when they need medical attention, and their families took them out to eat at restaurants as children.

Every single one of these young people say that life has treated them *“very well,” “super well,”* or *“incredible”*. None of them remember ever having faced any type of economic hardship, although a small group did mention times of lesser abundance when their family’s businesses was going through a crisis or because the national economic crisis of 1994-1995 affected their parents’ work situation.

**Accumulating cultural resources**

These young people’s stories make it clear that their families did not skimp when it came to ensuring their personal development and expanding their life opportunities. As such, families began to advise their children and help foment their social development since their first years of life.

Regarding the group’s educational trajectories, all youth studied in private, cost-prohibitive schools and universities. They explain that their parents chose these schools because they knew their children would receive a higher quality education, have access to personalized attention when necessary, and be immersed in an academic environment that reinforced the importance of studying and setting high academic goals.

Their parents went further than simply evaluating the institutions’ academic qualities when choosing a school. They also considered the fact that expanding their children’s opportunities for the future meant enabling them to build a broad social network of with others from their same social strata. The social interactions that occur in the school environment, whether they be with other students or with teachers, positively reinforce education as a means of personal growth. The social networks youth consolidate at school are also a form of social capital because they can broaden youths' work opportunities in the future. The time they spent in these institutions also allowed them to differentiate themselves from youth from other social classes.

These young people only become aware that they were being socially differentiated from others their age when they were taken out of these institutions. Two testimonies make this observation perfectly clear. First, Wilson, a twenty-eight-year-old dentist, explains that he was expelled during his second year of middle school, which meant that he had to study at a public school for a year. What we want to emphasize with this case is the social contrast Wilson encountered upon having to interact with teenagers from low-income neighborhoods; it was the first time in his life he had come into contact with that group.

*“Because of my grades and behavior, I had to move from a private school to a public school because no private school would take me. I had to go to a very, very different class. Everything was different: the environment, what people liked, my classmates.”*

Arturo, a twenty-five year old systems engineer, notes that his school environment was primarily composed of upper class students. He observed that these groups differentiated themselves from others by adopting practices and lifestyles associated with their social class, which also led them to behave arrogantly. Arturo says that this was one of the most impactful experiences in his life:

*“Having gone to a bilingual school and interacted with kids who are pretty “fresa” has marked me for life.[[2]](#footnote-2) Some were really arrogant and snobby. Maybe at some point I was the same way.”*

This last testimony introduces another feature common to the type of schools the majority of the youth in our study group attended. All of them studied at elite private schools and accumulated social advantages that only groups with high levels of purchasing power can finance. Families decide to put their children in these schools hoping that their children’s education credentials that differentiate them from their peers in the job market. They hope that these credentials, when paired with other resources, are what makes a difference in determining whether or not their children find quality jobs when the time comes. Ernesto, who is twenty-five and has a bachelor’s degree in psychology, expresses this idea in his own words:

*“Maybe it is easier for someone with my resources [to get a job] than for others. Because, on one hand, I have the resources my parents provided me, which are pretty good. My education, the fact that I speak English, that I have a degree from a prestigious university, that I have good values, that I have a work ethic.”*

These young people are also completely aware that their ability to speak English places an important role in their lives and affords them advantages in the work world. Arturo’s testimony on this topic is invaluable because he speaks to the opportunities his English fluency has brought him:

*“The opportunity to speak with someone from another culture or who speaks another language is always a pleasure, especially if they are American or English. (…) It’s important to be able to speak another language if you want to understand a lot of things. It’s opened a lot of doors for me because, out of nowhere, sometimes American students come, and I’ve been able to speak with them. I’ve been to conferences, met researchers, people that know a lot.”*

Their families did cut corners when it came to boosting their children’s command of a second language. Providing their children opportunities to study other languages from a young age is yet another way these families sought to expand the resources available to them. It is actions like these that allowed their sons and daughters to accumulate a set of social advantages that are economically impossible for individuals from social classes to emulate. Their language skills also put young adult at an advantage when facing the international competition that globalization has brought to labor markets. Among the young people we studied, Leonardo, Camila and Antonia reported having taken French classes since the time they were young. Ernesto studied Italian, and Alfredo studied German, Japanese, and French.

