

DIVERSITY AND CAREER CONSTRUCTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE USE OF THE REPERTORY GRID

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The goal of this study is to analyse the modes of career construction of college students. The constructivist technique "Repertory Grid" (Kelly, 1955) is used to assess how the student's established relations between career constructs, identity features and relevant models for the construction of career identity (GRC, Silva & Taveira, 2005). In this paper results of the Career Repertory Grid are presented, based on personal construct correspondence analysis (Feixas & Cornejo, 2002), for the total sample and for two individuals, a college woman and a college man. Implications of this study for practice and future research are discussed.

The data presented in this study are based on a wider study, with purpose is to help to understand how women and men construct their career trajectories in college, and by therefore, to identify necessary conditions and criteria to guarantee college career interventions' effectiveness and quality.

Method

Participants

Participants were 118 students from University of Minho (52,5% women and 47,5% men; Mages= 23,38; SD= 4,028), who attended, for the first time, the last year of their graduation, in the year of 2005-2006.

Measures

Career Repertory Grid (GRC: Silva & Taveira, 2005): Measures for this study were derived from Kelly's (1955/1991) RepGrid, as analyzed by the computer program GRIDCOR (Feixas & Cornejo, 2002). The Career Repertory Grid is a 16x15 original grid, in which participants rate interpersonal and self elements along a common set of 15 bipolar constructs using a 7-point Likert scale (e.g., competent vs. incompetent). This provided a matrix of ratings for each participant, with columns representing important people in his or her interpersonal world and rows representing career construct dimensions. The interpersonal elements were elicited and constructs were provided. The 15 constructs were theory drawn, based on a career development literature review, and focused on causes of sex discrepancies in career development (see the fig.1).

Measures derived from the RepGrid for use in this study included: Percentage of variance explained by the first factor (PVFF); Intensity; RepGrid Cognitive Complexity Profiles; Polarization; Uncertainty; Self-ideal differentiation (self-ideal); Self-others differentiation or perceived self-isolation (self-others); Others-ideal differentiation (others-ideal); RepGrid self-construction profiles.

These measures indicate the cognitive structure of career construction, concerning the differentiation/integration and flexibility/rigidity of the career construct system. It also indicates the relation between the way the students construct their self, the ideal self and the others.

| | 1 Very much so | 2 Quite a lot of | 3 A little | 4 Middle point | 5 A little | 6 Quite a lot of | 7 Very much so | Self | Mother | Father | Brother/Sister | Significative person | Partner | Professor | Women positive career model | Men positive career model | Women negative career model | Men negative career model | Self before university | Self in 6 months | Self in 5 years | Self in 10 years | Ideal Self |
|--|----------------|------------------|------------|----------------|------------|------------------|----------------|------|--------|--------|----------------|----------------------|---------|-----------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------|
| 1. Career as first objective of life | | | | | | | | 4 | 7 | 7 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 7 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| 2. Determined to spend time and energy with career | | | | | | | | 1 | 7 | 7 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| 3. Inclination to close relations | | | | | | | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | |
| 4. Dependent from others | | | | | | | | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 7 | 6 | 7 | |
| 5. Tendency to influence others | | | | | | | | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | |
| 6. Job/occupation typically feminine | | | | | | | | 3 | 1 | 7 | 4 | 4 | 1 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | |
| 7. Professional behaviour congruent with sex | | | | | | | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | |
| 8. Involved in search and analyse of information activities related with jobs/career opportunities | | | | | | | | 1 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 7 | 7 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | |
| 9. Competent | | | | | | | | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6 | 7 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | |
| 10. Professionally successful | | | | | | | | 2 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | |
| 11. Career outcomes determined by personnel factors | | | | | | | | 2 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6 | 7 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | |
| 12. Tendency to achieve objectives | | | | | | | | 1 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | |
| 13. Desire of career progress | | | | | | | | 1 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | |
| 14. Career as source of pleasure/well-being | | | | | | | | 2 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 | 6 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | |
| 15. Career decisions influenced by others | | | | | | | | 3 | 1 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 5 | | |

Fig. 1 - Example of a RepGrid created by a specific participant in the Study

Results

The analysis of the general indices of the Career Repertory Grid presented elsewhere (see Silva, Taveira & Fernandes, 2006), evidenced that, in cognitive terms, the profile of the global sample of students is characterized by a moderate differentiation and a low integration. These results could indicate a cognitive organization profile of some confusion/disorganization in relation to the dimensions constructed in the career life domain. The polarization measure, in the general sample, shows rigidity of the construct system. That can suggest that some dimensions of content are more significant than others, and to become rigid in a cognitive perspective can be, in this case, a mechanism of identity definition, and not only, a meaning of inflexibility. For the RepGrid self-construction measures, the students, in generality, present a positive profile relative to the way they construct their Career Self, that is, they have a global positive perception of themselves and of the others, represented by a positive correlation in each one of the three analyzed indices.

In this paper, the use of the RepGrid methodology is showed in two cases. The individual results of one college woman and one college man, randomly select in the sample of study (subject A and B) are presented. Grid A belongs to a woman and grid B belongs to man, both 22 years old and frequenting the area of studies of Education.

Table 1 presents the measures of cognitive structure of these students, who allow an assessment of the cognitive complexity of the subjects, in the career domain.

