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# Unemployment, a Social Construction. Institutional Programs, Experiences and Meanings in a Comparative Perspective

By **Nadya Araujo Guimarães, Didier Demazière, Helen Hirata, Kurumi Sugita**

A tradition of sociological research that goes back to the 1930s (Lazarsfeld et al., 1932) has constantly pointed out the diversity of reactions in the face of job deprivation and the consequent differences in the life stories of the persons concerned. In this sense, the category of unemployment – which differs from professional activity in that it implies being deprived of that activity, and from professional inactivity in that it implies actively seeking employment – can sustain a variety of interpretations: the people categorized as unemployed attribute various significations to their own situation and adhere to different sorts of identifications.

Nevertheless, that diversity of experiences does not express how near or far the “virtuous” unemployed person is from the social norm. It is rather a sign of the radically problematic nature of the situation, which forces those living it to improvise solutions outside the institutional programs (Douglas, 1986). This way of seeing the question is based on the fact that unemployment tends to lose its institutionalized significance, because the program that sustains it (i.e. a quick exit from temporary job loss made even quicker by an active job search) is not working well any more. Individuals can therefore no longer find sufficient resources in that rationale to make their situation meaningful. They must work out their own interpretation and invent new meanings.

The reason for this state of affairs is that unemployment is markedly different from both inactivity and employment. These two can be considered as social status. In contrast, unemployment is a problematic situation rather than a social status (Schnapper, 1989): it is by definition transitory and thus of necessity must cease. It also bears the stamp of deprivation and can only be defined by the negative, is deemed inferior and demands reparation, is affected by devaluation and calls for a change. Thus, being unemployed *ipso facto* means being turned towards the exit, and commanded to find a way out. Becoming unemployed

means wanting to be unemployed no longer, having to stop being unemployed. No social obligation or inner pressures characterize the opposite situations represented by employment and inactivity. For contrary to these, unemployment is not a reference. This is exactly why it poses a problem.

This characteristic is widely shared by the three countries examined here, France, Japan and Brazil, because in each one, work – understood as the paid participation in the production of goods and services – is the main lever in the distribution of wealth, albeit the codifications of labor relations and workers’ rights and benefits are very disparate.

Actually, current labor laws in France, Japan and Brazil are quite different, whether we look at the typical work contract, the range of forms of legal contracts, the relative importance of atypical contracts, the spreading of formal labor relations, etc. Such diversity is no less prevalent in the legal categorizations of unemployment, among the institutions responsible for handling it, in defining the system of indemnities and assistance for those who have lost their job, in a word, in the construction of a social status for the unemployed, together with rights and obligations.

On this score, if one sets out to evaluate to what extent unemployment has been institutionalized – by the existence of unemployment insurance schemes, the number of mechanisms in place to help a person get back to work, the readiness to register in an employment agency or the networks of social protection – it seems clear that Brazil is where such an institutionalization of unemployment is the feeblest, and in France – where unemployment has durably settled – that it is the strongest and most ancient, while it is more recent and less developed in Japan. But even in the French case, such considerable institutionalization implies a fragile and problematic situation for the unemployed, a fact that is even more pronounced in the other two countries.

For indeed, support and protection are granted for only limited and shorter periods of time, compensation systems

are deteriorating both from the point of view of the sums allocated and of their duration, accessing the mechanisms of aid and assistance are invariably selective, controls and penalties are getting more severe. The trend over the past decades has always gone in the same direction: administrative action for the unemployed has included a larger degree of control and the legitimacy it derives from that control has been reduced proportionally to the financial costs incurred for the national and local communities (Demazière, 2003).

A major consequence of the problematic nature of being unemployed is that it implies the individuals concerned must involve themselves in specific occupations intended to find a way out of the situation, i.e. to invent a new future, project oneself into a different situation, into employment.

For that reason, the job search is the key factor in being unemployed for it is only by obtaining employment that one can escape unemployment. The job search is also at the heart of the representations characterizing unemployment: *looking* for work is generally considered more apposite to the state of being unemployed than *not having work*. It is more or less institutionalized according to the social context, but is nearly always part of the exchange systems involving the unemployed, as the counterpart of the compensations they receive, an inescapable obligation.

But the job search is not only a rational investment in a strategy to end the period of unemployment, but also a magic symbol meant to reduce the insecurity that brands all unemployment. By searching, one is simply proving that one is not a prisoner of unemployment, that it is but a transitory state, meaning that insecurity can be exorcized.

More than a way of living a social status, the experience of unemployment means confronting that uncertainty, and leads one to develop ways of getting rid of it. Looking for work is one of its most obvious manifestations. This point of view echoes the conclusions of other investigations, which repeatedly bring home the fact that unemployment is a private and personal tragedy, destabilizing identities, breeding guilt and upsetting one's world-view, and which, on top of all the foregoing, distends social links, throws one's life off balance, disrupts established solidarities, and leads in many cases to disaffiliation (Ledrut, 1966; Schnapper, 1981; Castel, 1995).

The phenomenon thus possesses a meaning, or more exactly a double meaning, since it spreads out in a certain direction that becomes clear little by little and may (or may not) approximate employment, and since it takes on meanings that also transpire more or less rapidly. Depending on the direction and signification it is given, the job search will occupy a different position, either central or marginal, and other reactions may also be observed. In all cases, however, unemployment may be considered as the locus of a biographical elaboration, both *reflexive*, because it mobilizes the relation between a subject and his or her experiences, and *relational*, because it is linked to the actions of others.

That is the biographical experience we wish to explore here. Our hypothesis is that this experience is wrought of insecurity, instability, uncertainty, and that these elements must be limited, contained and reduced. According to the society considered, various institutions, regulations, mechanisms, contribute to the process and play the role of shock absorber. But that does not erase the insecurity that in any case remains the crucial part of the experience of being jobless. Thus – and that is one of the consequences of our hypothesis – the biographical experience of unemployment is fraught with tension and ambivalence, as may be seen in the biographical interviews carried out with unemployed persons.