Families also took steps to foment their children’s participation in complementary cultural activities. Sonia, for example, took dance classes at a private academy from the time she was a child. Antonio *“always took a ton of classes and extracurricular classes.”* Camila went to drama and painting workshops, and Ismael took private photography classes. Vania participated in an array of art workshops, which she enjoyed so much that she wanted to get a degree in the arts when she started college. Alfredo took piano classes, saying that *“I took music classes ever since I was a little kid. I played piano”*. Ernesto also mentioned having been involved in music classes for four years *“when he was little”* and Arturo remembers having participated in a youth group for fifteen years. Gerardo is the only one of our interviewees who did not have access to this type of formative, extracurricular experience. He attributes this to the fact that the family budget was too tight to finance *“those luxuries”* for him and his five brothers.

Specialized research has documented the central role these formative experiences play in building social, communication, and emotional skills. Today, these so-called soft-skills or social competencies have a high market value because are associated with having a diversity of socio-cultural and labor resources (Lareau,1987; 2000; 2015; Khan and Jerolmack, 2013; Barg, 2013; Carslon, 2015, Törqvist, 2018). Likewise, the non-cognitive skills an individual learns early in life are increasingly recognized as factors leading to social inequality in young adulthood (Coneus, Gernandt and Saam, 2010; Brunello and Schlotter, 2011; Anger and Schnitzlein, 2016).

Our study group was also exposed to cosmopolitan, cultural environments through international travel. They often took these trips with their families, and, in most cases, these experiences began in early childhood. These trips seem to have left the greatest mark on young people once they reached college; that is the period when they explicitly reference the life lessons they gained from international travel and how these lessons have impacted them. According to their stories, travel made it possible for them to make direct contacts with people from other cultures, expand the horizon they imagine for themselves, and have extensive opportunities to practice English.

Their accounts also indicate that they became increasingly autonomous international travelers as they grew older. Eventually they reached the point where were able to travel without their nuclear family, and this level of independence often began when they started college. Antonia reports having traveled to Europe alone when she was twenty-one. Camila mentioned frequently traveling to the United States with her friends since the time she started college. Sonia lived in the United States for a year after graduating. Leonardo traveled to the United States and France, and Ismael spoke about a trip he took to Europe at age twenty. Alfredo traveled to Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia with his friends at the age of twenty-two.

The horizon these youth had begun to imagine from a young age was reinforced by their universities’ institutional design. Studying abroad for two or three semesters was part of this process involved and implies an additional cost their families take on to ensure their children’s academic experiences. These experiences are so fundamental to youth’s academic trajectories that even Gerardo, the least affluent of the group, mentioned that he and his siblings took part in this type of exchange program: *“I went to Houston. Enrique went to Brazil. Vicente, the one right below me, went to France. My sister went to Canada.”*

These international experiences are highly valued for three reasons. First, they help youth master English as their second language. Second, they encourage youth to consider studying specialization courses, trainings, and graduate school abroad. Third, they contribute to youth’s process of maturing because, for the first time they face having to administer their own budget, make decisions for themselves, and take care of all aspects of daily life.

According to the group of young people we studied, these types of experiences allowed them to broaden their cultural horizons and feel open to the possibility of working and studying abroad outside Mexico. In this sense, they have successfully amassed a vast repertoire of cultural resources that undoubtably will influence how they visualize their future.

*Academic achievements*

These young people achieved the level of academic achievement expected of them given their social origins as well as the environment surrounding academics they found at home and their family’s aspirations for their future development. All the youth we studied reported finishing their bachelor’s degree on-time and being twenty-two or twenty-three years old when they graduated, which is concurrent with the expected age. Their educational trajectories were lineal and uninterrupted. This gave them the additional advantage of being able to plan the next step in their professional preparation without time pressures. For example, Gerardo was able to finish a second bachelor’s degree, and Ernesto changed degrees halfway through his bachelor’s in Systems Engineering because he realized that his professional vocation lay in another field.

Educational trajectories and whether a student finishes college depend on a group of factors; we will highlight three of them. First, as we mentioned previously, youths’ families had sufficient economic resources to guarantee that their children could be full-time students and maintain an uninterrupted educational trajectory from the time they began elementary school until they finished college. Second, their families were successful in socializing their children into having a positive view of schooling and setting goals for their professional life. Third, youth were instilled with an “academic habitus” that guided their scholastic behavior and encouraged them to finish their college education as planned.

