
INVESTIGACIONES

ADAPTABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A NEW LOOK AT A FOLLOW-UP STUDY

ADAPTABILIDAD EN LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR: REVISIÓN DE UN ESTUDIO DE SEGUIMIENTO

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RESUMEN

El entorno académico refleja el aumento de la diversidad y las características de la población que accede a la educación superior, una tendencia que ha ido creciendo en el contexto portugués debido la oportunidad de entrar en este nivel de educación de las personas con más de veintitrés años de edad y con diversos cursos de capacitación. Desde la perspectiva del aprendizaje permanente, la incorporación de nuevos participantes ha sido un privilegio de cara a la promoción de los objetivos de la igualdad de oportunidades en el acceso a la educación superior. Este incremento ha contribuido a la diversidad de la población, con un aumento creciente de estudiantes más adultos.

A través del análisis de las respuestas de los participantes a los instrumentos de medida utilizados en un estudio de seguimiento, se obtuvieron resultados que corroboran las diferencias de desarrollo de la fase de la carrera donde se encuentran las personas que inician el curso y los que ya lo están completando. Dado que la capacidad de adaptación personal, como rasgo transversal, es cada vez más importante para los estudiantes en la educación superior y para los trabajadores en el mundo laboral actual, se consideró pertinente para analizar los resultados de este estudio siguiendo el enfoque constructivista para la carrera recomendado por Mark Savickas. También se pretende reflexionar acerca de la importancia de la investigación sobre la intervención en el asesoramiento y gestión de la carrera en los adultos jóvenes.

Palabras clave: asesoramiento, adaptabilidad, constructivismo, desarrollo personal, educación superior.

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, the higher education setting is a portrayal of the characteristics and increasing heterogeneity of its population. This tendency has become particularly noticeable in the Portuguese context, through the opportunity given to adults over the age of 23, from a broad range of educational backgrounds, to gain access to higher education. From a lifelong learning perspective, one of the main goals in the promotion of equal opportunities in access to higher education has been to attract new populations. By doing so, a great diversity among such individuals has been accomplished to cover a wider scope of adults.

By analysing participants' answers to the measurement instruments used in the follow-up study, the findings corroborate developmental differences in relation to the career point at which those starting out on their course and those nearing its end find themselves. Given that personal adaptability, as a cross feature, is increasingly relevant for both higher education students and workers in the current labour market, we set out to analyse the conclusions of this study in light of the constructivist career approach put forward by Mark Savickas. It is also our aim to reflect on the importance of research for intervention in young adult career counselling and management.

Key words: counselling, adaptability, constructivism, personal development, higher education

Introduction

This reflection is based on a new look at an empirical study developed under the theme of Counselling Psychology and Career Development, with students in their first years of higher education at that particular point in time (Lima, 1998).

Three years after this research was carried out, a follow-up study was developed with a view to examining the same variables as the initial research study with just a sub-sample of Psychology students, in which different types of needs and doubts experienced by young adults at two different points were brought to light: at the onset of their course (adapting to a new educational system) and towards the end of their studies.

Whereas guidance and career conceptions only initially conveyed concern for youths progressing from school to the labour market, nowadays concerns are more likely to focus on a broad set of populations in which adults are included. Thus, a life course is constructed through involvement in social roles, but detached from the web of personal roles that are part of a life pattern. The key-role is work, by means of which they develop by expressing professional interests, vocational talent and work values (Savickas, 1997). Change is a fact of life, not only in terms of performing a professional activity, but also from a personal life perspective, for which adaptation to demands required of changing tasks is inevitable whether at school, work or in personal lives. Nevertheless, some people seem to handle change better than others (Mumford, Baughman, Threlfall, Uhlman & Costanza, 1993).

The heterogeneity of problems more frequently attributed to the "adult" population are very common among the higher education population to which counsellors will increasingly have to offer support. In Portugal, this slant towards a progressive diversification of the higher education population has seen an

increase since the creation of Decree-Law 64/2006*. This legislation established a regulation, more commonly known as *Maiores de 23 anos* [Over 23 year olds], to facilitate and make access and entry to higher education more flexible for those who have acquired vast professional experience or fairly developed competencies outside the formal education system but do not have the required specific qualifications.

