




# Emerging Adults' Representations of Work: A Qualitative Research in Seven Countries

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## Abstract

With the recent evolution of the labor market, emerging adults with no diploma are particularly exposed to unsatisfying jobs and barriers to access decent work. The aim of the research was to identify their representations of work, based on the psychology of emerging adulthood and the psychology of working theory. Differences related to each country's level of development and to the work situations met by the participants were expected. Ten emerging adults aged 20–25 were interviewed in seven countries ( $N = 70$ ). Data were processed using a thematic content analysis. The results stress that these emerging adults associate “decent work” with two specific qualities: the extent to which work allows survival needs to be met and the experience of positive social relationships in the workplace. This article discusses the similarities and differences in their representations of work and their role on identity development.

## Keywords

work, representations, career choice/development, employment, transitions to adulthood

In Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2018) countries, a diploma is considered a minimum threshold for successfully entering the labor market. Youth without a diploma are particularly exposed to marginalization risks (OECD, 2019). They face high rates of poverty; are increasingly exposed to nonstandard, informal, and insecure forms of employment; lack legal protection; and have limited opportunities for training and career progression (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2020; Standing, 2011; Yeung & Yang, 2020). Consequently, they often also lack clear occupational identities and are exposed to social inequalities and discrimination (Allan et al., 2016; Blustein et al., 2015). Furthermore, school-to-work transition outcomes depend on the country's level of development (ILO, 2017a). In middle- or low-income countries, a large number of young workers are in the informal economy and only about half of them (21% in Africa) are engaged in a registered work activity covered by a written contract (OECD, 2017). Agriculture, construction, manufacturing, trade, and transportation are the main work domains for low-qualified young adults in several developing countries. Those working in agriculture generally do low-skilled jobs and are the least satisfied with their work. Many workers in developing countries are also engaged in unpaid family work.

Self-employment is very common for young adults in low-income countries. In high-income countries, young workers face temporary activities, part-time work contracts, and low-quality work (Goffette & Vero, 2015).

This article synthesizes a qualitative study on emerging adults without a diploma in seven developed and developing countries. The objective of the study was to explore the ways in which these young people perceive work and, ultimately,

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to understand the extent to which work is considered as a source for identity development.

### *Emerging Adults Without Diploma*

According to Arnett (2000), the early 20s is a time of instability, identity exploration, feeling in-between, multiple possibilities, and self-focus. What matters the most to emerging adults is “accepting responsibility for one’s self and making independent decisions [and] becoming financially independent” (Arnett, 2000, p. 469). Emerging adulthood has been mainly studied among college students (Arnett, 2015b). Work-bound youth are an underexplored population; still, research shows some differences between college and noncollege populations, notably concerning how emerging adults integrate work into their lives and the meaning they find in their work (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006; Hendry & Kloep, 2010; Mitchell & Syed, 2015). Youth without a diploma can be considered as a threatened category of emerging adults since they have more difficulties finding satisfying jobs and are more exposed to precariousness, irrespective of where they live (Goffette & Vero, 2015).

Emerging adulthood has also mainly been studied within industrialized and developed societies (Arnett, 2000, 2015; Benson & Furstenberg, 2007). Within a globalized world, it is still not clear whether emerging adults’ characteristics can be extended to work-bound young people in developing countries. As mentioned by Arnett (2015b), indeed,

Emerging adulthood is likely to vary considerably across national, cultural and socioeconomic contexts. It is best to think of it as one stage with distinctive demographic characteristics but many possible paths through that stage, in terms of how emerging adults experience their education, work, beliefs, self-development and relationships. (p. 8)

### *Emerging Adults and Identity Exploration*

Identity exploration in the sphere of work is a characteristic of emerging adulthood and leads to questions such as: What do I really want to do? What am I best at? and What do I enjoy the most at work? (Arnett, 2015b). Work may provide young people with opportunities to explore their environment, learn about themselves, and develop a sense of agency (Schwartz et al., 2005). The first work experiences also help to prepare for adult roles (Arnett, 2015b) and are essential to social identity development and socialization (Arnett, 2007; Blustein, 2006). In turn, a clear sense of identity helps individuals to explore and engage in purposeful activities within the work sphere (Domene et al., 2015). Conversely, unemployment, low-quality jobs, and precariousness experienced by youth without a diploma, all over the world, may constrain identity and career exploration and engagement (Domene et al., 2015; Schwartz et al., 2005). This can also lead to difficulties in labor market integration and complex career construction in the long term (Arnett, 2006; Krahn et al., 2015; Tanner & Arnett, 2016).

### *Identity Development and Decent Work*

Precarious workers lack agency and have little means of resisting exploitative and oppressive labor conditions (Blustein et al. 2016). In many parts of the world, governments have adopted policies aimed at deregulation leaving young workers to experience great vulnerability. The definition of decent work has been adopted by the ILO (1999) in order to provide a basic framework with precise criteria to assess work contexts and promote good working conditions for all. The characteristics of decent work include (a) opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income; (b) security in the workplace and social protection for families; (c) prospects for personal development and social integration; (d) freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives; and (e) equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men. This definition is mainly based on objective criteria that focus on sustainable working conditions and contexts.

