

Repositório ISCTE-IUL

Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:

2024-03-06

Deposited version:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Silva, J. P., Mineiro, J., Estanque, E., Sebastião, J. & Lopes, J. M. T. (2023). Each person in their place: the 'praxe' as a ritual of integration, stratification and differentiation . Journal of Youth Studies. 26 (1), 98-112

Further information on publisher's website:

10.1080/13676261.2021.1981839

Publisher's copyright statement:

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Main document

Each person in their place: the '*praxe*' as a ritual of integration, stratification and differentiation

Word count:

Main text – 7972 words (including references, funding details and declaration of interests)

Abstract – 196 words

Abstract:

Every year, in a variety of countries, current higher education students welcome newcomers with a set of ritualised practices in which the latter submit to the former through tests that entail varying degrees and types of violence, but also an important element of playfulness. In Portugal, these rituals are known as '*praxe académica*'. This is a complex and multidimensional social phenomenon whose origins go back centuries, but is constantly reinvented and helps socialise new arrivals in accordance with the norms of the group into which they are to be integrated. Using sociological contributions to understand these rituals and their effects, we analyse the Portuguese case, arguing that these customary ways of greeting new higher education students have a triple effect on student life, contributing to: 1) the initiates' integration into a differentiated group; 2) the demarcation and attachment of symbolic value to the group members, compared to non-students and students who refuse initiation; 3) the structuring of positions and relations of power that mark the student world beyond the ritualised moments. Moreover, these rituals provide meaning and a sense of ontological security to the present, in the face of the biographical uncertainty that characterises contemporary youth.

Keywords: student customs, hazing, rituals, higher education

Introduction

In several countries, current higher education students welcome many newcomers to their institutions by means of a set of ritualised practices which, with variations depending on the context, are repeated each year. This is a common, albeit complex, phenomenon with different names in different countries: *hazing* (US), *bizutage* (France), *novatada* (Spain), *trote* (Brazil), and *praxe académica* (Portugal). Albeit different, these realities present regularities that allow us to see them as part of a vast, diverse phenomenon with different shades that depend on the socio-historical background. In all the above countries, many of the existing students receive their new colleagues in rituals consisting of a set of tests which are prepared by the former and contain diverse types and varying degrees of violence, to which the newcomers must submit and which imply an unequal power relationship (Renaud & Lamy, 1992; Frias, 2003; Nunes, 2004; Allan & Madden, 2008; Villaça & Palácios, 2010; Aizpún Marcitllach & García-Mina Freire, 2013; Dias & Sá, 2014a, 2014b; Fávero, et al., 2018, 2020; Silva, et al., 2019).

These practices are rooted in ancient times and have gone hand-in-hand with the history of the university as an institution (Lima, et al., 2018). Denounced by Plato in Greek academe, they existed in ancient academies and medieval universities and have persisted until the present day (Aizpún Marcitllach & García-Mina Freire, 2013). They are often studied as rituals of initiation and passage, which were extensively described by van Gennep (1981 [1909]). From this perspective, the *praxe* is presented as a process whereby newcomers learn the new group's norms and cultural references and are subjected to a process of reconstruction of their social identity. After overcoming a number of tests, they become full members of the group (Renaud & Lamy, 1992; Larguèze, 1995, 1997; Frias, 2002, 2003; Dias & Sá, 2014a, 2014b). However, the students involved in the rituals commonly downplay the violence they entail, and highlight their integrating function instead, while formal complaints about the various abuses that take place are rare (Allan & Madden, 2008; Villaça & Palácios, 2010; Aizpún Marcitllach & García-Mina Freire, 2013; Lopes et al., 2018). These rituals regularise the crisis caused by the entry of new members into the group (Cimino, 2011, 2013). The *praxe* allows to “control uncertainty (...) and seeks to keep everyone in their place” (Larguèze, 1995, p. 77) – i.e. it proposes a hierarchical ordering in the face of uncertainty, while teaching newcomers their place in the new social world to which they want to gain access.

We will argue that student initiation rituals help *put each person in their place*. They symbolically distinguish students from non-students (and students who take part in the initiation from those who don't); they also teach new students their place in the web of differentiated positions within the group they have just arrived in, each of which corresponds to an unequal status and

degree of power. This space of social positions and power relations endures beyond the ritual itself and constitutes a lasting social effect.

