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The Contacts Matter: Experiences and Labour Strategies of Actors and Actresses in Mexico City

ABSTRACT: This article examines the role of social origin and contacts to access job opportunities for actors and actresses in Mexico City. Qualitative interviews with 21 theatre actors and actresses from 25 to 38 years old were conducted. The results show that contacts and actors and actresses' adscription with a renowned public figure is a strategy to get access to job opportunities and for the development of a professional career, though the interviewees highlighted that social origin and education are elements influencing on labour inequality in the cultural sector. The paper concludes that the implementation of public policy with an emphasis on equality is pivotal for the recognition of the right labours and decent work conditions.

KEYWORDS: Inequality; precarious labour; social capital; cultural workers; Mexico.

Los contactos cuentan: experiencias y estrategias laborales de actores y actrices de la Ciudad de México

RESUMEN: Este artículo examina el papel que el origen social y los contactos juegan para el acceso a oportunidades laborales de los actores y actrices de teatro de la Ciudad de México. El estudio adoptó una metodología cualitativa y se condujeron entrevistas semiestructuradas en línea a 21 actores y actrices de teatro cuyo rango de edad es de 25 a 38 años y son residentes de la Ciudad de México. Los hallazgos señalan que tener contactos y adscribirse a una figura reconocida es una de las estrategias para el acceso a oportunidades laborales y el crecimiento de una carrera profesional, aunque consideran que el origen social y lugar de formación profesional influyen en la desigualdad laboral. Se concluye que para generar condiciones laborales dignas y derechos laborales dependerá de la implementación de políticas públicas con un enfoque de igualdad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Desigualdad; precariedad; capital social; trabajadores culturales; México.

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Introduction

For many years it has been argued that art and culture are fundamental for the development of societies, since, among other aspects, they participate in citizen construction processes, and along with education, people can expand both their intellectual and human capacities (UNESCO, 2000). It has also been pointed out that art and culture help to mitigate antisocial behavior and improve people's mental health (Facnourt, D.; Warran, K. & Aughterson, 2020; Rosas, 2012). Generally disseminated by international organizations, government documents and cultural organizations, these visions point out that art and culture have a positive impact on societies and lead to social transformation (Matarasso, 1997; Secretariat of Culture, 2014; Latin American Network Art for Social Transformation, 2008). Although they can generate positive effects on people, it is important to critically analyze who are the people who make art and culture and in what working conditions they live.

In deepening these reflections, making art and culture implies for its workers to face labor precariousness and uncertainty, as the existing literature has pointed out (García, Cruces, Urteaga, 2012; García, 2013; Guadarrama, 2019; Solís & Brijández, 2018) as well as gender inequality (Hernández, 2013; Jaramillo-Vázquez, 2022; Olivera, 2018), inequality in terms of internet and broadband access, as well as knowledge and use of digital technologies (Ortega, 2012; 2013). An outstanding issue; however, is the social origin and social capital in labor advantages or disadvantages in the cultural labor market.¹

This article examines the role that social origin and contact (social capital) to access to job opportunities for actors and actresses in Mexico City. With the question: what elements come into play for job placement and career advancement? It is argued that in the context of labor precariousness, inequalities emerge among cultural workers², where

¹ The work presented here is part of a research project entitled "Precariousness and job uncertainty in the cultural sector: The experiences of visual and performing artists in Mexico City", which explores working conditions, labor strategies and the effects of precariousness on their personal lives. Twenty-two interviews were conducted with visual artists and 21 with theater actors and actresses. For reasons of space, only the work experiences of theater actors and actresses are presented here. This research received funding from the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT), through the Postdoctoral Stays in Mexico program.

² The language and the position of writer of this article is inclusive at all times. Hence, the use of "cultural worker" as an umbrella term to refer to both genders without excluding the feminine gender.

origin and the role played by contacts are factors of labor distinction. This implies that certain agents with social and cultural capitals have some advantages to have successful labor trajectories and others face challenges to progress in dignity. In this sense, the cultural labor market involves precarious and unequal experiences for cultural workers in Mexico City, as theater actors and actresses from different social positions.

The importance of this study, in the face of the problem of inequality and labor precariousness, is to have a better understanding of who are the actors and actresses who do theater, in other words, the contribution of this work is the understanding of the processes through which such elements can generate advantages or challenges for the promotion of job opportunities for theater actors and actresses. As shown in this article, the vocations, skills and knowledge of many of them are undoubtedly solid and it could be assumed that their professional careers are successful from a material point of view, however, for most of them they are adverse and resort to strategies such as multiple work activities, establish healthy relationships with their work contacts and rely on their personal networks in order to keep their economies stable and continue with their professional careers.

