

# **The differing representations of youths from contrasting social backgrounds regarding decent work**

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## **Introduction**

During this presentation I share the results of qualitative research focused on understanding the social representations of what decent work should entail. Through a comparative study between young people who did not finish high school and young people who did, similarities and differences were identified in the semantic fields that define decent work. These specific perceptions and expectations are related to different familiar, educational and work pathways. These representations have a major impact on the construction of identity, future prospects and the development of competences that help young people find decent, sustainable work.

What do they understand by “decent work”? How do their educational and work pathways relate to their representations?

The concept of "decent work", as an aspirational goal, aims to agree on the key objective characteristics a job should have in order to allow people to live satisfactory lives (OIT, 1999). From the Theory of Psychology of working, the scope of this concept is sought to be broadened, focusing on subjective, intersubjective and psychosocial experiences. It must contribute to human fulfillment and general well-being and provide the means for people to meet three basic human needs: survival, social connection and self-determination (Blustein, Olle, Connors-Kellgren y Diamonti, 2016).

The debate about the scope of the decent work model includes the fact that it is necessary to take into account the particularities posed by certain specific contexts and populations. Strategies must necessarily be applied specifically taking into account the distinctive characteristics of each country and its different demographic groups, their needs, challenges, expectations and opportunities.

The outlook in Argentina is currently rather discouraging: unemployment, poverty, extreme poverty and crime are all on the rise at a time when the country is also undergoing a difficult period of political, cultural and economic transformation, characterized by greater social division and overall inequality.

In Argentina, the issue of vulnerability, precariousness and disaffiliation of young people, together with job insecurity and the fragility of wage labor, occupy the center of gravity of the social issue. Among them, vulnerable young people who did not finish high school have greater difficulty in joining the labor market. When they do, however, they generally end up in precarious, informal jobs, as well as in situations of mistreatment, abuse, insecurity and with fewer conditions for moving towards better jobs that would allow them to build a path towards decent jobs. On the

other hand, their own work experiences in precarious work, as well as that of their family – as it is often the case that at least two previous generations have never had any experience of good quality work – has an impact on their representations about what decent work should be. Objective and subjective conditions contribute to perpetuating precarious life situations in non-decent jobs.

## **Youth employment in Argentina**

Over the past 30 years, informal working conditions have been one of the main problems in the labor market. Workers in the informal sector tend to have low quality jobs, lower wages, longer working hours, less access to training opportunities and virtually no access to legal resources or the social welfare system.

60.8% of children and young people aged 0 to 29 are poor. Among young people aged 16 to 29, Poverty is 40%, and 10% of young people are destitute  
The Total Population Unemployment Rate is 9.7%, and 38.0% of the unemployed have been searching for more than a year. 42% of them have not been able to access full secondary studies.

Among young people (aged 14 to 29), unemployment reaches 22.6% of women and 17.9% of men. Also, six out of ten young people between 18 and 24 lack formal job: there are unregistered, or informal work: 59 %

35% of young people between 18 and 24 did not complete high school. Similarly, a quarter of those who entered the last year of high school failed to finish it, either due to the previous subjects or by failing the subjects of the last year.

The access and maintenance of education has socioeconomic determinants, since 5 out of every 10 young people in the lower sectors have incomplete secondary education

Among young people from vulnerable sectors, the transition to the world of work occurs at an earlier age and in more precarious conditions. The percentage of young people that did not complete high school, who have informal undocumented jobs is 76.5%; almost 30% more than those who have reached the country's average level of education. All this puts their personal development and future plans at risk. This situation presents us with the enormous challenge of developing knowledge for those who cannot fully exercise their rights as workers.

However, many socially vulnerable young people view their working situation through the prism of their own or their family's experience. It is often the case that at least two generations have never had any positively regarded, quality work. Instead, they have relied on temporary jobs known as *changas*, social welfare, and in some cases, illegal activities. This has a negative impact on the formation of identity and the development of skills to improve one's work and way of life. Their ability to obtain decent work is thus impaired.

## Methodology

Relevant data on this issue arises from two international studies (Duffy, et al., 2017 and Cohen Scali et al., 2019) with the objective of evaluating how people perceive the elements that make up decent work.