To explore the unemployment experience, we began by carrying out sample surveys in the metropolitan areas of Paris, São Paulo and Tokyo followed up by in-depth interviews with a subsample of about two hundred unemployed persons.<sup>1</sup>

The populations affected by unemployment do not make up a single social category, for though the probability of becoming unemployed varies considerably according to the level of education, professional training and status, age, sex, ethnic attributes, etc., it is still true that unemployment affects all the different categories. This fluctuates according to the country being considered and inequality in the face of unemployment also varies in each, but in every case, the unemployed make up a multifarious ensemble, as we have seen above (Pignoni, Sugita, Montagner, 2006).

Carrying out an international comparison founded even partially on biographical interviews, as ours is here, confronts the researcher with daunting problems, due to the many various and heterogeneous elements the corpus

contains. A comparison is exposed to the classical difficulties connected to the way the biographical interviews are used. If one can admit that the subjective meaning of a discourse is not reducible to its linguistic significance, clearly then it is not enough to be able to understand a language in order to grasp what a person meant to say (Demazière, Dubar, 1997). Within a single linguistic universe, meaning does not boil down to the words employed, and the sociological analysis of an interview cannot simply consist in noting similarities in vocabulary. Those difficulties are even greater when several languages are involved, as is the case here, since interviewing was done in Brazilian Portuguese, French and Japanese. How can these corpora of discourses recorded in different languages be compared at all, given that each already contains considerable internal variation? How can one decide that the signification attributed to the situation of unemployment in a Japanese interview is close, or even similar, to the one expressed in a Brazilian or in a French discourse?2

This paper explores our research results and presents some pathways to overcome analytical difficulties in approaching unemployment as a biographical experience. This approach clarifies the reflexive dimension of individual behaviour in labor market competition; it also illustrates the complexity of social processes underlying the matching between labor force demand and supply under different employment systems and cultural contexts.

## 1. Shared regularities and significations: exploring a proximity hypothesis

Unemployment breaks up into a myriad of varied interpretations in each of the countries that are not reducible one to the other: what does an unemployed person who, throughout his or her interview, insisted on the personal project that will guarantee getting a good position in the labor market, have in common with the one who clamors that professional horizons are totally obscured and that life is hardly worth living, or again the persons who handle the difficulties to go back to work by giving meanings to alternative activities with ambiguous status, or yet again those who are actively searching for work and convinced their efforts will be crowned with success in the end?

A situation coded in an identical manner – “unemployment” – is thus categorized in very different ways by those who have to face it in real life. This diversity invites us to delve further into a set of questions, exploring a proximity hypothesis: do these heterogeneous elements have certain

traits in common, do they share certain polarities, are they structured in a similar fashion, is it possible to identify certain cross-national figures?

The proximity hypothesis can be borne out by placing side by side and comparing those discourses collected in each of the countries that might, beyond the differences of language, have the same signification.

Such attempts to pool the discourses together can be easily illustrated by presenting and discussing all those definitions of the situation (of unemployment) that hinged on the **job search**. That interpretation of unemployment is found in interviews in the three countries, even though similarity does not mean there are no subtle differences. In these discourses, the job search is related as being the person's main activity, giving meaning to their real-life situation, occupying all their waking hours, and leads to their vision of their future employment. It is a discourse that dilutes unemployment in the activity of searching for work and in the competition to succeed. It also presents a few specific traits according to the country.

*In the French case, the emblematic terms and colloquial expressions were “I've got my plan for finding a job,” “I know where I'm going,” “I've understood one needs to hang on”, “I don't ask, I offer what I know how to do, it's very important.”*

*In Japan, we found rather the following: “I'm looking for a company that will allow me to further my career,” “I must protect my career plan,” “according to private agencies, my experience is excellent,” “dynamic and competent people are registered on the Internet, like I am.”*

*While in Brazil, one finds: “my CV is on the Internet,” “that's how I see myself,” “I've put myself on unemployment,” “it's not possible that I can't find anything.”*

These short excerpts are naturally not interchangeable. However, one can immediately note that, associated to action verbs, the subject is, if not systematically present, omnipresent, whether explicitly or not. *The subject of the utterance is staged in a position of mastery, in control of his/her situation and itinerary.* Sharing this characteristic does not erase the particularities of the discourses, but it does make them strongly specific, compared to the rest of the corpus.

Thus, it appears that in France, the outstanding point is the claim that the job search is being carried out in a profes-

sional manner, sustained by the belief that sooner or later there will be results, and by experiences guaranteeing that one has gone through apprenticeships and acquired certain competences. This refrain is linked to the massive apparatus, mainly public, that provide assistance in the job search, whether through professional assessments, training periods, guidance interviews, or lessons on techniques of searching for employment: such help and assistance have become the vehicle transmitting the norms of behavior that socialize the unemployed, and are the vectors for spreading a compelling model that puts them under pressure.

In Japan, seeking employment is presented as a very rational act, planned and somehow optimized, and what is more, aimed at a clearly defined objective: not just finding a job but promoting one's career. The job search is thus the continuation and anticipation of one's (past and future) career, and mastering it somehow obliterates the interruption caused by unemployment. This structure reflects the continuous and upwardly mobile model of the professional career. It suggests the implicitly normative injunction to remain competitive and dynamic (or become competitive and dynamic once again) that does not lead, however, to socializing mechanisms capable of supporting the unemployed during their job search.

In Brazil, looking for work also gets people on their feet, and aims at picking up the threads of an interrupted professional itinerary. Defining oneself as a job seeker means first and foremost explaining one's situation as being the result of a personal decision, not one that had to be passively endured, which takes the bite out of being called unemployed. It must be added that projecting oneself into the future, into a well-defined professional future, is very prominent here: searching for employment means both having an aim suited to one's past experiences and being able to maintain oneself in the formal labor market, even if for the time being one only manages to find an odd job (*bico*).