The work experiences of actors and actresses show the tensions of a labor market characterized by its precariousness and inequality and a rhetoric that praises art and culture for its social benefits, however, it is not always easy to understand how the social benefits of the arts and culture can be perceived, culture is more than a political instrument with positive social effects for people. From Cultural Studies and anthropological studies, which through their analyses dismantled hierarchical visions of high culture, culture and creativity are generated in the daily life of people, from their social relations, actions and meanings (Ingold & Hallam, 2007; Oliver, 2009; Osborne, 2003). In other texts it has been understood as the ways in which people produce, share and circulate habits, symbols and customs, or ways of life (Miller & Yúdice, 2020). By transferring these reflections to the cultural work of cultural workers, those who paint, engrave or perform constitute cultural productions, which in the first instance are loaded with meaning for themselves, and in the

second instance, “contribute to the development of the art and culture” of societies, whether in an employment relationship or outside it (UNESCO, 1980).

Those who participated in this study are considered cultural workers because they develop their acting activity within the framework of labor relations with independent theater companies, they contribute to the cultural development of the society in which they work. They are also actors and actresses who work in the so-called independent theater. Taking into account the discourse of the people interviewed, independent theater refers to theater subsidized by the State for its production and exhibition. Although the actors, producers and directors of this theater have the intellectual independence to make their plays, the economic and material conditions they have detract from their work and life experiences in a broad sense, which leads to precariousness and experiences of inequality.

Although most of the people interviewed have developed acting in independent theater, some of them have also participated in plays with the support of the private initiative, which in practice provides them with more economic income for their economies, but of a temporary nature. So, the article is divided into three parts. The first part presents a review of labor precariousness and inequality. The second part presents the methodology, and the third part presents the results and conclusions.

Precarious work: multiactivity and intermittency

The labor market in the cultural sector shows contradictions with academic studies that celebrate the configuration of a “creative class” (Florida, 2003) and who understand culture as a catalyst for economic growth. According to Florida, this creative class involves the cohesion of “creative” individuals who share talent, values and contribute knowledge and “creativity” to the technological development of international corporations and economic growth of capitalist economies. Studies in line with Florida, point to the creative industries and culture as a “productive and profitable” sector (Piedras, 2010; Piedras, Rojón, Arriaga & Rivera, 2013) and that generates economic growth. While there are cultural workers (or creative in Florida’s logic) whose work and economic experiences are generous, other

cultural workers experience the opposite situation. Other academic research, however, shows the fractures of flexible capitalism where labor conditions in the arts are marked by precariousness and inequality.

These elements have been present for several decades, approximately since globalization and the technological transformations of the 1980s, which brought about the flexibilization of employment, an increase in informal employment and unemployment (Guadarrama, Hualde & López, 2012; Mora & Oliveria, 2011; Reygadas, 2011). In the context of the information and knowledge age, people with low levels of education as well as those with high, particularly artists and cultural managers, face serious experiences of job insecurity and inequality.

It has been documented that the characteristics of cultural work in Latin American countries are characterized by multi-activity, intermittency and uncertainty (Guadarrama 2019; 2014; Solís & Brijández, 2018). Multi-activity, which involves simultaneously performing several jobs with some or no employment benefits; intermittency, which refers to periods where there is work or development of projects with generous income, but with a defined time frame. These circumstances make it difficult to save, invest and plan for the future. Experiencing these circumstances affects the private lives of cultural workers and leads to situations of uncertainty about the future (García, 2013; Gerber & Pinochet, 2013).

Multi-activity and intermittent work are symptoms of labor precariousness. According to Reygadas, precariousness refers to: unstable jobs, without a contract, with low wages, without benefits, with irregular, part-time or excessively long working hours and poor working conditions (Reygadas, 2011, p. 22). In the language of cultural workers, the displacement of work by "project" implies replacing the vision of conventional, salaried work with working conditions associated with flexibility and lack of social security (García, 2013). Likewise, project work "constitutes the most common forms of labor flexibilization" (Guadarrama, Hualde & López, 2014, p. 130; Solís & Brijández, 2018) without signed contracts, social protection and constant income.

In non-Latin American countries, there are also records of precariousness in the cultural labor market, such as in the United Kingdom (Brook, O'Brien & Taylor, 2019;

McRobbie, 2016) and in Spain (Rowan, 2009), where the working conditions of the workers are very similar to those of Latin Americans, as they do not have social security, work on a project basis and generate creative ventures. These circumstances continue to damage the labor rights of cultural workers and create labor precariousness, understood as a structural problem of flexible capitalism and where competition and labor intermittency are more the norm than the exception, brings problems in the working conditions of cultural workers such as theater actors and actresses. In addition, it generates inequality, which is another issue that runs through the subjectivities of these agents and is detailed in the following section.

Inequality: behind economic resources

The analysis of inequality in Mexico is a subject of extensive research conducted by sociologists, anthropologists and economists.³ This paper situates the discussion of inequality in the area of Cultural Studies and Anthropology with special emphasis on theater actors and actresses.