The survey was aimed at urban Argentine workers, men and women over the age of 18, who completed the self-administered questionnaire in 2017. The sample is made up of 480 people who were working at the time they filled out the questionnaire. 53% was composed of young people with no high school diploma, working in low-skilled jobs.

On this occasion, I will compare the differences between young, low-skilled workers from vulnerable backgrounds, with higher-skilled workers from higher social categories. In order to analyze the differences and similarities of the representations of what entails decent work relative of their qualifications, me organized them in two groups. The division was made based on the level of education reached.

The subsample analyzed is composed of 134 young men and women between the ages of 18 and 25 that were working at the moment of answering the survey.

## Comparative chart of employment related characteristics

| VARIABLE               |   | GROUP 1 (N 76) NO HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA | GROUP 2 (N 58) WITH HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA OR MORE |
|------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| TYPE OF EMPLOYMENT     | FULL TIME EMPLOYMENT                    | 36%                                   | 32.8%   |
|                        | PART TIME EMPLOYMENT                    | 25%                                   | 55.2%   |
|                        | SEVERAL JOBS HELD SIMULTANEOUSLY        | 27%                                   | 1.8%  |
| AVERAGE MONTHLY INCOME | AVERAGE MONTHLY INCOME UP TO ARS 10,000 | 40.5%                                 | 10%   |
|                        | ACCUMULATED UP TO ARS 20,000            | 74.3%                                 | 37.9%   |
|                        | OVER ARS 20,000                         | 12.5%                                 | 43%   |
| TYPE OF CONTRACT       | FORMAL                                  | 12.3%                                 | 64.9%   |
|                        | INFORMAL                                | 84.9%                                 | 33.3%   |
|                        | INDEPENDENT                             | 10.4%                                 | 8.6%  |
| WEEKLY HOURS           | MAJOR FREQUENCY                         | LESS THAN 10 HOURS                    | LESS THAN 10 HOURS                              |
|                        |   | 31.5%                                 | 12.1%   |
|                        | ACCUMULATED                             | UP TO 30 HOURS                        | UP TO 30 HOURS                                  |
|                        | 65.8%                                   | 55.2%                                 |   |
|                        | MORE THAN 50 HOURS PER WEEK             | 12.3%                                 | 1.7%  |

### **GROUP 1= NO HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA**

The sample is composed of 76 young men and women who were working at the time they answered the questionnaire. 35.5% of the participants identify themselves as female and 64, 5% as male. The average age is 21.22 (DS=1.89). 94.7% identify as Argentinean.

As to the main employment characteristics informed, 36.4% says they work full time; 25.5% works part time; 5.5% are full time independent workers; 16.4% part time independent workers; 1.8% carries out housework, and 7.3% mentions they perform *changas* (temporary jobs).

27% of the young men and women say their work entails several different jobs per week.

Relative to the average monthly household income, 40.5% receives a pay of ARS 10,000 (approx. USD 150) or less. 74.3 is paid up to ARS 20,000; and 12.4 is paid between ARS 20,000 and 60,000.

The average weekly hours worked is less than 10 hours for 31.5%, between 10 and 20 hours for 13.7%, between 20 and 30% for 13.7%, which amounts to a total accumulated percentage of 65.8%, which reflects the trend towards under-occupation in this group. 23% works more than 40 hours per week.

Pursuant to the amount of current jobs held, 68.7% says they have 1 job, while 25.4% says to have 2 jobs.

12.3% refers to being formally employed; while 84.9% is informally employed. 2.7% says they have both types of jobs, formal and informal.

### **GROUP 2= WITH HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA OR MORE**

The sample is composed of 58 young men and women who were working at the time they answered the questionnaire. 81.5% of the participants identify themselves as female and 19% as male. The average age is 22.19 (DS=2.021). 96.6% identify as Argentinean, and 22.4% has a high school diploma.

As to the main employment characteristics informed, 55.2% says they work part time; 32.8% works full time; 5.2% are part time independent workers; 1.7% carries out housework, and 3.4% mentions they perform *changas* (temporary jobs).

Relative to the average monthly household income, data is more scattered. 10% earns income equal to ARS 10,000 (approx. USD 150) or less. 37.9% is paid up to ARS 20,000; and 43% has income ranging between ARS 20,000 and 60,000.

When comparing the average monthly household income, the percentage of lower income is significantly higher for unqualified young people, whereas for the group of more qualified young people the percentage is larger relative to higher income.