An ensemble of similar meanings emerges thus around this refusal to define oneself as unemployed and the production of an argument focalized around the job search. It seems to provide a sort of escape from unemployment, a resource enabling one to define oneself otherwise. Searching actively, or at least claiming to do so, means defining oneself as an active person, far removed from the common fate of the unemployed, and resembling, when all is said and done, the employed persons, those who have work. It also means positioning oneself above the mass of the unemployed, keeping aloof and feeling somewhat superior to

the ordinary unemployed person, by reasserting more or less explicitly and bluntly the principle of competition that structures the labor market, and showing a certain self-confidence stemming from the idea that one is still competitive in the job hunt.

Nevertheless, this is not the only way to express the experience of this instable situation. Our approach identified another figure, corresponding to definitions of the situation built around what we have called *discouragement*. This interpretation is common to a certain number of interviews carried out in the three countries. In this case, the definition of the situation is permeated by *fatalism, coupled with the incapacity to change the situation, build a future, and get a job*. As the vain attempts to escape unemployment pile up, job deprivation is experienced as being more and more unbearable and insurmountable. When put side by side, the expressions used in the three countries are very akin to one another; all reflect powerlessness and despair.

*One can find, in France: "I see everything in black," "can you believe that nothing is to be done any more?" "I've tried everything but in the end I've got nothing to show for it," "I've been swallowed up, I don't see how I can get out of it."*

*In Japan: "I can't do anything," "I have nothing to sell," "I can't stand it any longer," "I've lost my sense of direction, I don't know where to go from here," "I cannot want to move anymore;"*

*In Brazil: "I'd rather die," "I don't even have a job in the street," "what can I do?"*

All these phrases also place the subject in the center but differently: *the subject of the enunciation is still very much present, but not staged as an active subject, on the contrary, rather as the object*, the one that must bear all the devastating and destructive effects of the situation, and feel how hemmed in he or she is with respect to his/her capacity to act. The interviews tend to be shorter than average, choppy as well, as if putting the situations into words were more painful here.

In France, the corresponding discourses are strongly marked by a blow-by-blow description of the job search and more particularly of the repeated failures. The numerous setbacks are so intrusive, insurmountable and threatening that they actually become the source of the definition of the situation. Above all, these setbacks are de-

nounced as unfair, arbitrary, revolting, and the employers are made responsible because they hire applying some obscure, mechanical favoritism or illicit and discriminatory criteria. In this framework, getting back to work appears more and more unlikely, or even impossible, no alternative whatever having emerged that might allow a person to escape from the slow descent into pauperization, in some cases mentioned explicitly.

In Japan, discouragement is also compounded by the difficulties encountered during the job search. The sense of injustice is not absent from the ways of speaking of these difficulties, but the expression of a personal helplessness is more prevalent than the denunciation of any external agents, such as the companies, in particular, that could be held responsible. The interviews illustrate a process whereby the narrator is progressively and quite ineluctably hemmed in and reduced to a state of inertia. It appears quite evident that, according to a reflex mechanism that makes the individual responsible for his/her situation, the causes for their failure have been considerably internalized, even if in some cases the economic context is given as an explanation.

In Brazil, discouragement is strongly manifested by the very great difficulty to put things into words: the discourses are brief and not very developed, as if verbalizing one's situation were unbearable, to the point that the narrative may be interrupted, sometimes definitively, by sobs and tears. We nevertheless found the same basic equation as in the other countries, i.e. that the individual's super-human efforts were put on a parallel with puny or non-existent results. The effect of this impasse is an identical helplessness, which may lead to a question of life and death.

A whole set of cross-national significations emerges, based on the deterioration of the situation, caused by the accumulation of failure in the job search: first, the individuals stop searching, for that activity has become subjectively senseless, then they feel trapped in a dead end, and can no longer even imagine an alternative future that might allow them to avoid seeing their situation go steadily downhill. In this case, unemployment is so intrusive and omnipresent, it has saturated the situations and the temporalities to such a point, that the individuals feel completely lost and uprooted. They can no longer involve themselves in acts or conceive of perspectives that might allow them to find a way out. The only conceivable exit is the probable further deterioration of their situation: an eviction from the status of unemployment, in the worst possible way, which is already so advanced and worrisome

that they no longer even want to call themselves unemployed.

A third type of interpretation emerged from our comparative analysis of the interviews collected in the three countries. It concerns those discourses that also stress forms of *withdrawal* from employment, but this time by giving value to activities that, though they are numerous and varied, all have in common the fact they support a sense of social utility and provide a basis for redefining the situation: *they erase unemployment, lastingly if not permanently, by eclipsing the job search and filling all their spare time*. Beyond this, they are considered to be work of a sort, different from their previous professional activity, and thus representing a sort of reconversion.

Though the nature of such activities differs considerably from one country to the next, the expressions used to characterize and qualify them are quite similar and contribute to giving them nearly the same tonality.

*We find in the French interviews phrases such as "with time, I got reorganized," "part unemployment, part work, you know," "I'm sort of on the margins now," "do small favors for people," "do a little bit more, but it wasn't planned," "it became more and more important."*

*The corresponding expressions in the Japanese interviews were: "I have obligations in the community," "I'm involved now," "for me it's more important than the job I had," "I don't really need to work".*

*In the Brazilian interviews, similar expressions: "I feel self-fulfilled," "never felt so useful before," "I saw I could be more useful," "there are people who need me, I can feel it."*

In France, the activities that give rise to this sort of experience share the fact they generate hardly any sort of income or monetary resource to speak of, but are the source of a sense of social utility and recognition. Whether they are engaged in them as volunteers, members of an association, or militants, the persons feel integrated in a community that pays out symbolic retribution in exchange for their dedication. They also provide an escape from the difficulties encountered on the labor market and give rise to alternative universes of self-investment. These activities become all the more attractive as the persons concerned are able to consider definitively retiring from their profession in the not-so-distant future and as they benefit from minimal material security. The activities then are put on a

par with work, and are considered a positive alternative to the employment lost.