The psychology of working approach has enriched this definition of decent work in order to introduce more subjective and psychosocial indicators (Cohen-Scali et al., 2018; Duffy et al., 2017; Pouyau, 2016). Specifically, according to the psychology of working theory (PWT; Blustein, 2006; Duffy et al., 2016), work potentially fulfills three core human needs: survival and power, social connection, and self-determination. When work satisfies not only survival needs but also relatedness and self-determination, it is considered both decent and dignified (Blustein et al., 2017; Guichard, 2016). Indeed, it provides dignity to human beings, contributes to a more satisfying life, and improves mental health (Blustein et al., 2016). In this sense, exploration and engagement in work activities that are interesting and stimulating help achieve personal and social goals and contribute to identity development (Blustein, 2006, 2019; Blustein et al., 2017).

### *Social Representations of Decent Work*

The belief that work should be an expression of one’s identity, mainly observed in industrialized and high-income countries, reveals an “ethic of autonomy” (Arnett, 2015a, p. 495) that does not prevail in all cultures. Such beliefs can be conceived as social representations, which refer to a form of social thought and “commonsense” knowledge constituted of social cognitions, attitudes, stereotypes, values, and images held by members within a given group or society (Jodelet, 1989; Moscovici, 1984; Negura & Lavoie, 2016). Moscovici (1976, p. 13) defines a social representation as:

A system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function: first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it. And secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history.

**Table 1.** Inhabitants Number, Youth Employment Rate (20–24), Youth and Global Unemployed Rate, Human Development Ranking (HDR) in the Seven Countries. <sup>a</sup>

Country	Inhabitants <sup>b</sup> (in Millions)	University Partner	Employment Rate Among 20–24 years old	Youth Unemployment Rate	Global unemployment	HDR <sup>c</sup>
Brazil	215	University of Sao Paolo	48.1% <sup>d</sup>	13.4% <sup>e</sup>	12.4% <sup>d</sup>	109
Burkina Faso	20.2 <sup>f</sup>	University of Koudougou	77% <sup>f</sup>	29.4% <sup>f</sup>	8.6% <sup>g</sup>	221
France	65.5	CNAM, Angers University Catholic	36.5% <sup>h</sup>	22.6% <sup>i</sup>	8.8% <sup>i</sup>	36
Iceland	0.3	University of Iceland	47.6% <sup>h</sup>	7.7% <sup>e</sup>	2.5% <sup>e</sup>	14
Lebanon	7.5	University Lebanese	36.7% <sup>j</sup>	15.5% <sup>j</sup>	6.5% <sup>j</sup>	111
Switzerland	8	University of Lausanne	47% <sup>h</sup>	7.9% <sup>e</sup>	2.7% <sup>e</sup>	10
United States	331	Lesley University, Cambridge, MA	50.4% <sup>k</sup>	8.2% <sup>k</sup>	3.9% <sup>l</sup>	22

<sup>a</sup>Numbers before the COVID-19 Pandemy of 2020. <sup>b</sup> <https://countrymeters.info/>. <sup>c</sup> <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi>. <sup>d</sup> <https://tradingeconomics.com/brazil/unemployment-rate>. <sup>e</sup> <https://data.oecd.org/unemp/youth-unemployment-rate.htm>. <sup>f</sup> International Labor Organization (ILO, 2016). <sup>g</sup> National Institute of Statistics and Demography ([www.insd.bf](http://www.insd.bf) [2015]). *Enquête multisectorielle, emploi et chômage au Burkina Faso* [Multisectors survey, employment, unemployment in Burkina Faso]. <sup>h</sup> Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2018). <sup>i</sup> Dares (2018). <sup>j</sup> ILO (2017b). <sup>k</sup> <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgec.t02.htm>. <sup>l</sup> [www.statistista.com](http://www.statistista.com).

According to Abric (2005), social representations are structured into central and peripheral elements: The core of the representation is composed of stable, shared elements that give meaning to the representation; the peripheral elements change according to the context and result from cultural and local practices (Negura & Lavoie, 2016). Thus, we conceive beliefs about work as a socially represented phenomenon that is under the influence of people's experiences of work within a given culture (Salmaso & Pombeni, 1986). In this regard, Guichard (2011) underlines the existence of different types of representations of work: representation of occupations in general, detailed representations of some well-known activities such as one's own job but also intimate representations associated to the deep meaning each individual attaches to work. The notion of social representation offers, therefore, a possibly fruitful perspective to study perceptions of decent work within and across diverse cultural contexts. Indeed, it allows the identification of both common and culture-specific perceptions of decent work—that is, the central versus peripheral elements of its social representation.

### Research Purpose and Contexts

Our general objective was to explore the representations of work of emerging adults without a diploma involved in various work situations in seven countries. Ultimately, we aimed to understand whether and how these representations and actual work experiences affect identity development (Arnett, 2000). Based on the PWT (Blustein, 2006; Duffy et al., 2016), we expected that in the contemporary globalized world, youth with no diploma have assimilated the belief that work should fulfill core human needs and contribute to identity development. This general objective was divided into three specific objectives. First, we aimed to identify what low-qualified young workers consider as the most important and shared representations of work. We posit that these aspects of work are close to the three needs decent work is expected to fulfill according to the PWT (Blustein, 2006; Duffy et al., 2016): survival, social connection, and self-determination. Our second specific objective was

to explore possible similarities and differences in the work experiences among participants in seven countries throughout the world. Particularly, we expected differences between developing and developed countries according to these experiences. We anticipated that many participants in developing countries would not define their work as “decent,” on the basis of ILO's criteria (Blustein et al., 2016; ILO, 1999; Yeung & Yang, 2020). The third specific objective was to uncover the role of work on identity development. Precisely, we presumed that the rather precarious work situations experienced by emerging adults might somehow contribute to their identity development (Mitchell & Syed, 2015).

