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A FOLLOW UP STUDY OF RECENTLY GRADUATE PSYCHOLOGISTS IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS OF PRACTICE

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AIM

To analyse mental models of problems situated in contexts of professional practice in 45 recently graduate Psychologists from Faculty of Psychology of Buenos Aires University, related with the competences assigned to the role of Psychologist in different fields.

To compare these mental models and competences with those they had when were undergraduate students and were interviewed when they began and when they finished Professional Practice Apprenticeship, in 2003 and 2004 and with the Tutors/Professors they had had in the communities of practice become academic contexts for situated learning.

THEORETICAL FRAME

In the approach to “human practice in interaction” the socio-historical- cultural theory contributes a dialectical perspective . The frame is based in Lev Vygotsky thought. In line to James Wertsch “action mediated by artifacts or mediation tools” (1) , mainly Yrjo Engestrom (2) concepts of “**system of activity**” has inspired our construction of a “unit of analysis” that can reflect the complexity and interdependence of dimensions in the issue of Psychologists Training. Yrjo Engestrom (2001) has studied the relation between microcontext, macrocontext and human actors in diverse settings of “Work in Change” and emphasized the role of **tensions and contradictions** in the possibility of changing the work by changing the context and changing the actors, through a process of “**internalization and externalization**”, plus the confrontation of models from a diversity of activity systems, the negotiation and translation of meanings, purposes, attitudes that can respect the differences by including them in new “task unities”. These approaches implicate a change on modern dominant epistemology, that has built external relations between causes and effects, and the “split conception” between body and mind, emotion and knowledge, society and individual (Castorina and Baquero,) (3)..

We focus in “**cognitive changes**”, as they have been studied by María José Rodrigo (4) as development in educational settings. To distinguish from a more stable representation such as “schemas”, Rodrigo used in 90s the concept of “mental model”, created by Johnson Laird in 80s. **Mental models** are “*psychological constructions, that are dynamic and temporal representations, based on a specific part of our beliefs and knowledge about the world, that are activated by the content of the task or the situation, and that depend on the subjective intention of the person, related to the event that he/she has to cope with*”(Rodrigo:1993). To formulate, analyze and solve a problem that requests professional intervention of psychologist, undergraduate students and graduate Psychologists build a discursive configuration that supposes a mental model. In former presentation, we pointed that the “**unit of analysis**” – “the very small unit in which you can divide a problem of study without losing its essential nature” (Vygotsy, 1998) (5) – was “*the mental models that students of psychology build for the reflective analysis of problems situated in contexts, which need a professional intervention strategy from the psychologists in different fields of activity*” (Erausquin, Basualdo et al.) (6) . Psychologists in process of training develop a “**participative appropriation**” of tools (Rogoff 1997) (7), building general and specific “competences” for the professional activities in different contexts in “**communities of practice**” (Lave and Wenger, 1991) (8).

A **competence** is something you know how to do, it’s a skill, but more than that, it is a strategic ability, necessary to face complex situations. It’s not a procedure, a rule, a recipe, although it may include them, if necessary. “*A competence is a capacity of effective action toward a family of situations, that people can construct because they have the necessary knowledge and the ability to mobilize that resource in an appropriate way and in an opportune time, to identify and solve the problems*” (Ph. Perrenoud, 2004)(9). The competences: a) are

knowledge, skills and attitudes and at the same time, they mobilize, integrate, and guide those resources, b) that mobilization is related to a situation, which is unique, but can be similar to other known situations, c) are built and proved through complex cognitive operations, supported by a mental model of situation, that identify general formats of reasoning (Rodrigo, 1994, Perrenoud, 2004), to determine and perform an efficient action, d) are built in academic education but also in training of performance, in work situations, one by one.

It is remarkable a “**contextualist shift**” in conception of “learning” (Pintrich, 1994) (10), no more a mental and individual event, but a complex activity, involving mind and body, emotion and cognition, in the core of interpersonal exchange.

METHODOLOGY STRATEGIES

This a descriptive and exploratory study with qualitative and quantitative data analysis. The sample is formed by 45 Psychologists, graduated at Faculty of Psychology in Buenos Aires University, between July of 2003 and December of 2005. These Psychologists had made the Professional Practice Undergraduate Apprenticeship in different Areas: Clinical, Education, Work, Social-Community, Justice, and Research, between 2003 and 2004, when they were undergraduate students. In that opportunity, they had answered the **Questionnaire of Problems Situated in Contexts of Psychological Activity**, at the beginning and at the end of the Apprenticeship. For this study, they have brought new answers to the Questionnaire, that had been formerly answered by three generations of Psychology students including them, and whose results were studied by the Project of Research with categories mentioned above. In current study the **unit of analysis** – mental models of recently graduate Psychologists reflecting about their own professional practice in context - is composed by four **dimensions**: a) problems situated in contexts of Graduate Psychologists professional activity, b) professional intervention, c) the tools they use, d) the results with whom they evaluate their intervention and their attribution of reasons or causes to those results (Erasquin, Basualdo 2006). In each dimension, different **axes** are displayed, conforming lines of run, ways and tensions identified in process of “getting professionalism” as psychologist in our context. In each axis, we distinguish five **indicators**, that mark qualitative differences in mental models, ordered in line of enhancement and improvement in the process of getting professionalism. It is not supposed a “representational hierarchy”, neither genetic nor of power or efficiency in a strong form.