A fundamental text for understanding inequality from a social and cultural point of view is *La Distinción: criterios y bases sociales del gusto* (Bourdieu, 1988), which examines the formation and differences of social classes by focusing on “cultural capital”. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital refers both to the cultural practices of the subjects (visits to museums, concerts, choice of food) and to the internalized relationships and practices that motivate subjects to prefer and maintain certain cultural tastes and consumption. Such relationships and practices are observable both in their social origin (considering the father’s occupation) and in their educational and social capital.

³ To present in this manuscript the extensive literature on inequality in Mexico, including thematic and academic ones, would be tantamount to an article dedicated to the above. However, some examples of institutes and research centers that for years have been examining inequality in the country are: The Network of Studies on Inequalities of El Colegio de México, whose research addresses the different types of inequality, related to migration, economics, health or labor, the Institute of Social Research of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, the Department of Anthropology of the Autonomous Metropolitan University with the research line “culture, power and citizenship” which has conducted the research line “poverty, exclusion and social inequality”.

Building on Bourdieu's contributions, analyses have been developed to understand inequality in cultural work. For example, in the UK, Brook, O'Brien, Taylor (2020) argues that the arts labor market in the UK is characterized as "profoundly unequal" (2020, p. 4) by examining how inequalities and exclusions are reproduced by gender, social origin and the role of "contacts" in labor market insertion. Their mixed-methodology study shows that the cultural workers surveyed maintain a meritocratic view when reflecting on the elements for having a successful artistic career, even though they recognize that there are structural inequalities, such as social origin, school and "who do you know?" (p. 72). On this last point, the authors acknowledge that cultural work in the UK is "highly dependent on social networks." (Brook, O'Brien, Taylor, 2020, p. 73) especially when short term and temporary projects arise. They also point out the predominance of cultural workers of middle social origin and the minimal presence of workers of working social origin. (O'Brien, 2020, p. 245).

Studies carried out in Mexico show the power relations and their importance in maintaining a place in the cultural sector. For example, Ejea (2011) studies power relations in the labor world of the artistic sector, with emphasis on the theatrical field. It examines the role of the National Fund for Culture and the Arts (FONCA, by its acronym in Spanish) and the National System of Creators (SNCA, by its acronym in Spanish), and shows the web of power relations that allowed some Mexican artists to generate economic and symbolic resources and that today they are individuals in the highest spheres of artistic power. The author argues that such artists, from their positions and decision-making in the councils and commissions of both organizations, reproduced practices that turned out to be contradictory in light of the principles of FONCA, which propagated the democratization of the arts and culture through its stimuli and actions aimed at decentralization. Some of these practices were the inclusion of artists from the Federal District in the ranks of the councils and commissions, which generated more centralization than decentralization, greater economic support to individual projects than to collectives, as well as to people 50 years of age and older.

According to Ejea, such practices were carried out in a vertical and unipersonal manner, which has led to the existence of a group of elite artists who have resources, recognition and prestige. This situation means that those who are not part of this elite group, such as young artists and actors starting their careers, experience precariousness and inequality. As will be shown below, the pursuit of being “connected with, being a student of and managing to work with” are socio-labor strategies that they employ in practice for the sake of their labor insertion, to enhance their professional careers and to achieve social recognition.

Mixed methodology studies (García, Cruces & Urteaga, 2012; García & Piedras, 2013) examine “collective collaboration networks” in young artists as a response to job insecurity and labor market uncertainty in visual arts, music and publishing. Through a survey addressed to young artists in Mexico City, they inquired about their socio-demographic profile, socioeconomic level, working conditions and forms of collaborative work (Piedras, Rojón, Arriaga & Rivera, 2013). The results were augmented with qualitative interviews and ethnographies to gain insight into the artists’ direct experience of networking, entrepreneurship practices and the use of digital technologies.

Although not all the research studies delved into the differences that legitimize inequalities among cultural workers, some studies pointed out that those engaged in artistic production in Mexico City came from an affluent socioeconomic level, which allowed them to engage in consumption practices and affluent lifestyles in spite of facing precarious labor circumstances (Gerber & Pinochet, 2013, p. 137, 141).

From these readings, there are coincidences in terms of the profile of cultural workers: they have high levels of education, live in urban environments and have a medium socioeconomic level (Ortega, 2012, 2013. See also Flores, Nivón & De la Garza, 2020; Urteaga, 2012). This is important because, on the one hand, it seems to be an indicator that those with low socioeconomic status are absent from the artistic labor market, and on the other hand, despite the precarious labor market context, the middle socioeconomic levels and above can perhaps cope better with precarious circumstances than those who experience economic and material difficulties.

In line with the readings analyzed, contacts are understood here as social interactions between subjects involving power relations. Such social interactions or web of relationships are established and maintained, among other reasons, to reduce the uncertainty of job insecurity. In this search and maintenance of contacts, there are advantages for some and disadvantages for others.

