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Subjectification of Highly Qualified Professionals in the Cuban Realm of Work: Analyzing a Two-Sided Process

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Key words: subjectification; problem-centered interviews; interpretive subjectification analysis; discourse; subject positions; self-positioning; identity; professionals; work; Cuba

Abstract: In this article, I elaborate on discourses and discursively mediated subject positions regarding the working self in Cuba. My main objective is to analyze whether and how highly qualified professionals in Cuba position themselves relating to these discourses and subject positions. Building on the hitherto little-known conceptual framework of *interpretive subjectification analysis*, I perform the empirical analysis in two parts: First, I identify subject positions directed at Cuban workers in contemporary discourses on the Cuban realm of work. Second, based on qualitative interviews with highly qualified professionals in Havana, I reconstruct individual self-positioning modes. I demonstrate how the interviewees described and explained their professional biographies by relating to discourses and subject positions. By indicating similarities and differences with the existing literature on the working self in Western, post-Fordist, and neoliberal contexts, I intend to enhance the understanding of subjectification processes in a new context. Simultaneously, I evaluate whether the approach of *interpretive subjectification analysis,* which was developed in a Western, market-capitalist context, is equally fruitful for understanding subjectification processes in Cuba. In doing so, I contribute to the advancement of this approach.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades, various scholars have analyzed contemporary labor discourses and subjectification processes of workers in Western, post-Fordist, neoliberal contexts. Discourse analysts have investigated the genesis and nature of a discursive subject generally referred to as *the self-entrepreneur* (BOLTANSKI & CHIAPELLO, 2017 [1999]; BRÖCKLING, 2015 [2007]; FOUCAULT, 1988, to cite just a few seminal works; for further developments within the framework of governmental studies, see, e.g., BÜHRMANN, 2005; MARTTILA, 2013). This, in turn, has led to further analyses of how this discursive subject, also called a subject position, is appropriated when (working) subjects self-interpret their position and form their identity (e.g., FARRUGIA, 2019). Until recently, researchers focused predominantly either on discourses or on subjects, omitting and tacitly presupposing either one or the other of these aspects in their analysis. Moreover, some analysts of subjectification viewed discourses as all-powerful structures that restrict the (working) subject's scope of interaction and reflexivity from the outset. [1]

A recent branch of the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse contains a new perspective on the concept of subjectification through *interpretive subjectification analysis* (e.g., BOSANČIĆ, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2019; BOSANČIĆ, PFAHL & TRAUE, 2019; KELLER, SCHNEIDER & VIEHÖFER, 2012). In this strand of research, subjectification is a two-sided process based on a definitional and theoretical framework that combines the interpretive paradigm of sociology and post-structural theories. [2]

In this article, I discuss whether and how this approach can be employed to explore subjectification processes as an interplay of discourses and subjects' self-interpretation/self-formation in a different context than the ones studied so far, namely in the Cuban realm of work. Nowadays, the application of Western concepts and methodologies in the analysis of the Global South is rightly being called into question (e.g., GO, 2016; NEUBERT, 2022). In this specific case, however, the (reflected) appropriation of Western concepts seems reasonable and potentially fruitful. This is based on the initial assumption that the concept of the *working self* is also pertinent in the Cuban context, where discursive narratives of state-led socialism intersect with those of global capitalism. However, there are important differences compared to the contexts studied so far on a discursive level. In previous studies, researchers have shown that in Western, post-Fordist, neoliberal discourses particularly the (self-)optimization and flexibilization of individuals has been emphasized (e.g., BOLTANSKI & CHIAPELLO, 2017 [1999]; BRÖCKLING, 2015 [2007]; RÖCKE 2017, 2021; SENNETT, 1998). Meanwhile, national and international contemporary discourses about the Cuban realm of work are focused on structural issues of the Cuban economy, which is generally depicted as being in a problematic condition[1].

1 From the wide range of literature on the topic, I mention only a few recent examples here: ANAYA and DÍAZ (2018); BYE (2020); IZQUIERDO and BURCHARDT (2017). With the COVID-19 pandemic, the Cuban economy is said to have deteriorated even more drastically, and the Cuban government has accelerated reform processes (some of which had already been planned and/or started before). HOFFMAN (2021) has attempted to grasp the impacts of crisis

While the descriptions of its problems and their causes vary by source, there seems to be a consensus that the main problems of the contemporary Cuban realm of work are related to, in short, persistent scarcity, excesses of planning and bureaucracy, and the so-called *inverted pyramid*, that is, a non-meritocratic order of the occupational (earnings) hierarchy. In this context, it is often emphasized that Cuba has a relatively large proportion of highly qualified professionals who suffer particularly due to these problems (e.g., ANAYA & DÍAZ, 2018; FEINBERG, 2016; RITTER & HENKEN, 2015). [3]

In the following, after briefly discussing methods and data (including some methodological considerations in Section 2), I outline parts of these discourses and associated subject positions directed at Cuban workers (Section 3). Using qualitative interviews conducted in Havana in 2020/2021, I then examine some examples of how highly qualified professionals interpreted and positioned themselves as working subjects in contemporary Cuba (Sections 4 and 5). The interviewees' references to discourses and especially to the subject position of *victim/loser* serve as heuristic devices for the analysis and presentation of the results. I summarize the main results in the conclusion (Section 6), where I again address the question of the suitability of *interpretive subjectification analysis* in the analysis of the Cuban context: for the present analysis, the approach has proven fruitful. Furthermore, its extension beyond the Western context allows for a different perspective on subjectification processes, which in turn contributes to the advancement of this approach. [4]

