

## Social Risk Factors in Spanish Youth and their Impact on Self-Concept Construction

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This paper presents evidence from a psychosocial framework about the relationship among youth, work, and identity construction. The aims of this research were twofold. The first one was to analyze the working conditions of Spanish youth and their impact on individuals' biographies. The second one was to examine the effect of labor-related variables on construction / change of identity elements in Spanish youth. For this purpose, two research techniques were used: the Delphi method (103 experts sample from several entities and organizations closely related to our topic) and deep interviews (15 interviews with youths classified according to their relationship with the work market).

*Keywords:* youth, self-concept, risk factors, employment, work

El presente artículo aborda la relación existente entre juventud, trabajo y construcción de la identidad, desde perspectiva psicosocial. Los objetivos de la presente investigación fueron dos. En primer lugar, analizar la situación laboral de los jóvenes españoles y su impacto en la biografía de éstos. En segundo lugar, evaluar el papel de las variables laborales en la construcción / modificación de determinados aspectos de la identidad de los jóvenes españoles. Para ello se utilizaron dos técnicas de recogida de información: la técnica Delphi (muestra de 103 expertos pertenecientes a distintas entidades y organizaciones con experiencia directa con el colectivo objeto de estudio) y entrevistas en profundidad (quince entrevistas distribuidas a lo largo de tres colectivos de jóvenes categorizados en función de su relación con el mercado laboral).

*Palabras clave:* trabajo, empleo, jóvenes, autoconcepto, factores de riesgo

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There is abundant bibliography about the social contexts that determine certain risks for Spanish youth. This bibliography addresses diverse topics, among which are drug consumption, the use of video-games, socialization problems, intra-family relation problems, social maladaptation, low academic achievement, incapacity to cope with normative limits (see, among others, Megías et al., 2002; Mirón, Serrano, Godás, & Rodríguez, 1997; Oliva, Parra, & Sánchez-Queija, 2002; Rodríguez, 2002; Rodríguez, Megías, & Sánchez, 2002; Rutter, Giller, & Hagell, 1998).

However, from our viewpoint, among the above-mentioned risk factors, we underline the role that the work context plays in the construction of certain aspects of identity of youths. Specifically, we are referring to job instability. This is certainly not a new phenomenon in our societies. It has been one of the challenges in western societies for the last 60 years. However, the labor norm created after World War II in European societies (and later in the Spanish society) involved job stability as a central defining element, and so, working conditions became the main problem to be addressed. After WWII, Fordism became the typical European production model. At that historical moment, societies based their economic dynamics on mass production (Alonso, 2000a; Díaz Salazar, 2003).

Access to consumption and the creation of these mass markets were (among other factors) based on the importance of the work factor. The Ford model generated a period of strong and sustained economic growth based on abundant work force. It was a time of massive employment, in a setting in which the power of work became an essential productive factor to sustain production (as a consequence of the current technological development), and consumption (massive employment led to expanding markets because the workers had access to them: work and poverty became separate). Work, therefore, became a social process and not just an *input* for production. The workers worked in long and persistent biographic cycles, thus constituting a social norm of employment: work performed for just one employer, by means of a contractual link of indefinite duration, and full time. Summing up, the companies reproduced, through a stable working force, their own production and market stability.

However, the consequences of the transformation processes in the socio-productive area have notably increased the percentage of temporary workers in European societies in general (Cebrián & Moreno, 2001; Gallino, 2002; Miguélez, 2003), and, in particular, in Spain (Cachón, 2000; Díaz Salazar, 2003). And in our country, the youngest work force has been one of the most affected by this process of increasing instability (see Santos Ortega, 1999). Among the youth, the breach in the linear trajectories of the work market and their dissociation into multiple individualized trajectories has become much more evident (Tezanos, 2001). In this sense, we are facing a generational breach of the job market (Alonso, 2000a), which affects the most well-trained and

qualified generations (precisely, the young people), protagonists of a situation that short-circuits their access to the adult world.

As indicated by del Campo (1995), access to adult status in our society is marked by success in certain social and personal areas: the end of the educational stage, access to a job in order to achieve economic independence, and access to housing to complete family independence. Contemporary youths finish their educational stage, reaching the first milestone in their path towards adulthood. But the new work scenario (atypical with regard to the Ford employment norm) blocks their progress towards economic independence and, as a result, their progress towards family independence. All these processes directly affect the way in which Spanish youths construct their identity. To some extent, the elements that condition and affect the construction of identity are of a paradoxical nature, as a consequence of the consideration of "youth value" in our societies (Serrano, 1999): On the one hand, youth constitutes a model, an ideal, and an image directly related to the market and certain ways of consuming; on the other hand, youth constitutes a *deficit*, a pre-adult stage, which has not yet completed the transition to adult status. And, to a great extent, this paradoxical conception derives from the contradictory situation in the job market of young people who, having a privileged education and qualifications, are incapable of articulating a firm trajectory in a fragmented and flexibilized job market.