Relative to the number of Jobs currently held, 85.5% says to hold 1 job, while 10.9% refers to having 2 jobs.

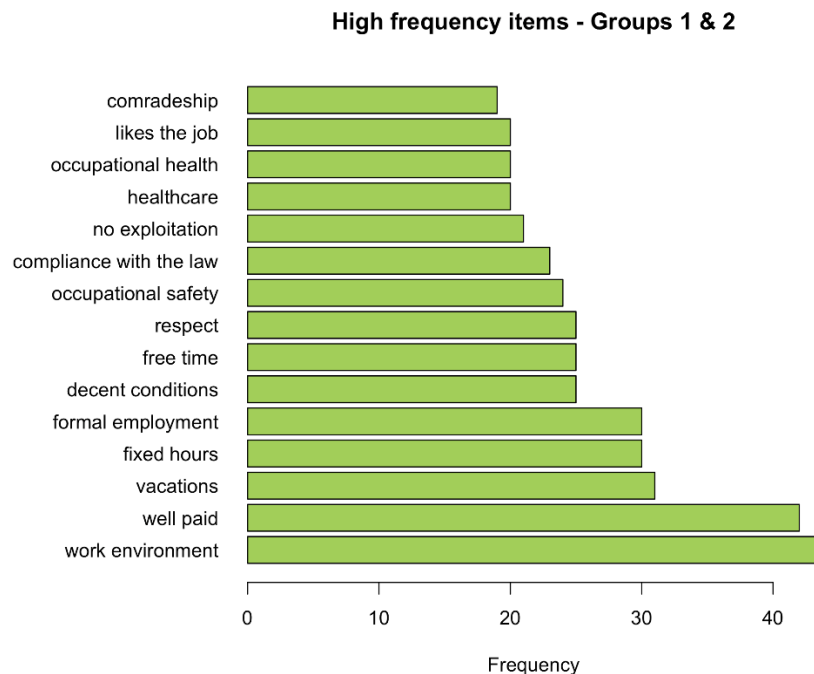
The average weekly hours worked are between 20 and 40 hours for 55.1%; between 10 and 20 hours for 12.1% and less than 10 hours: 12.1%. 20.7% work more than 40 hours a week.

64.9% express being formally employed, while 33.3% are informally employed, and 1.8% holds both types of jobs simultaneously. Out of the total sample 8.6% say they are independent/self-employed.

## Preparation of the Material

Firstly, the data base was revised in order to eliminate any possible inconsistencies. Nothing fundamental was modified, but simply criteria was unified in terms of grammatical number (singular/plural). Below is a list of the changes made and in parenthesis the frequency in which each time the word or expression appeared in the original data base is shown. The most frequent version was maintained however, except for the case of “compliance with the law”, where the version including the definite article was kept.

When analyzing the entire sample (754 units), without discriminating by group, we can see that a total of 107 words or expressions were used, with a frequency of up to 44 times. Below is a bar chart that shows the 15 most frequently used expressions.



## Procedure

To explore the representations of those surveyed about decent work, the following question was asked: DECENT WORK is regarded as work that meets an acceptable minimum of requirements in order to live a decent life - In light of this definition: What elements do you believe a job should offer so as to be considered 'decent'?

The answers were analyzed to identify the most common words and expressions used—words with similar meanings were grouped together—which define the respondents' semantic priorities.

## Results

In order to better visualize the differences and similarities between the terms used by both groups, we introduce a word cloud with the group as the variable, in order to see which are the most frequent expressions used by each group.

The word cloud is a visual representation of the graph with the frequency of words/expressions indicated by size and color.