2. Methods and Data

2.1 Methodological considerations

The inconsistent use of terms and definitions in the diverse literature on subjectification[2] can be confusing. When using notions such as *subjectification* or *technologies of the self,* it is often unclear if authors want to emphasize discourse- or individual-related processes, or the interplay of both. The terminology used in the subjectification approach mentioned above, which is referred to as *interpretive subjectification analysis* (e.g., BOSANČIĆ, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2019; BOSANČIĆ et al., 2019; KELLER et al., 2012), provides some clarity in this regard. In this conceptual framework, subjectification is understood as the "interrelatedness or entanglement of normative subject orders and subjective self-relations" (BOSANČIĆ, 2019, p.88)[3]. In other words, subjectification is a two-sided process: it includes socially/discursively constructed subject positions, as

and reforms in terms of social policy and institutions.

2 These authors are not necessarily concerned with the working self (only), but also with other possible forms of self-reference (i.e., the bodily/physical, sexual and intimate self, see BOSANČIĆ, 2014, p.170).

3 There are also some terminological inaccuracies in this approach, for example, regarding the alternating use of the terms *subjectivation* and *subjectification*. This inconsistency is probably mainly due to translation issues: the approach originates from the German-speaking world and there seems to be no standard translation for the German term *Subjektivierung*. For the sake of consistency, I exclusively use the term *subjectification* in this article.

well as individual modes of self-positioning (for a framing of this approach in the broader field of discourse and subjectivation research, see, e.g., GEIPEL, 2019). [5]

Subject positions are understood as discursively generated "identity templates" (BOSANČIĆ, 2018, p.190) that instruct "addressees to shape their self" (ibid.). In any kind of discourse, examples of typical subject positions are "heroes, rescuers, problem cases, sensibly and responsibly acting individuals, villains and so on" (KELLER, 2011, p.58). Such subject positions reflect underlying social norms of (self-)interpretation that are mediated through discourses. These subject positions, which are a form of *positioning through others*, affect individual modes or processes of self-positioning. *Self-positioning* can thus be understood as the process of dealing with or reacting to discursively generated subject positions. In the literature, there are a variety of terms and concepts that correspond to the concept of self-positioning.[4] For the empirical analysis in this article, I understand self-positioning first and foremost as a process of (self-)interpretation and self-formation that is assumed to, in one way or another, relate to discursive subject positions. [6]

In this approach to subjectification, discursively processed subject positions guide or influence processes of self-positioning*, but* they do not determine them. Human actors, as the target of subjectivation instructions, "are more or less free when they are adopting or referring to subject positions [...] [, and] possible reactions to interpellations have a wide range from affirmative adaption, adaption in parts, to misinterpretation or ignoring the interpellation" (BOSANČIĆ, 2018, p.190). As described by BOSANČIĆ (2014, 2016, 2018, 2019), epistemologically speaking, this understanding of subjectification combines post-structuralist concepts of subjectification, as elaborated by FOUCAULT (e.g., 1988) and BUTLER (1997), with the identity concept of the interpretive paradigm of sociology, drawing especially on MEAD's (2009 [1934]) conception of the self.[5] Indeed, a common feature of these approaches is the assumption "that the human self, the mind or in general this kind of 'inner space' is an instance of self-reflexivity which is bound to 'outer' symbolic orders, materialities and time and space relations" (BOSANČIĆ, 2018, p.192). Identity is thus understood here as a form of self-awareness of individuals or subjects (whereby the categories *subject* or *individual* are broader and thus less tangible concepts), which is, however, conditioned by social norms. Hence, subjectification or self-shaping processes (understood as processes of identity positioning) are a product of *outer* symbolic orders as well as *inner* self-reflexivity. Very simply put, the preceding considerations can be summarized in the following formula: *Subjectification* = *subject positions* + *self-positioning.* [7]

4 BOSANČIĆ (2018, p.191) gave the examples of "self-formation, self-relation, actual subjection, self-interpretation or technologies of the self." He pointed out that "[d]espite the differences of the notions, most of the theorists invoke a concept of identity in some way when they talk about the processes on the level of lived subjectivities" (ibid.).

5 BOSANČIĆ (2014, 2016, 2018, 2019) claimed that this is unconventional because post-structuralist and individual-centered approaches are usually juxtaposed.

The conception of subjectification as a two-sided process entails that the empirical analysis of subjectification must also include both components. Thus, in this article, I consider two types of empirical data to approach the interplay of normative orders and self-relations of highly qualified professionals in Cuba. I examine the two types of data in a two-step analysis. First, I identify the subject positions directed at Cuban workers based on an analysis of discourses revolving around the Cuban realm of work. Second, I rely on transcripts of qualitative interviews conducted with highly qualified professionals in Havana to reconstruct these workers' self-positioning modes and to examine whether and how they related to subject positions. In the methodology of this article, I combine discourse and interview analysis, which integrates the analysis of empirical subjects within social orders of knowledge, and thus facilitates an analysis of the circulation and transformation of these orders (BOSANČIĆ, 2014, p.197). [8]