University partners from seven countries (Brazil, Burkina Faso, France, Iceland, Lebanon, Switzerland, and the United States), working in the field of career and school counseling, conducted this research. Six of these universities are affiliated with the UNESCO Unitwin network (<https://wp.unil.ch/unitwin/>) on life designing interventions (counseling, guidance, and education) for decent work and sustainable development. Table 1 provides detailed information on these partners and their respective countries, including rates of employment and the Human Development Ranking<sup>1</sup> (HDR) of each country.

Our study is based on an exploratory perspective, given the social and economic variability among these countries. The youth employment rate is indeed very high in Burkina Faso (77%), Brazil (48.1%), and Lebanon (36.7%). In these low- and middle-income countries, informal work is also very common. In the present study, we consider Burkina Faso, Lebanon, and Brazil as developing countries (HDRs ranging from 221 to 109) and Switzerland, Iceland, the United States, and France as developed countries (HDRs ranging from 36 to 10).

### Method

Collaborative qualitative research (Almond & Connolly, 2019) between partner teams in the seven countries was undertaken to provide a deep understanding of how participants interpreted and experienced their contexts of work (Bertolini et al., 2018).

**Table 2.** Professional Activities Gathered in Ad Hoc Categories.

Country	Hotel and Restaurant	Trade Sales	Services to Individuals	Social Work	Crafts, Small Businesses	Services to Companies
Brazil	Cook and waiter	Retail seller, bakery cashier, hairdresser			Tapestry assistant	Graphic designer ( $N = 3$ ), cleaner in building
Burkina Faso	Waiter in a coffee shop and cleaner in a hotel		Handler, septic tank cleaner, gravedigger, water cart pusher, sand and gravel picker, and clothes washer		Brick makers ( $N = 2$ )	
France	Waiter, hotel receptionist, and welcome officer	Saleswoman ( $N = 2$ ) and hairdresser		Social animator, and social worker		Multitask worker, and warehouseman
Iceland	Hotel manager	Retail worker, seller in a bookshop, and bakery cashier	Car rental manager, car security worker, car cleaner, and driver	Multitask recreational and social worker ( $N = 2$ )		
Lebanon		Saleswomen ( $N = 4$ ), salesman, and cashier	Mechanic and gas station worker		Goldsmiths worker	Farm worker
Switzerland	Cook assistant, hotel receptionist, and waitress	Bakery cashier and bookshop seller	Worker in a garage and security agent	Assistant care worker and social mobilizer	Builder assistant	Handler
The United States	Fast-food service worker, pizza maker, and night auditor		Bus driver trainee, garbage truck driver, cleaner, and roofer		Precision factory worker	Movie theater trainee, manual laborer, and assembly of outdoor gear
Total	14	17	15	7	5	12

Each of the seven research teams had a local project coordinator and collected data in their contexts using a common procedure, while the French team coordinated the global project.

### Participants

Ten emerging adults (five women, five men) were interviewed in each country, for a total of 70 participants. Inclusion criteria were being aged 20- to 25-years old, working for at least 6 months, having limited education, not being in education (except for language courses or community adult learning programs), and having their main financial resource coming from their job. Participants were recruited in varied ways depending on the recruitment opportunities unique to each country. In developing countries, research participants who met the recruitment criteria were easy to reach because most young people work. In contrast, finding participants in developed countries was harder because emerging adults have more opportunities to go back to school (see also Mitchell & Syed, 2015). Most participants were recruited by contacting career services, temporary work agencies, or youth centers. The professionals of these institutions were informed of the research

and were asked to provide information to the young people in their programs. Participation in the study was voluntary.

Table 2 shows participants' work activities classified by sector and job title. It shows that these emerging adults work mainly in three sectors: trade sales ( $N = 17$ ), services to individuals ( $N = 15$ ), and hotels and restaurants ( $N = 14$ ). Job titles are very diverse, and most jobs require vocational skills, sometimes specialized (e.g., tapestry assistant, car rental manager, septic tank cleaner, and hairdresser). Some of their jobs demand physical strength (e.g., gravedigger and construction worker), working at night, or being in dangerous conditions. Many participants do jobs that involve relationships with clients (e.g., waiter, cashier, social worker, and clothes washer).

### Instrument

The French team produced the first draft of a semistructured interview protocol. This first draft was discussed among the seven teams in October 2017. Each team then conducted a pilot interview. A few questions were modified to be understandable by all the teams in the different countries, leading to the final version of the interview protocol.