Theoretical coordinates

Rituals of initiation as rituals of separation

The *praxe* includes a strong element of integration and socialisation. By calling on a range of symbols and practices derived from a student past that is mythicised and classified as ‘tradition’, it also possesses an important differentiating dimension: by it, its practitioners lay claim to a heritage and a history of their own, and thus a differentiated group identity. Initiation rituals like the *praxe* are rituals of consecration and legitimation, to the extent that they separate the members of the group from people who don’t belong to it and from those who can’t belong to it, all of which results in the social consecration of a difference and a statement of the group’s social prestige (Bourdieu, 1989). As such, in rituals like these, “what is important is the line” (Bourdieu, 1982, p. 59), and the *praxe* does draw a dividing line (Larguèze, 1995, p. 76): it integrates the students who take part while symbolically setting them apart from both those who refuse it and everyone else who can’t take part because they’re not students of a higher education institution. It is thus linked to the construction of a specific and symbolically valued student identity, fuelled both by symbols and practices which are said to be group traditions taken from the more or less mythicised student customs of other times, and by the purported exclusivity of the rituals the newcomers must undergo.

Like other rituals, the *praxe* creates distinctions between participants (Collins, 2004), instituting a hierarchy between those in charge and those who follow the ‘voice of command’. This hierarchical organisation is associated with one of the main ‘lessons’ the *praxe* seeks to teach: respect for those in positions of power. Therefore, if rituals have lasting effects that transcend the space-times in which they occur, the *praxe* ensures a power structure between students that defines the role associated with each of its positions – a definition whose effects transcend the world of the *praxe* and make themselves felt at other moments of student sociability. Newcomers have less power because they are not yet part of the group, but it is the *praxe* which legitimates and crystallises that power differential, creating among other things intermediate positions in the hierarchy that fuel an idea of an escalator that progressively raises the status of the participants in the ritual.

Interaction ritual theory

In order to understand how the *praxe* produces the effects described above, it is necessary to understand how its rituals work. Our theoretical tool to do so will be interaction ritual theory, as described by Collins.

Building on both Durkheim and Goffman, Collins has developed a full theory that presents ritual interaction as the foundation of social life. Ritual is defined as “a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership” (2004, 7). Successful rituals contain the agency of social life, generating “feelings of membership that are attached to cognitive symbols” and “the emotional energy of individual participants, giving them feelings of confidence, enthusiasm, and desire for action in what they consider a morally proper path” (Collins, 2004: 42). Nevertheless, a ritual will only be consequential if it meets certain conditions: 1) co-presence; 2) a clear distinction between participants and non-participants; 3) a common focus of attention; 4) the production and dissemination of emotional energy among the participants. This emotional energy is crucial: it rewards participation, animates the participants and crystallises itself in feelings of belonging and solidarity, and also in shared symbols.

Collins’s approach is a microsociological one, and his analytical departure point is the situation and its dynamics. Therefore, we will pay close attention to different *praxe* situations and their inner workings. However, we will also consider the socio-historical context of the *praxe* in our analysis and interpretations.

Brief contextualisation of the *praxe*

The history of the *praxe* runs side-by-side with that of the University of Coimbra, which was founded in 1290. For centuries, Coimbra was the only Portuguese university and an elitist, male social microcosm whose singularity and privilege made it highly autonomous – it was not subject to the general civil justice system until the 19th century (Estanque, 2016). Within this context there developed a particular student culture. That culture mimicked the hierarchical rigidity, formalism, ritualism and search for symbolic differentiation of the academic culture, while also being influenced by popular cultures and bohemia and presenting aspects of exacerbated virility and gregariousness (Nunes, 2004; Estanque, 2016). It also included the practices for receiving new students – receptions that were historically ritualised and marked by violence and submission to their established colleagues. Such practices became known as ‘*praxe*’ and enshrined as a tradition in the second half of the 19th century (Cruzeiro, 1979).

The *praxe* was never immune to change and underwent various transformations (Frias, 2003; Nunes, 2004), albeit always retaining its hierarchical and punitive dimensions (Cardina, 2008). Over the course of the 20th century, it was temporarily abandoned at various times of major social and political agitation. In the 1960s it was initially mobilised in the fight against the authoritarian regime known as *Estado Novo*, and then fell into disuse within a context of growing social and political dissidence among students that culminated in the ‘academic struggle of 1969’, which put an end to the rituals until they were resuscitated in Coimbra in the late 1970s, already under a democratic regime.