2.2 Methodological procedure and data basis of the discourse analysis

The discourse analysis presented in this article is based on the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (KELLER, 2005, 2013). When assembling the data corpus, I focused on capturing a qualitatively broad spectrum of so-called fragments[6] of contemporary discourses about the Cuban realm of work. Following theoretical sampling procedures[7], I took special care to obtain a heterogeneous sample representing different sources of discourse fragments and actors. Therefore, the corpus is not limited to particular media or document types but includes diverse discourse fragments from 2010 to 2021[8]. I conducted a focused search in a database of 429 documents (most of which are text documents) compiled for a previous discourse analysis concerned with issues of distributive justice in the Cuban realm of work and welfare (JANY, 2021). Thirty-two additional fragments accessible on the internet (dealing with the *inverted pyramid*, Cuban highly qualified professionals, and related topics) complement the data corpus for the present analysis. For analytical and illustrative purposes, I distinguished between two main types of discourse fragments: 1., what I call *state-dependent* fragments, such as articles in the state-controlled media[9], legal texts, party resolutions, policy and action programs; 2., what I refer to as *state-independent* fragments, that is, national and international media content[10], as well

6 A discourse fragment is a "statement-event (utterance) in which discourses are more or less comprehensively actualized (e.g., a text); [and the] principal database for analysis" (KELLER, 2013, p.73).

7 In line with KELLER's (2013, pp.95-101) guidelines on corpus building and the selection of data, which are based on ideas of theoretical sampling from grounded theory methodology (e.g., CORBIN & STRAUSS, 2008).

8 This time frame is based primarily on the consideration that various socio-economic reform processes were discussed and initiated in this decade, starting with the *actualización del modelo economico y social* [update of the socio-economic model] in the early 2010s, up to the *ordenamiento monetario* [new monetary order] launched in 2020/21. Among the goals of these reforms, in the words of state-dependent fragments, is to *eliminate the inverted pyramid* (i.e., to establish a different earnings hierarchy). The complete list of documents that make up the corpus is available upon request.

9 For example, *cubadebate*, *granma*, *trabajadores*.

10 For example, from online media such as *elTOQUE* (a multimedia platform run by a collective of Cuban journalists and bloggers, the *Colectivo Más Voces Foundation*, legally registered in

as (international) common and academic literature about Cuba. The in-depth analysis of these discourse fragments was based on methodological proposals for grounded theory methodology (CORBIN & STRAUSS, 2008) that have been adapted for discourse analysis (KELLER, 2013). Methodological procedures involved open, axial, and selective coding, as well as memos and comments. The driving question for the analysis was: What subject positions can be identified for Cuban workers, and especially highly qualified ones, in the discourse fragments? Certain key passages identified during the coding analysis underwent further scrutiny using sequence analysis. [9]

2.3 Methodological procedure and data basis of the interview analysis

To analyze if and how self-positioning modes of Cuban professionals relate to discourses and subject positions reconstructed in the discourse analysis, I used the transcripts of 12 problem-centered interviews (WITZEL, 2000; WITZEL & REITER, 2012) conducted with highly qualified professionals in Havana in late 2020/early 2021. Interviewees were selected either from a pool of participants in an online survey conducted between June and September 2020 in collaboration with the Department of Sociology at the University of Havana (and distributed through mailing lists of the latter), or were identified through a snowballing approach.[11] I used a sampling strategy of *least similar cases* with the aim to achieve a high degree of heterogeneity in terms of biographical trajectories, as well as a balanced representation of age groups and gender. In total, I conducted 19 interviews with qualified and highly qualified workers. For the analysis presented in this article, I focused on 12 interviewees who met the criteria of *highly qualified professionals* according to their educational degree and the categorization of the Cuban National Statistics Office (ONEI, 2020). In the case of one university dropout, self-assignment was also considered. The professions represented correspond to occupations that are particularly emphasized in discourse fragments describing the *inverted pyramid,* i.e., doctors and teachers, but also industrial engineers, lawyers, an architect, and a performing artist (further information on the sample can be found in the Appendix).Thematically, the interviews were focused on the interviewees' professional biographies (including decisions and motivations, concepts of work, work satisfaction, future prospects, etc.) and their assessments of the current Cuban realm of work. To adequately account for the relevance structures of the interviewees, as well as to avoid "just mak[ing] simple comparisons of discourses and interviews" (BOSANČIĆ, 2018, p.199), I used open, axial, and selective coding, as well as memos and comments, following grounded theory methodology (CORBIN & STRAUSS, 2008) for the analysis of the transcripts, consistent with the approach for the discourse analysis. Codes were inductively developed based on the general question of how respondents described and explained their professional

Poland: https://eltoque.com), O*nCubaNews* (a U.S.-based news platform founded and chaired by the Cuban-born U.S. entrepreneur Hugo Cancio: https://oncubanews.com), *14ymedio* (a news platform founded and directed by Cuban blogger Yoani SÁNCHEZ: https://www.14ymedio.com).

11 Originally, interviews with people from different provinces were planned; due to travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic the sample is limited to the capital.

biography in the Cuban world of work. Certain key passages identified during the coding analysis underwent further scrutiny using sequence analysis. [10]

3. Discourse Analysis: Subject Positions in Discourses on the Cuban Realm of Work

In the following, I outline some discursive elements and subject positions reconstructed in the discourse analysis; I do not claim they are exhaustive. What follows can be understood as research hypotheses about discourses and subject positions (BOSANČIĆ, 2014, p.271). All translations from Spanish in this and the next section are my own. [11]

As indicated in the introduction, it has been emphasized in many discourse fragments—both state-dependent and state-independent—that Cuba has a (highly) qualified labor force, whose potential is underused and/or undervalued in Cuba. This can be illustrated by the following quote from US author FEINBERG (2016, p.37): "The tragedy of the Cuban Revolution is this: it endowed its citizens with abundant human capital, while it sadly left them bereft of the tools or incentives to gainfully employ their acquired talents." [12]