Interviews lasted 1 hr in average and covered five themes:

1. Participants' perceptions of work in general (e.g., "How would you define work, in general?");
2. Comparison of current work conditions and the definition of decent work. Interviewers provided the ILO's (1999) definition of decent work and asked participants the extent to which they considered that their current job aligned with this definition. The following characteristics of decent work were considered: (a) opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income; (b) security in the workplace and social protection for families; (c) better prospects for personal development and social integration; (d) freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives; and (e) equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men;
3. Perception of their current work and vocational situation (e.g., "Can you describe your current job?");
4. Description of academic trajectory and other aspects of life (e.g., "Can you describe your school and professional paths?");
5. Identity and perceptions of the future (e.g., "What kind of person would you like to become in the future?").

Each team collected the data in accordance with the ethical standards of its research lab and university and ensured the consent to participate in the research. Interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed.

### Data Processing

Our analysis was informed by the qualitative research methodology described by Bertolini et al. (2018). The French team designed a first coding grid based on the French sample. This first draft was submitted to the six other partner teams who completed it on the basis of interviews carried out in their own countries. We then collaboratively produced a consensual list of thematic categories (Bardin, 2005; Hill et al., 1997), gathering all the themes from each team. Then, each team used this grid to code its country's interview transcriptions, with regular exchanges between teams—by email and in-person during Unitwin international meetings.

The themes and subthemes of our analyses were mainly derived from the answers given in the two first sections of the interviews. The first theme covered "general perceptions of work" and was divided into three main subthemes: "What work should be?" (including four categories), "What good work actually is?" (including eight categories), and "What bad work is?" (including seven categories). For the second theme, namely, "comparison of current work experience using the ILO's definition of decent work," we focused on the number of yes/no answers for each of the five ILO criteria for decent work. A "yes" indicated that the participant considered that a given ILO criteria were present in their current job, and a "no" indicated the opposite.

## Results

The presentation of results is divided into four parts: the first, second, and third part cover the three subthemes within the theme, "general perception of work," namely, "What work should be?" "What good work actually is?" and "What bad work is." The fourth part addresses current work experience using the ILO's definition of decent work.

### What Work Should Be

Table 3 shows the four categories of answers within the sub-theme, "What work should be?" by country and summarizes the answers provided by participants within each category. The first category refers to the importance of "good pay and work conditions" (75 answers). Comments in this category were mentioned more frequently than any other category in all seven countries. For these participants, work should provide enough money to satisfy one's vital needs and work should take place in good conditions. For example, in France, all participants agreed on the idea that work must fulfill vital needs. In the United States, work must be steady and provide decent treatment and decent pay. In Lebanon, work serves to buy basic necessities, and in Burkina Faso, participants stressed that work should offer good working conditions and the possibility of a better life.

The "social role" of work is the second most popular category (32 answers), with references to this theme from respondents in four countries (Burkina Faso, France, Switzerland, and the United States). Answers show that work appears to be important for social inclusion, providing people with a place in society, as well as with respect. This idea was particularly evoked in the French sample (nine participants). For the Burkina Faso sample, work should also help others to live well (eight participants).

The third category refers to the importance of "purposeful and enjoyable work" (22 answers). Respondents in four countries (Brazil, Iceland, Lebanon, and the United States) consider that work should provide purpose and pleasure to the worker. This is the case especially in the United States, where seven participants reported that work should be interesting, engaging, and fun.

The fourth category reflects the perceptions of work as a source of "personal and professional development" (15 answers). Here again, answers from four countries (France, Lebanon, Switzerland, and the United States) reflect the belief that work should contribute to personal and professional fulfillment, especially in France where seven participants stated that work should allow for personal growth.

### What Good Work Is

While Table 3 summarizes what participants say good work "should be," Table 4 presents eight categories that outline participants' perceptions of "What good work actually is?" in their experience, covering 154 answers in total. The first category is "to benefit from good relationships at work" (32 answers). This

**Table 3.** Answers Provided to Categories Within the Subtheme “What Your Work Should Be.”

Country	Good Pay and Working Conditions	Purposeful and Enjoyable Work	Social Role	Personal and Professional Development
Brazil	Work should be well paid ( $N = 8$ )	Work should be a happy place ( $N = 5$ ) and make sense for workers ( $N = 5$ )		
Burkina Faso	Work should allow to live ( $N = 8$ ) and must offer good working conditions ( $N = 6$ )		Work should help others to live ( $N = 8$ ), must keep occupied, avoid to steal or to beg, and provide respect toward others ( $N = 5$ )	
France	Work is necessary to be able to live and fulfill vital needs ( $N = 10$ )		Work provides a social role ( $N = 9$ )	Work allows to grow and develop ( $N = 7$ )
Iceland	Work should provide money ( $N = 7$ ) and fulfill the vital needs ( $N = 3$ )	Work should be enjoyable ( $N = 2$ )		
Lebanon	Work serves for earning money and buying things ( $N = 8$ )	Work should lead to satisfaction ( $N = 3$ )		Work should allow to be independent and develop one's skills ( $N = 4$ )
Switzerland	Work serves for earning money ( $N = 7$ ), allows being able to live ( $N = 1$ ), and is an obligation ( $N = 1$ )		Work serves to feel useful, be active, and occupied ( $N = 4$ ) and to have a social activity ( $N = 1$ )	Work serves to self-expression ( $N = 2$ )
The United States	Work should be in a well-managed place, with decent workers treatment ( $N = 8$ ) and provide decent pay and be steady ( $N = 8$ )	Work should be interesting, engaging, fun, and motivating ( $N = 7$ )	Connecting with people and helping others ( $N = 5$ )	Work should relate to the career one aspires to ( $N = 2$ )
Frequency of evocations	75	22	32	15

category was a priority in five countries (all but Iceland and Lebanon) and seems to be a key quality of work that is considered to be “good.” More specifically, this quality means relationships with coworkers are friendly, respectful, and supportive. This category is particularly important for emerging adults from Brazil, where eight interviewees mentioned the importance of relationships at work.