In Japan, such activities are also positioned outside the field of employment and concern individuals who declare they don't need to work, who can survive without a salary. These activities are partly linked to accepting responsibility for certain roles within the local community and partly to domestic agricultural production with an eye to becoming self-sufficient. They illustrate an at least temporary withdrawal from professional activity but are sometimes associated with an active and persistent, albeit discontinuous, job search. They sketch the contours of a problematic and hybrid situation, characterized by an investment in alternate occupations that marks an attempt to escape unemployment, rather than a renunciation of employment.

In Brazil, these activities are, in similar fashion, a resource permitting people to combat the specter of unemployment and define their situation more positively. They are also more clearly substitutes for employment, in a social context where work is often less codified and formalized than in the other two countries. These activities are defined as being useful to others but sometimes resemble service relations that do not exclude a mercantile dimension. They can then be considered like real work and stand in for the employment that was lost.

Beyond certain differences, a set of cross-national significations appears, pointing to the fact that such alternative activities allow the person to reduce the tension between employment and unemployment. First, they correspond to a set of relatively long-term and long-lasting altruistic practices, fit into an organized ensemble of division of labor, and are the vectors of an enhanced social standing. They restructure the daily lives of the people involved, because they frequently correspond to a serious reorganization of their private universe. They also appear as a totally new way of life when compared with their previous existence and often compete with their professional activity. These alternative activities are thus both subjective and social resources allowing a person to anticipate the future as disconnected from employment and, above all, set job deprivation aside and de facto withdraw from the unemployment situation.

## 2. A common matrix and a schematization

The three figures described in the previous section exemplify our comparative approach by treating and bringing together the biographical interviews that were carried out to clarify the experience of unemployment. Each figure condenses a particular signification attributed to job deprivation: the first attaches value to the *job search* itself and rejects identification with the unemployed; the second meets up with *discouragement* due to the competition in the job market and ends up by withdrawing from the category of the unemployed; the third invests in *alternative activities* that mark and assert one's positive retiring from the situation of unemployment. Each interpretation is thus a declension of a typical and specific figure of unemployment. All have as their common denominator the attempt to cope as well as possible with the intrinsic insecurity accompanying job deprivation and to trace definitions of the situation irreducible to the category of unemployed.

Analyzing the material we realised that the interviews were not easy to distribute among univocal categories, even ideal-typical ones. These interviews were efforts to put into words and make sense of a problematic biographical experience, and discourses aimed at finding a way out of the unemployment dilemma cannot be reduced to projections into employment or clear-cut anticipations. Each individual is holding up as best they can under a negative ordeal and trying to come up with a difficult and necessarily improvised response in order to survive, i.e. in order both to access an alternative and more respectable social status, and avoid being blocked and reduced to that problematic situation. It is thus obvious that the discourses are filled with a tension and ambivalence, simultaneously translating the need to escape unemployment and the uncertainty of being able to do so. Such factors cannot be transformed into univocal, fixed, watertight, analytical categories, as ideal-typical ones might be.

Rather than attempt to identify and isolate fixed points that crystallize a set of significations, we preferred to signpost and outline a *space of meanings* in which the discourses can expand and sort themselves out. With this in mind, we built a matrix of significations in order to account for the diversity of the ways this biographical experience is put into words. In other words, we proposed to unfold the variety of figures of unemployment rather than condense them into a few typical figures. What is at stake in our approach is the way the two sorts of categories work to-

gether: the *indigenous categories*, which are the raw material of the research, and the *analytical categories*, that allow putting our results into a sociological form. Therefore, though translating the ones into the others implies a series of reductions, it seemed essential to us to account as far as possible for the discursive dynamics and tensions noted in the interviews. To achieve this, we had to adopt an approach letting the figures of unemployment unravel progressively, i.e. preserve the diversity observed, identify the differentiations and discrepancies, and account for the expansions and displacements. That is why we undertook to draw a matrix of meanings, indicate its components, and identify its structure.

Describing the characteristics of the common matrix that organize a space where the biographical ordeal of unemployment can be deployed, means grasping what constitutes that ordeal, what goes into building, modulating and redirecting it, what can eventually reconvert it. We proceeded progressively and repeatedly, confronting and comparing the interviews taken from the corpus of each country, to allow the categories to emerge.

Four poles were thus identified:

- Setting up, participating in, and creating what may be called social activities, which cover diverse practices (*unemployment as an overwhelming ordeal*);
- The heavy burden of job deprivation dominates and tends to eliminate every other element of the situation (*unemployment as an ordeal of emptiness*);
- The attraction for a professional occupation, corresponding to a status of employment and a variety of logics of accessibility (*unemployment as an ordeal to overcome*);
- Projecting ways of withdrawing from activity, which can be very diverse, temporary or definitive, paid or unpaid, hinging or not on a recognized social status (*unemployment as an ordeal to avoid*).

These four poles do not cover all the significations of unemployment, as ideal-types would. They don't even exhaust all the possibilities, but at least they organize a space in which to inscribe them. Though each pole is homogeneous from the point of view of what opposes it to its symmetrical vis-à-vis – activities *versus* deprivation, professional occupation vs. withdrawal from activity –, it is also marked by an internal ambivalence which we were able to

identify, describe and name as we went along, according to a reiterative approach as previously applied.

Thus, those non-professional activities that turn unemployment into an overwhelming ordeal can be invested as resources to prepare one's progressive *withdrawal from activity*, putting employment at a distance, or else as means to implement a *professional project*. Their signification is somehow slippery, sliding either towards a transformation of those activities into official and remunerated professional employment, or towards being progressively converted into occupations which are substitutes for work.

Similarly, being deprived of the possibility to work, which marks unemployment as an empty ordeal, can deteriorate into feelings of being trapped and paralyzingly resigned, or else into an intense or even exclusive investment in a *job search* that becomes an obsession. Its signification can espouse the form of a mobilization turned towards competition in the labor market, or, on the contrary, of a *discouragement* leading to or preparing a withdrawal from activity.