Therefore, and among other factors, young people's work context seems to be a suitable element of analysis to understand some of the psychosocial processes involved in the construction of self-concept and identity. In effect, in the decades following WWII until the 80s, one of the main anchors for the construction of identity was, precisely, the work setting. As mentioned, work was the backbone of our societies, which became salaried societies that recognized themselves and their citizens as a function of the relations established in the work setting. Thus, the processes of identity construction are notably affected by these work relations, and work is one of the main sources of relevant meanings for self-concept construction (see Jahoda, 1987).

This process is the central axis of this article, that is, the study of the possible effects of the above-mentioned transformation of the work market on the processes of identity construction, and specifically, in young people's environment. Following the terminology of Alonso (2000b), we wish to explore the possible impact of weak employment on Spanish youth's identity construction. The aims of this investigation are, therefore, the following: first, to confirm the importance of work factors as a risk factor for the youthful population of Spain. For this purpose, the Delphi technique was employed. Second, once the work factors are confirmed as social risk elements, we wished to assess their role in the construction / modification of certain aspects of young people's identity. For this purpose, we used deep interviews. Given these goals, two complementary studies were conducted.

## Method

### Study 1. Experts

The goal of this study is to confirm the importance of work factors as risk factors for the young Spanish population. The Delphi technique was used, as it allows gathering and systematizing data from experts related to the object of our study. For this purpose, we contacted a total of 103 experts, selected with two main criteria: they were working with and they had experience with the population object of study and/or were researchers in that area.

#### *Procedure*

A questionnaire<sup>1</sup> was designed in the framework of a Delphi-type survey. This questionnaire was made up of a series of open questions to obtain the maximum amount of information about the construction of the definitive questionnaire. The responses of the experts to this first questionnaire were analyzed. The result of this content analysis was a second Delphi questionnaire, this time with closed questions that was once again sent to the sample of experts. Three deep interviews with experts in the area, specialized in working with young people, were also conducted. The data of the second questionnaire completed by the experts and the information from the deep interviews was then analyzed conjointly.

#### *Results*

The following areas were identified as particularly relevant for the collective of young people up to the age of 24 years: training, work status (difficulty of finding the first job, work instability, and unemployment) and emancipation plan (housing and family dependence). Specifically, the percentages of experts who considered these variables to be relevant were as follows:

- Unemployment: 61%
- Work instability: 42%
- Access to the first job: 24%
- Family area: blocked emancipation plan (access to housing): 52%.

### Study 2. Young Workers

The goal of this second study was to assess the role of work in the construction / modification of certain aspects of young people's identity, once its relevance in the analysis of social inequality had been verified.

## *Participants*

Three segments were established of collectives of youths, who were classified as a function of the relation between their training biography and their work status.

1. The first collective was made up of youths with a low training level and who were working at the time of the study. The qualification criterion was the highest grade reached in the educational system. Thus, the first collective was made up of youths who had completed Compulsory Education. For example, in the sample were professions such as cleaning assistants, hairdressers (with a low educational level), or messengers.
2. The second collective was made up of individuals with medium to high educational level, equivalent to certain Professional Training programs (medium or higher) or university degrees. These youths were working but their jobs did not involve performing activities from the training area in which they earned their academic degree. That is, their jobs had no relation with the studies achieved, for example, licensed lawyers carrying out tasks corresponding to administrative assistants.
3. The third collective was also made up of youths with a medium to high academic level. However, in this case, the professions carried out were related to the area of studies chosen during the educational stage. For example, licensed lawyers working as lawyers' assistants or licensed sociologists integrated in technical teams in the Minors' Courts.

Participants were selected according to the criteria of age, sex, educational level and occupational level. There were 8 women and 7 men and their ages were between 22 and 30 years old. A total of 15 deep interviews were carried out: 4 in the first collective, 5 in the second, and 6 in the third.

#### *Procedure*

Data was collected in deep interviews. With this technique, the interviewee can elaborate a freely structured discourse about the issues proposed in the interview. Thus, attitudes, beliefs, judgments, and definitions of the individual's work reality and self-identity emerge during the interview. Given our interest in individuals' experience of job instability and the ways and dimensions from which Spanish youths construct and define their identity, this technique is clearly pertinent.

These interviews were semi-structured. In this sense, they were all undertaken with a common interview guideline, with some differences according to which specific and pre-defined collective the person belonged to<sup>2</sup>. The interviews were carried out by an expert in a special interview room provided by the Spanish Youth Council, and they were

<sup>1</sup> The questionnaire can be obtained upon request from the authors.

<sup>2</sup> The interview guide can be obtained upon request from the authors.

recorded for their subsequent transcription. Participants were informed about the confidential nature of the data collected. All the interviews lasted approximately 1 hour.

### *Analysis and Results*

Content analysis of the data was carried out along a series of thematic axes. In view of the goals of the work, these thematic axes were the following: training and work biography, consideration of the characteristics of the current job and work conditions, centrality of the job in the individual's life, relations between work experience and identity construction.