The second category is “to have pleasure and satisfaction at work” (29 answers). This characteristic of good work is shared by emerging adults from five countries (all but Burkina Faso and France). For them, work is enjoyable, when it makes people feel happy and when it makes sense. This category is particularly important in Iceland and the United States, where 7 of the 10 emerging adults mentioned it.

“To save money, to have future prospects with decent pay” (28 answers) is a third category of good work. This category covers the belief that a job is good when it is fairly paid and allows the worker to live decently. This response was evoked in five countries (all but Brazil and France) and particularly among U.S. participants (eight people).

The fourth category is “to develop oneself and skills” (22 answers). In four countries (Burkina Faso, France, Lebanon, and the United States), participants report that they value work that contributes to the improvement of professional skills and self-development. Among the French sample, eight participants mention the importance of skill development at work.

Four other categories are mentioned less often in the interviews. “To have a work contract and fair treatment” was evoked in Brazil, Burkina Faso, and Lebanon, for a total of 14 answers. This category appears to be important for half of the sample in each of these developing countries. Participants in France, Iceland, and Switzerland (11 answers) report that good work implies having “security and good work conditions.” “To work in our own way, with our own pace, and our own values” is important in Lebanon and Burkina Faso (nine answers), whereas “to work in a good organization” is mentioned nine times (by eight U.S. participants and one Swiss participant).

### What Bad Work Is

A set of seven categories (Table 5) was identified within the subtheme corresponding to the perception of “What bad work is?” with 123 answers in total. The first category is “general bad work conditions” (31 answers). Participants in six countries (all but Iceland) mention this category, in particular in France (eight participants) and Lebanon (seven participants).

“Bad environment” (29 answers) is the second category characterizing bad work, and respondents in four countries (Brazil, France, Switzerland, and the United States) mention this. All the participants from the United States spoke about bad work environments (including poor management and

**Table 4.** Answers Provided to the Categories Within the Subtheme “What a Good Work Is.”

Country	To Benefit From Good Relationships at Work	To Have a Working Contract and Fair Treatment	To Have Pleasure and Satisfaction at Work	To Save Money to Make Prospects, With a Decent Pay	To Work in Our Own Way, With Our Pace, Our Values	To Develop One-self and Skills	To Have Security and Good Working Conditions	To Work in a Good Organization
Brazil	Good relationships with coworkers (N = 8)	Having a work contract (N = 5)	Do what you like (N = 3)					
Burkina Faso	To have a place in the community (N = 6)	To be paid at fair value and to be treated with respect (N = 5)		Allows to save money and make projects (N = 6)	To be done at your own pace, as we want (N = 3)	Allows professional development (N = 3)		
France	To have friendly social connections (N = 6)					Allows skills and self-development (N = 8)	Security on the workplace, good working conditions (N = 5)	
Iceland			A job that makes you happy (N = 7)	A job that provides good or sufficient wages (N = 4)			Has a good environment (N = 5)	
Lebanon		Having a contract (N = 4)	Enjoyable (N = 6)	Providing money (N = 6)	In accordance with our values (N = 6)	It is important and interesting (N = 6)		
Switzerland	Good atmosphere and respect (N = 6)		It is loved, be enjoyable, and make sense (N = 6)	It allows to earn money and be a fair reward (N = 4)			Not physically demanding (N = 1)	Within a good organization (N = 1)
The United States	Offers the chance to help people (N = 6)		Allows satisfaction (N = 7)	Decent pay, enough to live on (N = 8)		Opportunity to use their hands (N = 5)		Good management, working with good people (N = 8)
Total	32	14	29	28	9	22	11	9

**Table 5.** Answers Provided to the Categories Within the Subtheme “What Is a Bad Work.”

Country	General Bad Environment	Bad Communication	Bad Working Conditions	No Equity or Justice	No Meaning, No Personal Development	Bad Organization	No Recognition, Consideration for Workers
Brazil	Bad environment (N = 7)	No dialogue, communication (N = 5)	Bad working conditions (N = 3)				
Burkina Faso			Bad for health (dangerous, painful, and tiring: N = 4)	No equity or justice (be ashamed of your work, where you have to claim your money, that does not fill vital needs; N = 7)	Doesn't allow to improve your situation (N = 3), with no meaning (N = 1)		
France	Relational conflicts and bad atmosphere (N = 7)		Bad working conditions (N = 8)			Dysfunctional hierarchy or organization (N = 8) Bad superiors (N = 5)	Lack of recognition (N = 7) With abuse, no respect for people (N = 3)
Iceland							
Lebanon		Bad relationships at work (N = 5)	Bad working conditions (N = 7)	Low or unfair wages (N = 4) Lack of equity and equality (N = 6)	A place where you feel miserable (N = 4)		
Switzerland	Bad atmosphere (N = 5)		Bad working conditions with too many hours and a miserable wage (N = 4), stressful (N = 1)		A place where you do not want to go to, that you do not like (N = 3), where salary is the only motivation (N = 1)	With no organization (N = 1) No training and arbitrary rules (N = 1)	
The United States	Poor management and poor workplace culture (apathetic: N = 10)	Unfriendly workers and conflicts (N = 4)	Physically demanding (sitting, standing too much, and exhausting; N = 4)	Unfair treatment (N = 1)	Boring (lack of variety or intellectual, or other challenge; N = 6)		
Total	29	14	31	19	15	15	10



