

Life cycle and psycho-social characteristics of unemployed adults

Tomas Izquierdo Rus¹

Actualización por temas

SUMMARY

This article offers a contextualization of adult unemployment considered from the psychology of life cycle. Evolutionary development is understood as a process that occurs during all periods of life cycle where consistency and change happen in a person's life. Adult development is marked by events such as new family roles, disease, unemployment, and retirement. Placing adults within a certain period of the life cycle theory implies that the corresponding social roles and norms are attributed to this level of the development process. Unemployment is studied from a psycho-social perspective with a special interest in aspects such as work in adulthood, the transition between work and unemployment, and the vulnerability of adults over 45 years old. Most of the development researchers that study adult age identify a series of changes in maturity. However, nowadays, only some believe that these changes usually produce a crisis in maturity. Other studies, on the contrary, reveal that there is a high degree of variability when comparing the development process of different people from the same age group and a great continuity in the development of each individual.

To refer to life cycle psychology implies to propose a wider perspective than the one usually considered by Developmental Psychology. Evolutionary Psychology refers to the entire course of human life and its main interest is focused on the description, explanation and modification of the internal change of behavior and its relation with the inter-individual differences throughout the life cycle. From what was exposed above, the extremely social character of adulthood, or rather, the most relevant aspects and features related to adult development can be easily inferred. However, there is another set of authors who contribute to a series of diverse ideas and interests from a psycho-social perspective. These adulthood events evolve depending less on time than the previous stages and are more conditioned by the diverse experiences of the individual. Adulthood, unlike what happens in other stages of development, is strongly marked by social events, changes in role structure and new demands derived from important social tasks. Many authors have considered that the three most important roles that identify adulthood are those that have to do with family, work and community. Within the work environment, adults face the task of establishing a work identity. Mid-life is also the moment when there may be events linked to nil productivity, as in the case of unemployment and retirement. It is of great importance to consider that the psychosocial effects derived from unemployment must be heavily linked to the work environment.

This study highlights the fundamental role played by age in the significance of work. Between unemployment and employment, with certain conditions (schedule, compensation, security...) there is a wide range of situations. One of the most common is included in the so-called "submerged economy". Therefore, age becomes one of the variables that modulate the effects of unemployment. People over 45 present the most evident characteristics which define the group. The studies that analyze the effects of adult unemployment show that the consequences become more noticeable in this age group. Many research results have shown that the negative effects derived from unemployment are especially important for the middle aged group where it indicates more remarkably the derived consequences of the deprivation of rank and privileges. Finally, the research results suggest the use of specific career guidance methods in order to offer solutions and alternatives to the unemployed, especially those with disadvantages in obtaining a job.

Key words: Unemployment, adult age, life cycle, social psychology, career guidance.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo ofrece una contextualización del desempleo en los adultos desde la psicología del ciclo vital. El desarrollo evolutivo se entiende como un proceso que acontece durante todos los periodos vitales donde la constancia y el cambio se van sucediendo en la vida de las personas. El desarrollo en la edad adulta se ve marcado por acontecimientos como nuevos roles, jubilación, enfermedades crónicas y desempleo.

Situar a los adultos en la teoría del ciclo vital supone la asunción de una serie de roles sociales y normas adscritas a este periodo del desarrollo evolutivo. Se estudia el desempleo desde una perspectiva psicosocial, con un interés preferente en aspectos como el trabajo en la vida adulta, la transición trabajo-desempleo y los mayores de 45 años como uno de los colectivos con mayor vulnerabilidad. La mayoría de los investigadores o estudiosos del desarrollo que estudian la edad adulta identifican una serie de cambios en la madurez. Sin embargo, hoy en día, sólo algunos creen que esos cambios suelen producir una crisis en la madurez. Otros estudios, en cambio, revelan que se da un alto grado de variabilidad al comparar los procesos de desarrollo de diferentes personas de la misma edad y una gran continuidad en el desarrollo de cada individuo.

¹ Department of Methods of Research, University of Murcia, Spain.