According to Leccadi (2005), new modernity is currently producing significant changes in both the temporal (and spatial) parameters of the social world and in the ways it is experienced by individuals. These changes occur within a social context characterised by much uncertainty, acceleration and fragmentation, impacting the biography construction of youths in their way of planning and connecting with the future.

Such evolution has led to a need for a paradigm shift: from individual/environment adequacy to the adequacy of the individual to new contexts in which work and employment are developed. In this new paradigm, understanding how people develop their careers over time is not the only concern. What matters is how they construct their lives through work, while bearing in mind that a career is a reflection of their life course, thus, falling under the category of Lifelong Psychology (Duarte, 2006).

Savickas (2005) points out that society has provided individuals with a great narrative career which they use to mentally structure their own working lives, enabling them to gain fuller understanding of themselves and others. However, although it still has its use nowadays, other narratives have begun to emerge. In the author's opinion the career denotes "a subjective construction that imposes personal meaning on past memories, present experiences, and future aspirations by weaving them into a life theme that patterns the individual's work life" (Savickas, 2005, p. 43).

As a cross feature, personal adaptability has become increasingly important, not only for higher education students, but also for workers in the current dynamics of the world of work. The individual characteristics that predispose people to be more proactively adaptable are clearly beneficial since they are now required to negotiate a number of work-related changes and transitions (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008).

From a constructivist career approach, career adaptability corresponds to a "psychosocial construct that denotes an individual's readiness and resources for coping with current and imminent vocational development tasks, occupational transitions, and personal traumas", in other words, the coping processes, by means of which individuals connect with communities and construct their careers (Savickas, 2005, p. 51). These tasks are associated with each one of the five career stages which, according to Savickas, may be broadly described on the basis of a maxi-cycle covering growth, exploration, establishment, management and disengagement, enabling the individual to re-establish stability and to maintain continuity, due to changes stemming from the

* Decree-Law 64/2006, 21 March.

transition to a new stage of life. Adaptable individuals are conceptualised from this perspective as displaying *concern, control, curiosity* and *confidence*.

To clarify what defines each of these four dimensions, concern is regarded as the most important dimension and refers to future orientation. In other words, the individual feels that it is important to plan the future, developing planning competencies and taking past experiences, the present moment and the future into account. It is an attitude that encourages planning and belief in continuity (Savickas, 2005). The inclusion of anticipated events in the future makes it real and usually heightens the sense of continuity which links present behaviour to future results, as well as maximising optimism in relation to goal feasibility (Savickas, 2003).

Control corresponds to the second most important dimension and means that one feels and believes oneself to be responsible for constructing a career, even though significant others may be consulted. Attitudes based on belief and decisiveness lead individuals to commit to vocational development tasks and negotiate their occupational transitions, or rather, make personal decisions (Savickas, 2005). Proactive behaviour, such as decision-making and the postponement of reward, increase the feeling of interpersonal autonomy and of changing one's own destiny (Savickas, 2003).

Curiosity refers to an inquisitive attitude which is conducive to exploration of the environment in order to learn more about oneself and situations. It fosters acquisition of a knowledge base that may be helpful in making more suitable decisions in a given situation (Savickas, 2005). It is a feeling of curiosity geared not only towards the individual, but also towards the surrounding environment, with a view to developing ideas or convictions on how life should be lived out (Savickas, 2003).

Confidence is related to feelings or beliefs of self-efficacy in relation to one's ability to resolve a problem or successfully carry out a given action that is necessary for making and implementing suitable career choices (Savickas, 2003, 2005). Confidence stems from day to day problem-solving and, having established goals, may lead individuals to accomplish roles and aims, thus facilitating behaviour conducive to mastering vocational development tasks (Savickas, 2003).

Method

Participants

In the main study (Lima, 1998), a total of 189 students participated in the sub sample of the Psychology course, of which only 85 were part of the follow-up study (Lima & Guilherme, 2003, 2005). This sample covered these same participants (16 boys and 69 girls, aged between 21 and 41) at two different points in time: at the onset of higher education (1st and 2nd years of the course) and at the end (4th and 5th years), when there is higher involvement in the academic environment and a foreseeable transition to active life.