Summarizing the observations from different fragments, such missing "tools" and "incentives" of the Cuban labor force have often been highlighted. With *missing tools, reference is* usually made to the structural problems of the (state-led, US-sanctioned, and crisis-ridden) Cuban economy. In many fragments, deficient production capacities (lack of infrastructure, materials, efficiency, etc.) that do not correspond to the skills and qualifications of the Cuban labor force were emphasized particularly. Moreover, by referring to missing tools, authors of discourse fragments have also pointed to the everyday problems caused by an economy of scarcity—in Cuba often collectively referred to as the *lucha* [struggle]—, as well as by the disparity between dollar and peso economies.[12] With *missing incentives*, in turn, reference is made to excessive bureaucracy in an infrastructural and legal framework that does not sufficiently allow, promote, and/or reward (private) effort and innovation[13], as well as the prevalence of *amiguismo* [nepotism] and *sociolismo* [corruption]. [13]

Most importantly, with missing incentives, reference is also made to the low and undifferentiated wages prevailing in the state sector in recent decades[14]—in contrast to potentially high incomes from labor activities in other sectors (including illegal activities) but also from non-labor incomes such as remittances.

12 Despite the abolition of the dual currency system in January 2021, the resultant *dual economy* is said to continue, as, in many cases, the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC) has simply been replaced by the US dollar or other foreign currencies.

13 In the past, a major point of criticism in this regard has been that self-employment is not possible in all professions. However, in August 2021, the list of professions to be performed on a self-employed basis has been substantially extended (in fact, it is now a negative list, which enumerates the professions that cannot be practiced privately).

14 The implementation of the *ordenamiento monetario* [new monetary order]framework in 2020/2021 has resulted in wage reforms that have allowed for greater differentiation within the state wage scales and has raised wages in general. However, at the time of writing, these wage increases are generally said to be offset by inflation.

The resulting occupational (earnings) structure is generally referred to as the *pirámide invertida* [inverted pyramid]. This metaphor likely originates from academic discourses of the 1990s (the earliest reference found in the framework of the present analysis is GÚZMAN 1995, cited by ESPINA, NÚÑEZ & MARTÍN, 1997, p.20), and seems to have spread across all levels of discourse over the past decades. It appears in Cuban discourse fragments (state/government, media, and everyday/popular), as well as in international ones. Typically, the metaphor is employed to describe that qualifications and/or responsibility, performance, and earnings do not align as expected. In other words, it highlights a discrepancy between professions demanding high qualification and/or responsibility, and the low income these professions yield. In the fragments in which the *inverted pyramid* is mentioned, it is usually depicted as unfair and economically counterproductive, and thus undesirable. [14]

In this discursive framework are different descriptions of what Cuban workers are or should be like. As indicated in the following quote by former president Raúl CASTRO, Cuban state workers in general, and highly qualified professionals (doctors, teachers, lawyers, engineers, etc.) in particular, were often depicted (in both state-dependent and state-independent fragments) as *losers* or *victims* of the inverted pyramid:

> "It is also certain that the salary does not satisfy all the needs of the worker and his family, which generates demotivation and apathy towards work, has a negative influence on discipline and encourages the exodus of qualified personnel towards better-paid activities, regardless of the professional level required. It also discourages the promotion of the most capable and dedicated to higher positions, as a result of the harmful phenomenon of the 'inverted pyramid', which means that, generally, the greater the responsibility, the lower the personal income" (2014, n.p.). [15]

While CASTRO did not explicitly refer to highly qualified workers as victims of the inverted pyramid, in his statement he suggested that the "harmful phenomenon" directly affected these workers—and thus, as a consequence, also affected Cuban society and economy (which Cuban politicians and journalists often voice as their main concern). In other fragments, more explicit vocabulary that points to characteristics of victims or losers has been used, such as when there is mention of "injured actors" who "suffer" from the inverted pyramid (MONTES DE OCA MONTANO, 2015). Based on these and similar attributions in several fragments, a first subject position for highly qualified workers can be identified, that in the following I refer to as the *victim/loser* position. [16]

Beyond the victim/loser position, other subject positions can be identified. The *(e)migrant* position, for example, has frequently been mentioned in discussions about brain drain. As indicated in the preceding quote, this concerns not only *emigration abroad* but also *occupational migration* within the Cuban economy. On the one hand, these two forms of (e)migration have been portrayed as the professionals' reaction to the victim/loser position. On the other hand, in many discourse fragments, (e)migration has been depicted as the most sensible course of action and/or the only option of survival for Cuban professionals.