Those who grew up in a context where both parents have university studies and occupations related to the artistic field may have greater possibilities to be connected with other people who contribute to the development of their children's successful career path. Growing up in an artistic family context, it is very likely that from childhood children will develop cultural consumption, knowledge and social relations that will allow them to interact and face the unstable artistic labor market with some success.

In the context of a flexible capitalism, precariousness and its features (multi-activity, intermittent work and flexibility) restrict labor insertion and the development of dignified careers for cultural workers. Likewise, social capital and social origin can provide opportunities for some cultural workers, as well as exclusion for those whose social capital and social origin is weak compared to that of their peers. The experiences of independent theater actors and actresses illustrate these issues.

Methodology

This research was developed from a qualitative perspective to understand the precariousness and inequality in the work environment of theater actors and actresses. By prioritizing the subjects' point of view, precariousness and inequality are situated processes that are experienced from different social positions. In this sense, both those from a well-to-do social position and those from a humble background experience precarious work circumstance, but the origin and contacts modify the way in which they face precarious work experiences.

Being a "conversational practice" where the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewed generates knowledge about the object of study (Brinkmann, 2008, p.470), the interviews allowed us to delve deeper into the working relationships and

practices in the working lives of actors and actresses in the theater. These aspects were contextualized with the quantitative information we have regarding the sociodemographic and socio-labor profile of the study participants. Twenty-one qualitative interviews were conducted with actors and actresses living in Mexico City over eight months (September 2020 to February 2021 and September 2021 to December 2021). In order to respect the health contingency for Covid-19, the interviews were conducted online using Zoom and Messenger, with a duration of approximately 90 minutes. Most of the people interviewed were in the 25 to 38 age range, with 30 to 35 being the age group that predominated over the others. The participation of the people interviewed was 11 actresses and 10 theater actors.

According to Brook, O'Brien, Taylor (2020) and O'Brien (2020) examining the jobs and occupations of subjects provides insight into their social background. While work or "positions" in the labor market provide information on the social position of the subjects, together with social and cultural elements, occupations provide information on labor trajectories. Likewise, by examining the parents' occupations it is possible to observe "the impact of the parents' occupation on social mobility" (O'Brien, 2020, p. 44). The criteria for analyzing the social origin of theater actors and actresses were: the educational level of their parents and their occupations. (Brook, O'Brien & Taylor, 2020, p. 58; O'Brien, 2020, p. 244).

The topics covered in the interview were: profile of the interviewees (age, highest level of education and where they studied, place of residence), working conditions (benefits, multiactivity and intermittent work), social origin (parents' level of education and occupations), contacts (teachers and parents who in some way supported the labor market insertion of the study participants). To maintain anonymity, fictitious names were used, and where necessary, work locations were altered.

Being residents of Mexico City, the choice of city was due to the existing contradiction between the cultural infrastructure and the working conditions of the study subjects. It has been documented that Mexico City concentrates a large number of artistic spaces (e.g., museums, galleries, theaters) (Piedras, Rojón, Arriaga & Rivera, 2013) which

implies an important cultural participation of the people and contribution of the cultural sector of Mexico City to the GDP of the country (Cruz,2022). However, precarious working conditions affect the working and existential lives of Mexican artists.

Sociodemographic profile of cultural workers in Mexico City

According to the Culture Satellite Account of the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI, 2020), 1,220,816 people were engaged in the cultural field nationally in 2020, as opposed to 2019 with 1,394,358⁴. This represents a difference of 173,542 people, who could have become unemployed or informally employed, among other reasons, due to the impact of the Covid-19 health contingency.

The expanded questionnaire of INEGI's Population and Housing Census (2020) indicates that in the country there are 22,721 people with academic training in the performing arts nationwide, of which there are 6,926 in Mexico City. This figure is equivalent to 30% of the performing arts professionals trained in the city. Professional women and men in the performing arts are 4,543 and 2,383, respectively. In terms of employment, according to Census data (2020), 15,832 professionals are employed nationwide, of which 4,782 are employed in Mexico City alone, equivalent to 31%.

The average monthly income of these professionals at the national level is \$10,768 Mexican pesos, while in Mexico City it is \$15,834 Mexican pesos. This data is important because it indicates that the average monthly income in Mexico City is five times higher than in the rest of the states of the Republic. However, although income is higher, the costly standard of living in Mexico City, in terms of rent and utility payments, results in insufficient income.

Based on these data, Mexico City concentrates a considerable percentage of people who decide to study a career in the Performing Arts and who develop their careers in the city. This is due to the concentration of infrastructure in the west and south, the possible connections they can make to access greater job opportunities and the slightly higher income level than in other states of the country. Likewise, although we have presented

⁴ Both figures are preliminary.

quantitative data on cultural workers in the performing arts, we now present the results of the qualitative interviews. The study was carried out with theater actors and actresses who have completed their university studies, residents of Mexico City and at an early stage of their careers, since, as mentioned above, it is in these experiences that inequality and labor precariousness can be made visible.