The perspective of obtaining employment that formats unemployment as an ordeal to overcome, can take the shape of a *personal project* enlarging or transforming one's personal investments in certain activities, or of a reasoned strategy for prospecting in the labor market, a discipline more or less learned during the period of unemployment. Its significance extends in two directions: the elaboration and realization of preferences based on one's previous itinerary or the practice of certain activities, or, at the other extreme, bringing up to date and settling into a role defined by the job search.

Finally, withdrawing from activity that makes unemployment into an ordeal to avoid can be prepared by investing in occupations that progressively appear like supportable *alternatives* to employment, or may be the continuation of a spiral of *discouragement* that leads to giving up, as if one were somehow forced to. Here again, its signification forks in two directions, since it can either turn towards a reconversion giving increasing importance to peripheral activities, or towards an eviction from the labor market after a series of failures.

These tensions or states of ambivalence authorize connecting the different interpretations of unemployment thus described, in such a way as to organize a space of meanings in which each interview can be situated. That is what

we have done in Figure 1 (see Appendix: Figures) presenting the matrix of significations of unemployment.

What immediately stands out when observing this figure concerns the way the interviews occupy the matrix; they are completely spread out, and this dispersion concerns all three countries. However, the interviews are not disseminated in exactly the same way in each corpus (Brazilian, French, Japanese) and, given this framework for the analysis we must identify the differences and similarities that mark the biographical experience of unemployment in each of the three countries.

### 3. Differences: subjective worlds and normative constraints

Our last questioning then concerns the differences between the three countries. Decomposing the proposed schematization into three national diagrams, i.e. accounting for the positions of the interviews of each country within their common matrix, directly allows us to formulate a few comparative observations.

In the French case (Figure 2, see Appendix: Figures), the squares (each representing an interview) are concentrated on the left and right-hand sides of the schema, and occupy each time both the high and low positions.

In the Japanese case (Figure 3, see Appendix: Figures), the triangles fall almost exclusively into the lower part of the graph, on the left as well as on the right-hand side.

In the Brazilian case (Figure 4, see Appendix: Figures), the distribution is also unbalanced, but following other modalities: a very dense cluster of circles can be seen in the upper, central part of the graph, while a smaller cluster occupies the lower right-hand corner.

The distributions are thus specific to each country. But in the three cases, a significant number of interviews are concentrated in the lower right-hand angle of the graph, where one makes out a very dense and very international cluster as we could see first on Figure 1. This zone covers what we have called discouragement in the previous section. There the corresponding interpretations of the unemployment situation are those earmarked by inactivity in the sense of withdrawing from, or even dropping everything connected to unemployment, such as a job search or any alternative activity that could help liberate oneself from that status. The persons concerned feel trapped in a dead

end from which they cannot imagine any way out or any relief. They are, so to speak, crushed by a ubiquitous unemployment against which (as they express) it has become impossible to fight and which, for the same reasons, has become painful, absurd and unjust. The most extreme form of such an interpretation, marked by despair and misery, consists in the mention, sometimes only insinuated, of a fateful ending, such as suicide or death.

This form of experience appears as the most extreme way to live unemployment, as an exacerbating way of interpreting the situation. It also corresponds to the most negative modulations among the ensemble of discourses collected during our survey. It echoes, too, the teachings of the oldest sociological investigations on unemployment, which stressed how much that condition meant humiliation, social decline, withdrawal from all participation in collective life (Lazarsfeld, 1932; Ledrut, 1966). But at the same time, that form of experience is not all-pervasive and does not exhaust all the discourses we heard from unemployed persons, nor does it define the totality of our corpus of interviews, far from it.

The observations accompanying the schemas (Figures 2, 3 and 4) lead us to hypothesize that this form represents *the negative pole of a universe of significations proper to each country*, that it represents the reverse of each country's dominant experience, crystallizing the non accomplishment of a social and normative reference specific to each.

The differences among countries can then be studied following the tensions between the variable referential poles (specific to each country) and that one identical negative pole. If our hypothesis is correct, each context is marked by specific tensions, which translate the problematic and uncertain nature of the unemployment experience.

Nevertheless, those references must not be reduced to subjective experiences, or, on the other hand, to the cultural models which frame those individual experiences. They must be considered as the joint product of both institutional structures and subjective experiences, of the strategies of individual actors and collective regulations, of subjective worlds and normative constraints. For the frames of reference of professional life, activity and work are the result of interaction between structural dynamics and subjective logics, and consequently so are the significations of unemployment. We must therefore now go into those frames of reference, and, returning to our data,

attempt to explain them by considering them as configurations rather than national models.

### **In France: socializing the responses**

Broadly speaking, the French interviews fall into two main sections, situated on the margins to the left and right of the schema (as we can see in Figure 2). The greatest number gathers close to the pole we have called *professional work*, corresponding to a categorization of unemployment as an ordeal to be overcome. In this area, unemployment is in a relation of proximity to employment. That proximity has several different significations: it means all at once the projection into future employment and the anticipation of coming out of the state of unemployment, the personal mobilization in activities connected to the job search, and involvement in processes and techniques limiting the distance that separates one from work. A plurality of ways of being present on the labor market, therefore, which concretely means going out to look for work, carrying out a professional project, accessing transitory statuses (training, short-term contracts, etc.). The definitions of the situation are framed by the employment/unemployment pair, while being irresistibly attracted towards employment, mainly because of one's involvement in practices that may jell into intermediate positions, in complete contrast with discouragement. On the opposite side, but in the upper part of the schema, a considerably smaller number of interviews are drawn towards the reverse pole, i.e. withdrawal from activity, and towards its modulation of alternative occupations. That situation corresponds to taking one's distance from unemployment, but in an opposite direction: withdrawal from the labor market, supported here too by the possibility of obtaining one of the substitute occupations contained in a more or less codified status.

