

Changes in psychological empowerment of low-qualified adults participating in Adult Education and Training*

Gomes, I. P.* (1), Coimbra, J. L. (2) & Menezes, I. (3)

Psychology Centre

Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences - University of Porto

(1) isabelgomes@fpce.up.pt; (2) jcoimbra@fpce.up.pt; (3) imenezes@fpce.up.pt

Abstract

The Adult Education and Training (AET) model in Portugal provided a new way of envisaging the learning construct, admitting that informal and non-formal learning, developed in life contexts, should also be taken into account when looking at people's competences and skills, as opposed to the "traditional" sole-value of formal learning. Adults participating in AET devices repeatedly refer, as the most important outcomes of the process, improvements on self-value and self-esteem. However, the impact of the process in terms of psychological development is still understudied. Our goal is to explore and analyze data from 4 waves of a longitudinal study with AET participants, using the MANOVA and ANOVA repeated measures procedures, in order to understand the impact of participating in these devices, on the development of psychological empowerment of a low-qualified adult population. Preliminary findings will be discussed taking considering the new Portuguese AET policies, which postulate the enlargement of the Recognition, Validation and Certification process to higher levels of education and also exigent benchmarks to be achieved.

Adult Education and Training in the knowledge era

Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, one of the biggest poetry writers of the 20th century, once said: "A man condemned to ignorance is someone from whom a part of one's right to live has been stolen". In Europe, this consideration is taken very seriously, and this has been not hazardous or recent; on the contrary, a geographically historically founded phenomenon: back to the days of 1948, after World War II, Europe gathered in an European Federalist Movement Conference (The Hague), which first outcome was the decision to create an European Bureau of Adult Education (EBAE) and reflected the early attention that Europe was devoting to the matter (Toiviainen, 1995). The etymological genesis of the word, leads us even further, as

Europe means *the one who sees beyond*. The *old continent* has, in fact, always been sensitive and devoted to knowledge and understanding. Nowadays, as Carneiro (2002) put it, “[i]n most European countries we are proud of the virtues of universal basic education; any statement to retreat from it would be considered nothing less than a heresy.” (p.302). Europe is the birthplace of different concepts of the position and role of the human being in the world, but foremost, it has a “century-old legacy constituted by the so-called European social model and the *corpus* of humanistic values that underlie its representations.” (ibid., p.303).

The Lisbon Strategy, the most recent initiative taken in order to create conditions for Europe’s growth as the most developed knowledge-based geographical area in the world, states to gather humanistic and economical goals, while stretching the benefits at the personal, community and societal levels of a generalized participation in Lifelong Learning: without better education and training systems, and wider participation in them, Europe’s competitiveness cannot be improved. Investment in human capital is now clearly a vital investment in Europe’s future. However, it is realized that the Lisbon goals are being slowly achieved and new reflections and directions have to be examined.¹

In Portugal, the scenario is disquieting when it comes to understanding the low-qualified population and its characteristics: there are 3.5 active (i.e., available to work) Portuguese people, representing 72% of the total active population, who haven’t finished the 12th grade. In this group of people, 2.6 millions have between the 4th and the 9th grade and 1.5 million have only finished the 4th grade (Jornal Público, 2006). In this context, we could all agree with Amorim (2006):

The interventions aimed at adults should contemplate flexible tracks that include the recognition of key-competences, formally and informally acquired throughout life, as well as the development, acquisition and consolidation of transversal and instrumental competences which are indispensable to the critical understanding and the transformation of the surrounding world. (p.16),

as a matter of *social justice*, some would add.

In Portugal, since 2001, the Recognition, Validation and Certification (RVC) “system” and the AET courses have been put into practice and developed. The RVC process is

¹ For detailed attention on this matter, e.g. <http://cordis.europa.eu/euroabstracts/en/june04/human02.htm>

the core strategy in the development of the AET model, and it implies that adults rebuild their life experiences into a portfolio of self-reports and evidences. In the process of retrieving the life history and its channelling into formal certification, even when it is done only on the basis of the *utility* of certification, opportunities for reconstructing new meanings for experience emerge. Therefore, adults do not risk losing their knowledge and competences acquired throughout the lifespan; they transform them, converting them into knowledge which is formally recognized in a certificate (up to the 9th grade).