In this presentation, data of current job and mental models of recently graduate Psychologists are presented, and we analyse them over the landscape of mental models of the generation of Students they integrated and the Tutors/ Professors they had had when undergraduate students.

FEATURES OF THE SAMPLE AND FIRST JOB

All of recently graduate Psychologists have strong desire to work as professionals in different fields and kinds of activities. The Area of their current performance is related with one of the Areas and with specific settings in which they had developed professional undergraduate Apprenticeship in 2003 or 2004. Opportunities to work as professional Psychologists, in urban context of Buenos Aires, are major in Clinical Area, but they are articulated with necessity and possibility of exploring other Areas of professional activity, like Social-Community, Education, Justice, Work or Research. Even when current performance is in Clinic Area, generally they work in institutions, mainly Hospitals or Mental Health Centres, and the narration includes dimensions very frequently found in the analysis of problems and interventions in contexts of Social-Community, Education or Justice Areas. 97% of recently graduate Psychologists are working in their profession, but there is a great variety in time they destinate to professional work by week and rentability those works had got. Only 27% recently graduate Psychologists of the sample work without any economical retribution. 70% of them receive some payment for their work in consulting-room or in diverse institutions. Very few times it is a normal monthly payment, not even for a part-time work. 10% recently graduate Psychologists are working with a retribution appropriate to their dedication and studies. Generally they have enthusiasm in

searching work and with the first opportunities to prove themselves in the professional activities. It has been more difficult to have a good experience to open opportunities to perform as Psychologists for some of them that depend on the payment of their job for support their living: they have to work “in some other thing”.

70% of recently graduate students of the sample had developed two Professional Practice Undergraduate Courses. In this 70%, 2/3 had developed Professional Undergraduate Apprenticeship in two different Areas and 1/3 in the same Area, generally Clinic. 2/3 of the sample of recently graduate Psychologists had developed one or two Professional Practice Courses in Clinical Area. When they had developed two Clinical Practices, majority had got one with Children Assistance and the other with Adult Assistance. 40% of recently graduate Psychologists are performing as teachers in Faculty of Psychology in Buenos Aires University.

MENTAL MODELS AND COMPETENCES OF RECENTLY GRADUATE PSYCHOLOGISTS (Only report the state of some significant Axes of two Dimensions)

1st Dimension: Problems situated in contexts of Psychologist Intervention

1st Axis. Cutting complex and multidimensional problems for analyzing and facing them in contexts of professional practice. Recently Graduate Psychologists: 35,6 % answers situated in indicator (4) *Cutting complex problems that articulate meaningfully factors, actors and dimensions*, and 44,4% situated in indicator (5) , as 42,6% answers of Tutors *Cutting complex problems that articulate relational psychosocial and interpersonal wefts among diversity of actors and dimensions*. 2003 Students of Psychology in Post-test Apprenticeship 41% situated in indicator (3), *Mentionning complex, multidimensional problems*, and 31% indicator (2) *Mentionning simple, unidimensional problems*

2nd Axis. Describing, explaining and formulating hypothesis about problems situated in contexts of professional practice. Recently Graduate Psychologists 42,2% answers in indicator (3) *Mentioning some inferences besides data* and 42,2% answers in indicator (4) *Formulating hypothesis about factors or reasons that explain the problem*, very similar to Tutors and Professors of Apprenticeship, that have got more percentage in indicator (5) *Diverse combination of interrelations of factors in Hypothesis*. Students in Post-Test Apprenticeship 2003: in indicator (2) is situated the majority of answers: *Only describing the problem or Only bringing an abstract scheme of the problem without situating in any context* (45%).

4th Axis. Expliciting historical antecedents / background of the problem with meaningful relations. Recently Graduate Psychologists 28,9% answers in indicator (4)) *Mentioning diverse inter-related antecedents of the problem*, and 26,7% in indicator (2) *Mentioning only one antecedent*. Tutors/Professors 31,9% in indicator (4) and 23,4% in indicator (2). Students Post-Test Apprenticeship: 31% in indicator (1) *Do not mentioning any antecedent*.