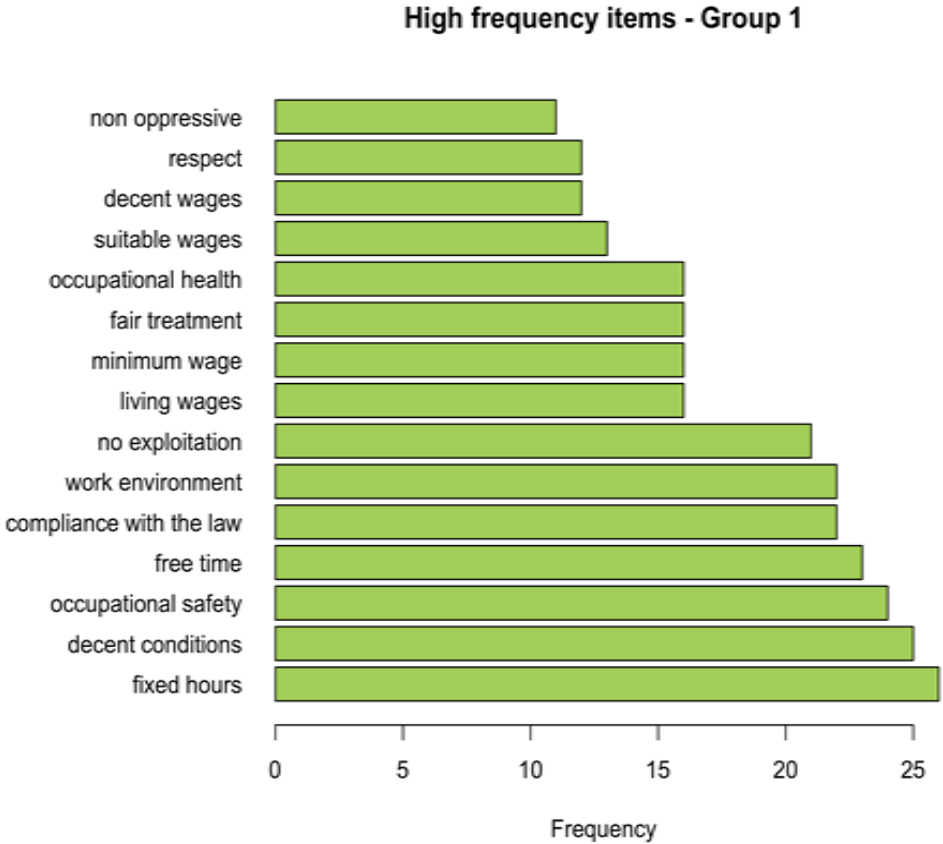
### Group 1



### Group 2

**Group 1**

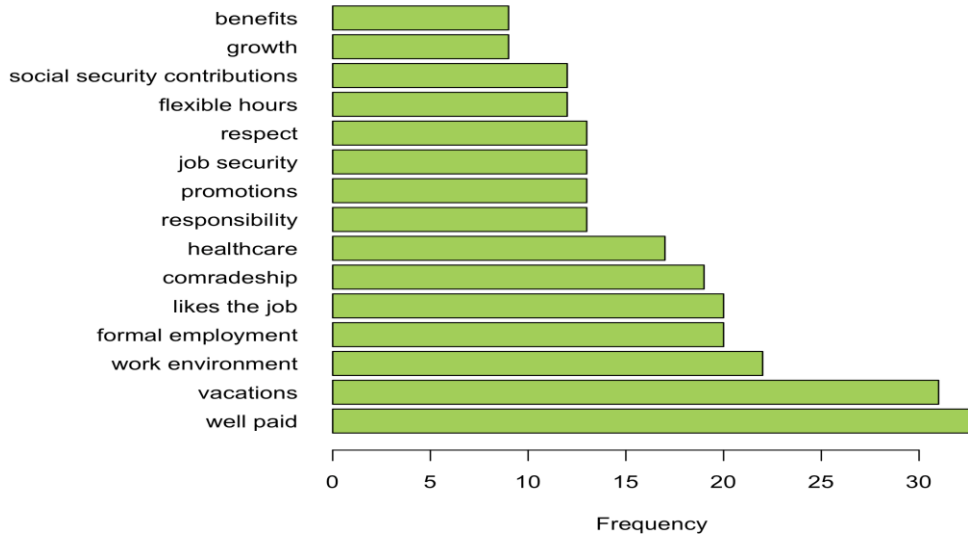
Group 1 used a total of 48 words or expressions for their descriptions, with a frequency within the range of 33-1 (the corpus has 333 units). The bar graph presented below shows the 15 most frequently used expressions for this group.



**Group 2**

Members of group 2 used a more extensive variety of words and expressions for their descriptions. A total of 85 terms were utilized with a frequency that falls within the range of 26-1. The corpus is composed of 421 units. Below is a bar chart with the 15 most utilized expressions by this group.