Today, although controversial, the *praxe* has become a mass phenomenon (Fávero, et al., 2020). It consists of a particular set of relations, practices, symbols, values and narratives that fuel feelings of group belonging and a specific identity which contributes to the differentiation between students and non-students and between students themselves (Cardina, 2008). At its core continue to lie ritualised practices whereby students in each institution greet many of their new fellows, which can continue for several weeks or even the whole academic year. Although participation is not mandatory, it isn’t easy to refuse these rituals, inasmuch as they are rooted in the power which established students hold over new arrivals and which enables them to deny entry to the group. These students also have ways of symbolically legitimising the *praxe*, especially in contexts of institutional acceptance. Therefore, the power underlying the *praxe* is also symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1989), which in turn makes it something ‘natural’, or ‘normal’, in the new students’ eyes (Silva, et al., 2019).

An analysis of the current configuration of the *praxe* phenomenon should take into account what it means to be young and pursue tertiary education in contemporary Portugal. The Portuguese higher education system, which was closed and elitist during the *Estado Novo*, has expanded spectacularly during the last four decades (Grupo de Trabalho sobre o Acesso ao Ensino Superior, 2020). Tertiary education is no longer a privilege of the elite. It also went through some demographic diversification, with the arrival of older and foreign students, although most students are Portuguese and in their late teens or early twenties (Statistics Portugal, 2020a, 2020b).

The number of graduates in Portugal has sharply increased, mainly among the younger generations. Nevertheless, the average education of the active population remains low, especially among people above their thirties (Grupo de Trabalho sobre o Acesso ao Ensino Superior, 2020). Portuguese youth is now more educated than ever before, but this does not translate easily into stable and well-paid jobs for those who graduate. “Flexible capitalism” (Sennett, 1998) has changed how young people live their transitions into work and adulthood. Access to employment has become more difficult and often provisory; consequently,

professional trajectories became unpredictable and potentially reversible. This has important effects on the biographical trajectories of young people, which become unstable, non-linear, recursive and elusive to anticipation and planning (Pais, 2003; Gil Calvo, 2011). Some youngsters still experience linear transitions, while others might welcome this unpredictability (Bradley & Devadason, 2008; Artegui Alcaide, 2017); however, after the 2008 crisis, the professional future of young people has become especially uncertain, even for those holding higher qualifications. It has even been suggested that the crisis is a generational marker, as professional precariousness has become a common and lasting feature of the experience of being young, impacting heavily on youth transitions (Allen, 2016). This is important to consider in the Portuguese case (Ferreira, 2018), as Portugal was hit hard by the crisis and responded to it by implementing severe austerity policies that deeply affected young people (Cairns, et al., 2014; Carmo & Matias, 2019).

Methodology

The empirical basis for our argument lies in the data collected as part of broader research on the *praxe* in Portugal. We conducted fieldwork at six Portuguese cities: Bragança, Beja, Coimbra, Covilhã, Lisbon, and Porto. We conducted 42 semi-structured interviews of students, ex-students, university leaders, student ombudsmen and student union leaders; we held 6 focus groups with students and officers of student unions; and we performed non-participant observation of 60 *praxe* rituals. We also subjected *códigos de praxe* (literally: *praxe* codes)¹ drawn up by students from different institutions to document analysis. The interviews with university leaders and ombudsmen were related to a different goal of our research, namely to understand the relations between the leaders of higher education institutions and the protagonists of the *praxe*. As such, this article will draw on data collected from 26 interviews and 6 focus groups with students (including student union leaders, which may or may not be involved in the rituals) and former students, the document analysis, and the observation sessions. Concerning the latter, it should be noticed that not all *praxe* rituals have the same visibility: some are public exhibitions, others occur in the public space, but do not have an ostensive nature, and others yet are meant to be witnessed only by their participants. These might happen in public spaces, but in retired places and/or during the night, and students frequently oppose the presence of outsiders. In Lisbon and Covilhã we were able to negotiate

¹ *Códigos de praxe* are formal regulatory documents which are drawn up and periodically reviewed by the students who coordinate *praxe* rituals. With rare exceptions, they are not legally binding, although they possess *de facto* legitimacy within the ritual context in which they are invoked.

access to some of these rituals, while in Bragança, Porto and Coimbra we only had access to public exhibitions and other rituals occurring in plain sight, watchable by anyone passing by. We performed a qualitative content analysis of the material, designed to describe, analyse and reflexively interpret the meaning of a variety of qualitative data. The process included three steps: data reduction, systematisation, and flexible interpretation (Schreier, 2013). First, reduction in order to select the material that was most relevant to answering the research questions. This reduction then required systematisation: an initial coding of analytical categories and subcategories based on a part of the empirical material that reflected the diversity of the research work; then a conceptual clarification of those categories, so as to again test them in their relationship with the empirical material; and an interpretation of the whole of the selected material in the light of the analytical categories and a refining of their analytical validity. Finally, interpretative flexibility allowed us to combine categories derived from an analytical guideline oriented by concepts we deemed especially productive for an analysis of the *praxe* with categories constructed from empirical data.