Regarding this “academic habitus”, the youth in our group also had the advantage of living in a family environment that fosters this type of academic behavior. This environment is evident in the fact that their parents are professionals (mothers included for the most part) and that their siblings also followed similar education paths. For example, Sonia, the oldest of three children, commented that her two younger sisters are in school; one is in college and the other in high school. Vania, a twenty-three year old public spokesperson and the youngest of three children, indicated that her oldest sister is an architect and her brother is a public spokesperson. Gerardo is the only young person from a large family, and he points out that:

*“the majority of my siblings are already working. The ones who aren’t working are finishing college. The oldest is a public spokesperson. The one after me is a mechanical engineer. The next one is also an engineer. My sister is finishing her degree in Social Work. The youngest just finished a degree in Systems Engineering.”*

The family environment surrounding schooling includes efforts to build good study habits from infancy. According to what our young adults describe, maternal figures often took on this role. These activities included reading with their children, helping and supervising homework, and mothers were particularly involved in extra-curricular activities. Gerardo illustrates how educational habits are formed within the family environment:

*“When I was a kid in kindergarten, I remember having to practice writing circles and lines. And I have really bad handwriting. One day when I did them really badly my mom erased them all and made me do them again. So I had to try hard to do them right. (…) And, one way or another, she made sure we did our homework every day, and that’s how we learned to do what we were supposed to do, take responsibility for our actions, be responsible, and finish what we’re supposed to do. That habit of being responsible helped me a lot later on in school and work. They’re things that I learned at home, certain values that are now just a part of me.”*

Wilson was the only case who did not mention having a positive view of his educational experience. He says that his experience with school was purely instructional: *“I never liked school. I never liked studying”* and adds that *“studying, in my case, is like preparing yourself to earn money and get by. That’s not how I want my life to be and it’s not my main priority.”* However, despite his criticism of school, Wilson finished college at twenty-three and went on to study to become a dental assistant with a specialty in orthodontics. In other words, Wilson’s account makes clear that he has been a disciplined student regardless of his negative attitude towards school.

As we have indicated, this group of young people molded their academic trajectories around the goal of getting a college degree. None of them expressed doubts about this route in life. The goal of graduating from college seems to be immersed in a family environment that facilitates this trajectory as well as social and institutional mediums that encourage it. Youths’ interactions with peers, other family members, and friends from their same social strata were key in solidifying the importance of college as part of their life plan. Their socialization in academic institutions that encourage students to pursue higher education is another element that makes college seem like a natural component of their life trajectory.

The young people did not express difficulties choosing where they got their undergraduate degree because their choices were limited to a very small selection of private universities. In fact, these universities are institutionally designed to have mechanisms that attract students with their profile as well as processes that make it easy for students who went to prestigious, private high schools to be accepted. Perhaps that is why none of the ten youth who went to private schools had to pass an academic filter to be accepted into their college of choice. The real filter, however, is the students’ families’ ability to pay. In this sense, the transition from high school to college was not a critical experience for youth in terms of whether or not they would be accepted.

Unlike choosing a college, choosing a career path was a cause of anxiety for the youth we studied. Their parents played a key role in advising them; however, this advice did not always encourage them to make decisions autonomously. This situation was particularly difficult for youth who felt pressured by their parents to change their original choices. Camila and Claudia’s experiences illustrate this situation. Camila received her bachelor’s degree in Political Science although she originally wanted to study law. Her father “convinced” her to look at other options because he thought that law was a very saturated, tricky profession. She remembers her dad telling her that *“first you have to defend [the clients], and then you have to turn around and fight with them so that they’ll pay you”*. Claudia initially wanted to get a bachelor’s degree in art, but her parents did not allow it, and she was forced to search for an alternative. Her testimony speaks to the restrictions her family placed on her choices when she says that *“I always wanted to study something related to art. But it didn’t work out. Here [in Monterrey] there aren’t any options. My parents wouldn’t let me go somewhere else [to live in another city]”*.