Actors and actress' profile

The interviewees completed their undergraduate and graduate studies in acting (20 participants) and a specialty abroad with national funding (1 participant). With the exception of 5 people who studied in private theater schools in Mexico City (e.g., *Casa Azul* and *La Casa del Teatro*), 16 participants had completed their studies in the schools of the National Institute of Fine Arts and Literature (INBAL, by its acronym in Spanish) and the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM, by its acronym in Spanish). Some of the reasons why most of them studied in public institutions is due to the trajectory and reputation of these institutions, and also because the costs were lower in relation to private institutions.

At the time of the interview, they mentioned living in Mexico City and in neighborhoods and municipalities located in the west and south of the city. Some of these neighborhoods are: *Del Valle*, *Tizapán*, *San Ángel*, *San Pedro de los Pinos*, *San Clemente Sur*. The experience of one interviewee who, thanks to the support of a friend, lived in her apartment on work days and returned to her parents' house on weekends, since otherwise the daily commute to the city would involve high transportation costs that she preferred to avoid, in addition to taking a long time. The data show that the people interviewed live in an urbanized context and one of the reasons for doing so in the west and south of the city is because of the geographic proximity to their workplaces, such as theaters, forums and theater schools.

Regarding housing and with whom they live, 14 people said they live in apartments whose rents are shared with: their partners (5), roommates (3) one of their parents (2) and alone (4). Those who mentioned living in their own home without paying rent live with:

their parents (4) and their partners (2); one respondent lived alone in a small rented room. Some of the reasons why 14 people rent an apartment or live in their parents' house is because they face job instability and lack of benefits in order to own their own house or apartment. The next section examines the social background and social capital of the respondents.

Educational level of fathers and mothers

In the analysis of the interviews, 30 fathers and mothers have a bachelor's degree. Subsequently, we found families in which one of the parents has a bachelor's degree and their partners have a technical career, higher secondary education, or couples with basic and higher secondary education (see Table 1). In relation to the children's studies, all of them have completed their bachelor's degree and some have specialties and postgraduate degrees. Although there are fathers and mothers who have higher education and technical careers, their daughters and sons (i.e., the participants in the study) completed a bachelor's degree in acting and, in four cases, have two bachelor's degrees and a major in the United States. Although upward educational mobility is shown, it does not guarantee their job success in acting is assured.

Sara (32 years old), who studied in the United States, said that her parents' level of education is high school and their occupations are related to the electrician's trade and housework. Although this suggests Sara's upward mobility due to her academic achievements, her high levels of education have not allowed her to fully develop her career as an actress. Consequently, she carries out multiple activities, such as teaching English at a university, being a member of a collective and continuously participating in calls for proposals to win funding and carry out her theatrical projects. Sara's attitude towards the role of contacts will be presented later; for now, the parents' work occupations are presented.

Occupations of fathers and mothers

The occupations of fathers and mothers are diversified. In the case of fathers, they have worked as cafeteria attendant, human health or veterinary worker, owner of a small spare parts business, acting teacher, freelance activities, entrepreneurial occupations and media management. The mothers' occupations were concentrated especially in housework, in public and private institutions. Others were owners of a grocery store, a restaurant, a shoe store, a real estate agency; and three retired women worked in the areas of music, stage design, costume design and teaching. The following table shows the educational levels and occupations of the fathers and mothers of the interviewees.

Table 1. Levels and occupations of the fathers and mothers of the people interviewed.

Fictitious name	Mother's educational level	Father's educational level	Mother's occupation	Father's Occupation
Sara	Upper middle level	Technical career	Housewife.	Electrician. Works for a communications company.
Patricia	Technical career	Basic level	Housewife.	Blacksmith. He works as a caretaker of a small family business.
Mateo	Upper middle level	Basic level	Housewife.	Retired. Worked as a laborer in a brewery.
Ernesto	Technical career	Basic level	Housewife.	Owner of a business selling auto parts.
Noé	Upper middle level	Bachelor's degree	Grocery store owner.	Retired. Worked as an engineer in a public institution.
María	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Housewife.	Employed in a chemical company.
Julieta	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	General Practitioner. Works in a public hospital.	General practitioner. Works in a public hospital.
Mónica	Two bachelor's degrees	Technical career	Owner of a small restaurant.	Retired. Engaged in commerce and sales.
Miriam	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Lawyer. She works in the legal area of a public institution.	Lawyer. At the time of the interview, he was unemployed.
Lilia	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Retired. She was a violinist and music teacher in	Acting coach for a television and theater company.

			two public institutions.	
Lucía	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Retired. She was set designer and costume designer.	He passed away. He was an actor, director and writer.
Renata	Bachelor's degree	Engineering	Housewife.	Pensioner.
Darío	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Housewife.	Freelance. He is dedicated to graphic design.
Marco	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Housewife.	Veterinary Doctor. He has his own clinic.
Daniel	Bachelor's degree	Engineering	Retired. Former preschool teacher.	Retired. Worked in different public and private institutions.
Isabel	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Real estate franchise owner.	Deceased. Former owner of a real estate franchise.
Rosa	Bachelor's degree	Engineering	Businesswoman.	Businessman.
Ricardo	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	University and postgraduate professor.	Employed in a public government institution.
Ramiro	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Shoe store owner.	Owner of a shoe store and partner in a recycling company.
Elías	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree and a major	Housewife.	Physician with specialty. Owner of a clinic.
Samuel 22	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Journalist in a government institution	Director of a newspaper.