Table 1. Career Repertory Grid: Cognitive Complexity measures of Subject A and B

| | Student A | Student B |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| PVFF | 51,43 | 66,43 |
| Intensity | 0,184 | 0,310 |
| Polarization | 9,167 | 49,167 |
| Uncertainty | 11,667 | 34,167 |
| RepGrid Cognitive Complexity Profile | Fragmentation | Fragmentation |

In Table 1, we can see, that the percentage of the variance explained by the first factor (PVEFF), for the two subjects is higher than 50% (51,43% for the subject A and 66,43% for the Subject B), that indicates that these students, and specially the subject B, present a relatively undifferentiated system of construction of meaning about the career. The intensity index, that ranges between 0 and 1, has been interpreted as a measure of the degree in which a cognitive structure is integrated (the greater the intensity, the greater the integration, and vice versa). The students, present low values of intensity (0,165; 0,299), which indicate that they have a poor integration of the construct systems relatively to the career, specially the subject A. The low Differentiation and Integration seems to characterize these students who describe a profile in which the subjects have few dimensions of meaning that they use to discriminate in the career domain and this dimensions are not sufficiently organized to constitute a whole. This profile is quite infrequent in literature, although Feixas and Cornejo (1998) suggest that it could be found in cases of personality splitting (diagnosed as dissociative disorders, borderline personality disorder, split or multiple personality), as well as in normal developmental transitions, before the consolidation of a more sophisticated, multidimensional system. The polarization index reflects the percentage of extremity ratings and has been understood as a measure of flexibility or rigidity. The theory probability of extreme ratings in a 7 points scale is close to 28,57%. The subject A has 9,17% of extreme ratings which is less the average for her grid, but the subject B has 49,17% extreme ratings which is above the average for his grid (30,77%). This indicates that subject B has a more cognitive polarization or rigidity regarding career construction than the subject A. A measure that goes in the opposite direction of meaningfulness is the Uncertainty score which describes the proportion of elements that the subject has been unable to place on either poles of the construct. The subject A has 11,67 in the Uncertainty score and the subject B has 34,167. This aspect demonstrates that the subject B has more difficulty than the subject A in giving significance to the elements, using the provided career constructs. This difficulty can mean lack of knowledge or involvement of the subject, or even, confusion in knowing the way the other significant ones are relatively to career.

Table 2 presents the self-construction measures of Subject A and B.

Table 2. Career Repertory Grid: self-construction measures of Subject A and B

| | Student A | Student B |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| r (Self . Ideal) | 0,274 | 0,851 |
| r (Self . Others) | 0,635 | 0,813 |
| r (Ideal . Others) | 0,500 | 0,694 |
| RepGrid self-construction profile | Positive profile | Positive profile |

The results of the correlation analysis of Self and of Ideal Self demonstrate, in the subject A, a positive correlation but not very raised (0,27) and, in the subject B, a positive and raised correlation (0,85). According to Feixas and Cornejo (1992), the SELF-IDEAL discrepancy can be considered a measure of self-esteem. In this term, the results of subjects B, demonstrates a better self-esteem towards career than the subject A. The results gotten in the other index are similar to the first. The correlations are positive and greater for the subject B. The correlation between the SELF and OTHERS is considered by Feixas and Cornejo (1992) as a measure of perceived social isolation and the correlation between the IDEAL and OTHERS as a measure of perceived adequacy of others. In this case the students seem to construct their career experience in the same direction as the others, and that is the direction of their ideal or what is expected by the society. The self-construction profile in both students are a positive profile, that is, there is an overall positive image of the self and of the others, everything is all right in career construction, and there is an absence of conflict. Nevertheless, if this is not associated with a sense of psychological well-being, something may be wrong (oversimplification of reality towards the positive, a "naive" point of view, denial, among others).

Conclusion

The CRG presented in this study, could be one important instrument of research and intervention with college students, especially for the diagnostic and promotion of the self-knowledge and for the exploration of the gender differences in the way how the students construct their careers.

The woman and the man presented in this paper are living a similar phase in their careers but they seem to construct that experience in a different way. Although both the students demonstrate a fragmentation profile in the way they construct their careers, the man presents more rigidity and uncertainty face to career than the woman. The rigidity presented by the polarization index in the man, can suggest that some dimensions are more meaningful than others, and the rigidity is a mechanism of self protection and of identity definition. In the intervention with this student it could be important to understand the career dimensions that present more rigidity and, probably, give more contribution to the career identity definition of the student, or can be more important to origin conflict.

Regarding the self measures, both students have a positive profile, in the way as they do the construction of the career self. However, the woman shows a low career self-esteem score, relatively to the boy. In the same sense, she perceives the others as more different in relation to herself and to her ideal self than the man. She seems to identify more similarities between her actual self and the others than between the actual self and her ideal self. This indicates, on one side, that this significative others are career models who the client wants to follow in her career life, or, on the other side, the woman sees her ideal self more similar with the others than with herself. This can originate an inferiority feeling relatively to the others, who can influence her career decisions, decreasing her aspirations and career goals. The man, on the other hand, demonstrates an overall positive image of well-being with the self, the ideal and the others. However, once again, this apparent well-being could signify a tentative of oversimplification of the reality towards the positive, a "naive" point of view or a denial face the requests of the career developmental phase that he is living. This could be more salient in the man than the woman because the society expects more control in the men career management, so the fragmentation demonstrated by the cognitive index is not tolerated. Effectively, Adams-Webber (1990) and Schwartz (1992) suggest that healthy constructing involves a balance between positive and negative perceptions, rather than an elimination of negativity.

In sum, the results of this study support that it is important to consider the sex and individual differences in the vocational structure when we design career interventions. Because research in this area has traditionally neglected to study the operation of possible sex differences, the impact of these effects in this literature is largely unknown and should warrant future attention.

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