This goes to show the extent to which the subjective logics aimed at avoiding unemployment (by inactivity), or on the contrary aimed at overcoming it (by obtaining employment) are supervised and validated by the institutional norms in France. In the French context, public policy in the battle against unemployment multiply the particular and intermediate statuses between standard employment and unemployment: training periods or assisted contracts cause unemployed people to settle into positions that cannot be reduced to unemployment but that do not assimilate them in the workforce either. Parallel to this, but pointed in the contrary direction, a good number of systems aiming at anticipating the withdrawal from professional life (early retirement, being exempted from the job search, a more

favorable system of indemnities for the oldest unemployed) sketch potential alternatives and bestow legitimacy to aspiration towards the end of one's professional life. More generally, the already ancient presence of an imposing network of local public employment agencies and, above all, the repeated campaigns of follow-up of the unemployed and the intense service distribution which goes with them (scheduled interviews, assessment sessions, assistance with the job search, personalized follow-ups, orientation and definition of professional projects, aptitude tests), contribute to lending a specific consistency to the unemployment situation, filling in the space left empty by job deprivation. In short, the unemployed are not left to themselves as if plunged totally alone into the fray. They are supervised and accompanied and often invited or even summoned to participate in the measures and systems set up to help them reintegrate the working world. That strong institutionalization of unemployment lends a specific texture to the experience and channels the ways the situations are interpreted.

Institutionalization is instrumental in tightening the links between employment and unemployment, explicitly declared to be the principal objective of the program helping people to access employment, and moreover, it formats the entire experience of unemployment. Firstly, because the latter becomes a shared experience (an object of public discourse and action) which thereby is not attributed solely to the individual's responsibility. Next, the measures included in the recently named Active Employment Policy carry normative demands that influence the unemployment experience. For instance, requiring the unemployed person to define a personal project, considered a factor in obtaining work, and assimilating the job-seekers' competences, especially in their investment in relational networks, participate in the definition of modes of conduct marked by individualization but also, and simultaneously, backed by the organized distribution of resources. In a complementary manner, institutionalization also functions according to a logic of selection that more or less firmly eliminates certain unemployed people from the labor market, particularly the oldest ones. But here again, that eviction is socialized, i.e. backed up by protective and compensatory statuses.

In such a structural framework, the French unemployed are not left to face their ordeal alone, whether to overcome it or to avoid it. This does not exclude the fact that unemployed people may inexorably slide towards the pole of discouragement, particularly because the mechanisms have

not been effective enough in preventing the rise and persistence of long-term unemployment. Nevertheless, those mechanisms support a referential signification of unemployment, which is that the ordeal is alleviated by the institutions and accompanied by statuses and compensations many and varied, to adapt it as well as possible to the individuals and shorten its duration. The importance of this normative model explains why most of the interviews conducted in France fall into the first cluster, drawn towards the pole of professional work and stretching out vertically, and into the second one, attracted towards the pole of withdrawal from activity and also stretching out vertically. Discouragement here thus reflects the failure of a two-part institutional program: one part seeking to accompany the unemployed towards reintegrating the working world while educating them for the job search, on one hand, the other part giving access to a status of inactivity connected to social protection (invalidity or social assistance) or indicating the end of professional activity (early retirement), on the other hand. We met a few cases that do not fit into this picture and will return to them later.

### **In Japan: individual and personal responsibility**

The distribution of the Japanese interviews is very uneven, since nearly all of them crowd into the lower part of the schema (see Figure 3). It signifies that the force of attraction of *job deprivation*, corresponding to a conception of unemployment as an ordeal of emptiness, scatters the interviews over the entire continuum, from the job search to discouragement. The latter thus acts as the negation of the former, which appears as the referential norm: being unemployed in Japan means first of all starting to look for work, getting involved in that activity and focalizing on the quest for new employment. It is an eloquent statement on the fact that the employment/unemployment pair is the reference that frames the subjective significations that a person might elaborate on and express. That is the reason why they cannot define their situation from the viewpoint of activities, not even from strategies of investing in alternative occupations (the nearly empty upper right-hand corner of the schema bears this out).

Such subjective constructs are supported and reinforced by the institutional norms in Japan. Thus, aside from the role of housewife and mother, which lends validity to a woman's at least temporary withdrawal from the labor market – and even that only tacitly – there is hardly any alternative status to unemployment (and to employment) that might represent a resource with which to elaborate

other interpretations of the situation. In the same vein, the situations are codified in a sufficiently rigid and formal manner to make it difficult, or even to prohibit, any improvisation of the intermediary situations that could be invented and designed by persons faced by unemployment.

Given this configuration, what are the outstanding traits of the reference experience of unemployment in Japan? The combination of job deprivation with the job search is its basis, and it is also an exclusive framework in the sense that socially legitimate alternatives are practically non-existent. This normative context is made even more severe by the rarity of collective responsibility for unemployment, which forces individuals to face it quite alone, makes them responsible for the unfortunate transformation of their own situation, causing them to internalize all the weight of unemployment. Many factors enter into the birth of this configuration: the fact that unemployment is relatively recent in Japan and the weak responsibility on the part of the State, now trying to replace the large firms which regulated the surplus of manpower internally, the lack of public measures to ease and accompany job deprivation, the weakness of the indemnities system and social protection. To all this must be added the fact that it is not considered advantageous or even decent to use one's relational networks for the job search and their relative ineffectiveness when looking for work: advertising work offers, especially atypical ones, goes mainly through the press, to the detriment of the diffusion of information through networks, the obligations and indebtedness created by having recourse to social networks are degrading for the person who asks for the favor. Furthermore, once cut from the professional environment, unemployed persons are isolated from social networks, and their families are left alone to manage their financial difficulties resulting from unemployment.

In such a structural framework, the Japanese unemployed are to a large extent left to their own devices. Of course they are not completely cut off from the public system, reticulated supports, or extended solidarities, but these measures of accompaniment are not sufficient resources to solve the problem of unemployment, at best they function as active shock absorbers. They cannot erase the referential signification of unemployment, according to which that ordeal must be overcome by a personal effort, the only factor capable of bringing success in the competition on the labor market. The weight of this normative model explains why most of the interviews carried out in Japan seem to be aligned between the pole of job search, corre-

sponding to the referential program that every unemployed person is supposed to follow, and the pole of discouragement corresponding to the inability to realize that program and to the various and powerful processes that cause their situation to decline. Naturally, a few cases do not fall into this scheme and we will return to them below, but this structure nevertheless has a strong magnetic pull.