Results

Praxe as an interaction ritual

Praxe occasions can be characterised in accordance with two distinct logics. Some rituals are dominated by the discipline imposed by the senior students - on the freshers and on themselves - while others occur in an environment of pronounced hedonism. Both these logics are simultaneously found in almost every type of activity, but some types are above all disciplinary and do not allow much space for freshers to enjoy themselves, whereas in others the disciplinary dimension wanes and opens the door to spontaneity and the enjoyment of the activity by every participant.

The first logic is predominant when people 'mock the fresher' – i.e. when the senior students mobilise the newer ones in order to submit them to a range of situations that are emotionally or physically uncomfortable. These moments are frequently described, by both freshers and senior students, as a playful and inconsequent dramatisation, but students from both categories also consider that their purpose consists in integrating newcomers in the group and "educating" (i.e. socialising) them. Here lies an obvious contradiction. The second type dominates festive occasions, such as academic dinners, concentrations in local bars and nightclubs, and above all the major festive student ceremonies of the *praxe*. We will call the first type 'disciplinary *praxe*',

and the second 'hedonistic *praxe*'. We will show how each of the four ingredients that Collins (2004) considers necessary to a ritual's success is present on each of these occasions.

1) Co-presence

On disciplinary *praxe* occasions, the senior students decide how the space where the ritual occurs is occupied. Following their instructions, the freshers take their places in an orderly fashion, forming several lines with even spacings between them and all facing the same direction. The students directing the ritual stand in front, while the other seniors position themselves to the sides and behind the freshers. The seniors sometimes completely surround the newcomers, preventing them from seeing anything outside their immediate context. The formation can be temporarily broken or disorganised when more mobile activities take place, but the seniors quickly reform it. Many activities imply some synchronisation between participants. Examples include chants accompanied by choreographed moves or collective rhythmic physical activity, with the latter sometimes used as forms of collective punishment. The above examples often occur and force each participant to recognise the presence of all the others, as a group. The same happens when the students go into town in order to perform *praxe* activities. The latter are arranged in pairs, generally hand-in-hand, in disciplined lines with seniors at the head and rear. They often chant in unison.

Co-presence is also ensured on hedonistic *praxe* occasions. At academic dinners, where camaraderie and alcohol consumption are mixed with the hierarchical dimension that is typical of the *praxe*, the students chant in choir mode. This can also be heard in the orderly lines that wend their way to restaurants. The '*latadas*' – celebratory parades in which students are grouped by institution and march through streets with cans tied to their bodies – mean stopping traffic in various central areas of the town or city, which are reserved for the marchers (the students) and their spectators (relatives and friends), always in coordination with city councils, who support these initiatives.

2) Distinction between participants and non-participants

The way students involved in *praxe* activities occupy and behave in the public space helps demarcate participants from non-participants. This demarcation is conscious, as the content of their chants shows. We identified various types of *praxe* chants, including those we called watchwords ('watchsongs') of pride and belonging, in which students proudly state their belonging to their course and affirm their purported superiority (often sexual) in relation to

other students. This distinction is also made by the clothing worn and accessories carried by students engaging in the *praxe*. Senior students must generally wear academic robes – garb with an ecclesiastical appearance that was historically the uniform of Coimbra University students. Today, in their multiple regional variants, they are primarily used for the *praxe* and on particular festive or formal occasions, as a symbol of a differentiated student identity and status. In addition, the freshers are usually uniformed, or at least wear clothing that easily sets them apart. This generally comprises a shirt referring to their course and institution, which is designed to ostentatiously display the applicable colour (each area of knowledge has a specific one), logo and name, which can be complemented by a variety of accessories, such as hats or cardboard ears evoking those of a donkey. It is also common for freshers to have a card around their neck identifying their course, year and the nickname they are known by during the *praxe*. However, despite being standardised, their clothing is often also personalised, as in the cases of t-shirts signed by fellow students, the pyjamas or extravagant disguises worn on the orders of the seniors. The use of disguises is common at the *Latadas* of Covilhã and Coimbra. ‘*Latadas*’ can also entail wearing cans tied to the body and highly visible uses of the course’s colour, which serve to more easily identify freshers.