Source: Own elaboration based on data collected.

When considering the level of education of mothers and fathers and their occupations, these elements suggest that the social origin of four people would be at a low level (Sara, Patricia, Mateo, Ernesto) while eleven people would be at a medium social origin and six people would be at a medium-high social origin (Isabel, Rosa, Ricardo, Ramiro, Elías and Samuel). This is reinforced by several aspects: three mentioned being supported with major medical insurance by their parents, others live in properties that belong to their parents and do not pay rent, or they were not required to contribute with family expenses at the time of studying their degrees and were financially supported.

Theater actors and actresses from low and middle social backgrounds mentioned contributing to family expenses when they were studying their careers, or voluntarily contributed, and did not have major medical insurance at the time of the interview.

Mateo (actor 38 years old) mentioned that since he was 18 years old, he worked for several years as a salesman in a department store, allowing him to pay for his university studies in theater. By working as an actor, he has combined his work with other odd jobs, which sometimes provide him with health insurance:

Since 2008 to date I have had contracts where some of them do not offer social security, that is, you do not contribute anything, and others where you are paid on a fee basis. Then you have to pay your taxes. Sometimes I have been hired for a month to three months maximum because it was also outsourcing. So, they paid me and I had medical insurance. Fortunately, I did not have to use the medical service, but my medical insurance now is the Seguro Popular. I do not have private health insurance. I have contributed to my retirement savings, but in reality, it is nothing, in other words, I must have 50,000 pesos saved in 14 or 16 years (Mateo, 38 years old).

Although a qualitative study has been carried out here, it is important to highlight that the largest number of actors and actresses are of middle and upper-middle social origin, as other literature with a quantitative approach has shown (Piedras, Rojón, Arriaga & Rivera, 2013; Flores, Nivón & De la Garza, 2020). These data highlight the fact that precariousness and inequality should be understood as situated processes, and in this sense, cultural workers develop experiences and strategies to face their labor challenges from their social position. Furthermore, that such experiences and strategies somewhat contradict Florida's view of *creative class*. As part of those experiences and strategies, the role that contacts have played in developing their performance trajectories was examined. The next section discusses this point.

The role of contacts for labor market insertion

The interviews asked to what extent it has been important to have contacts for their job opportunities. Social capital or contacts are important because, although they do not

determine the actors' labor trajectories, there is a relationship between the social capital of actors and actresses and the possibilities or legitimization of inequalities for labor opportunities. The analysis of the interviews showed three aspects.

1. Contacts have been valuable and attachment to the big names

From the point of view of 12 people, having contacts with producers, teachers, directors and maintaining the relationship is healthy in order to be contacted in the near future. The opinion of one interviewee stands out, who considers that any conflict with these people implies the risk of hindering the labor trajectory and, therefore, suggests that it is better to have a good relationship:

Undoubtedly it has nothing to do with talent and many (not so talented) colleagues have had a lot of help because they have friends and a lot of work. And there are some cases where both things coincide, they have talent and contact, but undoubtedly in the theater it's all about people liking them. Directors, producers, and even the cast members themselves like you because maybe someone else has a project and if you make a fuss because they didn't pay you on time [later they will say] "no, not that one". Then something else happens in the industry, and that is that some of our colleagues are too meek because we are afraid to raise our voices to make the fart (Marco, 35 years old).

Included in this same point are accounts that consider contacts as very important, although they emphasize the ascription to *big names* (renowned artists) for job opportunities. For example:

They are because of the work connections you have. For example, if you do not belong to certain groups linked to such people, it is difficult for you to access other groups. Like this logic of belonging to a circle to then belong to another circle, to then belong to another circle. There is a certain bias according to who you know. But if you are one of those who are already linked and move with powerful people, somehow, I feel that there is this kind of closeness (Sara, 32 years old).

He is a man whom I admire very much and his name is (the name of the person was omitted), he is an actor-director-dramatist-playwright-puppeteer. I will always be very

grateful to him. We have worked together for various things and the truth is that he is a person from whom I have learned a lot and has given me the opportunity to have work and income. He has taught me to value myself and my work (Julieta, 26 years old).

