

DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONAL TRAITS FOR EMPLOYMENT: METHODOLOGY FOR CHANGE WITH GROUPS OF UNEMPLOYED PEOPLE*

Juan Miguel De Pablo Urban
INEM. Dirección Provincial de Cadiz

This paper intends to show a methodological design with a systemic-constructivist approach to working with groups of unemployed people. This approach has been implemented by the INEM (National Employment Institute) through the project "Development of Personal Traits for Employment, (Desarrollo de los Aspectos Personales para la Ocupación, or DAPO). There is a description of the epistemological principles of the approach and the intervention techniques used. With regard to the latter, which may be based on individuals or groups, there is specific description of the work with the narratives of the participants and the techniques of deconstruction (blurring) and co-construction (amplification). The narratives used relate to employment, unemployment, training and work.

El presente artículo pretende mostrar un diseño metodológico con abordaje sistémico constructivista, para el trabajo con grupos de desempleados y que ha sido puesto en marcha desde el INEM a través de la acción Desarrollo de los Aspectos Personales para la Ocupación, (DAPO). Se detallan los principios epistemológicos sobre los que se sustenta la metodología empleada. Se describen las técnicas de intervención, grupales e individuales utilizadas y, mas concretamente, el trabajo con las narrativas de los sujetos así como las técnicas de deconstrucción (difuminación) y de coconstrucción (amplificación) de los relatos utilizados sobre el empleo, el desempleo, la información y el trabajo.

The launching, through the Occupational Counselling Services of the INEM, of programmes oriented to working with the unemployed has greatly assisted their integration into the labour market. Traditionally, the activity of this service has been directed towards professional counselling and information, and to accompanying the unemployed in decision-making processes, career choice and the active search for work.

The repeated observation of the motivational difficulties demonstrated by a large part of this group for making their own training and employment plan, taking responsibility for improving their possibilities of re-entering the labour market, or starting up an organised, active and constant search for employment, has led to suggestions for the need to look for new ways of increasing motivation and self-responsibility levels in work integration processes. Thus, it has become necessary to design methodologies oriented to attitude change, and

programmes that include innovative perspectives that complement the actions traditionally implemented by public administration.

At the end of 1994, through the INEM's General Sub-directorate for the Promotion of Employment (*Subdirección General de Promoción de Empleo*)², a series of productive seminars was held with the technical staff working in this field in order to update the content and methodologies involved in employment information, counselling and search activities. Within this general review and updating -in line with work on attitude change- an innovative action in the domain of attention to unemployed groups was developed. This action was called the Development of Personal Traits for Employment (*Desarrollo de los Aspectos Personales para el Empleo*, or DAPO). In its design, a series of questions were posed: what would be the optimal methodology for attitude change in the unemployed? Which format -individual or group- would be the more effective? What time period would guarantee lasting changes? What kinds of content could give support to the methodology? And what position should the technician adopt to promote the salvage of personal resources and to faci-

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* Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Juan Miguel De Pablo Urban. C/ Rosadas, 27. 11510 Puerto Real. Cadiz. Spain.

litate users' responsibility for their own work integration project?

There were certain antecedents to guide us on our way. For example, actions by the work insertion organisation GIRA (*Grupos de Incorporación y Reincorporación a la Actividad*) (Likadi, 1993), included in the EC's NOW initiative, considered motivational aspects in its design, aspects related to self-esteem and, most of all, to gender-awareness (it was a programme oriented only to women). Later actions, such as the Andalusian community government's pre-training programmes (OPEM) (Likadi, 1995), also within programmes for equality of opportunity, had included this motivational model, which is notable for its development of exercises promoting reflection, the confrontation of certain habits and decision-making. Although it is a valuable model, three problems arise: the first refers to the coexistence of different order objectives, the second to the work methodology used, and the third to the time-schedule design.

With respect to its objectives, the work was more directed to awareness of gender than to the psychosocial aspects involved in increasing the employability of the unemployed; this led to complications, since it obliged the study to deal with quite diverse aspects which are difficult to bring together. It is not that work on the psychosocial factors influencing employability were absent, but they were diffused among so many exercises focused on the female condition and the social prejudices of/toward females.

As regards the methodology used, the exercises used a cognitive confrontation approach, that is, certain habits and ideas were questioned and debated, and alternatives to certain ways of understanding women's access to employment (married women, women with children) were discussed. This work allowed the users to feel progressively more self-confident with regard to their possibilities and their desires to take on new projects. The motivational baseline rose sharply in the course of the programme, so that the final results denoted a clear change in participants' expectations, aspirations and motivations. However, it was not a methodology for attitude change. Motivation works like an engine that requires action to reaffirm it, support it, multiply it or, on the contrary, reduce it or refute it. The lack of action in the programme's design -by which we mean behaviour directed to insertion in the labour market, not limited to the experimental classroom space- produced undesirable effects. Like a balloon that, once inflated, explodes on

the very first contact with the external environment, it occurred that when these same users, whose motivational levels had increased considerably, were faced with the search for employment, all the work done collapsed. Real contact with the labour market, its difficulties, frustrations, the need to maintain their own insertion project, impeded them from sustaining an attitude of orientation to achievement and of efficient management of their active search for employment. In a very short time the motivational curve decreased to levels lower than those existing at the beginning of the programme. This brings us to the third problem: the temporal design was short (one week) and compressed, that is, they worked for five consecutive days with no space or time to confront reality, thus generating an artificial situation that fell to pieces after their first contact with the labour market.