#### *Group 1: Job Instability as Biography*

One of the first determining factors of the influence of the work setting on identity construction made by the young people from this group involves the *naturalization* of job instability. The term naturalization of job instability refers to the attitudinal and experiential processes that led this collective to incorporate instability as a distinctive trait, which is essential and natural of their work experience:

Most [of my jobs] were unstable, yes. Because of the conditions, the salaries, the way I was treated. I don't know whether I dare talk about exploitation, but maybe...sometimes I have felt exploited. Sometimes, yes. Humiliating treatment, no, of course not, because I wouldn't stand for that. But sometimes, I have felt as if I were a slave to the job (...). I have often worked up to the very limit of my abilities. Of course, that seems like exploitation (...).

*Interviewer:* Has that happened very frequently in your work trajectory?

Frankly, yes, Because of the working schedules, the salaries, having to work beyond a person's real possibilities.

I think work has been degraded (...). Perhaps there is more work in the sense of there being more posts (jobs), but the economic and work conditions have certainly become worse. Really work, in order to work, anyone with a good attitude can work in this country, but in what conditions?—that's another question. In some places, the conditions are pretty bad. [G1 I2]

As detected in the discourses analyzed, the work biography, understood as a biography of instability begins in the educational stage. First, we wish to call attention to the perception of failure in educational terms observed in the interviewees' discourses, which ends in their early incorporation into the work setting. Early initiation in the work market defines—always from the interviewees' viewpoint—a work itinerary that leads the subjects towards jobs with a high level of instability.

The naturalization of job instability has a clear correlate in the way in which the educational system is abandoned. In

this sense, abandonment also occurs “naturally.” Natural, because this dropping out occurs in the world of daily life, in group interaction, in the socializing experience, under the influence of the social groups, taken in the broadest sense. The interviewees' immediate experience consists of becoming aware that the working world is their privileged way out in terms of a life project: poor academic results in the peer group in turn lead to frequent and rapid dropping out of the educational system to perform manual labor (masonry, building and reformations, messenger service, waiters, etc.), the perception that the educational system does not imply the possibility of moving up on the social scale, family economic pressures that press young people to look for income to pay for their leisure expenses, etc. In this context, abandoning the educational system does not imply a break with the typical behavior patterns of the person's close social environment. On the contrary, premature dropping out of the educational system is culturally and socially structured as the clearest option, already at early ages (as of 16 years of age).

Thus, the discourse of this collective clearly shows that abandoning the educational system is just another element in the socialization process. The counterpart, that is, incorporation into the working world also has this objectivizing nature. It is one more stage in the developmental process. A stage that, moreover, is clearly structured in the social environment of individuals from this group: “the normal thing” is to start working.

Second, the experience of job instability should be analyzed. These individuals' assessment of their subsequent experience in the work setting is clearly negative. This negative appraisal is expressed in a series of contents that they perceive as central to their work. Some of them make a specific construction of the experience of instability. In other words, what is job instability for youth with a low level of qualification? What are its defining elements? What is an unstable job in these youths' experience?

In Figure 1, this process is represented in an outline-synthesis that can be used as a guide for the following pages. This is a hierarchic classification of the elements that the interviewees incorporate in their discourse, more or less explicitly, to describe their work biography as a biography of job instability.

From this hierarchic viewpoint, the first element is the salary. The most interesting aspect of this has to do with the perceived functionality of salary for the individual's social life in general. Because, to appraise the salary received, these individuals do not only use the workload demanded by the employer, but instead, their appraisal of the salary is based on other reference patterns. Thus, the comparison reference expands to include aspects not directly related to the work sphere and that affect other areas of the individual's life, mainly the emancipation project<sup>3</sup>. Therefore,

<sup>3</sup> This aspect will be addressed in depth in another section.

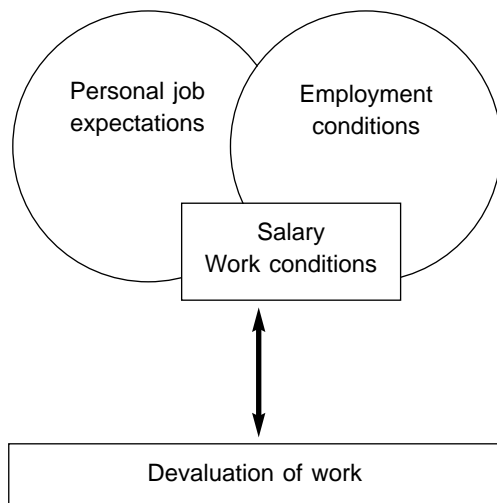


Figure 1. The experience of job instability in youths with a low level of qualification.

the salary is not just money. In contrast, these youths consider that the jobs that do not allow access to certain conditions of social wellbeing (mainly housing) can be defined as unstable jobs.