Correspondence: Tomas Izquierdo Rus. Department of Methods of Research, University of Murcia, Spain. Campus Universitario de Espinardo, 30100, Murcia, Spain. Tel: 34 868884553, Fax: 34 868888202. E-mail: tomasizq@um.es

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Referirnos a una psicología evolutiva del ciclo vital supone postular una perspectiva más amplia que la habitualmente considerada por la llamada psicología del desarrollo. La psicología evolutiva se refiere a todo el transcurso de la vida humana cuyo interés se centra en la descripción, explicación y modificación del cambio intraindividual de la conducta y las diferencias interindividuales en dicho cambio a través del ciclo vital. De lo expuesto hasta ahora se puede deducir fácilmente el carácter eminentemente social de la adultez o, mejor dicho, de sus acontecimientos y quehaceres más significativos, vinculados al desarrollo adulto, pero hay otro conjunto de autores que aportan una serie de ideas de diverso alcance e interés desde una perspectiva psicosocial. Estos acontecimientos de la vida adulta siguen una evolución menos dependiente del paso del tiempo que los de etapas anteriores y están más condicionados por las diversas experiencias de la persona. La vida adulta, al contrario de lo que ocurre en otras etapas del desarrollo, está fuertemente marcada por acontecimientos sociales, cambios en la estructura de los roles y nuevas demandas derivadas de la asunción de importantes tareas sociales. Diversos autores han considerado que los tres roles más importantes que identifican la vida de adulto son los que atañen a su vida familiar, profesional y comunitaria. En el ámbito laboral, el adulto se enfrenta a la tarea de establecer una identidad laboral adulta. En la mitad de la vida es, también, el momento donde pueden sucederse acontecimientos ligados a la no productividad, como es el caso del desempleo y la jubilación. Es de gran importancia considerar que los efectos psicosociales derivados del desempleo han de estar estrecha-

mente ligados al mundo del trabajo. Este estudio pone de relieve el papel fundamental que cumple la edad en el significado del trabajo. Entre el desempleo y el empleo con ciertas condiciones (horarias, retributivas, de seguridad...) existe un abanico amplio de situaciones. Una de las más comunes es la inclusión en la denominada "economía sumergida". La edad se convierte, por tanto, en una de las variables que modula los efectos de la situación de desempleo. Se presentan las características más notorias que definen al colectivo de mayores de 45 años. Los estudios que analizan los efectos del desempleo en los adultos muestran que las consecuencias se hacen más notables en este grupo de edad. Los resultados de diversas investigaciones han mostrado que los efectos negativos derivados del desempleo son especialmente importantes para el grupo de edades medias, siendo este grupo donde se manifiestan más notablemente las consecuencias derivadas de la pérdida de empleo.

Por último, los resultados de la investigación aconsejan la utilización de metodologías específicas desde la orientación profesional, para ofrecer soluciones y alternativas al desempleo, especialmente en los colectivos más desfavorecidos. Estas metodologías pueden convertirse en herramientas eficaces para plantear nuevos objetivos y contenidos para la orientación profesional que, a pesar de la complejidad del mundo laboral, es todavía un campo relativamente reciente.

Palabras clave: Desempleo, edad adulta, ciclo vital, psicología social, orientación profesional.

INTRODUCTION

From the life cycle theory perspective, evolutionary development is understood as a process that occurs during all life stages where both continuity and change take place in a person's life. The succession in development from one period to another is as small as passing from one age group to another, one status to another, one occupation to another...

Nevertheless, the change process presents different characteristics depending on age; the differing characteristics could be due to common causes as well. Adult development is marked by events such as new family roles, disease, unemployment, and retirement. Adulthood events follow a progression less dependent on the passage of time than previous stages and are extremely contingent upon each individual's personal experiences. As Nunes¹ states, maturity acquired during development is essential for the construction of a satisfactory life course.

Placing adults within a certain period of the life cycle theory implies that the corresponding social roles and norms are attributed to this level of the development process. These factors will help us better understand certain situations like the reaction that occurs when a person becomes unemployed (Kail and Cavanaugh).²

Research into the differences associated with age and psychological changes experienced by the subjects when unemployed has been scarce. Therefore, the research has been conducted with other stages of development.

LIFE CYCLE: ADULT DEVELOPMENT

The life cycle concept suggests the existence of an underlying nature in the course of life, from birth to old age. Baltes and Graf³ propose that development is a process throughout life in which each phase is not only the result of a certain age but also of the precursor conditions of life cycle.

Most development researchers that study adult age identify a series of changes in maturity. However, nowadays, only some believe that these changes usually produce a crisis in maturity. Other studies reveal that it occurs with a higher degree of variability when comparing the development process of different people within the same age group and a great continuity in the development of each individual. Stassen and Thompson⁴ consider adulthood to be a time of crisis that coincides with a large number of worrisome personal changes.