### High frequency items - Group 2



### Comparing both groups

#### a) Wages

In group 1 the most frequently used expression in reference to wages is “well paid” with a total of 33 appearances. In group 2 on the other hand, “minimum wage” is the most frequently used expression, with a total of 16 appearances, which puts it in the 8<sup>th</sup> place of the chart. This difference in place occupied by the matter of wages is due to the fact that the members of group 2 used a wider variety of expressions to refer to the same matter, as can be seen in the following chart:

#### G1

well paid (34)

suitable wages (3)

decent wages (1)

#### G2

minimum wage (16)

living wage (16)

suitable wages (13)

decent wages (12)

well paid (9)

enough to cover basic needs (2)

In group 1, “well paid” is the most common expression used. On the other hand, in group 2,



many expressions are used for the same matter: “minimum wage”, “living wage”, “suitable wages”, “and decent wages”. It is worth noting that only in group 2 do wages appear expressly linked to the use of money, that is: money is used to live, cover basic needs, for expenses.

*b) Work and leisure*

The second most used word in group 1 is “vacations”, with a total of 31 appearances. It is interesting to see that this word is completely absent from the descriptions of members of group 2. However, in group 2 we find the term “time off” (5) that does not appear in group 1.

“Free time” appears 23 times in group 2 compared to 2 times in group 1. Free time is associated with having time to spend with one’s family, rest, raise kids, study. Relative to work hours, while in group 2 the expression “fixed hours” (26) is the most frequent, “flexible hours” (12) is the most frequent in group 1. This clearly indicates that the representations of work are different: flexibility in formal employment, which means greater freedom, commitment, home office, compared to the flexibility of informal, precarious work, reflected in flexible changing schedules, non-paid overtime, etc. Only in group 2 is there a specific mention to the amount of hours worked and days: (“10 hours”, “8 hours”, “no 13-hour days”, “Monday through Friday”).

| <b>G1</b>           | <b>G2</b>                 |
|---------------------|---------------------------|
| vacations (31)      | fixed hours (26)          |
| flexible hours (12) | free time (23)            |
| fixed hours (4)     | time off (5)              |
| free time (2)       | Monday through Friday (2) |
|                     | 10 hours (2)              |
|                     | 8 hours (2)               |
|                     | No 13-hour days (1)       |

*c) Answers in negative form*

Group 1 defines everything almost exclusively in positive form (there is only 1 appearance of a negative form: “no labor exploitation”. Group 2, on the other hand, presents many definitions in negative form. In the word cloud we can see the expressions: “no labor exploitation” (21), “not oppressive” (11), “not abusive” (10) and “non-violent” (2). Other examples present in this group are: “no disdain”, “no 13-hour days”, “non-hostile”, “non-tyrannical”, “not harmful” and “not unpleasant (*sic*)”.

*d) Working conditions*

In group 1 “formal employment” (20), “healthcare” (17) and “social security contributions” (12) are frequently used expressions. Group 2 used expressions such as: “decent working conditions (25), “in compliance with the law” (22) and “no job exploitation” (21) as the most frequent. In this group “formal employment appears 10 times, healthcare 3, and social security contributions does not appear at all.

“Job security”, however, is a frequently used term in both groups (13 times in group 1 and 24 times in group 2), but occupational health appears in group 2 (16 times, compared to 4 times in group 1).

*e) Enjoyment and personal development*

A frequently used expression by group 1 is “likes the job”, as can be seen in the graphs, with a total of 20 appearances. This contrasts highly with group 2’s “mildly enjoyable” or “not unpleasant (sic)”, which appear one time each, and refer to actually enjoying one’s work and not simply putting up with it.

The following table introduces the expressions (and their frequency of appearance) related to personal development, which seem to be more present in group 1:

| <b>G1</b>            | <b>G2</b>                 |
|----------------------|---------------------------|
| growth (9)           | progress (3)              |
| training (8)         | personal expectations (2) |
| progress (6)         | training(2)               |
| training(3)          | training (2)              |
| sense of purpose (2) | recognition (2)           |
| promotion (1)        | development (1)           |
|                      | training (1)              |

*f) Work environment*

The matter of work environment is present in both groups. However, only in group 2 is the figure of the boss mentioned, while in group 1 the relations among fellow workers seem to be more relevant. Group 2 also presents some expressions defined in negative form relative to this matter, as opposed to group 1 where there are none. The list presented below shows the points mentioned.