> "To be sure, some highly skilled Cubans—doctors, lawyers, professors and others—are leaving the country in search of opportunity. But many more who are staying in Cuba are opting to leave their jobs because of low state salaries or are taking on second jobs, becoming taxi drivers, waiters and bellhops—jobs involving regular interaction with foreign visitors and their hard currency" (ROBERT H. SMITH SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, 2017, n.p.). [17]

Other subject positions have particularly been depicted in state-dependent fragments. While GUEVARA's (1965) ideal of a "new man" may have faded in recent decades, the Cuban (state) media have continued to paint a picture of, to put it pointedly, an *engaged socialist worker* committed to the goals of the Cuban revolution[15]. Despite (potentially) adverse circumstances, this socialist worker is characterized by his or her honest and hard work, perseverance, and, nowadays, also by his or her self-reliance and self-responsibility—albeit while acting within the framework of the Cuban revolution's goals at all times. This positive template of working subjects is generally directed at all Cuban workers, whether state employees or the self-employed in Cuba's growing private sector[16]. In contrast to earlier periods of the Cuban revolution, the self-employed are nowadays considered to be an important part of this revolution:

> "With their activity, the self-employed show their credentials in the different spheres of the economy and services, as evidenced by the progressive growth of their contribution to the State budget and to the solution of specific needs of the population" (VALDÉS, 2016, n.p.). [18]

Positive archetypes of working subjects are countered by negative examples of what could be referred to as *profiteers* of various kinds. In state-dependent fragments, different examples of *crooks were exposed, who,* unlike the engaged socialist workers, do not distinguish themselves through honest work but instead enrich themselves at the expense of society. Two frequently mentioned examples are *acaparadores* [hoarders], who pinch goods from the state production system, and *revendedores* [resellers], who then sell such goods. *Non-honorable* (as opposed to honorable) *self-employed* are accused of basing their success less on their own work and effort than on contacts and unearned financial resources (in Cuba and abroad), of procuring goods illegally, and/or of selling them at exorbitant prices. [19]

Besides these rather binary subject positions in state-dependent media, in some state-independent fragments a position in between was outlined, which I call the *inventive survivalist.* This position involves that workers in Cuba (must) develop creative ways of dealing with the conditions, limits, and contradictions of everyday social and economic life in Cuba. This may include the breaking of laws or the successful maneuvering between legality and illegality.

15 The Cuban revolution is generally depicted as an "ongoing state political project—event, structure, and process" (GROPAS, 2007, p.533) rather than a one-time event. Although this view is debatable, it is adopted in this article for the sake of simplicity.

16 Since the reforms of the private sector in September 2021, these have even been joined by entrepreneurs of small and medium-sized enterprises.

> "[T]he unending resourcefulness, as well as the innumerable *inventos* (inventions), often technically illegal, that most Cuban citizens have long had to undertake in their daily struggle to *resolver* or "make ends meet." As with the countries of Eastern Europe, this part of the economy—long hidden, but everywhere in plain sight—has been of major importance in the everyday lives of the Cuban people, playing a role in the provision of needed goods, services, and employment" (RITTER & HENKEN, 2015, p.ix). [20]

Finally, I presume that the subject positions encountered in Cuban discourses intersect with subject positions and narratives of global, post-Fordist capitalism. The assumption is that the position of the above-mentioned *entrepreneurial self*[17] or, for example, narratives of meritocracy—such as "from rags to riches"—play a role in the self-positioning of working subjects in Cuba. Since these positions and narratives have already been discussed at length in the literature (as cited, e.g., in the introduction), I will not elaborate further on them here but will return to them when presenting the interview analysis. Essentially, just as in the case of Cuban discourses, the question arises here of to what extent subject positions circulating in Western discourses also shape subjectification processes in Cuba. [21]

4. Interview Analysis: Self-Positioning of Highly Qualified Professionals

In the analysis, it became clear that the interviewees' (self-)narrations could be well represented using references to the victim/loser position described above. On the one hand, the emphasis on this position resulting from the material can be understood as an indication of the (discursive) centrality of Cuban labor and wage hierarchies and their (perceived) injustice. On the other hand, the identity template of the *victim/loser* provides interviewees with a good point of reference to depict their own biographies as more or less successful stories. Overall, the prominence of this position in the interview transcripts seems to support the hypothesis of discursively mediated subject positions (and their transformation in individual subjectification processes) proposed by the *interpretive subjectification analysis* approach. Consequently, I opted to mirror this focus on the victim/loser position in the subsequent presentation of the interview analysis.

17 In the context of the *new spirit of capitalism* (BOLTANSKI & CHIAPELLO, 2017 [1999]) and the *information* or *knowledge society* (e.g., BELL, 1973), the *entrepreneurial self* is supposed to acquire skills and competences autonomously, working creatively and flexibly, and self-optimizing on its employability.

Figure 1: Strategies of self-positioning [22]

Figure 1 shows the strategies of self-positioning that were reconstructed in the analysis. In the present sample, all but one of the interviewees[18] relied on the above-described discursive elements such as the inverted pyramid and particularly on the victim/loser position to describe and explain their own professional biography—with varying frequency and directness. What particularly stood out in the analysis is how the interviewees used these discourse references to emphasize that, and in what way, they *distanced* themselves from this victim/loser position. In the following, I first describe one example of identification and then illustrate three different dissociation strategies, which also contain (partial) allusions to other subject positions. [23]

*L*orena[19], a young architect, provided a clear example of an *identification strategy*. According to Lorena's narrative, she was offered a position[20] in the state sector after completing her studies. After she started working, she realized that this position had little to do with architecture. She did not know what to do there, felt underemployed, and viewed her co-workers as incompetent and unqualified. After about a year, Lorena was able to find a new position in another firm that corresponded to her education and skills, but there were bureaucratic problems concerning the continuation of her social service[21]. This was the reason for her dismissal, she said, a few months after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when her salary was the only source of income for her household. [24]

The way Lorena used discourse vocabulary suggests that, on the one hand, she sees herself as a classic victim of the inverted pyramid, in which professionals

18 The exception is Ernesto's interview, which fits more into the category of *non-reference*. This category describes the possibility that an interviewee's (self-)narration completely ignores discourses and subject positions. Since non-reference can also be understood as a form of self-positioning, an elaboration of Ernesto's case would be interesting—for reasons of space, however, I will concentrate on identification and dissociation.