For other youth, choosing a degree proved to be problematic because they had to decide at a young age when they were still unsure what career path they wanted to take. Antonia, twenty-three, says that she had to decide when *“she was finishing high school and had absolutely no idea what she wanted to study. Nothing seemed interesting.”* Ismael, also twenty-three, currently feels detached from his career because, as he sees it, *“I was too young to be able to make decisions about my future. So now I’m not so sure about the profession I chose”*. Finally, Ernesto, twenty-five, says that his first choice was influenced by his peer group: *“I went for engineering because that’s what all my friends were going to study. But, honestly, I really didn’t like playing on the computer. I didn’t like programming or making databases.”*

A third group of youth did not struggle to choose a career path because they decided to follow in their family’s footsteps. Ingrid’s experience stands out because she claims to have discovered her vocation as a child through interactions with her aunts who were dentists. She was always close to them and became familiar with the profession through her interactions with her aunts, *“Three of my aunts are dentists, so I already knew what I was getting into.”* Her professional horizon was forged from early childhood, *“I started to decide to be a dentist when I was five years old.”* She never doubted her choice.

Whether youth freely chose their professions, received advice or pressure from family, or had little doubt about what they wanted to do, the common thread between all the 10 cases was their parents’ unconditional support for getting a college degree. This support included receiving guidance when it came time to choose a profession and emotional support during times of personal crisis. It is quite notable that some youth received a second chance to choose when they needed it. This situation is evident in the experiences of Ismael, Ernesto, and Gerardo who realized that they had made a mistake after already completing over half their degree, and they needed help starting a new degree. Twenty-eight year old Juan is an example of a different situation. He decided to study a second degree to improve his employability when he found himself unemployed after graduating.

Finally, these youth showed a marked inclination for continuing graduate studies after finishing their bachelor’s degree. The oldest of the group, Ingrid and Wilson, who are thirty and twenty-eight years old respectively, had already specialized in their chosen fields. Others, like Alfredo, Ernesto, and Ismael, have already started their master’s degree. Leonardo, Arturo, Camila, Vania, and Antonia plan to start their master’s degree soon, but, for now, are accumulating professional experience. The majority hope to get a doctorate degree abroad in first-world universities. They assume that doing so will provide them with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in an increasingly competitive and globalized job market.

***The importance of postponing sociodemographic transitions***

With the exception of Sonia, who is twenty-eight, a lawyer, married, and expecting her first child, the rest of the youth in our group are single. The majority of them have postponed both their first conjugal relationship and motherhood/fatherhood. In fact, only two of these young adults are in a stable relationship and have marriage plans (Ernesto, a psychologist, and Wilson, a dentist, both of them twenty-five). For the rest, having a family is something they are planning to do ten years down the line.

Sonia and Camila are the only two youth in the group who have experienced *residential emancipation*. The rest still live in their parent’s house. Sonia moved out because she got married, and Camila did so when she migrated to Monterrey for college. Claudia’s transition is relative, however, because her parents continue to pay her rent.

The rest of the youth do not feel that living in their parent’s house is an inconvenience. They are aware that this living situation takes away a certain amount of autonomy when it comes to decision-making and also prolongs their subordinate relationship to their parents because it means living under their house rules. However, they feel that the benefits outweigh these restrictions. Youths’ testimonies point to three key privileges. First, they are able to continue actively using their family’s resources and maintain their mid-upper class lifestyle, which they say they could not finance with their current income. Vania, who is twenty-three, states that *“I cover my own expenses, but there are certain things they still help me with”*. The other interviewees reiterate this same idea, and, despite having a professional job, they still have not taken on any family responsibilities.

Second, living in their parent’s house allows them spend their income on expensive goods and services with high symbolic value such as trips abroad, cars, electronics, next generation smart phones, brand-name clothes, etc. Twenty-five year old Leonardo summarize his peer’s opinion when he says:

*“like I said, I don’t pay rent, I don’t have a mortgage, I don’t have debt, I’m not financially responsible for anyone. I cover my expenses (…). If I want to go on vacation -go to a wedding in Cancún, for example- I pay for it myself. Or any other trip. I pay for it myself.”*

Third, this living arrangement allows youth to save money, which they hope to invest in buying a home or starting their own business. Twenty-eight year old Gerardo, speaks to this observation:

*“I basically don’t have to pay for anything at my house. I help with really minimal expenses, but I don’t have any financial responsibilities. I’m thinking of using the income I’ve saved to buy a house so I can live on my own.”*

***The transition into the labor market***

The period when these young people start their professional lives is an important work milestones. This is the moment when the true value of the social advantages they have accumulated are put to the test.