To sum up, we face a scenario in which the salary does not guarantee a way of life that the interviewees consider legitimate. As can be seen, this is a particularly relevant aspect for the youths' identity, because this situation perpetuates the youth role, independently of their chronological age. Effectively, this is a limitation of their access to the adult role and therefore, of their redefinition of their self-concept.

Along with salary, there are other criteria used by the interviewees to define a job as unstable: temporariness (which is directly related to the naturalization of instability: "all jobs are unstable") and some specific working conditions (shifts, work-schedule flexibility, and abusive hierarchic relations). This outline is precisely the one represented in Figure 1. In this figure, three large semantic areas are identified that constitute the defining axes of instability for the interviewees. Specifically, they are the areas delimited by the circles that define job instability. With a specific distinction for this collective: these are "universal" processes, perceived as characteristic of the great majority of the jobs available to this group. In the interviewees' discourse, we detected a *generalized* perception of insufficiently structured work relations (first circle of the figure) and the development of work and personal expectations that were notably limited (second circle). In this context, when another series of *specific* characteristics of a job merge together (those represented as rectangles in the figure), then one can observe the experience of job instability that is typical of this collective.

But our analysis should not stop here, because the definition of job instability analyzed in the in previous pages has effects that go beyond the sphere of the concrete, generating interesting interactions with the cultural sphere.

Because the result of all these processes manifests in the *loss of the centrality of the value of work* in this collective. As mentioned in the introduction, one of the characteristic traits of contemporary western societies is the centrality of work for individuals (see Jahoda, 1987). Work is not just a source of income, but rather its functions go beyond the merely instrumental plane. Work expresses values, insofar as it acts as a basic defining aspect of individuals' identity, of their status. Collectively, western societies can be defined as working societies, salaried societies. In fact, it is not overstated to say that western societies are (have been) societies integrated through work and, in this situation, they found a central element for their self-definition. In turn, this collective articulation through work has a clear impact on individuals' lives, as they articulate their own social and personal life through work. This conception, the idea of work as a value, characteristic of salaried societies, has been questioned by diverse processes of social change and transformation (Beck, 1999 Castel, 1997; Tezanos, 2001). The analysis of the interviews of the collective of youths with low qualification levels shows that all the *non-instrumental functions of work* (that is, the functions that have nothing to do with the mere achievement of income) *are suspended*. This is true to such an extent that losing one's job is, exclusively, an economic "crisis." This is detected in the interviews:

Work is completely on a second plane (...). Work is vital because I need income (...). The job makes me feel satisfied at the end of the month, when I get paid, really (...). Losing my job would be terrible because it is a source of income and, well, yes, it'd be important. But, well, I'd just have to find another quickly...[G1 I1].

[Asked about the value that others grant to their work]: They're not activities that could really satisfy a person, at least not in my case, and I think this is so for the immense majority. According to my mates, you know, and we talk about it [G1 I1].

And a female interviewee: [asked how losing her job would affect her]: Like I told you before, I cannot see myself in ten years working in a hairdresser's (...). If I were jobless, well, my world would not topple down because I'd look for other ways and my family is always there and I know they will help me, you know? Don't think I'd become depressed or anything like that. I'd just not be earning a salary, that's all.

Interviewer: Then, for you, work has an economic value and...

Participant: That's all. That's what I think nowadays. When I was younger, I'd comb my dolls' hair and so on, and say, I want to work, I want to work. And you'd say...you weren't thinking about the money angle but now, sincerely, I get up in the morning and sometimes yes, I feel like working, but other days I say: I'd love to stay at home (...). Because when I started, I really felt like working, I was just waiting for the next day to start working and for my vacations to be over to be working. For me, work was...I enjoyed it a lot (...). Nowadays, don't think I get up and feel like being nice to people (...) [G1 I4].

The participants' identity does not seem to be based on the job, but rather it is developed exclusively in the social contexts defined by the family and the peer group. As expressed in the interviews, work, in its institutional dimension, is incapable of constituting an articulating element of the individuals' identity.

Therefore, if work no longer has its expressive dimensions, it is not surprising that, in this collective, the discourse about work shrinks (it includes fewer dimensions), so that the elements that define a job as unstable are limited to the instrumental elements, because the remaining dimensions of work (its expressive nature of competencies, attitudes, values, etc.) are suspended. However, even in its instrumental dimension (as a source of income), work is beginning to become, paradoxically, a problematic element. Firstly, because the salaries do not retribute the work (see above). Secondly, because the income from an unstable job prevents the construction of vital projects. We are referring to obstruction of the emancipation plan. This is a particularly relevant aspect because to the extent that a job is limited merely to a retributive sphere, it becomes unstable in symbolic terms. The discourse and attitudes no longer reflect the psychosociological dimension of work, but instead they focus on the economic dimension.

### *Second Group: the Role of Overqualification*

In the first place, as in the former group, the salary is one of the most relevant aspects to define job instability. In this case, the appraisal of salary is made from two reference points. The first referent is the work itself, understood as "excessive" with regard to the salary. The second referent is the individual's training biography. Thus, the appraisal of salary is carried out as a function of the perception of a clear disconnection between the work skills acquired during a prolonged educational stage and the work this training has led to:

In all the places where I have worked (...) there has never been a quality-price relation. They didn't pay well; the salary that they pay did not compensate at all the time you spent or the work you were doing there [G2 I5].