**Table 6.** Number of “Yes” on Each Criteria of the International Labor Organization (ILO, 1999) Decent Work Definition.

Decent Work Indicator	Brazil (N = 10)	Burkina Faso (N = 10)	France (N = 10)	Iceland (N = 10)	Lebanon (N = 10)	Switzer-land (N = 10)	The United States (N = 10)	Total
1. Contribution to productive work	3	10	10	8	10	10	7	58/70
2. Fair income	8	0	8	7	0	5	7	51/70
3. Security at the workplace	8	0	8	9	0	10	0	35/70
4. Social protection for families	8	0	7	8	0	8	2	33/70
5. Prospects and personal development	3	0	8	7	9	7	2	36/70
6. Participation in decisions	0	0	5	8	7	8	2	30/70
7. Freedom to express concerns	0	5	9	8	7	7	2	38/70
8. Equality for all men and women	0	0	7	7	4	5	0	23/70
Total	30/80	15/80	62/80	62/80	37/80	60/80	22/80	

workplace culture), as well as seven participants in both Brazil and France.

“No equity or justice” (19 answers) is the third category that describes bad work. This category is evoked in four countries (Burkina Faso, Iceland, Lebanon, and the United States) and seems particularly important for participants from Burkina Faso, where seven interviewees reported this aspect.

The fourth category is “no meaning, no personnel development” (15 answers). This category also was mentioned in four countries (Burkina Faso, Iceland, Switzerland, and the United States). For example, six of the 10 participants from the United States underscored that a job is bad when it is “boring,” “lacks meaning,” and has “no intellectual or other challenge.”

“Bad organization” (15 answers) is the fifth category of characteristics of bad jobs. People in four countries (France, Iceland, Switzerland, and the United States) named this category, especially in France where eight of the 10 participants mentioned a dysfunctional hierarchy or organization.

“Bad communication” (14 answers) is the sixth category depicting bad work. It was quoted in three countries: Brazil, Lebanon, and the United States. “No recognition or consideration for workers” (10 answers) was the last category of bad work and was reported by three participants from Switzerland and seven from Lebanon.

### *Perception of Work According to the ILO Definition of Decent Work*

Emerging adults from each country were asked to evaluate their current work based on the eight criteria of decent work provided by ILO (1999). For each criterion, they could answer “yes,” when the criterion was met in their job or “no,” if the criterion was absent. The “yes” answers were counted and totals are reported in Table 6. Results reveal the existence of three groups of countries that differ according to the degree to which participants believed the ILO criteria were met in their jobs. The job of emerging adults from three

countries can be considered as mostly decent: Iceland (62 “yes”), France (62 “yes”), and Switzerland (“60” yes). Work can be qualified as partially decent in Lebanon (37 “yes”) and Brazil (30 “yes”). Finally, participants from the United States and Burkina Faso seem to consider that their work does not meet the standard for “decent work,” given that there are only a few “yes” answers to ILO criteria (22 in the United States and 15 in Burkina Faso).

Two observations can be made when looking more closely at the specific criteria for decent work. First, “opportunities for work that is contributive and productive” is the decent work criterion that brings together the greatest number of positive evaluations and that is shared by the majority of participants across all countries (58 “yes”/70). Thus, most interviewees perceive their current work as contributive, whereas for all other criteria, there is a great variety of answers across the countries. Second, only 23 participants considered that their job guarantees “equality for all men and women,” with none of the participants from Brazil, Burkina Faso, and the United States answering “yes” to this item.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of our research was to explore the representations of work of emerging adults without a diploma from developed and developing countries. Specifically, we aimed to explore their shared representations of work, identify similarities and differences concerning their actual working experiences (based on the ILO criteria for decent work), and understand how work might influence their identity development. In line with these general and specific objectives, four statements emerge from our results. The first relates to the structure of participants’ social representations of work. The second refers to what they consider as the most important aspects of work. The third addresses the possible role of the socioeconomic situation on the “degrees” of decent work experienced by participants.

The fourth relates to the role of work regarding identity development.

### *Core and Peripheral Elements of Work Representations*

With reference to our general goal, results stressed the existence of core and peripheral facets of social representations of work within this population, core components being shared throughout the countries, peripheral components being context-specific (Abric, 2005; Moscovici, 1984; Negura & Lavoie, 2016; Salmaso & Pombeni, 1986). The idea that work must provide decent wage and good working conditions seems to constitute the core facet of work representations, given that it is shared by participants from all countries. This shared conception of work among emerging adults in diverse contexts could attest a worldwide dissemination—in the media, but possibly also through international organizations such as the ILO—of general standards about work. It also tends to confirm, as advocated by Arnett (2000), that emerging adults are influenced by globalization processes, which contribute to the development of similar views of the world (Standing, 2011).