More recently, the New Opportunities Programme², which aims to qualify 1 million active Portuguese people until 2010, in order to fulfil the Lisbon benchmarks, has set into its priorities the enlargement of the RVC and AET courses to higher levels of education, namely to the 12th grade. This situation has, so far, triggered the development of a new key-competences framework for that level of certification, the opening of more than 100 RVC Centres (now called New Opportunities Centres) and the reshaping of the organizational configuration of these educational devices, taking them from private and community organizations and placing them in schools and other state institutions, involving new actors, new contexts and (one could raise the doubt) new strategies and practices in AET, fundamentally changing their essence.

The scattered adult

“Uncertainty, risk, insecurity and other terms in the same semantic constellation can be considered the *zeitgeist* of Western contemporary societies, affecting daily life and experience.” (Coimbra, 2005, p.3). In this rapid evolution age, information and knowledge-based, where social and labour integration can mainly be obtained through technological channels, adults who are low-illiterate and low-qualified are definitely in the margins of the societies, as they cannot access the instruments through which the new citizens of the post-modern societies gain mastery over the new *paradigms* of life and learning. This situation actually comes to reinforce the previous dependences of this particular population: people who were previously low-qualified and saw their integration in the labour market complicated by low certification levels are now confronted with a massive problem: understanding the new *functioning model* in which the world turns these days.

² For more information on the subject: www.novasoportunidades.gov.pt

Education and Training have more and more become what seems to be the magical solution to the European and also Portuguese *developmental* problems, as countries and as geographical region, allied with the problems raised by the post-modern societies: in the *l'Ère du Vide*, there is a “new awareness, all made of [uncertainty] and fluctuation (...) instituting a «spirit» kneeled down to *permanent training*, [where] narcissism cooperates in the great undertaking of scientific management of bodies and souls.” (Lipovetsky, 1989, p. 56). In sum, following the perspectives of Lasch (1979), Lipovetsky (1989) and Bauman (2006), only to mention some authors, perceptions of uncertainty and the individualization of contemporary societies do, in fact, cooperate to produce the same social and personal results.

The Adult Education and Training Portuguese model, supposedly anchoring in life experiences, is bound to promote the reconstruction and reshaping of the times, places and foremost the learning that each adult brings into the process, by allowing new and oriented reasoning of the whole past, and also the expected future, granting a new “thread” which could help reassemble the broken and shattered lives of low-qualified adults in post-modern knowledge societies like ours.

The evolution that the New Opportunities Programme reflects might jeopardize the accumulated experience capital, by turning RVC processes into “production lines”, as Fragoso (2005) put it, in which great numbers of certificates can be produced in order to accomplish high rates of certification (ibid., pp.2-6), thus deviating the object of the AET model, into a statistical one, oriented towards superficial benchmarking.

It appears, therefore, to be justified the relevance of studying the psychological dimensions at stake in these contexts, trying to understand what is changing in the human person and in his/her relationship with the world, when confronted with supposedly new and more adequate models of Education and Training.

Assessing Adult Education and Training psychological outcomes

Several studies have shown the importance of raising the education levels in the development of individuals and communities, namely in particular groups: “research (...) displays evidence that a satisfactory completion of basic education by those in the handicapped social groups can raise individual preferences for further education and increase the demand for upper secondary studies or, alternatively, post-compulsory vocational training” (Carneiro, 2002, p.302). It's a fact that those who are involved in

education and training are more likely to commit and participate in Lifelong Learning than those who are kept aside the educational systems.

Other Portuguese studies (e.g. Canelas, 2004) have also given glow to *adults' voices*, using self-report questionnaires and interviews, and recognising the main dimensions in which AET had important impacts: self-knowledge, self-esteem, self-value, self-confidence, reconstruction of personal and occupational projects, probability of finding a job or motivation to look for a job (in the unemployed population).