*According to another interview:* I deserve a higher salary. I deserve much more. That is, I just don't know (...). I was looking at some tables of how much a licentiate should be earning and, well, it isn't even close. That is, I'm not a person who wants to earn, I don't know, say 500.000 pesetas, but (...). But I believe I should earn more, I don't know. Besides the fact that I've been working here for 3\_ years and they don't have to show me how to do my work.

(...) It puts me in a bad mood to think that I finished my career a long time ago, I have experience, I speak English, I have a lot of things in my favor (...). It's true, and I consider myself to be a hard worker (...). And here I am, stuck (...) and I see I'm advancing but very slowly and it isn't fair. It's not just me. I see my classmates and the same thing is happening, it's the same for everyone [G2 I4].

As can be seen, in these discourses, there is some elaboration about overqualification as a defining criterion of job instability. This trait is clearly a differentiating distinction of this collective of young people in comparison to the other two collectives of this investigation.

*[Overqualification]:* It's frustrating. Yes, in fact I asked for a transfer because of that (...). I was working as a doctor's secretary. Well, that's fine. You take down the phone messages, you send his faxes, you write letters with the structure determined by law ...But this has nothing to do with procedures, functions, inspections. I asked for a transfer to different department where I would get the same salary in spite of the fact that I had a chance to get a raise quite soon where I was...despite that, I changed jobs (...) [G2 I3].

*A last illustrative example* [in a telecommunications business, hired as a scholarship holder]: ...and besides I spoke English, and well, it was as if I was making some sense of what I had studied. And besides, I worked hard, that is, there was a lot of work. Well yes, I was exploited because I used to leave work at 8 or 9 in the evening, but well, you can't complain. It's what you studied and they even pay you, even if it's a tiny amount (...) [G2 I1].

In any case, in this group there is a persistent impression that their qualification level is functional to ascend in the work sphere. The training received, therefore, tentatively precludes them from foreseeing a future in terms of job instability. In other words, the situation for this collective is defined in terms of job instability from the small relation between training and work, but there is a fundamental distinction, because job instability is conceived as a transitory stage, *potentially* leading to jobs in which it will be possible to develop the acquired skills.

First, it's the expectation of work, not so much the job I have now but the one I can get, I don't know whether in three years, five, or seven, but all my goals, my strength, my energy, all my time are directed at earning a higher competitive examination (...). Because I have, besides studying the licentiate, which was five years, it was very difficult for me because at the same time, I was studying the career to prepare for the examination. It would make me feel that I had wasted my time at that stage and I know I made a great effort (...). I think I can still study. I don't want to have wasted the former years [G2 I2].

Training is particularly important for this collective. Training understood by the interviewees as a strategy that can potentially contribute to meeting their work expectations. It should not be forgotten that, in this collective, work expectations, the future scenario represented, is an opportunity to escape from unstable jobs. The following fragment of interview illustrates this:

*Interviewer:* Then, do you think you have a lot of ways to ascend?

*Participant:* Yes, even studying courses of, of syndicates...even studying a Master's course, I don't rule anything out.

*Interviewer:* That means you have access to training.

*Participant:* yes, yes.

*Interviewer:* How do you feel about that?

*Participant:* Very positive. Because besides, it's completely compatible with the work schedule. It's not that you work in the morning and in the afternoon, if you wish, you attend a course. No, they excuse you from going to work (...) and you dedicate your time to continue training (...).

*Interviewer:* Can the courses help you advance?

*Participant:* Maybe, if they are longer than 20 hours, because then they count, not for all the posts, but for some of the free appointment posts [G2 I4].

All these processes lead to a contradictory consideration of work understood as value. In their current working conditions, work (as a social institution) is incapable of becoming a source of identity, an element to articulate individual experience. Thus, the temporary dimension (in terms of work expectations) becomes one of the most important thematic axes. In this temporal dimension lies the possibility of becoming inserted in a work area (and at an occupational level) that can structure the individual's biography and identity. Thus, getting a job directly related to the training received would allow the person to develop the potentialities acquired, as well as to articulate the individual's social life.

Work is essential, to the point that...Let's see, it's not the most important thing in life. I work to live, I don't live to work. I do my eight hours and I try, well, I work 100% the eight hours, and if I sometimes have to stay later...I could leave, but, well (...). But I could not go home and feel OK, because I would not sleep well unless whatever I was doing was finished (...).

But a bit later: Work is on a second level, definitely. That is, I leave work and I disconnect and I can leave all that...I don't let it get to me because I try not to let it get to me, but well, maybe some day you can go with some...well, I don't

know, because you've had an argument with someone, it can happen, but no, I try to go out and disconnect and say, well, this is it (...)

*Interviewer:* What consequences would losing your job have for you?