3) Common focus of attention

Seniors work hard to focus the freshers’ attention on the activities they give themselves up to. Disciplinary *praxes* are generally organised in such a way that only one student gives orders and instructions to the group at a time. Even among robed students, the ones who direct the ritual are easily distinguished, inasmuch as it is their voices that command the activities, they occupy a central position in front of the freshers, and they usually carry a mace or a very large wooden spoon. These are important *praxe* symbols and confer authority on their bearers. In many rituals, new students must in turn respond to whatever stimulus they are given in unison and in a standardised manner.

On hedonistic *praxe* occasions, particularly the major collective celebrations, the noise can be deafening. Even so, the students who are responsible for transmitting instructions manage to do so effectively, sometimes with the help of megaphones. When the freshers sing and perform choreographed moves, the seniors often direct their synchronised movements with hand signals or the help of the maces and large wooden spoons. The celebration focuses people’s attentions: the students enthusiastically chant and shout watchwords, using their bodies, musical instruments and other objects to make as much noise as possible, in an attempt to drown out those from other courses.

4) Collective emotional energy

The production and dissemination of collective emotional energy is most obvious during hedonistic *praxe*. We observed various rituals of this type, of which the '*latadas*' and the Bragança '*mostra*' (show, display) are good examples, but which also include academic dinners, organised excursions to bars, and visits to the local town or city.

With their local variations, '*latadas*' are large processions of students along the emblematic streets of the local town or city. They start in a symbolically important place and march through the historic quarter, watched by relatives, friends and onlookers. Seniors wear their academic robes, newcomers wear their *praxe* outfits or a variety of disguises. The predominant colour of the freshers' clothes identifies their institution. In Coimbra and Porto, freshers wear cans that make a loud noise when they move, but students in general also use any other available means to make a noise.

The Bragança '*mostra*' consists of several musical performances by freshers. The tunes are often humorous adaptations of popular successes and cover various aspects of student life, with frequent sexual allusions and glorifications of the students on the course in question. The performances end with the enthusiastically sung course anthem. Spectating students encourage their course-mates and boo the other freshers' performances. Verbal disputes between courses often arise, especially at the beginning, with students chanting songs and watchwords intended to provoke and ridicule those from other courses, or to state their course's superiority. At the end of the show, everyone loudly and enthusiastically shouts their institution's initials.

The freshers speak 'with a single voice' through these chants and watchwords. Each group tries to make itself heard above the others, and this helps intensify the euphoria and the emotional energy that fuels their bodies. To quote a fresher:

"When I sing, I want to show the other faculties that my house is better, which is what I think – every student thinks their house is the best. My heart overflows to see that there are freshers who share the same love as me. It's very beautiful to see, I think; I feel very moved."

Praxe as a ritual that structures positions in the student universe

Participating in the *praxe* implies inclusion in a singular ritualised context that is demarcated by the participants' specificity and their symbols – scissors, mace, spoon and outfit – chants and

watchwords, which make the students initiate and their filiation immediately recognisable. A Lisbon student told us about that singular context and defined the *praxe* as follows:

“To a large extent the *praxe* mixes the creation of a spirit of camaraderie [which] also falls within the concept of rites of passage, of initiation into a group, and it goes way beyond that... And that’s what’s not [as clearly] demonstrated, much less understood [...] What is the *praxe académica* really? [...] To us it’s a culture, a set of rules, objects, spaces, codes of conduct [...] it includes a set of symbols that gradually evolved over time, of stories and sharing of knowledge and repeated practices over the years and decades. At the end of the day it’s really a group, a culture; it shouldn’t be closed in on itself, but there was always a certain barrier between this group who belong to the *praxe académica* and those who don’t, or don’t understand, or are against [it].”

The demarcation this student talks about is ostensive, as many rituals are of public nature and clearly separate participants from onlookers. But the *praxe* is also consciously shrouded in secretiveness. Certain rituals are held at night, or in hidden spaces, and attempts are made to prevent people from outside its universe from watching them. But it is only an apparent secrecy, in that the essence of *praxe* practices is known and is documented in various ways, including audiovisual, that are easily accessible on the Internet.