19 The names of all the interviewees mentioned are pseudonyms.

20 Via a centrally organized job allocation process for university graduates, whose first working position usually involves a three-year social service.

21 See Note 20.

are "the most vulnerable part of society" (Lorena, §52)[22]. Furthermore, she saw herself more generally as a victim of the Cuban labor system, to which she, at various points in the interview, attributed many of her problems and failures.

> "I felt very disappointed with the, with the system of work in Cuba. ... Because ... I asked myself a lot ... I mean, I asked myself all the time: Is this socialist Cuba, where they say that no one is left without protection?[23]. That nobody is left without work and that, that the state takes care of the people, and so on. This is not true ... They left me without a job, they left me in the street, in a very bad ... economic situation" (§30). [25]

Despite her identification with a victim/loser position, which Lorena used to describe and explain parts of her professional biography, she also used various strategies to partially *dissociate* from this position. This dissociation allowed her to not see herself merely as a passive victim of the Cuban realm of work (and specifically of the inverted pyramid), and to gain agency over her biography. From the experiences described, she concluded that, in the long run, she would leave the state sector and become self-employed. Thereby, she placed her hopes on her artistic projects, which she considered a childhood dream and a rediscovered passion. I call this form of dissociation strategy a *strategy of refusal/denial*:[24] the interviewees referred to a victim/loser position in order to contextualize their professional biographies, but in the course of their narration they also made clear that they were unwilling to accept victimhood, at least in the long run. In most cases, this amounted to abandoning their original profession or at least the position they held at the time in question. This strategy becomes explicit in the following quote from Manuel, a young special education teacher, who categorically ruled out practicing his profession in Cuba:

> "What, what am I going to tell my nephews and nieces, to, to my children that I will have in the future - that I spent from [the age of] 25 to 28 waiting in queues?[25] Well, no. I refuse to do that. ... I refuse, I really refuse that. And I refuse a lot of things that are happening here that I don't, I can't conceive of. So, I'm not going to practice my profession here, for those reasons" (§22). [26]

Parallel to the subject position of the *(e)migrants* described above, Manuel made it apparent that for his future, as for that of many other young people, as he said, he saw no other option than to emigrate abroad. [27]

Another type of dissociation strategy used by interviewees is what I called the *make the best of a bad bargain strategy*. Here, the interviewees identified as

22 The paragraphs cited correspond to the paragraphs of the analyzed transcripts (in MAXQDA). Legend for the interview excerpts: pauses in speech are marked with "..." and omissions are marked with "[...]." If interviewees emphasized words or sentences in particular, this is highlighted with capitalization. Where necessary, the Spanish original is given in brackets.

23 *Nadie quedará desamparado* [No one will be left without protection] is a phrase often used by government members and state-controlled media in the context of ongoing reform processes.

24 Despite the terminological proximity, this designation must not be understood in the sense of a psychological concept/interpretation.

25 Manuel was referring to the queues that are part of many Cubans' everyday lives against the backdrop of recurring crises and the economy of scarcity.

professionals and, to a certain extent, accepted their fate in the Cuban realm of work, as they did not completely refuse to practice their profession. Instead, they said that they focused on the benefits of their profession. Some emphasized material benefits, such as a company vehicle or the possibility to buy goods at the workplace cheaply and without much effort (e.g., in the form of a so-called *jaba*, a bag of food that is given to employees at a discount). In this context, some of the interviewees also stressed that they simply gained advantages for themselves—in semi-legal or illegal ways—by, for example, pinching goods or deliberately being absent from the workplace. Some of them understood this kind of vigilante justice as a silent protest against their situation as professionals in Cuba. Others identified with the position of inventive survivalists: those who want to survive in the Cuban realm of work must be creative. On the other hand, several interviewees who used the *make the best of a bad bargain strategy* also emphasized the intangible benefits of their profession, such as social contacts, the gratitude of beneficiaries, or the possibility to practice their passion—even if under less-than-ideal conditions. The quote from Caridad, a general practitioner who had practiced her profession in Cuba for 20 years, reflects these aspects:

> "So as far as that is concerned, I repeat, these are ... uhm, uhm, experiences that, that generated a dissatisfaction in me, even though I still love the career of medicine (laughs), I still like it and I really enjoyed the work. And I enjoyed a lot; nowadays I have patients who … uhm, ah! You don't remember, but once my son came in very ill and you treated him and thanks to that. It makes you very happy. And for that part at least you feel, well, uhm, uhm, satisfied with what you did" (§19). [28]

Finally, another strategy that allowed interviewees to dissociate from a victim/loser position can be referred to as the *entrepreneurial strategy*. Here, the interviewees used discourse vocabulary mainly to depict the problems of the Cuban realm of work in general or for other people. This enabled them to describe how *they* differ from these other people: they escaped victimhood owing to, as they emphasized, their own efforts, performance, willpower, etc. For instance, Juan, a trained surgeon, said:

> "I repeat, the idea of the doctor is that the only thing they can do is to be a doctor. And that is why you see them there, why, why they don't do anything else. And they are frustrated" (§70). [29]

However, Juan made it clear that he did not consider himself to be one of those frustrated doctors. After several years in the profession (which he saw as a vocation, but in Cuba mainly as a source of numerous frustrations), he requested his dismissal to pursue another job in the state sector (outside of the medical field), with better working and pay conditions. Later, he started working in the private sector as a taxi driver for tourists. Overall, Juan viewed his professional biography as mostly a success story, crediting his own efforts, decisiveness, and willpower as important factors. [30]