The latest published Portuguese study on the impacts of the AET devices in the psychological development reports:

It seems legitimate to say, *grosso modo*, based on the results, that both AET devices contribute to the participants' development, namely on the central dimensions such as civic and vocational, that is, they configure distinct devices, however, both are promoters of development, of the enlargement of individual relationships networks, and finally, of liberation of the «cocoon» knitted by the non assimilation of successive social and technological mutations, by the under-certification of previous learning and by a competences deficit personally and socially compromising. (Amorim, 2005, p.7)

The reason why we talk about psychological development when we talk about Adult Education and Training, is because

the psychological is the outcome of a historical and social never-ending process where the construction and internal organization of individuals as subjects of meanings, emotions and thoughts takes place. (...) [and] the main source of such a construction process is to be looked for in human relationships (...) (Coimbra, 2005, pp.4-5).

Adult Education and Training settings are (or should be) privileged spaces and times for growth, as they are based in relationships (with oneself and the others) and meaning-making processes, because their raw material is the individual human interactive experience.

Empowerment as empowering processes and/or empowered outcomes

The empowerment construct has long been used to describe various things in different contexts and with diverse populations, inclusively as a mean to measure and report

results of European funded interventions such as those developed by EQUAL (e.g. GICEA, 2000). However, it is still an ill-defined construct.

The choice for this particular theoretical framework is due to the literature review, which showed us that the nomological network proposed by Zimmerman (1995) [vd. also Perkins & Zimmerman (1995)] permits a better analysis of the dimensions under study.

Empowerment is seen as a multileveled and complex construct, which fluctuates over time and depends greatly on the context in which it is being analysed. In this research we are mainly interested in the individual level of analysis, the psychological empowerment (PE). The basic distinctions proposed have to do with the difference between empowering processes and empowered outcomes, as shown in Table 1:

Level of analysis	Processes (empowering)	Empowerment Components	Outcomes (empowered)
Individual (PE)	Learning decision-making skills	Intrapersonal	Sense of control Critical awareness
	Managing resources	Interactional	Understanding and mobilizing resources
	Working with others	Behavioural	Participatory behaviours

Table 1. Processes and outcomes of Psychological Empowerment

Methodology

This study is part of a broader research project which aims to explore the impacts of participating in AET devices, and the relationships between psychological empowerment, training climate and the quality of participation experiences.

The methodology used in the project uses both qualitative and quantitative methods, in order to fully apprehend the complexity of the object at issue.

For this particular study, we tried to answer to the following questions:

- Are there differences across time in the PE of low-qualified adults participating in Adult Education and Training devices? and
- How do the three components of PE (Intrapersonal, Interactional and Behavioural) change across time?

One final consideration about this study is that the results presented are very preliminary, as for the moment and for the ANOVA RM procedures, we only had 37 respondents.

Data collection and sample

The study included 5 different organizations: a Youth Association, a Training Institute, a Training Centre, a Local Development Association, a Vocational School and one Professional Cooperation group, from which the longitudinal study participants come. The summary for the data collection and sample is shown in Table 2:

		N	RVC	AET	Men	Women
Before the longitudinal study	Focus groups – trainees	23	18	5	9	14
	Focus groups – pedagogical team	6	6	----	----	6
Longitudinal study	T1 (0 months)	276	216	60	124	152
	T2 (3 months)	193	137	56	83	110
	T3 (6 months)	135	85	50	59	76
	T4 (18 months)	37 (running data collection)				
Interviews	Trainees	4	1	3	2	2
	RVC professionals	3	3	----	----	3
	Regional Coordination	1	----	----	----	1

Table 2. Summary of data collection and sample

This data collection is still being run for the general longitudinal study, and that is the reason why, in this particular study, we only present preliminary findings.

Development of a Psychological Empowerment scale

The instrument used in this study was the Psychological Empowerment scale for low-qualified adults (adapted by Gomes, Veiga & Menezes, 2005). This scale has a total of 46 items, and included items previously used and validated [Psychological Empowerment Scale for University Environment (adapted by Veiga & Menezes, 2003)], which itself was developed on the basis of the Sociopolitical Control scale, developed by Zimmerman and Zahniser (1991).

The nomological network as defined by Zimmerman (1995) (vd. also Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995), informed the conception of this self-report scale with 10 subscales which group into the three components of PE, as the Table 3 reports.