*Participant:* It would affect me a lot. Because, look, I have a mortgage of 900 euros, plus all the expenses it involves...then, on the last day of the month, all the bills come in. And not to have any money, imagine (...). I am the typical person who has always had some savings. And nowadays to finish the month with 30 euros, it makes me nervous. Imagine if I had no work. That's why I tell you it's essential in the sense that it is necessary to live, but not the opposite. It is not essential for it to be the most important thing in my life, but work is very important [G2 I1].

Figure 2 synthesizes the main elements that define job instability for the collective of youths with a high level of qualification, but whose jobs do not correspond to the contents of their training stage. In some aspects, this analysis coincides with the content of Figure 1 (the synthesis of the experience of job instability of the youths with a low level of training). Such is the case of salary which, as we shall see, is included in the discourse about instability for all the collectives studied. But there are notable differences between Figures 1 and 2. Three are especially noteworthy: first, the importance of work and personal expectations in the second collective. As can be seen in Figure 2, this factor becomes the main defining axis of job instability in the discourse analyzed. Its impact also extends through two additional factors (availability of training and the work relation with the employer). Second, in the discourse of the second collective, overqualification emerges as an essential element to understand their appraisal of the work market. Third, and more extensively, the spaces defined by informalization do not extend to all the jobs. In fact, a job will be unstable to the extent that it fits the definition shown in Figure 2.

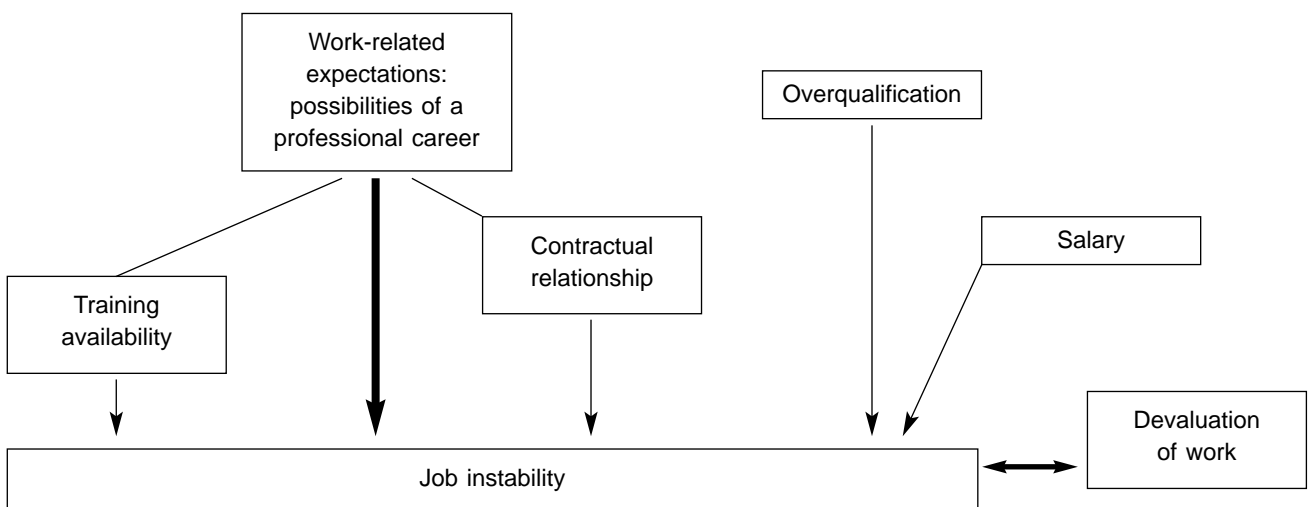


Figure 2. Experience of job instability in highly qualified youths whose jobs have no relation to their training.

*Third Group: The Privileged*

The analysis of the third group of our study showed a notably different panorama from the other two collectives. In this sense, the results of the interviews with these youths, whose job is directly related to the training received, reveals a discourse of relative satisfaction with their working environment.

First, it is revealing that the interviewees from this collective consider their jobs to be relatively privileged situations. Somehow, they perceive that the fact that their training and their jobs correspond more or less directly makes a qualitative difference with other jobs and work situations:

*Interviewer:* So work is very valuable for you...

*Participant:* Very much so (...). It's very important because it allows me to be near what I consider being near in professional terms, that is, I studied a career (...) and the work I carry out has a lot to do and it's pretty close to it [to that career: Sociology], and, in that sense, I consider myself privileged (...). My current job allows me to continue developing my research, to write my doctoral thesis, because I have free time in which to do it. Therefore, it has many values for me, not only in the economic sense, but it has a series of values [G3 I1].

This situation is a correction of one of the traits which, in the second collective, appeared as a description of an unstable job: overqualification. In effect, one of the aspects about which the youths from this collective express most satisfaction is, precisely, the feeling that their training has affected their way through the work market: their training efforts are showing functionality in work terms. Their high appraisal of this aspect can be made with regard to two referents.