The students who adhered to the *praxe* sought to define the way in which one can renounce it - “be *antipraxe*”, to use their own language – and the consequences of that choice. In many cases, ‘*antipraxe*’ students must publicly declare their opposition to the *praxe*, and at some universities provision is made for lists of their names to be drawn up, sometimes even with recommendations that *antipraxe* students have to prove their status by means of a formal written declaration. This labelling makes it easy to identify those who, albeit students, don’t belong to the group. There arises a clear separation between being ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the group. Furthermore, in some places, there is an intention to banish and preclude students who don’t take part in the *praxe* from certain academic ceremonies and symbols – among them, the highly valued robes. This creates a logic of exclusion of ‘*antipraxe*’ students, also revealing a logic of power that seeks to colonise a large space within the student universe and define its protagonists’ roles in ways that are not restricted to the space-time contexts in which the rituals themselves take place. As a student who engages in the *praxe* told us:

“There were people who chose not to be ‘*praxed*’; at the integration level it seemed that they were sidelined... By both the freshers and the senior students. It seemed like they were animals

who were there apart. Because they didn't do the *praxe*, they weren't part of the group. And then I also decided to do the *praxe*, because at the time there wasn't much choice, because, as they say: 'if you don't do the *praxe*, you can't wear the academic costume; 'you can't this'; 'you can't that'. In other words, that was almost, if you like... it was part of academic life, you have to be part of the *praxe*, you have to subject yourself to that."

Even when there is no evident intention to exclude, students who don't take part in the *praxe* can end up relatively distant from their colleagues who do, as a result of their exclusion from a range of interactions which are important to the construction of the group. This is particularly noticeable in institutions located in smaller towns and cities, where the socialization that occurs in the *praxe* ends up colonising the student sociabilities in the local context.

The *praxe* also institutes an intragroup separation between those who hold power and those who must obey them. In this universe, as a rule, each student's power grows with the number of years they have been in higher education and their commitment to and posture in the rituals, reaching a peak in cases in which the number of years exceeds that needed to complete the course. Freshers must simply obey. The asymmetric nature of the power exercised during the *praxe* is apparent in its rituals, and was plainly explained by a fresher:

"We have our *Dux* who is the most important [person] in our house, then we have our *conselho de veteranos* [Council of Veterans], that's all more important, then we have the *veteranos*, the *doutores*, the *semiputos* and the freshers, which is us, and basically those who are above us can tell us what to do; that's basically it, yes, we can't boss anyone about."²

Our data suggests that these inter-student power relations which the *praxe* ritualises can be also observed in the daily relations of students, albeit not always in such an obvious way. A Coimbra veteran told us:

"Now, the dinner itself, which is to say grabbing four or five freshers – 'let's go, freshers, today we're all going to my place, we're going to have a big dinner and then go out at night'. Although

² *Dux* (Latin: leader), *doutor* (Portuguese: student enrolled for a licentiate degree; colloquially, a student or graduate), *veterano* (Portuguese: veteran) and *semiputo* (Portuguese: halfkid, someone who has been in higher education for one year) are titles linked to students' positionings in the *praxe*. They originated in Coimbra, but can vary from place to place. At this student's university, *Dux* refers to the leader of the *praxe* at the institution, who is elected by the respective *veteranos*. The latter are students who already have enough enrolments, completed years and credits to finish their course but haven't graduated yet; they occupy privileged positions in the hierarchy and can take key decisions regarding the *praxe*. The *doutores* are next in the hierarchy, the *semiputos* are below the latter and just above the *freshers*.

that's an environment in which the *praxe* hierarchy is present, it's not exactly *praxe*. [...] It was the *praxe* that made it possible for there to be a relationship between those people [...] they met during the *praxe*, via a ranked structure. It's perfectly normal for that question to always be present, regardless of whether people are having drinks or dining at home. And it's perfectly normal that... man, given that the fresher came over and was eating, drinking and having fun, at the end they help tidy up and do the washing-up. And the others don't have to do that job."

In this situation, the *praxe*'s hierarchical logic is projected into student sociabilities outside the space-time of the rituals. Indeed, some *praxe* codes allow seniors to mobilise freshers to do housework at their homes. This and other possibilities provided for in such documents may not be put into practice, but their codification opens the way to legitimising their implementation. Another dimension in which this logic of power asserts its presence is that of personal feelings. In some of the contexts we studied, intimate relationships between freshers and seniors are not permitted. One of our interviewees explained this measure as a way of preventing abuses by the latter, implicitly acknowledging a power differential which makes such abuses possible. There are also *praxe* groups that prohibit intimate relationships between freshers – a ban that can't be justified by the same argument. As a highly ranked student in one such group told us, that prohibition is not always taken seriously, but it also originates various tensions and pressures:

"There was a time when there were people who also conducted a kind of witch-hunt. So they almost gave people a rough time – because two freshers were dating, they made insinuations and I don't know what else. For some of those people I know personally, it was a bit delicate."