2. Effort, individual work and “putting in a lot of effort”.

According to three interviewees, opportunities for advancement in performance depend on individual effort and are associated with a meritocratic vision. In the responses, a vision totally focused on effort was found:

I really had to put a lot of effort into it and I also feel that it has a lot to do with an attitude of I go in and learn and do what I have to do [...]. But I think it has to do completely with my capabilities. Okay, the contacts, but if you don't have the skills or the desire to learn more or to be there, the contacts run out because you can get to a project through contacts, but if people don't like your work, they don't talk to you again, that is, your contact is burnt out (Monica, 30 years old).

If I could put a percentage of the contacts, it would be 25% and the other is 75%. This is my experience, because I define my work. I can use 25% of the contacts to make connections, but if I don't generate the main idea, the other doesn't work.

I: Do you think that those who have relatives close to the performing arts have more job opportunities?

I think so, because it is also a different lifestyle. We must not lose sight of where each person comes from: the socioeconomic condition, the environment where you grew up. I think it does determine a lot. A person who has contacts or someone who has a relative to someone who, in my case, has to break through - yes or yes - with your work (Mateo, 38 years old).

This last paragraph is important because it points to socioeconomic status and family background as a factor that can legitimize inequalities or generate advantages in the promotion of a theater career. In this sense, for actors and actresses from lower social backgrounds, putting in a lot of effort implies a greater effort than their colleagues from middle and high social backgrounds to enter and remain in the theater labor market.

3. Balance between contacts and demonstrating the capabilities to perform a role

According to six people interviewed, they considered that contacts are a gateway in accessing job opportunities, but once inside the circle of contacts and work, acting skills must meet the expectations of the person or persons who gave them access to the job. In addition to this, two interviewees consider that educational background is important for access to job opportunities:

You need both your skills and your personal contacts. I think it's both, yes, it's a little bit of both. Here we live in a centralized country and everything comes together. The big theatrical productions are here in the city and one or two in the interior of the Republic. But the level of competition is higher here.

Here in the city right now they are paying me a thousand pesos per show, which is already a high tabulator. Contacts have weight and I think it also has to do with our roots, with our *malinchismo*. For example, I see it now with someone who studied a workshop at the Actor's Studio in New York, which is the school where the great Hollywood actors came from. They come to Mexico and bring a more contemporary technique.; or someone who has greater purchasing power can go to London for training and is given priority because they are world eminences over someone who studied, for example, perhaps at the *Escuela Nacional de Arte Teatral*, as is my case. A classmate of mine studied at *Casa Azul*. I don't know if she paid for her trip, but she went to study later to (theater school abroad) and was accepted into the National Theater Company of Mexico (Elías, 31 years old).

There are people who have really known how to do it without having absolutely nothing. But I think it's a very general thing. I think that in reality, if we think about the people who come out of schools like *Casa Azul*, *Casa del Teatro*, who have economic privileges, housing privileges, more obvious privileges, and for them theater is not considered as an activity to survive. Well, yes, of course it is easier for them to say "I do theater for the fun of it", isn't it? But I also know people who do not want to dedicate themselves to anything else and who want to get ahead with their activity and then they work a lot and, in the end, they do not obtain economically what a person with a more privileged position could obtain (Lucía, 33 years old).

Elías and Lucía's stories coincide in that people from a wealthy or privileged background have access to expensive and reputable theater schools, which will allow them to enter elite theater companies in the country. It should be noted that, according to Lucía, doing theater is more for those whose economic and material needs are covered, turning theater activity into a hobby. In contrast, those who come from poorer backgrounds face greater challenges in developing their working careers, including paying for their university studies, strengthening their cultural consumption and maintaining friendly working social relations.

As can be seen, the largest number of responses is on contacts and ascription to big names. Contacts have considerable weight for access to job opportunities, this is the point of view of respondents from middle social background and one person from upper middle. This is followed by responses regarding the balance between individual effort and social connections. Those who expressed their opinion are from a medium social background and one person from a low social background. Finally, there are the responses that point to individual effort as fundamental for occupational upward mobility, coming from respondents whose social origin is medium-high and one person of low social origin.

That one person (Mateo) relates the success of a theatrical career to a meritocratic vision is explained by the effects of social origin as a factor of difference, in the sense that someone who grows up in a working family context and not an artistic one has to make a greater and individual effort for their labor insertion. This is similar for the two interviewees who observe the training school as another factor of difference, in the sense that they must struggle academically due to the job competition involved in being with colleagues who studied in elite schools.

The contacts and the ascription to some figure speak to us of the "interdependence" of contact networks within the theater groups (Brook, O'Brien & Taylor, 2020). And while it can be highlighted that inertia and solidarity networks are generated among actors, it also entails exclusions and inequalities for other actors. That is to say, to be ascribed to a figure or group of actors will involve that those who are ascribed speak the language of those who give access to the group of belonging, or share attitudes,

values and languages in the way of doing theater, since in this way social and cultural relations are reinforced.