Similar to Juan, the young performing artist María also recounted a success story based on the idea of personal effort. What distinguishes María from Juan (and in

principle from all other interviewees in the sample) is that she attributed the problematic position of professionals less to the Cuban (labor) system or "the government" as others did. According to her, the problem is instead rooted in a general loss of social values and in the attitude or the stance that the professionals maintain towards their work:

> "There are very few people who ... who value their profes-, uhm, their pofies-, uhm profession, sorry. Who ... fight for it, who defend it. Who ... maintain a good attitude [*actitud correcta*]. [...] There are many people who say that they don't, uhm, the problem is that ... we are not in a capitalist country. ... That's the concept, isn't it? If ... your earnings were based on the work you do ... it would be different. And I don't see it that way. It's a problem of, as I already told you, education, ethics, values. A COMPLETE ... degenerative loss of the generation we are living in" (§25). [31]

Her argument about the loss of values in her generation allowed María to distance herself from this: she fought for her profession (which she loves, as she said), and had, as someone "from the street" (§30), prevailed against many others to get her place at art school and to be where she is today: "My slogan is, when you want to do it, you can do it" (ibid.). Altogether, María mainly used discourse vocabulary to distinguish her biography and her perspective from those of other people and from the common understanding of the current Cuban realm of work, the victim/loser position, the inverted pyramid, etc. Her self-representation, a narrative of ascent *par excellence*, also drew on various aspects of the positions of the engaged socialist worker and the inventive survivalist. Here, I also detect connections to the previously mentioned subject positions circulating in Western discourses. Maria's autobiographical accounts resemble the meritocratic "from rags to riches" narrative—even if the word "riches" would have to be reframed for the Cuban context. On some points, the narratives of both Juan and María are also reminiscent of the figure of the *entrepreneurial self*, with its associated appeals for self-optimization, flexibility, and self-responsible work. [32]

5. Discussion of the Interview Analysis

In summary, for most of the interviewees, the discursive subject positions reconstructed in the previous section, and particularly the victim/loser position, were an important tool for narrating their professional biography. Identifying with or dissociating from these positions allowed the interviewees to tell a "success story" or a "sad tale" in the sense of GOFFMAN (1961, pp.150-151; see also BOSANČIĆ, 2014). Interestingly, both narrative forms and strategies of identification and dissociation appeared simultaneously in many interviews. Nonetheless, most interviewees in this sample distanced themselves from victimhood rather than identifying with it. The analysis provided evidence that the subject position of the Cuban inventive survivalist served to construct a distance from victimhood, that is, the expectation that Cuban workers must and will develop creative ways of dealing with the problems and contradictions of the Cuban realm of work. The analysis further revealed that interviewees told a success story that reflected professional narratives of performance and

meritocracy. These narratives can also be understood as social and discursive expectations towards workers and specifically towards professionals (in Cuba, as in other countries). These expectations seem to have been internalized by some of the interviewees: they identified as highly educated and qualified professionals that could not *let themselves down* and let fate determine their lives, but had to instead do everything in their power to improve their situation. [33]

Finally, the analysis revealed that the telling of success stories by means of the above-described dissociation strategies can be related to further categories that were identified, that is, to context- and individual-related factors that are not necessarily directly connected to discursive subject positions. Financial security, for example due to remittances from abroad or some form of *negocio* [business][26], encourages dissociation from the victim/loser position. Likewise, the desire for distinction led some interviewees to use dissociation strategies to place their professional biography in a unique light—and thus to describe how they were different from other professionals in Cuba, as is the case with Juan and María. What is more, various interviewees cited self-fulfillment and satisfying their passions as a central aspect of their occupational biography. Success in this encouraged the use of dissociation strategies from the victim/loser position—and thus enabled the interviewees to tell success stories. In contrast, if their aspirations could not be realized, interviewees instead identified with the victim/loser position and told sad tales—at least in part. [34]

In the introduction, I addressed the question of the legitimacy and usefulness of applying an approach developed in the Western world to the Cuban context. The preceding interview analysis appears to confirm the assumption that the concept of the *working self* is also pertinent in Cuba. The concept manifests both parallels with and differences from its Western counterparts. In this context, it is worth noting that discursive narratives in Cuba (be they governmental, ideological, scientific, popular, etc.) have long intersected with Western narratives, including aspects of Marxism and global capitalism. In this regard, as a researcher from Europe, it also seems appropriate to address my own perspective and reflexive positioning. My origin has certainly influenced the choice of methodological approach. Nonetheless, Cuban researchers, with whom I discussed the research underlying this article, supported the approach via discourse and subjectification analysis. [35]

26 In Cuba, the term *negocio* is often used in everyday language as an umbrella term for legal, semi-legal, or illegal activities that generate additional income to that from one's profession.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I have analyzed subjectification processes of highly qualified professionals in Cuba and presented them as two-sided: as an interplay of discourses and self-interpretation/self-formation of subjects. This understanding of subjectification is based primarily on the premises of *interpretive subjectification analysis*, which provides a coherent conceptual and definitional framework for subjectification analysis. While I emphasize the importance of discourse structures (particularly in the form of subject positions) by using this approach, it also allows subjects to be granted room for action (in the process of self-positioning). Although *interpretive subjectification analysis* has its origins in a Western context, this article provides evidence that the approach is equally fruitful for the analysis of (self-)positioning processes of highly qualified Cuban professionals: I was able to show how the interviewed professionals related to certain discursive subject positions outlined in a previous part of the analysis.[27] [36]