Instruments

The measures used in the follow-up study consisted of the Vocational Identity Scale of the Questionnaire "My Vocational Situation" (Holland, Daiger &

Power, 1980), the Career Factors Inventory Scales (Chartrand & Robbins, Morrill, & Boggs, 1990), the Career Development Inventory – College and University Form (Attitude Scales) (Thompson & Lindeman, 1982) and the Participation and Commitment Scales of the Salience Inventory (Nevill & Super, 1986). As in the main study, a Personal Information Questionnaire was also used, the data of which was not taken into consideration, given the aims set out in this article.

The questionnaire entitled My Vocational Situation is made up of three scales: Vocational Identity, Occupational Information and Barriers. The Career Factors Inventory contains two information factors: Need for Career Information and Need for Self-Knowledge. It also contains a further two emotional and personal factors designated Career Choice Anxiety and Generalized Indecisiveness. The Portuguese adaptation of the Career Development Inventory - College and University Form (Attitude Scales) includes the two attitude scales from the original version of the “College and University Form”: Career Planning and Career Exploration. The Salience Inventory measures the relative importance of five main roles (student, worker, citizen, homemaker and leisurite) on three dimensions: one behavioural (Participation) and two affective (Commitment and Values and Expectations) (Lima, 1998).

Procedure

The adopted procedure was based on the collective application of tests, which always consisted of an introduction explaining the type of collaboration required, the distribution of material (personal information questionnaire and psychological tests) in a pre-defined order, and more individualised monitoring during such applications so as to clarify doubts.

Direct contact with the same students was sought in a classroom setting in order to collect information from them three years later (*follow-up*). After explaining the aims of the new data collection, clearly identified envelopes were distributed containing the same material used in the main study, to be filled in and returned at their earliest convenience.

Discussion of Results

In light of the constructivist approach of Mark Savickas, this novel reflection on the findings of the follow-up study takes both the qualitative and quantitative results obtained in this study into account. From this perspective, adaptable individuals are conceptualised as: 1) showing *concern* for their future, 2) increasing their personal *control* over their vocational future, 3) demonstrating *curiosity* through exploration of themselves and future scenarios and 4) building on *confidence* so as to pursue their aspirations. However, these four dimensions do not always develop harmoniously, which explains the differences in individuals' readiness to make certain decisions, as well as variations in their career development patterns (Savickas, 2005).

The following figure systematises the contributions of this reflection and is followed by a more detailed analysis of each item:

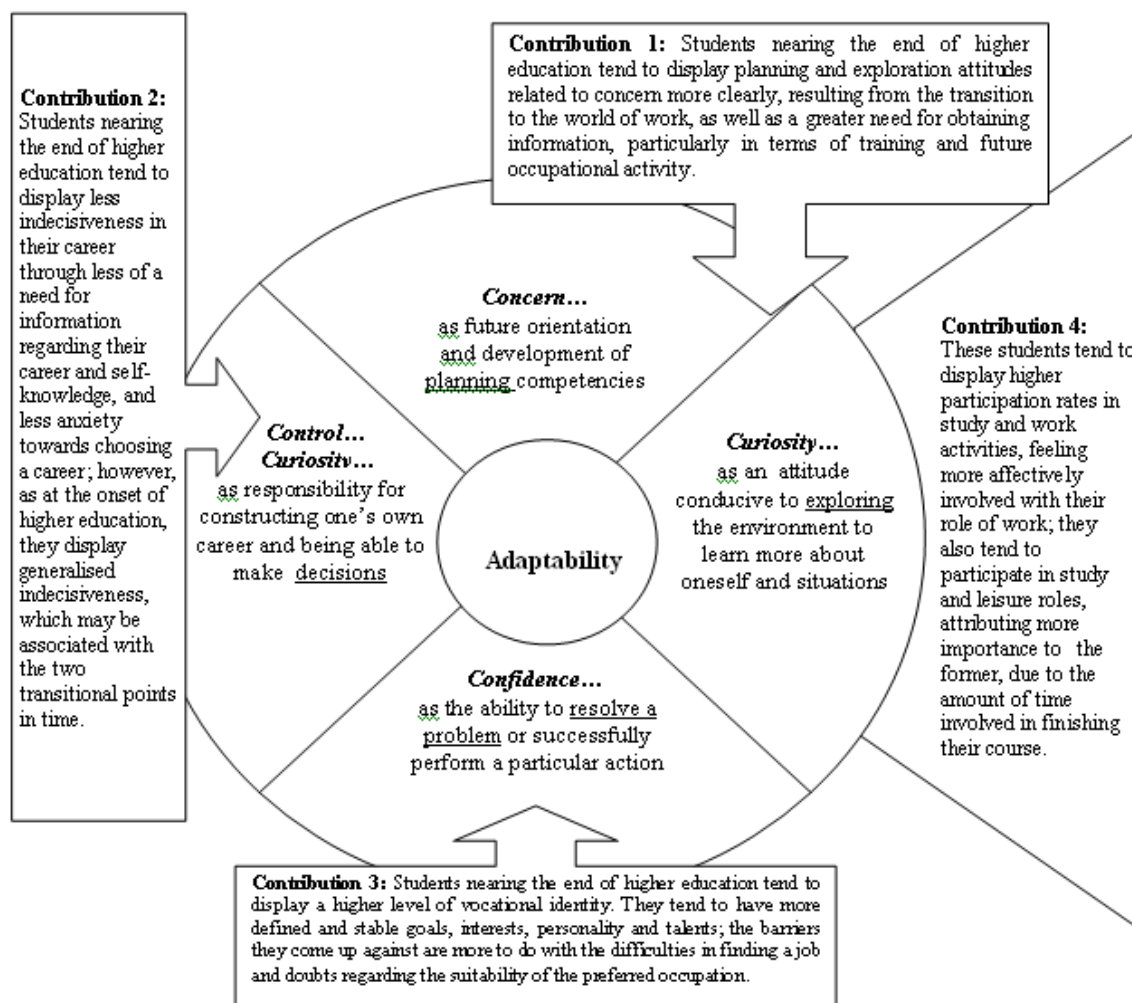


FIGURE 1.
Relation between results and adaptability dimensions

Overall, it is possible to infer from the data that students tend to have developed more behaviours, attitudes and beliefs conducive to better adaptability by the end of their higher education experience.

The most clear demonstration of the planning and exploration attitudes of students associated with concern triggered by transition to the world of work may be used as data related to the dimensions *Concern* and *Curiosity*, since they convey future orientation, the development of planning competencies and an inquisitive attitude which encourages individuals to explore their surroundings in order to learn more about themselves and situations. Similarly, a greater need for obtaining vocational information, particularly with regard to one's training and future occupational activity (in terms of suitability, characteristics, required skills and future of the occupation) is also related to these dimensions.

When stated that students tend to demonstrate higher levels of vocational identity (with more defined and stable aims, interests, personality and talents) during the last years of their course and, as regards their occupational goal choice, the barriers they come up against are more to do with difficulties in

finding employment and doubts as to the suitability of the preferred occupation, we are dealing with the dimension *Confidence*. This dimension refers to self-efficacy feelings or beliefs related to one's ability to resolve a problem or successfully carry out a particular action.

One of the results found in the Career Factors Inventory points to less of a need for information on career and self-knowledge at the end of the course, which may also be based on the assumption that more planning and exploration attitudes or concern and curiosity-related behaviours are being developed. On the other hand, the findings do not seem to express relevant differences in the Personal and Emotional Factors of the indecision measure of the career under assessment, which conveys less anxiety in career choice (similar to the point when students initiated their course) but rather generalized indecisiveness. These findings may be linked to the *Control* dimension, when one feels and believes oneself to be responsible for constructing one's own career and making decisions. Indeed, at both the initial and final stages of higher education, students are faced with transition. In other words they are closer to having to make decisions whether related to the onset of higher education by having to choose a course or at the end by insertion in active life.