This is the moment when their ability to find a quality job that leads to a satisfying professional career in the future is on the line. We will analyze how the youth in our group confront the process of entering the work world when they finish college. Two prototypical models define the transition between school and work: the lineal model and the non-lineal model (Furlong and colleagues, 2006).

The majority of the youth in our group experienced a fluid and favorable transition and found a satisfactory job as soon as they graduated. The other subgroup represented one-third of the cases, and these young people faced a more strenuous transition with periods of unemployment, labor precarity, or working in jobs unrelated to their career fields.

The fact that most youth easily and satisfactorily transitioned into the job market confirms that their accumulated social advantages bore fruit. Their family’s investment logic as well as the efforts they made during their children’s formative years had the desired results.

However, analyzing the process through which these young people entered the job market is not simply a matter of describing the transition. It is also necessary to envision how this process played out, the resources that were mobilized in order to access quality jobs, and the strategies used to overcome obstacles.

We identified four modalities through which youth made their way into the job market. The first focuses on interventions from their schools; these institutions helped organize the school-work transition. The second emphasizes support from family. The third highlights the importance social networks play in gaining access to certain occupational positions. The fourth involves interventions carried out by commercial job placement services.[[3]](#footnote-3)

An *institutionally guided transition* refers to way of entering the work world that makes use of existing, institutional mechanisms that serve to match the supply of professional labor with the demand. These institutions include job placement services, internships at companies, and formal agreements between companies and universities for hiring graduates. As our interviews show, this type of transition involves institutionalized practices through which elite universities mobilize their resources, influences, and prestige in ways that favor graduates’ employment in the private sector.

Without a doubt, young men and women who attended colleges offering these services have access to an institutional resource that reduces the tension surrounding job searches. By mobilizing this resource, they are able to avoid market mechanisms and find a quality job. Although they earn relatively high salaries (for the Mexican context), their income remains below their expectations.[[4]](#footnote-4) This group also has formal job contracts and a basic package of work benefits. In other words, they find themselves among the select group of young workers who found a stable job with benefits that also serves as a starting point for their professional career as long as it is related to what they hope to do.

It is noteworthy, however, that these mechanisms do not guarantee students a job once they finish college. The best opportunities are generally offered to students who earned degrees in areas that are under high demand in the job market. According to what the young people shared in their interviews, there is a bias towards technology (engineering and information technology) and business administration.

Vania, a twenty-three year old public spokesperson, exemplifies the role that elite universities play in job placement. She says that she didn’t have any idea how to find a good job when she finished college. She sought help from her university’s job counseling service because *“she didn’t know where to start looking for work”*. There, they advised her and put her in contact with *“an art magazine”*. She worked as a design assistant for four months and *“later they ask me to be in charge of the cultural section.”*

Internships serve as mechanisms for university students to put their professional learning into practice during their final semesters of college and also serves as a way of connecting the supply and demand of labor. Alfredo benefited from the company internship he carried out, as evidenced by the fact that the company offered to hire him with full benefits and a competitive salary.

Ernesto, a business psychologist, also got his first professional job with the help of his university. He says that the university had a database of all the students currently in their last semester. This information is shared with companies so that it can be used for hiring purposes as needed. Ernesto says that *“my information appeared in the college’s database. They called me. They hired me. That’s how it went.”*

The second transition is one that we define as being *guided by the family*. It involves young professionals whose first experience in the job market was solved by family businesses. As such, the young who experienced this type of transition did not face the challenge of finding a job through market mechanisms. They also did not have to make use of the institutional resources their universities offer. Therefore, this transition into the labor market is a way for youth to enter the professional world by mobilizing family resources.

We identified two way in which this type of transition occurs. The first occurs when youth who studied a profession such as law, medicine, or architecture begin working at a family-owned practice. For some, this type of transition translates into a form of inheritance in which the inherited assets include a client portfolio. This portfolio helps jumpstart an independent, professional trajectory. Ingrid, a dentist, exemplifies this path. When she finished her specialty in dentistry at twenty-seven she was able to started to her own practice thanks to her aunt, who is also a dentist and gifted Ingrid all the equipment she needed. As she put it, *“I basically didn’t have to buy anything”*. Her parents also renovated the first floor of their house so that she could set up her dentist office there. According to Ingrid, her primary challenges consisted of *“modernizing the equipment and diversifying her client portfolio.”*

The second type of family-guided transition occurs when young professionals join a family business and take charge of administrative tasks or a specific area of production. Camila, twenty-four years old with a bachelor’s degree in political science and public administration, is perhaps the most prototypical case of this transition. As an only child she is aware of the fact that she will have to take over the family businesses in the future. Her parents decided to put her in charge of their business franchises so that she could progressively gain experience running the business.

