

"AGAINST CURRENT": A PROJECT AIMED AT THE REVISION AND REORGANIZATION OF THE PERSONAL VOCATIONAL TRAJECTORY IN A SCENARIO OF UNEMPLOYMENT

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ABSTRACT: How often have we let us be carried by the current with the certainty that a secure route would be found somewhere? How often had we broken the currents that attached us to interesting people, places and activities that we have been found in the different areas and times of our lives? How often have we been forced to go forward against current to get what we wanted? With the "Against Current" project, target to unemployed in-training adults, we have tried to stimulate reflection about the different topics contained in this set of questions. In a more concrete way, it was intended to promote the recognition of personal strengths and its contribution to employability. With this aim in mind, three activities have been proposed: (1) "Com quantos pauz se faz uma canoa" ("How many sticks are needed to construct a canoe?"), (2) "Eventar" ("Inventing Events") and (3) "Cascata de oportunidades" ("Opportunity Cascade"). Activities have been prepared to facilitate the (pre-)definition of a professional project and/or the design of an employment search plan oriented by personal significant meanings and goals. Therefore, it encouraged the identification of personal and interpersonal resources and alternatives that participants may want to consider to pulling through the current of unemployment in which they were caught. This vocational intervention project, that has been implemented during an entire morning/evening with two groups (n = 30 elements, most of them from Metropolitan Association of Services (AMS)), was planned in order to lead participants to regain the confidence, optimism and determination that have been lost but must be recovered if they want to escape the unemployment whirlpool and to guide their work life in a personalized direction. This poster characterizes in detail projects' options regarding methodology and, as it was its first edition, it will also include some critical comments about the efficacy of intervention strategies considering, namely, participants' and facilitators' reactions and evaluations.

INTRODUCTION: Approaching unemployment, as a structural problem in contemporary society, is not a recent trend in social sciences. In spite of this, it stills prevail research and intervention paradigms, which are limited to phenomenon's characterization and/or to primary instrumental intervention with unemployed people. In fact, if we depart from the latent privation model (Jahoda, 1982)* which postulates that work can fulfill both latent and manifest psychological needs, it is clear that the assurance of legal and institutional conditions (e.g. upgrading qualification level, training employability skills and/or recycling technical abilities, ...) is not enough when providing the support needed by unemployed people for a successful professional (re)integration. As such, the great challenge faced by professionals who work with this specific population in the field of Vocational Guidance Psychological Counseling, is the transformation of their own view of the job search process. It is important to see it as an opportunity to clients' expression of their values, interests and personal skills in a meaningful and personally constructed project. This is the only way to make their professional project more differentiate and, simultaneously, more valued by employers (who can see more clearly the special qualities of a candidate as a potential interesting employee for the organization) and self-motivating to themselves (they can find in it extra-motivation for continually review and update their project as the internal dimensions in which their project's is grounded change with life experiences). In line with this last conception, the "Against Current" project – which resulted from a collaboration of the Service of Vocational Guidance Psychological Counseling from Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences (University of Porto) with "Cidade das Profissões" (Center of Information and Counseling) – was conceived to optimize the vocational competence of low qualified unemployed people, in order to promote the quality of their actual and future work transitions.

*Jahoda, M. (1982). *Employment and Unemployment: A social psychological analysis*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

PROJECT'S AIMS

- [1] TO PROMOTE PARTICIPANTS' AWARENESS ABOUT THEIR SURPLUS PERSONAL VALUE AND [2] TO UNDERSTAND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THEIR EMPLOYABILITY STATUS BY HELPING THEM [3] TO INTENTIONALLY USE THIS EMERGENT SELF-KNOWLEDGE IN THE DESIGN OF A MEANINGFUL PROFESSIONAL PROJECT AND/OR EMPLOYMENT SEARCH PLAN

PARTICIPANTS: 32 SUBJECTS, MOST OF THEM...

- ... COMING FROM METROPOLITAN ASSOCIATION OF SERVICES
- ... ADULTS (FROM 18 TO 54 YEARS OLD)
- ... LOW-QUALIFIED
- ... LONG-TERM UNEMPLOYED
- ... IN-TRAINING

MOMENT I: SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- TO EXPLORE EXPECTATIONS
- TO PROMOTE A POSITIVE GROUP CLIMATE
- TO INTRODUCE THE PROJECT

STRATEGY

INFORMAL INTERACTION

Psychologists established an informal dialogue with participants adopting a facilitative attitude which was expected to highlight participants' affinities and increase their motivation, involvement and effective participation in the intervention project.

MOMENT II: SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- TO IDENTIFY PRIORIZED VOCATIONAL VALUES
- TO PROVE SELECT VALUES' IMPORTANCE WITH LIFE/PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES

STRATEGY

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY: "HOW MANY STICKS ARE NEEDED TO CONSTRUCT A CANOE?"
Participants were invited to select ten values ("sticks") from an initial list of thirteen. They were instructed to think about what they really need, to feel personally realized and satisfied with work. After that they were asked to support the choice of the selected values by reporting past experiences that showed the subjective importance of those values. "The canoe" must be made of special materials. Each participant should choose the sticks that, for him/her, are those that offer them more guarantee of happiness when navigating through work and (un)employment waters.