Also, the way freshers treat seniors outside the framework of the *praxe* is sometimes similar to what happens within the *praxe* context. Some junior students address seniors by the title applicable to their rank in the hierarchy and in a formal style, even in non-*praxe* situations. In the words of a student with a senior rank in the hierarchy:

"I usually make a clear distinction between the way I am in the *praxe* and the way I am outside. Inside, I have a name and I have a status, and people address me by that name and in accordance with that status. I am still the senior, and if I say 'shut up', people shut up, in the sense that they go along with the game. Out here I am Orlando [*fictitious name*], I want people to call me Orlando, and not 'Your Excellency, the Veteran' or whatever. If it's fooling around, then OK, but in the corridors, I very often say to freshers, *doutores*, everyone: 'It's like this, my name is

Orlando, that's what's on my identity card'. [...] I try to have people separate the two, because I think that's fundamental, separating the context of in the *praxe* and outside the *praxe*. It would avoid a lot of mix-ups if people were able to do that."

There remains a sphere of student life in which the power relations that are present in the *praxe* can have repercussions: associative activities. The moral of the *praxe* is made of discipline and obedience, but also of group loyalty and solidarity. The leading students in the *praxe* universe can mobilise their notoriety and also bonds of loyalty and even coercive power to influence the results of a student election. As a union official told us:

"From a democratic point of view, it is very dangerous to have the *praxe* restricting the possible outcome of an election to the Student Union Board [...]. I think it's a real threat, and it has certainly already happened in many places that there is an instrumentalisation of the *praxe* as a means of interfering with the election process."

Discussion

We have described the *praxe* rituals, showing that they contain all the elements that, according to Collins (2004), are necessary to an efficient ritual, i.e. one that produces lasting social effects: co-presence, distinction between participants and non-participants, common focus of attention, and shared emotional energy. The speech of students and former students reveals the durable results of the *praxe*: integration in a group, reinforcement of the hierarchy and power relations of that group, and distinction of the group through shared symbols and a specific and valued identity.

The dual nature of the *praxe* renders these effects possible: disciplinary rituals are coercive and punitive, while hedonistic rituals are fun, allow spontaneity and generate shared enthusiasm. Importantly, these two logics never really occur alone. Disciplinary *praxe* contains games and other recreational activities that permit a good-humoured and less rigid interaction between participants – i.e. in addition to chants, often accompanied by choreographed moves, and some theatrical verbal disputes between students from different courses or institutions who come across one another. These moments are very important in the generation of the collective emotional energy that is so prevalent during hedonistic *praxe*, from which the hierarchical logic and the power of the senior students is never completely absent. The alternation and mixing of these two logics is fundamental to understand the efficacy of the *praxe* as a ritual. Although coercive initiations might create feelings of mistrust and resent between seniors and newcomers

(Johnson, 2011), the hedonistic moments temporarily suspend the disciplinary and hierarchical order (Fávero, et al., 2020). Disciplinary *praxe* then appears exceptional, perceived as a staged performance. It is thus presented as a dramatisation among equals, and this contributes to the freshers' acceptance of the orders that are given, because it means that none of those orders are intended to mistreat or humiliate them. While disciplinary *praxe* puts freshers in their place - i.e. in the base of the hierarchy - and teaches them to acknowledge and respect the power of senior students, hedonistic *praxe* generates the solidarity and sense of belonging that are necessary to accept, and even value, the norms of the group, including its hierarchy. The spontaneity and enthusiasm of the hedonistic breaks generate the "emotional energy" (Collins, 2004) necessary to promote feelings of common identity and cement the union of the group, the power of its symbols and the acceptance of its rules and morals. Collins argues that, because of the powerful emotional state they generate, successful rituals are "high points of experience" (2004, 42). Therefore, it is this intense emotional energy that motivates students to keep participating in the ritual, albeit in new roles, and act according to the rules and morals they learned as newcomers, thus perpetuating, with the inevitable variations introduced by broader social change, the group, its identity and its values, even though its elements rotate rapidly.

The separate nature of the rituals might suggest that the hierarchy and the power relations they enforce are limited to those rituals themselves (Cimino, 2011). However, we have seen how the former persist, albeit in subtler ways, in other contexts, including leisure time, romantic relationships, and, as Larguèze (1995) also observed, associative life. This shows that the *praxe* is much more than mere role-play. It puts each person in their place in the group hierarchy and teaches newcomers their role in the group. Thus, like *bizutage* (Renaud & Lamy, 1992; Larguèze, 1995, 1997) and *trote* (Siqueira, et al., 2012), it is a form of socialisation.