**G1**

work environment (22)  
 comradeship (19)  
 respect (13)  
 good environment (3)  
 good environment (3)  
 friendly (1)  
 fair treatment (1)

**G2**

work environment (22)  
 fair treatment (16)  
 respect (12)  
 non abusive (10)  
 good boss (7)  
 supporting boss (2)  
 good environment (1)  
 comradeship (1)  
 boss that recognizes work (1)  
 no disdain (1)  
 /boss that encourages  
 (1) / non hostile (1)  
 non tyrannical (1)  
 healthy interpersonal relations (1)  
 respectful treatment (1)

*g) Decent conditions*

When looking at both word clouds the frequency of the Word “decent” related to different terms is quite noticeable. For example, in group 2 it appears together with “decent working conditions (25)”, “decent wages (12)”, and “dignity (4)”. In group 1 it appears once, alongside wages: “decent wages”.

**Conclusion**

Similarities and differences were identified in the semantic fields that define decent work and these specific perceptions and expectations are related to different educational pathways. Such representations have a major impact on the construction of identity, future prospects and the development of competences that help young people find decent, sustainable work.

They can be summed up as follows:

While young people from higher social categories see decent work as being defined by good pay, good working relationships, career progress, good interpersonal relationships, the opportunity for autonomy and growth, and personal enjoyment and satisfaction, young people

from vulnerable sectors performing low-skilled, informal jobs see decent work as being defined by a decent salary, linked to subsistence: enough to cover a basic set of goods, not working longer than the period defined by the law, fewer hours, scheduled breaks and rest periods—days off, not working on weekends.

The main reason given for wanting time off was a desire to spend time with one's family.

**Lawful:** This is closely linked to abiding the labor law, especially in regards to respect of workers' rights. This is associated with negative phrases such as 'not being exploited', 'not being taken advantage of', or 'not being their slave'.

Young people from higher social sectors often mentioned opportunities for autonomy, career development, professional growth, training and opportunities for advancement.

Young people from vulnerable sectors, meanwhile, did not mention these aspects as much, and generally autonomy went unmentioned. Instead came the expectation that the employer work to improve conditions: 'the boss should encourage us', 'they should train everyone, not just a few.'

These results pose the question about the relation between these representations and their work experiences. Faced with the scarcity of job vacancies that adhere to the standards proposed by the ILO for decent work, and at the risk of losing one's job, unstable working conditions are accepted as a consequence of fear and conformity.

The fulfillment of only a few attributes is sufficient to conclude that a job meets the standard of being decent.

This stance draws our attention to the complex paradox of young people justifying these conditions, which replicates and deepens their vulnerability in employment.

The divergence identified between present work experiences and expectations of future employment on the one hand, and the motivations, hobbies and interests, on the other, affect the development of significant and sustainable plans, projects and identities.

This crossroads translates into purpose and non-integrated values of the self, which affect the possibility of imagining and projecting possible futures in which personal dimensions linked to well-being and a satisfactory life can be expressed.

Young people from vulnerable sectors perceive work as a means to cover basic needs and not as a space where satisfaction may be obtained, or the potential for personal development may be offered. They even seem to be unaware of the fact that jobs close to the ideal of decent work exist. The system does not generate quality jobs for workers in general, much less for young people.

## **Final thoughts**

Being aware of social perceptions of work, and especially decent work, provides us with the tools to understand people's behavior, attitudes and positions with regard to their work and

place in society. Variations in social position, interaction and involvement generate different perceptions that inform behavior and affect the formation of identity.

And, as we observed in their representations of what constitutes decent work, different working conditions and experiences affect the way in which these young people can anticipate their future, whether or not they accept their current situation and whether they demand more than the bare minimum.

Bearing in mind that these perceptions are also affected by self-perception and expectations and plans for the future, the definitions of decent work and its relationship with other social variables are very relevant to the Lifelong Guidance and Counseling, that has as objective to facilitate and generate the necessary transformations in the processes that engender social inequality.

Lifelong guidance and counselling theories face a great challenge, because they are about understanding the role of work in people's lives, and the construction of their identity for the definition of their life projects and the possibility of obtaining decent jobs.

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