1. First, their own work biography. The interviewees who, before their current job, were employed in posts like the second collective use their own biography as a referent with which to assign value to their current jobs:

I believe that my job is not unstable because I know the reality of unstable jobs. An unstable job, for instance,

was my first job: working without a contract, earning absolutely awful salaries, which are even below the minimum professional salary, working in conditions where you have no rights, in conditions of being in the power of whoever had authority over you (...). And a formal job, if you can call it that, like the one I did [subsequently], I don't know whether or not to classify it as unstable. As far as the correspondence salary-type of work, yes [G3 I6].

2. Second, with regard to their age group: In effect, the interviewees expressed the conviction that the situation is atypical, or at least, not as frequent as could be expected, in young people's work market. In this sense, one could refer to a feeling of "privilege," the development of the awareness that the training received does not always increase the probability of success in the work market.

*Participant:* Look, I tell you, of the people who were with me, there were 20 scholarship-holders, well placed, one of them because she had "pull," another had good luck, but she doesn't earn much, that is, very little, in relation to what she should be earning. And the rest of them are working as, well...I'm not lying! Another got a very good job because she was very lucky and had a very good CV (...). Not the rest of them. Everyone is in a bad way. Well, 17 people, who are working in things they dislike, they are substituting for someone who's on maternity leave, or are earning less than I am (...). I have received some really bad work offers ... [G3 I2].

Insofar as the job involves the existence of real possibilities of growing workwise, the job is not unstable. This process is reflected in Figure 3. As can be seen, in the lower part of the figure, there is a line that defines an unstable space. This does not imply that we define instability as a continuum. The figure should be understood as a mere graphic representation of the processes that, in this collective, define a work as unstable or stable.

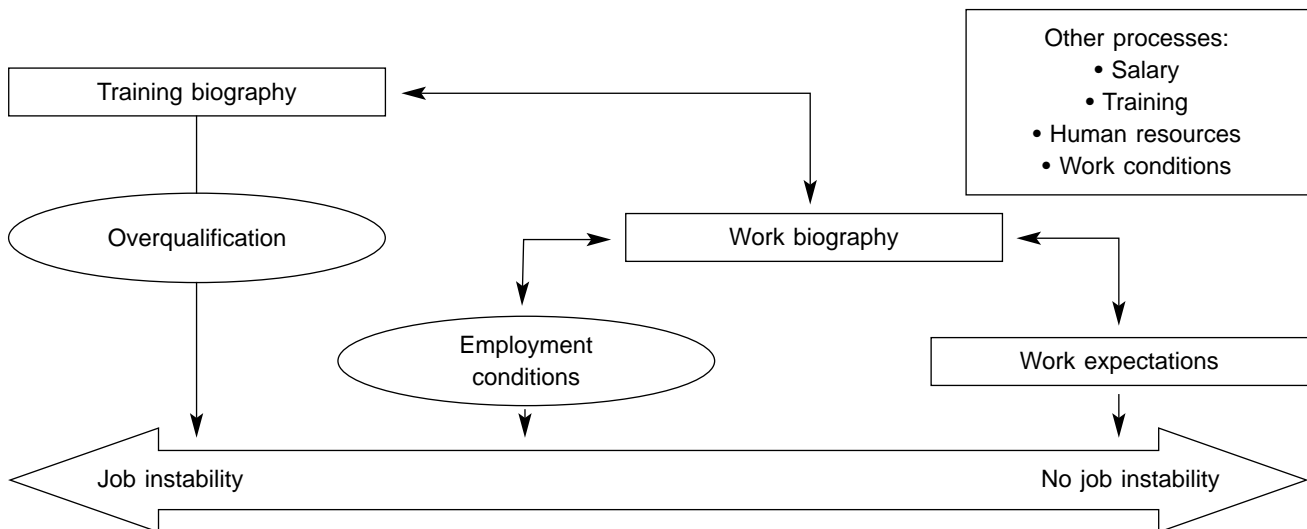


Figure 3. The experience of job instability in highly qualified youths whose work is related to their training.



Some interrelated processes are on the “instability line.” Specifically, the three processes analyzed so far: training biography, work biography, and work and personal expectations. Insofar as a job links the three criteria, we are moving away from the definition of instability. To the extent to which there is a disconnection among the different criteria, dysfunctional processes emerge that lead to defining a job as unstable. The main difference in this collective is due to the work relation (or contractual relation) established between employer and employee. However, the analysis of this aspect in this collective shows some differences with regard to the former collectives. This is because the work relation affects both the possible work expectations and the general contents of the work, so its effect is neither innocuous nor trivial.

However, let us not forget the importance of other particularly relevant factors. In Figure 3, there are three factors in the shaded square. These factors include most of those already mentioned for the rest of the collectives. We underline the importance of training availability, in its role of promoting the development of skills in the area of the current job, and its possible role in the reinforcement of work expectations.