In the follow-up study, salience of the roles was also assessed. At the end of the course students demonstrate higher participation rates in study and work activities, as well as a tendency to feel more affectively involved in work activities than at the beginning of their academic lives. More importance is attributed to the latter since the closer they get to the world of work, the greater their "concern" with the role of worker becomes. On the other hand, students tend to participate in study and leisure at both points in their academic lives, which may indicate the importance of carrying out different types of activities. Nevertheless, the students who are finishing their course seem to attribute more importance to the role of student, often giving up leisure activities. Such behaviour may be due to an attempt to ensure completion of all the tasks they feel obliged to conclude, given the amount of time and energy invested therein, whether through an internship, finishing their course or as a result of the importance attributed to academic success in order to enter the world of work.

Bearing in mind the importance of role conflict/articulation (Lima, 2001) in counselling and in the exploration of people's life courses, should such data be taken into consideration when adaptability is being studied or accomplished? Is it vital to take well-being into account on the basis of the time spent on performing different roles, where the amount of time spent may contribute to a proactive attitude, thus making the individual more adaptable?

Should adaptability also be assessed through the many roles of life, that is to say, through the ways time and energy are spent and invested? Could management of these different roles constitute a dimension of adaptability, namely conflict resolution?

Conclusions

The follow-up study set out to highlight different types of needs and doubts that young adults feel at two different points in time: when they initiate their course (on adapting to a new education system) and when they are at the end of their academic course. The findings of this study corroborate development differences related to the career stage at which these students find themselves at both these points of their academic course. Such differences imply differentiated attention in accordance with the educational level and also call for different types of psychological counselling intervention: support is necessary in the adaptation to a new education system, in experiences throughout the course of higher education and in preparation for a new, complex world which is conveyed in the transition to active life.

Thus, as supported by the constructivist approach, the evaluation of people's needs in order to define suitable goals and methodologies and the subsequent possibility of assessing the psychological interventions carried out, are of utmost importance. It is about intervening preventively and helping to answer the questions that emerge throughout our life courses, since each one of us is constantly undergoing change, has doubts and depends on others to grow and develop more effectively. From this perspective, the concept of adaptability, through the evaluation of its dimensions, is, indubitably, another contribution towards helping people more effectively through counselling and career management. A more adaptable individual tends to be more apt at effectively responding to the developmental tasks of the stage in life at which he/she finds him/herself and at easily overcoming the need for support habitually displayed by young adults during the course of their academic life.

Following this thread, if it is up to the counsellor to provide suitable intervention and support students by helping them to overcome the obstacles that are typical of the stage they are at, on the other hand, the fact that there has been a significant increase in the adult population of higher education calls for a need for new approaches to be implemented in career development and management. This may be accomplished through support in the planning of academic and career goals – an area in which the practice of counselling is probably less disseminated and developed in Portugal, not only due to an absence of more specialised training, but also owing to a lack of visibility on the part of psychological intervention in counselling and an individual's lifelong career.

When taking the new adult population in the current higher education system of Portugal into account, studies involving these young adults need to be developed, appealing to the contribution that may be provided by adaptability, as a concept in an even more specific academic course. It is also worth drawing attention here to the usefulness a study on employability may have, as adaptability geared towards employment issues, given the characteristics of such a population with a broad range of educational backgrounds. Developing employability means developing competencies in people, which will place them in a better position for access to employment at a suitable time and prepare them so that they can profit from such opportunities. It means monitoring their occupational transitions, improving the initial and final stages of their careers, stimulating mobility, organising training and developing

the social responsibility of companies (Rose, 2007). According to Duarte (2006), investment should be posited in people through their development and the development of their competencies so as to foster self-knowledge and self-development. It is important to support people in their self-knowledge and choice of desired lifestyle, as well as to help and be capable of more proficiently detecting the changes that occur in the environment and in people, themselves, without forgetting that a career is not only occupational life, but rather, covers all aspects of life (Duarte, 2004, 2006).

By reflecting on the importance of research for intervention in young adult counselling and career management, attention should also be drawn to their contribution to the actual counselling process through new ideas, techniques and strategies to emphasise the convergence of goals from a constructivist approach to counselling and those of other intervention areas in Psychology. Indeed, intervention in counselling and career management has often pointed to the need to re-formulate projects and re-define goals. This can be taken to a level beyond the development of life planning construction, imposing an increasing need for action on the part of the counsellor, both as a basis for a more “complex” support relation, and to complement support already activated in a previous context.

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