IN-GROUP INTERVENTION: IMPLEMENTED...

- ... WITH TWO GROUPS OF 16 ELEMENTS
- ... DURING 4 HOURS BY GROUP
- ... BY REQUEST AND WITH THE LOGISTIC SUPPORT OF "CIDADE DAS PROFISSÕES" (PORTO DIGITAL ASSOCIATION)
- ... ONE PSYCHOLOGIST/FACILITATOR BY GROUP

MOMENT III: SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- TO EXPLORE VALUED INTERESTS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP PROFILES
- TO PROMOTE THE IDENTIFICATION OF DISCRETE PERSONAL SKILLS

STRATEGY

SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY: "INVENTING EVENTS"

The members of each group were asked to discuss and agree about an event that they would be pleased to organize as a team. After deciding the kind of event to prepare and the respective programme, they were instructed to individually define in which of the different event organization areas (e.g., logistic, catering, recreation, publicity, finance, decoration...) they want to take personal responsibility. Each participant should think about the activities he/she likes and feels more able to accomplish with success and propose to the group his/her possible contribution. When the individual contributions were established, participants were asked to make a list of the tasks associated to the specific area of competence that must be performed by each of them. During all the process, the psychologist/facilitator registered, using an observation grill, the individual behaviours in order to produce, at the end of the activity, specific feedback about participants' communication and interpersonal skills (e.g., leadership, critical thinking, self-expression, persistence...). Participants also fulfilled a work-sheet about the interests, skills and values that they have acknowledged from their involvement in this activity.

MOMENT IV: SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- TO EXPLORE MEANINGFUL EMPLOYMENT ALTERNATIVES USING SELF-PREFERENCE AS CRITERIA AND ENVIRONMENT AS STIMULUS

STRATEGY

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY: "OPPORTUNITY CASCADE"

Using the metaphor of a water cascade, participants were invited to examine the section of employment of different journals and to collect the announcements that were more attractive to them. After that, they were asked to arrange sequentially the selected employment announcements by putting them in different lines according to the respective level of preference. It was explained that, as in a waterfall, "preference associate to the announcement" must be seen as flowing steadily downwards, i.e., decreasing one step to another. When the cascade was completed participants were instructed to remember the results of the previous activities and to analyze what interests, values and skills were (also) present in the chosen announcements. Finally, participants must give meaning to the observed (in)consistencies and reach their own conclusions about how to profit from what they learn about themselves in the process of work-market (re)integration.

PROJECT'S EVALUATION: At the end of the intervention, the participants were asked to give their opinion about different dimensions of the intervention. Most of the participants reported special satisfaction with the themes explored (its relevance regarding their present situation) and with psychologists' performance. Since the first task, the involvement of the participants was evident and it seemed to be related with the innovative approach that has been used to help them in the definition of professional projects. The option of deepening their self-knowledge, through introspection around vocational values, generative and transferable skills and personal interests contributed to the feeling that this experience brought something new and meaningful for them. In fact, at the very beginning, the majority of the participants tended to see the exploration of their main motivations, lifetime wishes and personal needs as unimportant. After all, finding a new job - any job - was their priority. In some way, we can find here the expression of social unemployment narratives primacy. Actually, unemployed are likely to forget what could be main factor of their differentiation and inclusion in the labour market - to capitalize the unique experiences and skills they've acquired through life in the construction of goal-oriented, yet flexible, professional and life projects. The project led them to this great insight: that they must see themselves as having qualities that could be appreciated by employers if those qualities are also valued by themselves in the search of a place in the work world. Group members had the opportunity to recognize their personal resources (developed in a lifelong basis), confronting their values, motivations and subjective perception of skills with their past experiences and actual ability to deal with the challenges involved in an activity like the "Inventing Events". It showed to be a challenging activity not only because of the tasks it selves, but because of the strategy used: participants must maintain a personal self-affirmation attitude in the context of their group's heterogeneity. Finally, the opportunity to articulate, in an active and independent way, the explored dimensions with in-day job offers, seems to have stimulated the development of fundamental vocational skills, such as self-efficacy, realism, confidence, optimism, self-determination, planning, active exploration and future orientation to action. Some of the participants told that, after concluding their training, they would use what they have learned during the intervention to cope with anxiety when facing the difficulties of getting a new professional occupation, i.e., they would approach the labour market in a more personally oriented fashion seen as the best way of feeling more compromised, motivated and therefore more capable to endure the "finding a job" challenges. In fact, we really believe that, one of the most important intervention's gains was participants' conclusion that they would know better what they will look for instead of accepting job opportunities that may appear, without any reflection on their personal resources, interests and needs.