[About the usefulness of courses in the current job]: Theoretically, very important. Later, in practicing the course, it is more or less useful. They teach you things you already know, others are new, it depends on the personal training, but, yes, yes, they are useful. Seeing how they are planned, they should be useful (...). [I take the courses] because, on the one hand, I'm just starting in this work, I think I have a lot to learn and I'm looking for a source of learning in these courses. On the other hand, I guess that for the CV it's always important for a competition to get a transfer, an internal promotion... They value the training you've received a lot [G3 14].

It is also important to remember the role of other work conditioners (schedule, flexibility, insertion in hierarchical relations, etc.) and to call attention to the salary. Here, the attitudes of the three collectives merge when indicating the disconnection between salary and work carried out. The problem of the salary again emerges clearly linked to the instrumentation of a realistic emancipation plan (mainly, related to acquiring housing). However, we point out that, in the characteristic discourse of this collective, the salary does not play such a radical role in their assessment of the job. Work is more than just a salary: it also involves the expression of the individual's identity, an activity by which individuals define themselves to themselves and to others. In this collective, work is understood not only as a productive activity, but also as a value that, to some extent, structures the biographies and individual experiences beyond its instrumental value. In other words, work persists as a central aspect (in its institutional dimension, as a value) in the life of these participants:

*Participant:* [my job] is very important. For me, my job, well, man, of course my family is more important, but I think that it is between... at a priority level of 2 or 3. Family maybe first, later my friends, leisure, and work. I wouldn't know but for me, work is very important.

[About the implications if he lost his job]: well, I like my job and it gives me satisfaction; and to lose it would mean that probably I'd have to find another kind of work that was not related to my training and so, it wouldn't give me what this job does. Personally, it is gratifying, not just because it's a source of income, but also because it allows me to be near to what I love, which is my training [G3 12].

## Conclusions

First, it is important to note that the discourse does not show relevant differences in terms of gender. Men and women emphasize similar defining dimensions and processes of job instability. We are not saying that the work variables are common for both genders. For example, we are not saying that access to the work market is egalitarian for young men and women, or that rates of activity, unemployment, temporariness, etc., are not different. What we do state is that the experience of instability, as well as its definition, has a similar nature for the men and the women in general, and it is difficult to identify relevant traits that differentiate the discourse of men and women.

In this sense, the educational variable allows us to establish differentiating distinctions in the explanation of the interaction between age and work market. Because the experience of work, as it appears in the interviews, certainly does not respond to a unique pattern, but rather it has differentiating distinctions depending on the educational/training reference group. It is clear that the discourse of the first two collectives (unqualified workers or employed in jobs with no relation to their training) is notably different from that of the third group (qualified workers whose job is related to their qualifications). In this last group, the interviewees show more involvement in their jobs as a consequence of the characteristics of the job and, mainly, as a consequence of the connection between the training received and the work carried out. For the youths of this third group, compared to the former ones, work is a central axis to understand their identity, as work experience is a constitutive element of their self-concept.

The first group is clearly at the opposite extreme, where the discourse obviously fits the process of *informalization* of work. This process causes instability to be experienced by this collective as something natural, one could almost say inevitable, which makes a quality job the exception in a reality of jobs with no future, condemned to instability. Job instability has been *naturalized*, it has become part of the world of givens; it has become installed in most of the jobs. Job instability is no longer an exception; rather it is the “natural” context in which youths feel they must try to develop their working life. We find a central variable in the experience of work in the Spanish youth: They must find the construction of their work experience in a work market perceived as informalized, unstructured. As a result, the institutional dimension of work, the constructor of the social

identity in salaried societies, where work is considered a fundamental variable in individuals' development, becomes the object of redefinition. And precisely in the discourse of these collectives (those of the highest job instability), we observe the greatest effect of the loss of the centrality of work, understood as a value in the construction of identity. Job instability, appraisal of work, and identity are interrelated realities.

In this general context, the differences related to the work experience have, in any case, some merging points. The variations seen in Figures 1, 2, and 3 take us back to a definition of job instability that is *not* based exclusively on the stability and/or temporariness of the job, understood in terms of temporary contracts versus indefinite contracts. In our second group, job instability has quite obviously incorporated the disconnection between training and employment, so that, to the extent that jobs offer a potential professional career, they have earned protagonism in the individuals' appraisal of their work. Thus, the notion of job instability exceeds, in addition to *temporariness*, the very idea of *overqualification* (García Espejo, Gutiérrez, & Ibáñez, 1999). And precisely the interaction of these dimensions is where we find a defining axis of job instability that transcends the idea of unstable *jobs* to arrive at the concept of unstable *trajectories*, which would include not only the work sphere, but also the relation between work and training: job instability has become installed in the vital itineraries as a defining aspect of the age group that was the object of our study.

Lastly, we wish to note that our results suggest the importance of future research that should analyze the impact of the processes studied herein (job instability, work as value, overqualification, etc.) in the development of the process of emancipation and transition to adult life. Such studies should include a variable closely related to the factors observed herein, that is, self-esteem as an evaluative element of self-concept.

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