Beyond this shared core facet, our results also highlight a variety of peripheral elements of emerging adults' representations of work. Depending on their contexts, participants expect from work that it also provides pleasure and satisfaction, a sense of purpose, a social role, and/or personal development. These representations are not shared by all youth and may have been elaborated on the basis of context-specific beliefs, socialization, and personal or familial experiences of work (Guichard, 2011). These results confirm, then, the existence of both core and peripheral elements in the representations of work, the latter depending on the specific work experiences of emerging adults within each country.

### *From Material to Relational Needs*

Our first specific objective was to identify what participants considered as the most important aspects of work. Within this objective, their answers can be associated to the needs that work is expected to fulfill according to the PWT (Blustein, 2006; Duffy et al., 2016). Participants' shared representation of work as a source of income seems to correspond to what Blustein (2006) and Duffy et al. (2016) call "survival needs"—the first type of needs decent work is meant to fulfill. Given that most participants, regardless of their country, expect that work will guarantee income that enables good life conditions, survival needs might be considered a cross-cultural expectation of decent work.

Participants also frequently refer to social and relational features of work, either when speaking about bad and good work or when describing what work should be. Specifically, many interviewees think, for example, that work should allow them to have a valuable "social role," that "benefiting from good relationships at work" is important, and that "bad communication" is deleterious. Taken together, these results seem to corroborate that work is also expected to fulfill social

connectedness needs, which is the second type of needs within the PWT (Blustein, 2006; Duffy et al., 2016).

Concerning self-determination needs—the third type of needs that decent work is expected to fulfill according to the PWT (Blustein, 2006; Duffy et al., 2016)—only a few participants refer to these needs; however, "personal and professional development" is named as important for some participants. This result might suggest that self-determination is not an expectation of decent work for participants across cultures, although further research is needed to confirm this interpretation. It seems, then, that the shared perceptions of work refer to the most basic components of decent work (ILO, 1999), whereas elements of dignified work, leading to gratification, personal development, and self-fulfillment (Blustein et al., 2017) might be more culture-specific.

### *Decent Work and Human Development*

Our second specific aim was to explore possible similarities and differences in the experience of work between countries, especially between developing and developed countries. A first distinction between countries seems to exist with respect to the extent to which participants' current jobs meet the ILO criteria for decent work. Emerging adults from three developed countries (Iceland, France, and Switzerland) reported that their work experiences were overall consistent with these ILO criteria. In contrast, participants from Brazil and Lebanon had mixed responses, and participants in the United States and Burkina Faso reported the lowest number of decent work indicators. Moreover, the three countries where participants had the most positive evaluation of their work were also those with higher HDR, whereas three of the four other countries (Lebanon, Brazil, and Burkina Faso) scored lower on this index. This result could be related to the fact that young people in Lebanon, Brazil, and Burkina Faso are often employed in the informal economy and experience high levels of work instability. Specifically, interviewees from these countries experience labor fluctuations, low wages, and frequent feelings of alienation. Surprisingly, participants from the United States reported work situations meeting very few decent work criteria, even though they live in a country with a high HDR. The peculiarity of the U.S. sample may explain this surprising result. Indeed, all research participants in the United States lived in rural areas and had seasonal, low-paying jobs. However, it is also important to consider the possible downward trend of work experience in the United States, explored by Blustein (2019).

A second observation emerging from the comparison between countries is that only participants from the three developing countries (Brazil, Burkina Faso, and Lebanon) mention the importance of having a work contract. In Lebanon and Burkina Faso, interviewees also underscore the importance of being free to work at their own pace and in their own ways. These findings could indicate that workplace justice might be more salient for emerging adults in developing countries, where youth with no diploma mainly do manual and physical tasks and work in the informal sector. Benefiting from an

employment contract and the associated rights and social protections, as well as having more freedom to decide how to work, might then be particularly crucial for them.

### *Decent Work and Identity Development*

Our third specific objective was to understand how the work situations of emerging adults with no diploma in different countries contributed to their identity development and, notably, to identity exploration. Results stress that, beyond “good pay and good work conditions,” three other qualities of a “good work” mentioned by participants might indicate that work is also expected to contribute to a meaningful sense of identity. The first quality is that work should provide a “social role.” This feature of work can be associated to a social identity exploration process, ideally leading to having a place in a group or in society. The second quality is that work should be “purposeful and enjoyable,” that is, a source of self-fulfillment and expression. In this case, work is considered to be a place that could provide an opportunity to explore and develop meaningful or interesting activities. The third quality is that work should contribute to “personal and professional development,” for example, through learning skills that could afford future possibilities. It seems, then, that work can support identity development and exploration through formal and informal learning experiences. Globally, these findings suggest that, regardless of their actual situation, emerging adults in many countries have high expectations toward work. Work is indeed often perceived as a critical domain for self-exploration and as an expression of one’s identity. This tends to confirm Arnett’s (2015b) observation that,