### **In Brazil: an organized making do**

The distribution of the Brazilian interviews appears quite haphazard, in the sense that the cluster of circles occupies practically every possible position on the fringes of the matrix (See Figure 4). Two concentrations nevertheless clearly appear: one in the lower right-hand corner, corresponding to discouragement, the other in the top central part near the pole of activities. This pole of attraction is particularly significant, since over 40% of the interviews fall into its orbit. The cluster of circles is very dense, indicating that those activities remain at a considerable distance from the logic of alternative occupations. These activities therefore correspond only very slightly to the statutory categories of employment and inactivity, and unemployment as well. They suggest rather an intermediate zone in which those categories are fuzzy and mixed. They create a buffer zone in which their pertinence appears problematic. Thus, in the Brazilian case, the experience of unemployment seems strongly shaped by the practice of activities of an indefinite nature, that are not reducible to the statuses habitually used to describe the positions occupied in the labor market.

The valorization of activities is both favored and restricted by the structural context and specific institutional norms in Brazil. A multiplicity of mechanisms contributes to the construction of the meanings of unemployment mainly the role of informal jobs and the regulation of employment relations, the system of social protection, the family structures, and the reticular organizations. The way the Brazilian labor market is structured promotes the multiplication of intermediary situations characterized by a weak statutory codification. This concerns in the first place the forms of labor, which – less than in the other countries – are not totally comprised in the notion of employment. For in fact remunerated labor covers a large spectrum, spanning from formal, official, supervised, statutory employment to more informal, unstable, fragile activities, from the non-declared workers hired in industry and commerce to the odd jobs of street vendor, through all the various forms of subcontracting, unofficial business, lending a hand, etc. The fuzzy

contours of employment have their counterpart in the situations of unemployment. The institutionalization of employment is feeble: public employment agencies are not very developed and bureaucratic accounting of the unemployed remains relatively rare, financial compensation is limited to a part of those who were formally employed, and measures to help people get back to work are practically nonexistent.

Given the foregoing, protection against the consequences of unemployment and against the threats it represents for personal survival depends less on the institutional measures taken by the State than on the structures of local community relations. In this respect, the family is the basic unit for managing unemployment, more exactly for developing the strategies to drain monetary resources. The interdependence that exists between the members of this basic economic unit favors a distribution of participation in economic activities that procure an income. Broader community networks such as the extended family, neighborhoods, and religious groups also provide information and resources stimulating the participation of individuals in activities whose status is uncertain but whose economic and monetary dimension has been proved. Proximity solidarity thus contributes to framing the unemployment experience: it orientates it towards the practice of remunerated activities (with very variable incomes) as a response to the deprivation of income inevitably brought on by unemployment. That solidarity also creates and consolidates systems of allegiance, obligations, reciprocity and indebtedness, that clearly leave their mark on individual situations.

This state of affairs further debilitates the institutionalization of unemployment and also of employment, because the result is that the social stigma of unemployment is not very serious, so that it is not the fact of having lost one's job that can organize its meanings, but other sorts of interpretation, founded on activities. In the Brazilian context, the unemployed are included in relational networks that convey the meanings and can procure them corresponding resources. Thus, the reference experience, both as it is lived by the individual and collectively supported, is structured by the act of mobilizing resources capable of restoring an income, and consequently orientated towards the participation in a variety of forms of labor. It stands out as a model of organized making do, which carries considerable weight, since a good number of the interviews carried out in Brazil fall into the zone of the pole of activities. The complementary pole of discouragement crystallizes the cases where this self-management has failed, that can only

lead to very rapid pauperization. A small number of other cases do not fit in with the above; we will return to them later.

We were thus able to note large gaps in the distributions of the interpretations of unemployment in the three countries: in France, what dominates is a *socialized and accompanied job search*, in Japan, the *internalization of job deprivation* prevails, and in Brazil, an *organized making do* carries the day. These three reference experiences have been analyzed at the intersection of subjective logics and institutional norms, which all shape either the significations of unemployment or the behaviour of unemployed people vis-à-vis the labor market. The three configurations that shape unemployment and represent so many differentiated ways of responding to it, are articulated, when these responses fail, to a counter-reference which in the three countries takes a similar form, *i.e. discouragement*.

These results, which indicate diversity in the logics of action in contrast with a similarity in the logic of inaction, fit in with our hypotheses about the existence of national configurations. In fact, our approach can describe significant differences between the countries, while at the same time respecting the contents of a large number of the interviews. However, all of them do not fit in with this schematization, clearly indicating that these configurations are not as inflexible as national models can be.

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## Endnotes

1For detailed information on the surveys carried out see Kase and Sugita (2006), Guimarães (2006 and 2009).

2Operational decisions and methodological aspects related to biographical interviews are carefully presented in Demazière, Guimarães and Sugita (2006).