		Perceived competence (4 items)
	<i>self perceptions on the</i>	Leadership competence (4 items)
Intrapersonal	<i>individual capacities to exert control</i>	Motivation to control (4 items)
		Decision-making (4 items)
		Self-efficacy (4 items)
		Self-esteem (4 items)
	<i>knowledge about</i>	Political control (4 items)
Interactional	<i>sociopolitical environment and community resources</i>	Critical awareness (4 items)
		Resource mobilization (4 items)
		Item examples (10 items total):
	<i>specific actions taken in order to exert control</i>	“I helped other people to make decisions”
Behavioural		“I achieved the main objectives I set myself”
		“I argued face to face with one or more people about a recent subject”

Table 3: Components, variables and items in the PE scale

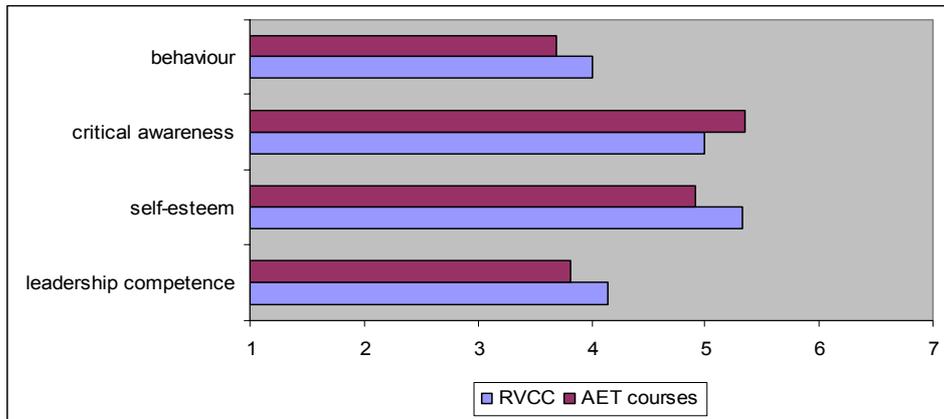
A 7-point Likert response scale was used, and all the observations were conducted in the places where participants had their training, except for the last observation moment, in which we are using diverse strategies: face to face, by mail, or by e-mail.

Results

We conducted MANOVA for each observation moment in order to explore whether there were significant differences in the responses of the participants in the two training devices: RVC and AET courses. We only found significant differences for the T1 observation [$F(10,264) = 2.510$; $p < 0.01$].

These differences can be due to the dissimilar composition of the groups participating in RVC and AET courses: people who attend to RVC are generally employed, whereas participants of AET courses are unemployed, most of them long-term ones.

Graph 1 also helps us realize in which of these variables there are greater differences and how they distribute in each group:



Graph 1. Significant differences between RVC and AET courses in T1

Graph 1 reports that RVC participants score higher in all the significant different variables, except for one: self-esteem. This comes to be an intriguing finding, which must be further analysed.

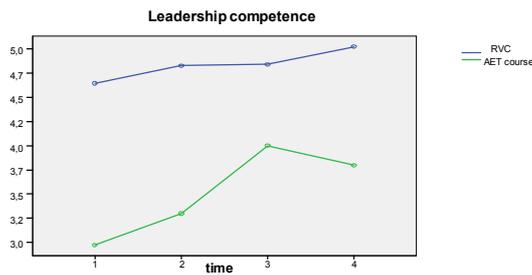
Then we conducted the ANOVA RM procedure in order to analyse changes across time, with co-variation of the two distinct AET devices. Results are shown in Table 4:

Variable	Type III Sum of squares	F	df	p
Decision-making (b)	5.246	4.359	(3,25)	0.007
Leadership competence (a)	6.860	4.781	(3,25)	0.009
Motivation to control (b)	5.468	4.640	(3,25)	0.005
Political control (a)	3.588	2.648	(3,25)	0.058 (*)