Some disciplinary rituals are secluded, while hedonistic rituals are generally meant to be witnessed by outsiders. Secrecy sometimes hides the riskier and more aggressive rituals, a "darker side" of the *praxe* that surfaces in the Portuguese media from time to time. But secrecy also intensifies feelings of possession and increases the value of what is secluded to others (Simmel, 1906), creating a seductive aura of mystery and exclusivity around student rituals. On the other hand, the public demonstrations of the *praxe* are displays of group union where the symbols of student identity are exhibited to an audience of non-members. These moments exalt a common identity in the presence of spectating outsiders (Fávero, et al., 2020), reinforcing a sense of belonging to the group and its specificity. Both – secrecy and exhibitionism – work to differentiate the *praxe* as a distinctive element of the group's identity and a set of rituals that promote its collective affirmation and symbolic status. Therefore, the *praxe* integrates and

consecrates the students who join the rituals and simultaneously draws a line that separates them from everybody else (Bourdieu, 1989; Larguèze, 1995).

This distinctive nature of the *praxe* is essential to understand it. The initiation practices that form its core were enshrined as a tradition at a point in time when the University of Coimbra was pressed by the relative social diversification of its students and the creation of other Portuguese higher education institutions (Cruzeiro, 1979). Back then, the *praxe* symbolically reinforced the status of the students of Coimbra and of the University itself. Interestingly, the *praxe* was reactivated in Coimbra in the late 1970s and became a mass phenomenon in the following two decades. Since then, the average education has increased importantly in the Portuguese society, especially among the younger generations. Higher education diplomas still grant some social prestige, but are no longer a privilege of those who occupy advantageous social positions. Importantly, they no longer guarantee secure and well-paid jobs (Cairns, et al., 2014; Ferreira, 2018). Therefore, the *praxe* seems to be a ritual that compensates the relative decline of the social status of tertiary education students (Fávero, et al., 2020), as it promotes a distinct, ostensive and symbolically valued student identity.

Simultaneously, it might also be interpreted as a symptom of the urgency that the present has to young people facing the biographical uncertainty that characterises the condition of being young today (Pais, 2003; Gil Calvo, 2011; Ferreira, 2018). As a ritual of passage that seeks to elevate the status of higher education students, the *praxe* might provide a sense of upwards social progression when the desired social position in adulthood is far from guaranteed. Moreover, when the future is shrouded in doubt and ambiguity, the present acquires greater importance and must be lived intensely (Gil Calvo, 2011). The *praxe* provides an intense and shared emotional experience that builds a sense of belonging to a group with a prestigious social identity. With its contemporary configuration, it offers young students a rush of shared emotional energy and also a communitarian, hedonistic and symbolically valued refuge from the uncertainty of the days that will follow the completion of their courses. Those who join the *praxe* and become committed to it find a group with rousing rituals, clearly prescribed roles (thus infusing a sense of certainty), symbols and rituals that elevate its status, and a specific student identity that, in a sense, transcends space and time, linking them to the culture of the students of the past (Frias, 2002) and of other contemporary higher education institutions. The *praxe* thus provides means to live the present intensely and meaningfully, and membership in a group that can be taken for granted for the time being. In other words, it provides ontological security (Giddens, 1991) where the latter is not easy to find (Ferreira, 2018; Carmo & Matias, 2019).

Conclusion

Praxe rituals are self-driven by both a marked use of different logics of power and by hedonistic practices. One superimposes itself on the other on certain occasions and at certain moments, but both are important. Disciplinary occasions teach the fundamental *praxe* rule: obedience to the hierarchy. They are essential to learning the various positions of the protagonists in the student world and their power relations. Concomitantly, the enthusiasm and spontaneity with which students give themselves up to the hedonistic occasions, combined with the high levels of intersubjectivity and focused attention these rituals present, generate the collective emotional energy that cements both the sense of belonging to the group and the interiorisation of its norms, as well as the belief in its morals and virtue. The shared emotional state generated in hedonistic moments is thus essential to the acceptance and even valuation of the hierarchy taught during the coercive occasions. This double nature of the *praxe* is fundamental to produce its social effects: the delimitation of the group, the elevation of the status of its members, and the subtle crystallisation of its hierarchy and power relations. At the same time, participation in contemporary *praxe* rituals might also be interpreted as a search for ontological security in a transitional moment of life defined by uncertainty.

Declaration of interests: the authors declare that no conflict of interests exists.

Funding: this article is an outcome of a study funded by the Directorate-General of Higher Education (DGES), Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education (MCTES), 21st Portuguese Constitutional Government.

The revision of this text was provided by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia through the Financing of the R&D Unit UIDB/03126/2020

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