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Title: How can Psychological Intervention and Career Counselling Respond to Uncertainty, Precarity and Unemployment’s Psychosocial Consequences?

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Abstract and 3 – 5 keywords

This paper intends to explore how a group of psychologists discuss the implications of the results of a quantitative study that focused on work’s manifest and psychological benefits, psychosocial uncertainty and coping with uncertainty. A group of psychologists from different areas of practice (educational, career counselling, clinical, human-resources…) are invited to participate in a focus group discussion centred on the implications for practice of a research that was conducted during the beginning of the economic crisis in Portugal, in 2009, a time of increased unemployment, precarity and austerity. This focus group is to take place in April 2019. Analysis is focused on the themes of uncertainty, precarity; (un)employment, and its psychosocial consequences.
There is a focus on the discourses produced on the participants of the quantitative study’s personal experiences (unemployed, precarious…) and on how psychological intervention in different areas can help or hinder people’s well-being, agency and career development.

Keywords: Uncertainty; Precarity; (Un)Employment; Psychological Intervention; Career Counselling

Relation to the conference theme

By exploring situations of precarity, (un)employment, and how people experience work and uncertainty, the quantitative studies intended to problematise the organisation of the labour-market and its psychosocial consequences, underlining socially created inequalities within working environments. This qualitative study intends to foster debate on practices that may, inadvertently, reinforce inequalities, and contribute with suggestions for socially just practices.

General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework

The level of security (or basic trust) developed in primary attachment relationships contributes to the psychological origins of uncertainty, which allow coping with uncertainty (Bowlby, 1980/1985; Erikson, 1968). Based on qualitative research conducted with underprivileged populations, Marris (1996) concluded that people who experience greater social vulnerability suffer uncountable consequences of uncertainty. He suggests there is an unequal distribution of uncertainty and of the power to cope with it. Within this context, the ones that are powerless are led to adopt self-defeating strategies to cope with uncertainty, which reinforce their condition of vulnerability and their sense of inadequacy.

Cultural, social, and political changes have contributed to individualisation becoming a hegemonic form of socialisation, to communities’ fragmentation, to instability in the labour markets, to competitiveness and distrust in professional relationships, and,
ultimately, to precarious working conditions (Bauman, 2001/2009; Coimbra & Menezes, 2009; Sennett, 1998/2001). Following the financial crisis of 2007/2008, countries such as Portugal were faced with economic crises, whose austerity measures had dramatic effects: increased unemployment rates, hyper flexibilization and deregulation of labour relations, and widespread precarity. It is proposed that all these social, economic and political conditions lead to the creation of new forms of uncertainty in people’s lives and work environments (Beck, 1992), thus complexifying the process of making meaning of experiences and of critically reflecting and integrating them, which may engender a widespread sense of existential insecurity/precarity.

The quantitative study explored the challenges people faced in the beginning of the economic crisis in Portugal, in 2009, analysing how employed, precariously employed and unemployed people: (i) perceive uncertainty in the social context and experience its consequences (in terms of community relationships, work, and the belief of being capable to cope with uncertainty); (ii) adopt emotional maladaptive strategies, to cope with uncertainty); (iii) and experience the latent (time structuring, social contact, collective purpose, status and activity) and manifest (financial access) benefits of work, as described by Jahoda (1992) and Fryer (1998). The model tested explained 67% of the adoption of emotional coping strategies towards uncertainty, being mostly explained by psychosocial uncertainty. Access/deprivation regarding the benefits of work is considered a psychological descriptor of personal circumstances. Furthermore, the model worked in the same manner for unemployed, permanently employed and precarious people but unemployed and precarious workers show higher means than permanent workers. So, psychosocial uncertainty explains the adoption of self-defeating strategies to cope with it, providing evidence for the existence of social origins of psychological vulnerabilities.

Therefore, the consideration of social circumstances in psychological vulnerabilities is vital to avoid victim-blaming discourses and practices. To fulfil democracy’s goals, how can various forms of psychological intervention contribute to a greater balance in the relationship between workers and employers, towards greater equality of income and power relationships.
By presenting the former results, this focus group discussion aims at exploring the following research questions:

1) How do psychologists from different areas give meaning to these results in terms of the psychological consequences of unemployment, precarity and psychosocial uncertainty?
2) How do these psychologists perceive their professional role within these aspects, regarding their practice?
3) How do these psychologists perceive their professional role regarding social justice?
4) Considering the results, do these psychologists identify practices that could hinder psychological well-being, personal agency and/or career development?
5) Does the discussion allow to identify possible strategies that may promote individual, groups, communities’ well-being, agency, empowerment or career development - what implications emerge from these results’ discussion for a practice that may be socially aware, empowering and socially transforming?

Therefore, it is intended to promote discussion within the group of psychologists regarding some of the main results in order to allow for these themes to emerge, be debated and new shared meaning to arise.

**Methods/methodology**

By integrating contributions from constructivism and social constructivism, knowledge is perceived as a pragmatic construction, based on socially created discourses and on the continuous process of reality’s construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966/1971; Gergen, 1985; Lyotard, 1954/2008) and so historically situated (Foucault, 1986). Thus, the inevitability of subjectivity and non-neutrality of results and scientific language are accepted, depending on the interpretation of the researcher and his personal, theoretical, social and cultural lenses (Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997).

Considering the aims of this study, focus group discussion was chosen as the method that could allow an analysis of the meanings that a group of psychologists may make of the implications of results, but also, the creation of new knowledge and understanding
of the world, through social interaction and debate (Burr, 1995). Moreover, by assuming an ontological and epistemological standpoint that enhances the role of language in the social construction of the world and knowledge, there will be different layers in data analysis (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002/2004).

Consequently, the analysis of the discourses produced will be an interpretative one, for which researcher’s reflexivity will be fundamental, even more so considering the researcher’s common professional role with participants (Parker, 1994; Willig, 2001). It will focus foremost on a thematic analysis concentrated on the themes of uncertainty, precarity, unemployment, and its psychosocial consequences.

It is important to acknowledge that our results will give access to one of many possible interpretations. However, measures will be taken to respect specificity as a form of ecological validity within qualitative research (Parker, 1994), by documenting procedures and assuming a critical attitude towards results and our own perspective (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Silverman, 2000). Finally, an open attitude will be taken, so that we can identify possible emerging categories that may contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon (Behar cit in Riessman, 1993).

**Outcomes/ expected results**

This study is at a very early stage and, considering its exploratory nature, it is complex to advance expected results. It seeks to foster reflection on practices that, by focusing on the adaptation of the individual to the context (Arendt, 2005), instead of focusing on the transformation of damaging features of work environments, may reinforce people’s sense of inadequacy and the status-quo. Broadly speaking, it aims at understanding participants’ meaning-making and positions regarding their work as psychologists and its relationship to social justice. A focus on how these discourses are produced would allow to explore their social and political impact, as well as of psychological practices (Burr, 1995). Therefore, we expect to explore how participants perceive certain psychological practices as possible forms of victim-blaming and of legitimizing inequality (Ryan, 1971/1976), and how they may connect with individuals’ feelings of inadequacy, self-blame, loss of agency regarding the socio-political context, opportunities for career development and satisfaction, as well as other psychological
consequences (anxiety, depression…). And so, analyse power relations in society (Adorno & Horkheimer 1979) and create a space for reflection on how psychology and psychologists can contribute to social justice (Martin-Baró, 1986).

References