This shared language will bring effects for theater making and cultural consumption. For example, in the way of making theater, one can fall into the creation of plays where directors, producers and actors are a group that already know each other, are cohesive and hardly include new talents. In cultural consumption, in order not to compromise box office earnings, directors and producers prefer to turn to *big names* to include them in the company, while for actors in early stages of their careers they have been faced with showing that they have high numbers of followers in their social networks, as it somehow guarantees producers that there will be economic gains from high audience attendance. These actions lead to employment inequalities for those who are starting or building their careers.

In the context of precariousness in the artistic labor market, making theater implies facing not only the challenges of precariousness itself, but also the inequalities in terms of social origin and the contacts that cultural workers have. In addition to this analysis, examining cultural policies is another element that broadens the vision of inequality and labor precariousness.

Cultural policies and labor rights

In Mexico, for several years there have been legislative initiatives for the recognition and implementation of the labor rights of cultural workers. These initiatives have been in line with the Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist (1980), a document of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In the Recommendation, UNESCO invites member countries to recognize both the freedom of expression of artists and to maintain and ensure their labor rights, including social security and a decent income. As a result of this Recommendation, there have been several initiatives in Mexico. For example, the proposal of the Support Fund for the Access of Artists, Creators and Cultural Managers to Social Security, created by Senator María de Lourdes Rojo Incháustegui (2010). This proposal sought to include artists in the social

security system, in order to contribute to a dignified life. The creation of the trust promoted that the State, artists and other types of individuals or legal entities make contributions so that they would have labor benefits, such as: disability, old age, life, involuntary termination of employment, illness and accident insurance. However, this initiative was stalled because it did not conclude its “legislative cycle” (Centro de Estudios Sociales y de Opinión Pública, 2020, p. 11).

Subsequently, in 2018 there were consultations and national forums where the problems of the artistic guild in labor matters were identified and there was an exhortation to legislators to take up the pending issue of social security for artists (Centro de Estudios Sociales y de Opinión Pública, 2020, p.11)⁵. Despite calls from artists’ civil organizations and legislative initiatives, the incorporation of artists into social security continues to be an issue that has not progressed legislatively.

Certainly, from the State, scholarships and economic support for artistic creation have been generated, which support individual and collective proposals of cultural workers, however, as Guadarrama (2019) points out, these policies are based on merit and excellence, rather than on criteria of social welfare, membership or union affiliation (2019, p. 219-220). This implies that it will be necessary to stand out and prove to be suitable to obtain support, a situation that is meritocratic and may generate inequalities for those who apply (see, for example, Ejea, 2011).

Although grants and financial support allow cultural workers to implement their cultural initiatives, their economic solvency is determined by the duration of their projects, a situation that puts them at a material, economic and personal disadvantage, especially for those with a low socioeconomic level. Once their project is completed, they need to seek financing, expand or maintain their secondary jobs, or rely on family and friends to support them. Therefore, if there is no public policy from the State that guarantees the labor rights of cultural workers (including theater actors and actresses), stimulating the cultural participation of theater audiences, the State will not be able to guarantee the

⁵The discussion of artists’ labor rights was presented at the “3rd National Theater Congress” (2018), National Dance Consultation, organized by the civil association *Periplo Gestión Creativa* and the National Forum for Dance Cultural Rights (2018) (Center for Social Studies and Public Opinion, 2020).

rights of cultural workers, as well as access to and strengthening of artistic education from an early age, the living conditions of many will continue to be unequal and precarious compared to those who have the social and cultural capital to open doors in the competitive artistic labor market. In order to put their vocations into practice, there will be those who take jobs that have little or nothing to do with their profession, participate in more public calls and rely on their family and friendship networks, which will have a negative effect on their living conditions.

Conclusions

This article shows that origin and social capital are elements that influence access to job opportunities for actors and actresses in Mexico City. From their experiences they consider the importance of making and maintaining contacts for their labor insertion, followed by visions where they recognize a balance between contacts and their individual effort, as well as meritocratic visions that consider that individual talent allows them to open up job opportunities. Likewise, some actors recognize that social origin and place of educational formation are circumstances of inequality with respect to those whose family context is influential in the theater and who were educated in elite schools, whether in Mexico or abroad.

Based on the results of this study, social background and social capital imply that work experiences in the theater are different, bringing advantages for some and challenges for others. Job insecurity and inequality are subjective and situated processes, which leads us to think of insecurity and inequality in the plural, i.e., insecurities and inequalities that, from the social position of the subjects, are faced in different ways. The artistic labor market in Mexico City seems to be characterized by its precariousness and inequalities. In addition, the lack of implementation of labor rights and the circle of artistic power are circumstances that constrain the working conditions and possibilities of cultural workers to pursue dignified professional careers. In this sense, the implementation of public policies with a focus on equality, so that actors and actresses from different social contexts have opportunities and labor maintenance, is a pending issue of the State towards the cultural

sector. Given the difficulties in developing solid labor trajectories, the recognition and enforcement of the labor rights of cultural workers by the State becomes fundamental.

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