Emerging adults want more out of work than decent wage and steady paycheck. They want their work be an expression of themselves, to fit well with their interests and abilities, to be something they find satisfying and enjoyable and to do some good in the world. (p. 192)

The analysis of participants’ perceived current work situation according to the ILO decent work indicators (1999) shows that only the participants from three developed countries (Iceland, France, and Switzerland) report that their work conforms to the qualities outlined by the ILO. Moreover, among these indicators, three criteria for decent work can be associated to identity exploration, namely, work that allows freedom to express concerns, future prospects and personal development, and participating in decisions. Yet, our findings show that around half of the participants do not meet these criteria. Hence, many emerging adults do a job that cannot be qualified as decent or that does not meet those decent work criteria facilitating identity exploration. Consequently, these emerging adults experience a gap between their aspirations regarding work and their current work situations, which can lead to difficult and unfulfilling work situations (Blustein, 2006; Domene et al., 2015; Goffette & Vero, 2015; Standing, 2011). Ultimately, it seems that despite a shared desire among emerging

adults to make work a source of identity exploration, some social and economic contexts prevent them from realizing this.

### *Implications for practice*

On the basis of these results, two sets of career counseling and guidance interventions could be implemented. The first would consist of monitoring emerging adults who leave the education system without a diploma to identify their main difficulties and help them find vocational training and decent employment. To do so, career services should provide holistic interventions including long-term follow-ups. These interventions already exist in some countries (CEDEFOP, 2018) and support early school-leavers for several years, offering individual interviews, meetings with professionals, vocational training, and job-search interventions. Ideally, this type of support should be extended until the emerging adult finds decent and dignified work. These services might also inform young people of their rights and institutional resources, such as possibilities to integrate vocational education and training, accommodations in case of disability, education on health and stress at work, and guidance for the construction of career plans.

The second set of interventions should support opportunities for young adults to reflect on their work experiences. For example, they can reflect upon the nature of their skills sets, identify the role of their work contexts as opportunities for learning, and evaluate how their work contexts can support their adaptability and employability. Career counseling may help them become reflexive in how they perceive opportunities, identify potential supportive networks, and become proactive in their career development. Also, these interventions should constitute opportunities to foster their identity development and to think about the role of work to implement new forms of exploration and social engagement. This reflection should also focus on self-anticipation, aspiration, and the construction of an image of the kind of person they would like to become in the future (Blustein, 2019; Cohen-Scali et al., 2018).

### *Limitations and Perspectives*

This study has several limitations that must be taken into account when interpreting its results. The first limitation is the small number of interviewed people within each country. A second limitation is the lack of Asian countries in the sample. Future research should then increase the sample size within each country and involve participants from Asia. Increasing the number of people involved could allow exploring more deeply the nature of the working experience in each context. This could also allow investigating more the political, socioeconomic, and cultural influences on work experience and on the social representations of work and comparing emerging adults with low-quality and high-quality jobs. A wider study extended to emerging adults in varied work situations should be implemented.

## Conclusion

There is a certain consensus among the emerging adults interviewed on how to define decent work, which seems to indicate the existence of shared expectations about work. First and foremost, work must enable people to live fully, not just survive. These expectations are, however, oriented and moderated by the socioeconomic context, which, in turn, depends on local labor legislation, the standard of living, and education systems of each country. Our results also show that a crucial aspect of work is linked to the quality of relationships in the workplace, confirming that working is not only instrumental but also a relational activity. Finally, our findings underline that many emerging adults across a variety of countries aspire to have opportunities of identity exploration on the workplace, but the local labor market does not always provide these opportunities. Given that early work experiences can have long-term impacts on people's lives (Benson & Furstenberg, 2007; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006; Krahn et al., 2015), it is crucial for career guidance and counseling to help disadvantaged young people improve their work situation.

## Author Contributions

Valérie Cohen-Scali contributed to conception, design, acquisition, analysis, and interpretation; drafted the manuscript; critically revised the manuscript; gave final approval; and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy. Jonas Masdonati contributed to acquisition, analysis, and interpretation; critically revised the manuscript; and gave final approval. Soazig Disquay-Perot contributed to conception, design, and acquisition and gave final approval. Marcelo Afonso Ribeiro contributed to conception, design, acquisition, and analysis and gave final approval. Guðbjörg Vilhjálmisdóttir contributed to conception, design, acquisition, and analysis; drafted the manuscript; and gave final approval. Rowayda Zein contributed to conception, design, acquisition, analysis, and interpretation and gave final approval. Janet Kaplan Bucciarelli contributed to conception and design; critically revised the manuscript; and gave final approval. Issa Abdou Moumoula contributed to conception, acquisition, and analysis and gave final approval. Gabriela Aisenson contributed to conception and interpretation and critically revised the manuscript. Jerome Rossier contributed to conception and analysis.




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## Open Practices

Data and materials for this study have not been made publicly available. The design and analysis plans were not preregistered.

## Note

1. The Human Development Ranking (HDR) has been developed by the United National Development Program to assess the development of the countries not only on the economic growth but also through people capabilities. The HDR is established using the Human Development Index. This index is built on three indicators: life length and health, knowledge level, and decent standards of living.

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