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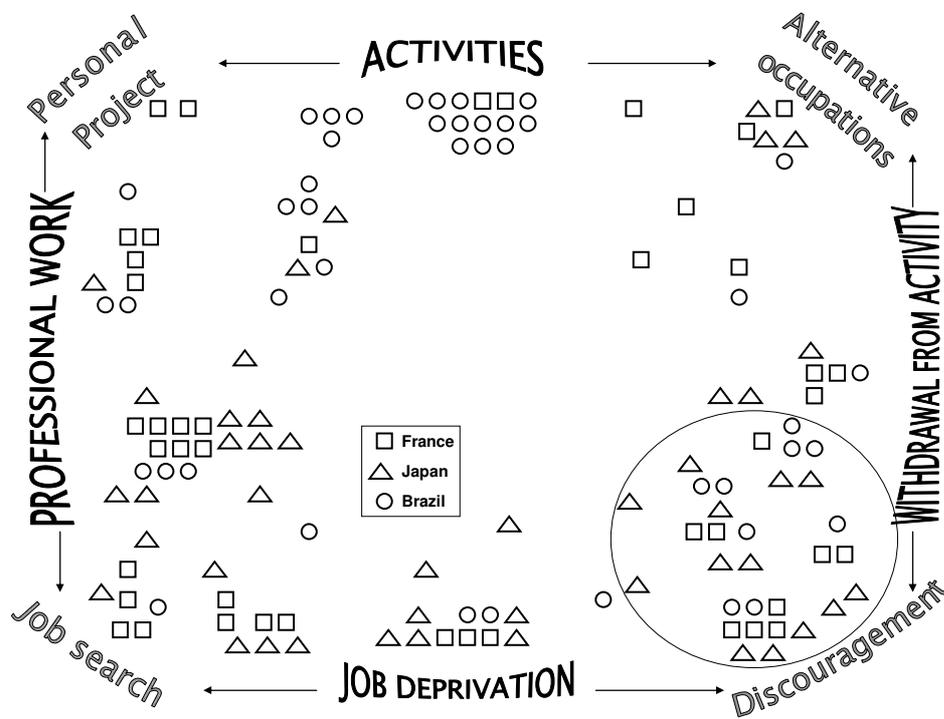
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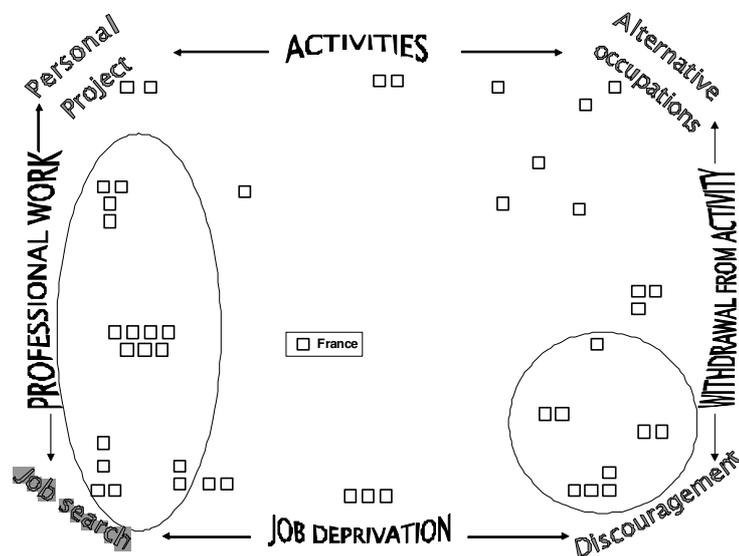
**Appendix: Figures**



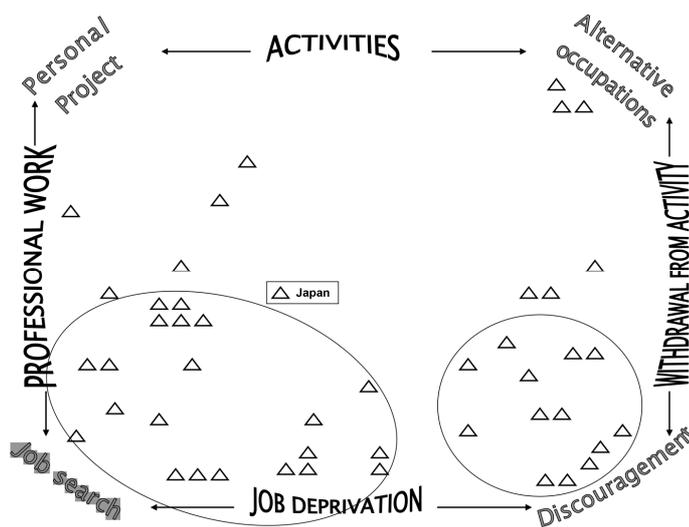
**Figure 1:** Poles of significations and cases (France, Japan and Brazil)

**Source:** *Fieldwork in Paris (1998-2000), São Paulo (2001-2004) and Tokyo (2001-2004).*

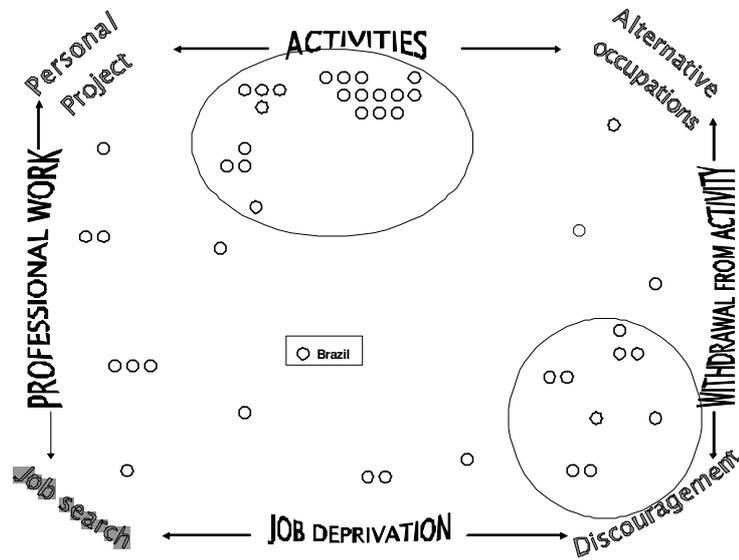
*Detailed information on methodological decision see Kase and Sugita (2006) and Guimarães (2009).*



**Figure 2:** Poles of significations and distribution of discourses collected in the French case  
**Source:** *Fieldwork in Paris (1998-2000)*.



**Figure 3:** Poles of significations and distribution of discourses collected in the Japanese case.  
**Source:** *Fieldwork in Tokyo (2001-2004)*



**Figure 4:** Poles of significations and distribution of discourses collected in the Brazilian case  
**Source:** *Fieldwork in São Paulo (2001-2004)*