This second type of transition into the job market highlights advantages derived from youths’ social origin and also makes evident that inheriting business assets continues to be a fashionable way of transmitting intergenerational social privileges.

The third successful type of school-work transition demonstrates the importance of *social networks* as a means for labor insertion. This transition includes mobilizing information, recommendations, and contacts available to those with access to social networks offering valuable resources. In the cases we analyzed, these social networks are dense and have strong ties that start with the extended family and branch out to the next closest sociability cores (classmates, close friends, girlfriend, boyfriend) and college professors with who they had a positive relationship.

These youth’s first interaction with the labor market is resolved because an influential member of their social network connects them a job opportunity. In other words, youth who experienced this type of transition got their first post-graduation job thanks to direct recommendations from someone who was able to influence the hiring process. These contacts provided them with information on available positions as well as connections that are indispensable for getting hired. In essence, they were able to convert their social position into a valuable job resource that gave them a more advantageous position in the labor market. This path serves as a second option for skirting the use of market mechanisms to find a job that fits expectations.

Leonardo, a twenty-five year old political science major, is one of the cases the best illustrates this type of job market insertion. He has had two jobs since graduating and says that he got both of them thanks to *“the influence of his father and his father’s friends.”* His father works at an institution that oversees his state’s electoral system, and Leonardo says that his father *“has been fundamental”* in putting him in contact with his clients. He emphasizes that *“what he likes is that he is working independently.”* Social networks have also been valuable for broadening his services as a political consultant: *“I am selling my services. I am putting myself out there and getting to know a lot of people. Those people know other people. They’ve heard of the meeting, the presentation. They include me in projects.”*

Arturo, a systems engineer, shows that this type of transition can also involve wider social networks. In his case, these links included connections he made at college. He graduated at age twenty-four and immediately got a job at the company where he currently works thanks to a reference from one of his university professors who consults for the company. Arturo explains how this type of transition works in his own words:

*“A professor sent me an email telling me that there was a job opportunity. I went for the interview. I went to a place where they organize events. I was put in charge of the company’s internet pages. They hired me.”*

The fourth type of labor market transition that emerged from our analysis involves *using market mechanisms* to find a professional job. This strategy was not very common among the youth in our group; after graduating, only one-third of them took this path to try to find work. These cases indicate that this path can be risky and lead to unemployment, precarious work, and having to take jobs unrelated to one’s profession.

Two extreme situations illustrate these risks. The first scenario appears in Antonia and Ismael’s histories. Antonia is a twenty-four year old international relations graduate, and Ismael is a twenty-three year old graphic designer and publicist. Upon graduating, both decided to look a job through market mechanisms. Their first jobs were precarious. Antonia worked as a waitress in cafés and bars and as an entertainer at social events. Consequently, her experience is a typical case of job precarity derived from a lack of job protections, job benefits, and not working in a field related to her profession. Ismael had precarious jobs in the industrial sector, but it is a sector related to his profession.

Antonio experienced family pressure to *“get a real job”*, meaning a *“stable job.”* Her family intervened to help her reorient her job path in ways that take advantage of her resources. Antonio decided to use private job placement services to find a job under pressure from her family. She got a job as a general assistant at a private foundation through an *“online job search engine.”* Not only is the job in her field, she works full-time, with a written contract, job benefits, and a salary four times higher than the minimum required by law.

Ismael began looking for a different job after his father began getting onto him for during a prolonged period of severe depression. *“I applied for several jobs. Normal. Got an interview, and they hired me.”* This job allows him to apply his professional knowledge and gain new skills, he has a contract, benefits, and a competitive salary. In his case, job precarity was not associated with a lack of job protections but rather job exploitation; abuse and poor work conditions were customary at his company. He felt unsatisfied with work because *“they treated people poorly. They worked us to the breaking point”*. He also says that the company forced them to work extra hours without prior notice and without extra pay. It was when they obligated employees to work Saturdays that Ismael decided to resign, *“that was when I said: ‘I’m not going back. I can’t give them my time if they aren’t going to give me anything in return’”*. He faced a period of unemployment after resigned, and as able to find another job thanks to help from a family member. He now has plans to start his master’s degree.