When we refer to Life Cycle Psychology, we assume to propose a wider perspective than the usually considered by Development Psychology. Evolutionary Psychology refers to the entire course of human life whose interest concentrates on the description, explanation and modification of the internal behavior and the internal differences throughout the life cycle (Baltes, Reese and Nesselrode).⁵

Baltes, Staudinger and Linderberger,⁶ consider that, currently, two important contributions to Evolutionary Psychology are converging. On the one hand, Evolutionary

Biology and the Dynamical Systems Theory emphasize the contextual aspects, probabilities, and self organization of ontogenesis; and on the other hand, the Cultural Psychology and the Sociology of the vital course that concentrate on the connection between opportunities offered by the socio-cultural contexts of human beings and the fundamental qualities of their psychological processes.

One of the most interesting contributions of Life Cycle Evolutionary Psychology is shown by Baltes,⁷ and proposes that we can consider the SOC model (Selective Optimization and Compensation) the most used model dealing with the development and intervention throughout life cycle. According to this model there are three fundamental processes of adaptation that take part: the selection, the optimization and the compensation; whose interaction produces a satisfactory condition in spite of the limitations that are imposed by age itself.

Baltes and Baltes,⁸ following the conceptual line of successful aging, proposed a model that helps to explain how individuals maintain important competencies despite losses related to age. This adulthood development model has generated a lot of empirical research (Abraham and Hansson,⁹ Baltes and Dickson,¹⁰ Baltes and Carstensen,¹¹ Burnett-Wolfe and Godbey,¹² Wiese, Freund and Baltes).¹³ The development process implies that gains and losses occur during the life cycle. Regarding to this model, Freund¹⁴ considers that the selective optimization by compensation is key to successfully understanding aging.

The most interesting thing about this model is that it is applicable in other specific areas of Psychology. Some researchers have demonstrated that the SOC model can be applied to the sphere of professional conduct successfully (Wiese, Freund and Baltes).¹⁵

ADULTHOOD SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

As stated in the previous point, the extremely social character of adulthood, or rather, the most relevant aspects and features related to adult development can be easily inferred. However, there is another set of authors who contribute to a series of diverse ideas and interests from a psycho-social perspective. Hagestead¹⁶ affirms that the life course or vital trajectory is based on a set of roles and statuses that the individual takes on throughout life, like the series of important events that form the life cycle.

These adulthood events follow an evolution less dependent on time than the previous stages and are more conditioned by the diverse experiences of the individual. According to Martin and Kliegel,¹⁷ change and stability coincide in people's lives, since changes in personal competencies take place at different speeds and their interaction produces certain stability.

Given the shortage of studies over the changes that adults have to face during different life cycle stages, it is

evident, as Clemente states,¹⁸ that "the study and the characterization of the evident mental, emotional and attitudinal differentiation that occurs throughout the adult life has a projection on the human psychological development and forms a base for the suitable preventive intervention or the improvement of the development on the adult".

The phases described by Ericsson¹⁹ play a fundamental role in the sequence of events from one stage to another in life cycle, whereas the positive resolution of each stage is vitally important to be able to access the following stages.

According to the phase perspective of Erikson, Levinson²⁰ did a research to determine what he named "the structure of life" as the example that underlines or designs the life of a subject in a determined moment. There are phases of human development relatively stable in which the structures and transition phases are created. Diverse studies manifest that in these phases there are certain "regularities" in behavior patterns derived from the norms taken by each age group.

From this standpoint, Blanco²¹ assumes the hypothesis that these social roles, demands and requirements are connected to a determined age status, the perspective norms of each age group, and modifications and changes in the social-historical aspect, which have such an influence, sometimes decisively, in the personality of such subjects. These conceptual norms about development, or what is expected to occur eventually with the "majority of the people", probably make it work as a frame of reference by which people evaluate their personal evolutionary trajectory.

Authors like Bueno, Vega and Buz,²² affirm that these norms or social normative structures determine the socialization of people. The following are underlined as age norm functions: connect the individual to the social structure; justify marginalization and exclusions relating to specific chronological ages; prescribe specific roles for the individual; serve as a reference point to assess the acceptance of the person in the family, work and community; and finally, by proposing goals to reach throughout life.

In these functions, culture is crucial in how a person develops. Izquierdo and Alonso²³ state that the idiosyncratic characteristics of each culture, typical for each country, influence the development of an individual's particular behavior, determined by his own personality structure.