6th Axis. Taking different perspectives in the focus of the problem, dis-centering of “unique thinking” about it: toward perspectivism Recently Graduate Psychologists: 57,8% answers in indicator (4) *Dis-centering from only one scientific perspective for understanding the problem*, similar to Tutors and Professors (48,9%). Students Post-Test 2003: majority of answers 41% indicator (3) *Centered in one unique perspective of the problem: the scientific one* and 31% indicator (2) *the perspective of common sense appeared as the unique, the “real”*

7th Axis. Analysing subjective and inter-subjective problems in context, with singular and structural components, conflicts dynamics and ethic dilemmas. Recently graduate Psychologists 44,4% answers indicator (4) *Combinating singular and structure factors with dynamics of conflicts intra and inter-system* and 33,3% answers indicator (3) *Singular and structure factors explain regularities*. Similar to Tutors and Professors, that reach more frequency of answers in indicator (5) *Dynamics of conflicts and ethical dilemmas of professional practice*. Students Post-Test 2003: 33% in indicator (2) *Personalization of problems without wefts or relationship or social definition of the problem without subjects*.

3rd Dimension: Tools that are used by psychologists in intervention

1st Axis. Using different tools in professional action over different dimensions of the problem. Recently Graduate Psychologists: 42,2% answers in indicator (4) *Using different tools related different dimensions of the problem* and 35,6% in indicator (2) *Mentioning only one tool*

related to only one dimension of the problem. Similar to the Tutors and Professors, with more frequency of answers in indicator (3) *Using one tool related with different dimensions of the problem* and in indicator (5) *Using different tools, related to different dimensions, with a hierarchy according to the context.* Students Post-Test 2003: Majority of answers, 38% in indicator (3). **2nd Axis. Consistence of the tools with specificity of psychological role and conceptual frame or intervention models.** Recently Graduate Psychologists 51,1% indicator (4) *Mentioning tools linked to role and field of professional activity and with theoretical supporting*, while Students in Post-Test 2003 majority, 48% answers are situated in indicator (3) *Mentioning tools linked to role and field of professional activity.*

CONCLUSIONS, OPENING THE DEBATE

Recently graduate Psychologists had got important **strengths** in the process of getting professionalism. They cut problems in context with complex and multidimensional units of analysis, articulating factors, actors and dimensions, including inter-subjective and psycho-social wefts. They also can dis-center from a “unique way of thinking” and they reach perspectivism. A complex problem can be seen and understood from different points of view, including other professionals or other social actors perspectives.

Since the beginning to the end of the Professional Practice undergraduate Apprenticeship, students of Psychology had already showed an evolution of their mental models, with construction or development of skills, abilities and some specific competences. That evolution has meaningfully increased since they were students to their current condition of graduate Psychologists, mainly in the issue of “competences” for professional practice.

Recently graduate Psychologists had also significant **weaknesses** in the process of getting professionalism, according to the necessities of social contexts and individuals. They are similar to weaknesses that have showed some novice Tutors or Tutors Assistants of Undergraduate Apprenticeship. And that weakness is major in students of Psychology mental models, even when they finished the Apprenticeship of Professional Practice. They don't formulate scientific hypothesis explaining the causes or effects of problems in contexts of intervention. That situation limits the extent of the reasoning that supported the interventions. Complexity of Practice seems to exceed theoretical models that had been appropriated by students and professionals during the career, mainly when they are mainly linked to Clinical Practice and Conceptual Frame of Psycho-Analysis, in Argentine context.

To give a background of the problem is a difficulty, another critical point in Psychologists that are modeling their profession. Neither students no graduate Psychologists actually mention antecedents of the problem. They analyse structures of features, generalizations, “pictures” or “frames”, that are linked with regularities or repetitions, but they do not articulate historical events in wefts of senses and meanings genetically related. Vygotsky articulates day to day knowledge with scientific knowledge in professional practice. One of them contributes with generality and abstraction, enhancing with the plenitude of sense and vital experience that the other contributes. Professional practice poses “in game” that tension between two vertical directions: ascendant and descendant.

It is meaningful what happens with dimension of Tools, the “Cinderelle” of the unit of analysis of situated problems in our context. There are significant differences among Areas, it is a strength in some of them and a weakness in others, but all of recently graduate Psychologists of the sample, as it happens with Tutors and Professors of Undergraduate Apprenticeship, are getting strongly aware about the necessity of developing the appropriation of useful and powerful tools for specific interventions. If there is a polyvalent title of Psychologist in different countries, and specially in a historic moment in ours in which Psychology has been stated as a “public interest” profession, “because the activity of Psychologists has significant effects over life and health of people”, we have to guarantee, in professional modeling of psychologists, that

diversity of logics and perspectives can be appropriated by every psychologist graduated in University, whatever will be the field they “choose” or they “find” to work, for the enhancement and integration of their knowledge and activity with human beings.

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