The second type of experience is traumatic and occurs when even the set of social, institutional, and personal resources is insufficient for finding a job in labor markets with limited opportunities. This is where we begin to see youth working in short-term, poorly paid jobs that are completely unrelated to their profession and that do not offer benefits. To make matters worse, these jobs are often followed by long periods of unemployment, frustration, angst, and emotional crisis.

Gerardo, a twenty-eight years old political science and public administration graduate, lived this experience. He says that he was optimistic about his future when he finished college, but *“after a year of failures”* he became depressed and felt that *“it was useless to have been the best student in my class”*. His job search triggered a chain of constant job changes, and he switched from one precarious job to the next. *“First, I was a Congressman’s assistant for a few months”* and earned just over minimum wage. Then, *“I taught classes at a high school”* with similar earnings. Next, *“I ended up at a call center doing sales”*. Gerardo tells his story as follows:

*“I felt really bad. I felt like all the effort I made in school was for nothing. I was so disillusioned. And desperate. I was like, and now what am I going to do to find work? There weren’t any opportunities anywhere.”*

Gerardo says it was a learning experience, and it convinced him that he needed to gain new perspectives. He decided to get a second degree, again choosing to study at a private university; however, this time he opted for career under high market demand: public accounting. He says he decided on that field because *“I had to study something that would give me certainty, security.”*

He was finally able to get a high-ranking job in the municipal government by putting his social networks. That is where he started his professional career and eventually became Director for the Institute of Youth at a government agency. He has a high salary and all the benefits required by law. He knows that is job security is not guaranteed because his position is exposed to *“political cycles”*. He also acknowledges that the did not get the job through market mechanisms but rather thanks to his political networks.

*“I didn’t get this job because I’m a political scientist, not because I’m exceptionally good, nor because I had been the best in my class. I got the position because someone recommended me. A friend who was working here in the municipality. He knew me well. He recommended me and helped me get in.”*

Antonia, Ismael, and Gerardo’s cases highlight the risks that these youth are exposed to when they use market mechanisms to make the transition between school and work. Their experiences also show that they can overcome these situations by mobilizing the resources their social position offers them, whether it be to find a job or further invest in their education as a means of increasing their employability.

On the other hand, Sonia and Wilson demonstrate that young professionals from middle-upper social strata also face tough barriers for entering the labor market, even given the wide range of job placement resources and family support at their disposal. It appears, however, that the barriers Sonia and Wilson faced appear to stem from their own life choices.

Sonia, a twenty-five year old lawyer who is married and expecting her first child, struggled to enter the job market. Upon finishing her degree, she got married and moved to New York to live with her husband who is a also Mexican lawyer. A year later she returned to Monterrey where was unemployed for eight months. She actively looked for work during this period: *“I started to look for a job,” “knocked on doors and tried to find work wherever I could think of”*. She activated both her own social connections as well as her husband’s. She made use of her university’s job search services and classic market strategies but was unsuccessful until finally finding a job in the banking sector. It is a stable job with a good salary, benefits, and eight-hour shifts five days a week. Sonia is emphatic that the only way she got the job was through social networks.

*“It was through an acquaintance. Meaning, I didn’t get the job through the job search services, newspaper ads or anything of the sort. Someone who had asked my friend and she send them my resumé. They called and I ended up getting the job.”*

Sonia resigned after three years because she became pregnant and decided to prioritize her maternity. She began searching for a job with flexible hours that will allow her to reconcile her obligations at home and as a future mother with her labor force participation. When we interviewed her, she still had not been able to find a professional job that met her expectations: high salary and flexible hours.

Sonia’s situation emphasizes factors that limit young, professional women’s participation in the world work. Their professional decisions are mediated by their subordinated gender roles, which end up conditioning and limiting their career development.

Wilson, a twenty-eight years old dentist, has also faced a row of difficulties in his search for a satisfactory job. His problems are related to labor precarity, having multiple jobs, and disassociating himself from his profession.