Bruner²⁴ proposes three reasons when it comes to explaining the importance of culture in human development: in the first place, human psychology cannot be constructed based solely and exclusively on the individual; secondly, Psychology, when it is immersed in a culture, must be organized according to the processes of construction and utilizing the significance that connects human development with culture; and finally, by showing the importance of what he denominated the popular psychology (beliefs, ideas, concepts that exist in society).

WORK IN ADULT DEVELOPMENT

Adulthood, unlike what happens in other stages of development, is strongly marked by social events, changes in role structure and new demands derived from important social tasks. Many authors have considered that the three most important roles that identify adulthood are those that have to do with family, work and community. In this part, we took a special interest, without overlooking the others, in finding the significance of work on adult development like "a complex social role, a group of conducts, abilities, and attitudes that society expects from that person who possesses that role" (Havighurst, 1982).²⁵

Nowadays, the value attached to work not only depends on changes in the labor market, caused mainly by the globalization of economy and technological revolution, but also depends on the vital space in which each social work group inhabits (Filippi and Diamant).²⁶

In the work environment, the adult faces the duty of establishing an adult work identity. Agullo²⁷ emphasizes the importance that work has on forming the identity of an individual, since it is the link between individual and society, and between the personal objectives and social goals.

Blanch²⁸ also considers work a survival mechanism. Work is the human effort devoted to exercising a series of instrumental activities oriented to obtaining the resources necessary for the individual and collective survival. Alvaro and Garrido²⁹ identify physiological answers to life experiences such as work. For these authors, not only is work the single way whose people have to obtain the economical resources that may guarantee its subsistence, but also allows for other needs to be satisfied enhancing a mundane life, increase the framework of interpersonal relationships, define the status and personal identity, maintain and sustain the development of an activity.

Jahoda³⁰ points out that work is the means to obtaining experience that has a sense of obligation for the majority of people that are employed: the imposition of a temporal structure, the expansion of social experiences towards areas where relationships are not based on emotions as in family life, participation in goals and collective efforts, the assignment of a status and of an identity in work and the necessity of doing a regular activity.

Work, additional to being a trigger of economic means, transforms into a mechanism for the establishment of interpersonal social relationships, a means of civic participation, a source of subjective well-being, a reference point for secondary socialization and an articulation point between public and private life, as well as between individual and groups (Blanch).³¹

From a psychosocial point of view, authors like Bueno, Vega and Buz,²² consider that individuals make throughout the life cycle a series of decisions regarding work. Truly enough, people go through their childhood, adolescence,

and part of their youth preparing for productive activity during adulthood. Towards mid-life, you enter the climax of the occupational cycle, or it may as well be considered the beginning of a new vocation. On the peak of the occupational cycle, there is more influence. One makes the most money and obtains more social respect than in any other period of the professional career. Mid-life may also coincide with the moment in which some people experiment a re-evaluation of themselves, with the purpose of a mid-life crisis, which may be at the origin of a new vocation.

Cristino³² adds that mid-life is also the moment where there may be events linked to nil productivity, as in the case of unemployment and retirement. In this phase of the occupational cycle, people link, at least by antagonism, the problem of unemployment when they still consider themselves fully capable of doing their work or profession.

WORK AND UNEMPLOYMENT

It is of great importance to consider that the psychosocial effects derived from unemployment must be heavily linked to the work world because, as it is pointed out by Rodriguez,³³ the influence of work is manifested in discovering the identity of a person, in the status that a person takes in society, in the levels of income, and in the psychological satisfaction.

Work has traditionally been considered the strongest link between an individual and reality. The loss of this bond, not being able to play a role that one has been preparing for or the abrupt involuntary ending, leaves the individual in a situation more than compromising. Then, work produces certain benefits which unemployed people do not have.

Furthermore, work helps forming self-concept by giving meaning like Rus³⁴ points out, the image that others have of us or the image we hope to portray as the person we seek to be like. Also, this takes up a large part of an individual's life cycle and it includes a sequence of related experiences (practices, learning period, voluntary work, part-time jobs, work at home, unemployment).

In a study conducted with adults, Ruiz³⁵ deduces that, in this life cycle period, one gives a relatively superior value to non-instrumental work phases versus the instrumental ones and concludes that it is not possible to sustain the thesis of one "true nature" of workers' motivation, while intrinsic or extrinsic and inherent of human nature, and instead it focuses on the dynamic aspect, which is why people learn from their experiences in their biographical situation and change their preferences accordingly.