(a) time (b) interaction time by course (*) marginally significant

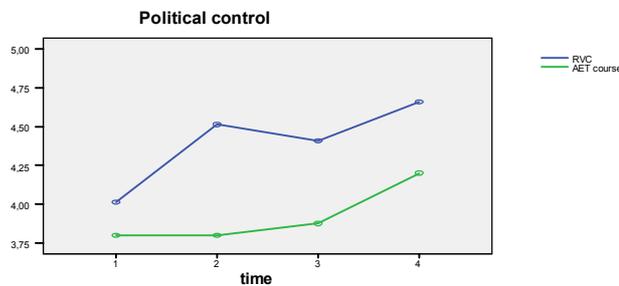
Table 4. Results of RM ANOVA for significant changes in PE variables

From Table 4 we can see that the variables leadership competence and political control change across time, whereas motivation to control and decision-making change across time only when co-variated with the training option. Graphs 2 to 5 can help us further understand the changes across time in these variables:



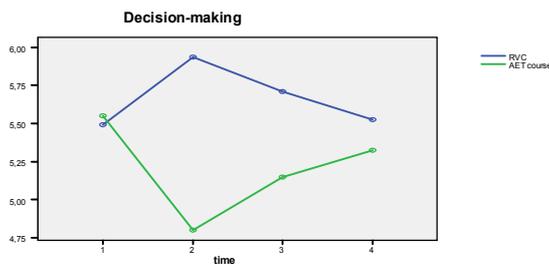
Graph 2. Leadership competence across time

As far as the leadership competence (Graph 2) is concerned, we can see, for both devices, a positive change across time, which is more significant in the AET course than in the RVC participants.



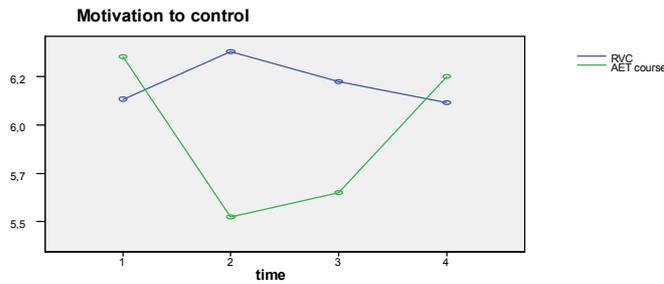
Graph 3. Political control change across time

In the political control variable (Graph 3), we can also see that there is a positive growth pattern, but in this case the increase is higher for the RVC participants.



Graph 4. Decision-making change across time

In the decision-making variable (Graph 4), there is clearly an opposite pattern of change in the RVC and in the AET courses and we can also realize that there is no significant change for both, as there is no gain when we compare the initial and the final results. This is also a peculiar finding which should be deeper scrutinized.



Graph 5. Motivation to control change across time

Finally, for the variable motivation to control (Graph 5), there is the same pattern found in the decision-making variable, with the exception that in this one, the AET participants score higher in the beginning and at the end, which is, again, an out of the ordinary finding and should lead us to profound explorations of these psychological changes.

Conclusions

Despite the prioritizing of AET in the European and national agendas, it is still not clear which might be the impacts of these interventions at the psychological level. Some studies have shown positive impacts on what could be considered psychological variables, and the present study aimed to contribute to this discussion by analysing psychological empowerment changes across time. The preliminary findings suggest that there is significant fluctuation in two of the variables of the intrapersonal component (decision-making and motivation to control), although no gains can be concluded. This might mean that AET devices are good opportunities to intervene in these dimensions, as empowering processes, but they might not be promoting structural change: once the training is over, the results are the same as in the beginning, and no empowered outcomes are produced. On the other hand, opposite patterns in the responses have been found: whereas RVC participants' results increase and then decline across time, AET participants decline first and later increase their results. This should lead us to further explore the changes identified, closely looking at the different populations of each training option, or at different psychological functions played by each type of intervention.

However, there are two variables, leadership competence (intrapersonal component) and political control (interactional component) which show a significant tendency to increase over time, which could lead us to pay more attention to the civic and political dimensions of the change promoted by these Education and Training devices.

On the behavioural component, no significant changes were observed across time, which means that, despite the increase in the intrapersonal and interactional components, no consequences in the behaviour of these respondents were appreciated. This finally leaves us with the question: if it is our goal to promote personal development in AET devices, which includes higher levels of participation (i.e., taking specific actions in order to exert control over one's life and over the sociopolitical environment), what are we not doing?

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