Wilson’s school-work transition was different than the other cases we have studied up to this point. He decided to take a pause at age twenty-three. After finishing his degree he moved to Mexico City where he worked for selling books without any type of contract, benefits, or job stability. *“I lived in a temple. I sold books on philosophy and religion.”* In other words, he completely separated himself from his career field. Afterwards he moved to the United States on a tourist visa and worked in *“informal jobs”* without a work permit for six months after his visa expired.

He then moved back to Monterrey and lived with his parents. His labor trajectory had not changed substantially, and he has gone through alternating periods of unemployment and precarious work, including many call centers. *“I’ve had a lot of jobs but never anything fancy. Just like dirty jobs. I make what I need and leave.”*

He says that he currently works the morning shift at a call center and has a contract and all the job benefits required by law. He does not consider it a good job, though. Wilson combines his job at the call center with his work at a dentist practice in the afternoons. Two years ago he opened a dentist office in a family home with the help of his parents. He does not think things are going well *“because [he] needs a second job”*.

Wilson’s case demonstrates that a personal decision can shatter a linear work trajectory and trigger a path characterized by job instability, working multiple jobs, and disassociation from one’s professional field. Although his family intervened and mobilized resources to try to help reverse his path, Wilson’s personal decisions still left their mark on his current job situation.

***To conclude***

Our analysis has shown that middle-upper class families make an enormous effort to enhance their children’s development throughout their life course, while also broadening their opportunities, and expanding the options they have available to them in the future. They do all this to provide their children with a wide range of resources that will help them to get a quality, professional job as adults. This milestone is indispensable for guaranteeing that they enjoy a comfortable life in the future.

These families develop practices for socializing and raising children. They make decisions about expected educational trajectories, foment an academic environment in the home that favors a long school career, help their children develop social skills from the time they are young, counsel and advise their children on academic choices and career paths, and support them when they decide to change directions in life but remind them that they should continue on a professional path.

These young people did not have to pay for their schooling. This allowed them the privilege of studying full-time, enjoying their free time as they choose, and expanding their cultural universes in ways that equipped with skills that have high market value in international job markets. Furthermore, these youth have decided to postpone transitions to adulthood; for example, entering into their first conjugal relationship, having their first child, and becoming economically independent. They also opted to continue living in with their parents in order to finish graduate school, keep up a lifestyle they could not finance on their own, or save funds for investing in their future well-being.

Finally, these youth’s work trajectories show a high level of job success, regardless of whether they have a salaried job or work independently. The majority of the group experienced a fluid work transition. They got well-paying jobs with benefits and that were related to their profession on the first try. Those who faced challenges made greater use of their family’s resources and social networks to overcome threats present in precarious labor markets.

Therefore, their key to successfully transitioning into the labor market involved mobilizing the wide range of family, social and institutional resources at their disposal for getting the best job available to them. Avoiding direct competition in the job market was a way for them to access job trajectories that also guaranteed the intergenerational transfer of the privileges that sustain the middle-upper class. Although these youth have accumulated a large endowment of job resources that undoubtedly offer them advantages over their peers in local job markets, their professional success is tied to a social structure in which an individual’s social origin continues to exercise a tremendous influence over his or her life trajectory.

1. According to Estrada (2011), being a professional in Mexico was a privilege around the mid-twentieth century. “According to the 1950 census, just over 100,000 Mexicans had a higher education – 0.4% of the population older than 25” (free translation). This figure contrasts with the fact that the crude rate of higher education coverage was 37.3% in 2018 (Mendoza, 2018). Muñóz Izquierdo (2006) also estimates that there were 1.5 highly skilled positions available for every professional worker between 1950 and 1960. By 2000 this ratio had fallen to 0.27, meaning that for each professional position created there were 3.73 professionals available. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In colloquial Mexican-Spanish, “fresa” is an adjective that refers to privileged, upper class youth. For details, see Martínez (2014) and Chaparro (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For analysis on the role that commercial and non-commercial job placement mechanisms play the efforts urban, Brazilian youth undertake to find work see: Araujo, Alves, and da Silva, 2010 and Araujo, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The youth in our group expected to earn approximately, on average, US$ 3,000/month. Their real monthly salary is US$ 1,500 on average. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)