This study highlights the fundamental role played by age in the significance of work. In the study of Izquierdo³⁶ it was analyzed whether age affected the probabilities of finding a job. For the study, he researched the attitudes towards work of unemployed older than 45 years in labor insertion programs directed towards groups with special difficulties.

It states that an ample number of unemployed people see their altered attitudes towards work as a result of the unemployment situation. Besides age, there are other variables like gender, educational level, and job status that are not only capable of giving meaning to work, but can also create a strong bond between the meaning and the absence of it at the same time.

Being without work places the unemployed in a situation which creates a double bond: the first is subjective, by which the person knows what he/she lacks and puts more or less the necessary means to get out of this situation, and the other bond is also subjective, by which society marks the subject when he/she does not fulfill his/her obligations of productivity that the systems imposes upon him/her (Escobar).³⁷

Blanco²⁰ remarks that the lack of work comes accompanied with the absence of a capital role in adulthood, a lack of adaptation and response to certain demands and social expectations, the fulfillment of a basic age norm. All of these come with the following repercussions about identity, self-esteem, and personality of the subjects.

There are various negative consequences that may generate the unemployment situation such as the worsening or impoverishment of work conditions, the acceptance of lower salaries, less claim of benefits, and less political movement, due to the fear of losing one's job (Alvaro).³⁸ Sometimes, it can also occur that the person assumes the situation of unemployment as an opportunity to reorganize his/her life, not only to change work, but also to re-orientate his own career (Vega and Bueno).³⁹

Carmona⁴⁰ considers that the interest on the repercussion on people of the way they see themselves has allowed for the execution of a large quantity of research. The subject is of great relevance if we take into consideration the psychosocial effects they have on people when becoming unemployed.

Various studies, comparing middle-aged employed-unemployed individuals, have shown evidence of differences in variables such as self-esteem, job commitment, hostility, causal attributions, locus of control, mental health, and physical health. In these comparisons it is clearly shown that unemployed adults show more physical symptoms, lower self-esteem, worsening of mental health, greater level of hostility, greater orientation towards locus of external control, and explain the situation of unemployment alluding to social causes in greater measure than those employed (Garcia).⁴¹

Between unemployment and employment, with certain conditions (schedule, compensation, security), there is a wide range of situations. One of the most common is included in the so-called "submerged economy". Martinez⁴² differentiates between the formal and informal sector of the economy, the way workers with a fixed salary and a steady job would be part of the formal sector, while the rest would be situated in the informal sector, in the traditional urban sector, or in the "reserve of partially employed and unemployed".

CONCLUSIONS

On the contrary to what occurs in other development stages, adulthood is strongly marked by social events, one of which is unemployment. The absence of a job throughout the life cycle is so concrete to development that in many occasions it is assumed that unemployment not only gives a capital role in adulthood but also unchains important psychological disorder effects. This article offers a contextualization of unemployment in the adults from the life cycle psychology perspective.

Age becomes one of the variables that modulate the effects of unemployment. The results of many investigations have shown that the negative effects derived from unemployment are especially important for the middle aged group. This particular group manifests attitudes and social identity derived from the consequences in loss of employment.

It is of great importance to consider that the effects derived from unemployment acquire a psychosocial dimension, because it is produced in a determined social context. Some aspects are: work in adulthood, the transition between work and unemployment, and adults over 45 years old, as one of the groups shown with greater vulnerability. It is especially difficult for people over 45 years old to find a job due to technological and organizational advances. This age group is defined by a series of characteristics, some of which threatens long-term unemployment.

The studies that analyze unemployment effects in adults show that the consequences are most notable in this age group. They present a situation of personal weakening that is necessary to deal with, according to Piqueras and Rodriguez,⁴³ with specific strategies within the professional direction.

Alonzo⁴⁴ points out a series of strategies for professionals to take actions with unemployed people:

- To endeavour emotional support.
- To increase self guided behavior.
- To improve self esteem.
- To regain the sense of self-efficacy.
- To increase the level of professional and labor competence.
- To facilitate the integration of the person to supportive social networks.
- To understand and conceive capacity as a possible situation, outside the formal paid employment system.

These strategies can become effective tools to offer solutions and alternatives to the problem of unemployment, proposing new objectives and contents for the professional direction that, in spite of the complexity of the labor world, is still a relatively recent field.

The University should not be oblivious to this challenge, since it is an institution that makes use of research as a privileged method for studies (either quantitative or qualitative), where the influence of diverse elements of the life span in unemployment of middle aged people is analyzed with more precision.

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