The victim/loser position turned out to be a central theme in this analysis. Therefore, the self-positioning processes of the interviewees were demonstrated primarily by identifying with and dissociating from this position. I also briefly presented other subject positions that the interviewees drew on for their self-interpretation and self-presentation, such as the *engaged socialist worker*, the *inventive survivalist*, as well as meritocratic narratives. Through this analysis, I have provided evidence that the interviewees' "creative engagement with subject positions" (BOSANČIĆ, 2019, p.94) is characterized mainly by combining different strategies of identification and dissociation as well as referring to different subject positions. In contrast to BOSANČIĆ (2014), who studied a homogeneous sample regarding the workers' milieu and workplace, the heterogeneity of the Cuban sample led to further observations on possible interplays between modes of self-positioning and other (e.g., biographical or habitus-related) characteristics of the interviewees. Thus, circumstances beyond discursive vocabulary and subject positions, such as financial security and the interviewees' desire to distinguish themselves from others or to satisfy their passions, also contributed to the interviewees' self-interpretation and self-presentation. [37]

The latter leads to a final observation whose closer examination could be an interesting starting point for further research: despite the peculiarities of the Cuban case, there are some parallels to Western, post-Fordist contexts, both on the discourse level and the subject level. On the discourse level, for example, narratives of state slimming, the flexibilization of work, and the transfer of responsibility to individuals can be identified.[28] At the subject level, it is noticeable that many of the interviewees emphasized aspects of self-fulfillment and passion when recounting their professional biography. For some, narratives of ascent and

27 In light of the above considerations on the specificity of the Cuban context, however, this does not allow any conclusions to be drawn as to whether this holds true for other contexts or strata. Exploring this question would require further investigation.

28 For example, as indicated, the present-day *engaged socialist worker* should act autonomously, self-responsibly, and be less dependent on the state.

self-optimization also played an important role. Nevertheless, the premises and results of subjectification analyses concerned with the discursive subject of the (neoliberal) *self-entrepreneur* cannot simply be transferred to the Cuban context. Instead, further analyses of the *engaged socialist worker*, for example, would have to take into account the peculiarities of Cuban discourse vocabulary. Hopefully, the results presented in this article will help to pave the way for further analyses of subjectification processes in the Cuban as well as other contexts, and possibly in a comparative framework. [38]

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Appendix: Outline of the Interview Sample

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	(Original) Profession	Brief summary of occupational biography
Caridad	w	48	Doctor	Worked for twenty years as a general practitioner; quit in 2016. Emigration plans.
Juan	m	49	Doctor	After his studies and specialization as a surgeon, he worked in his specialty for nine years. Then further education and eight years of employment as an inspector in a state firm (not in the medical field). Since 2018, he is a taxi driver for tourists (private sector).
Dayana	w	28	Doctor	Has worked as a general practitioner since graduation.
Isabel	w	59	School teacher	After her studies, she worked as a teacher (mathematics, art) for about twenty years. In parallel, she started baking and selling pastry in 1990. Since 2011, she has been working exclusively as a rental agent for tourists. She has been selling pastry again since the beginning of the pandemic.
Alfredo	m	46	School teacher	After his studies, he worked as a teacher (English) for five years. Language training; informal jobs in parallel. Since 2000, various jobs in the tourism sector (state sector). Simultaneously began to study again. Started to work as a teacher again during the pandemic.

Pseudonym	**Sex**	**Age**	**(Original) Profession**	**Brief summary of occupational biography**
Manuel	m	26	Special education teacher	Three years of language studies, then dropped out. Worked as a school teacher for about a year. Worked in bars/restaurants for three years, in parallel started studying special needs education. Worked in another country for a few months in 2019, returned in 2020 due to the pandemic. Finished special education studies during the pandemic.
Estela	w	26	Jurist	After her studies, position (social service) in legal advice (state sector), quit after a few months. Worked in bars/restaurants for about three years. Worked as legal adviser for a private firm during the pandemic.
Ernesto	m	42	Jurist	After school, four years of unskilled work in different areas (state sector and private sector); informal jobs in parallel. Further education and two years of employment in a bank (state sector). Four years of unskilled work in gastronomy/informal jobs (private sector). Six years of unskilled work in a state firm; law studies (evening school) in parallel, successfully completed but has not worked in the profession. Worked for approx. 5 years as a tourist guide (state sector). Unemployed since the beginning of the pandemic.
Mario	m	58	Industrial engineer	Since graduation has worked in ten different state firms; different positions and responsibilities (technician, specialist, manager).
Pavel	m	26	(Industrial engineer, *dropped out*)	Three years of industrial engineering studies, then dropped out. Further training in different areas, in parallel worked as a cleaner. Two years of unskilled work in gastronomy (private sector), until the beginning of the pandemic; in parallel has resumed studies.
Lorena	w	26	Architect	After graduation, position (social service) in the state sector for one year. Changed to another company (in parallel part-time work for a private real estate company). During the pandemic, she was dismissed and found a new job after a few months. Has plans to become self-employed in the artistic field.

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	(Original) Profession	Brief summary of occupational biography
María	w	23	Performing artist	Studies and simultaneous work in the profession (state sector). During the pandemic, "experience" in agriculture (self-employed and working in a cooperative). Working as an artist again since late 2020.

Table 1: Outline of the interview sample

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