This led us to reconsider time-schedule aspects in the design of our programme, and we opted for a type of action based on intermittent meetings, with easy tasks involving contact with the labour market reality, so that work sessions, group or individual, would allow motivation level feed-back and maintenance. Similarly, as we were dealing with a general group of unemployed people, we would avoid the complication of different order objectives (gender, etc.). Finally, methodology should be close to those intervention models most frequently used in attitude change, that is, close to clinical approaches in psychology.

At the beginning of 1995, DAPO's Technical Manual (INEM, 1995) was completed. At the same time, the *Servicios Integrados para el Empleo*, SIPE (Integrated Services for Employment) were created, to provide a formula for co-responsibility in developing actions directed at facilitating the labour market insertion of the unemployed. Local corporations, social agents and non-profit-making private entities signed the agreement in collaboration with INEM, adding to a wide network of resources that any user of employment services -and particularly of work reinsertion services- may currently use.

In the present article we will briefly describe DAPO's action (see INEM's Technical Manual for more detailed analysis), we shall point out the importance of using formulas of intervention for change coming from clinical approaches (especially systemic, constructivist and social constructionist approaches), indicate some epistemological bases for work with groups, and describe an intervention model with specific techniques which may be useful in the development of our work.

DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONAL TRAITS FOR EMPLOYMENT (DAPO)

"Long experience of working with the unemployed in counselling processes has underlined the existence of internal factors of the individual which make difficult their insertion in the labour market. Up to now, those actions affecting external factors have been emphasised, and intervention with regard to the personal aspects of those looking for work is also necessary" (INEM, 1995: 4). The above paragraph explains the necessity for a certain action -DAPO-, focusing on personal traits in order to increase the employability of the unemployed. We shall now give details of its design.

1. *"User profile: Job-seekers with special difficulties for employment insertion due to barriers, assumed or developed, demonstrating: lack of appetite to look for work, lack of self-confidence in their potential to find a job, self-restriction in decision-making and in the search for solutions to their situation of unemployment, and/or feeling unable to take responsibility for their own training and employment project"* (INEM, 1995:6) This profile is especially apparent in groups where the difficulties for accessing to the labour market are increased, as is the case of the long-term unemployed, first job seekers, groups included in equality of opportunities programmes (women, disabled people, minority or marginal groups, etc.)
2. Attention format: Basically in groups of between 10 and 15 members, with individual interviews (two included in the schedule, plus one of follow up)
3. Time-schedule: A total duration of two and a half months, with 26 hours of attention per job-seeker, in three phases:

1st) GROUP ACTIVATION PHASE, in which it is intended to facilitate group cohesion, information gathering and analysis of conceptions that participants hold about employment, work, unemployment and training.

2nd) CHECKING AND INFORMATION FEED-BACK PHASE. In this stage, participants will develop activities in the working environment and hold periodical group meetings -every two weeks approximately- with the aim of working with material derived from this task. With a total of ten hours, it will last six weeks. It includes a personal interview with the technician in charge of the group.

3rd) SUPPORT FOR AUTONOMY PHASE, whose objective is the assessment, adjustment and enhancement of alternatives arising during the programme. Total duration is four hours, over one month, with a farewell group meeting and final personal interview.

4th) FOLLOW-UP. A follow-up interview is held twelve months after the programme to check the results obtained.

4. Content: Group members' work involves several exercises: group dynamics, activities promoting interaction among participants, communication skills exercises, time organisation, goal-setting, etc. Exercises work as mere support; in fact, some are optionally described in a brief manner, since it is intended that they be used as the terrain where the intervention methodology is put into practice.

CLINICAL APPROACHES AND THEIR USE IN PSYCHOSOCIAL INTERVENTION

The goal of clinical psychology's, and particularly psychotherapy, is -regardless of the original perspective adopted- change. Change, as we refer to it, can be defined as the process of moving from conceptions of personal, relational and social reality (that is, who we are, what is happening to us and why, which are the result of our own experiences) which present certain difficulties for a full, effective and competent realisation of our life, to other, alternative conceptions, also resulting from our experience, which necessarily lead us to somehow distinct, more flexible and adaptive perceptions, allowing us a better experience of ourselves and of what is happening to us, and to a perception of potentials solutions to the problems with which we are faced.

From a psychosocial perspective, and in particular in work with the unemployed, our aim is to generate the possibility that certain attitudes, which are known to act as brakes on employability, may be modified, so as to allow an increase in the potential employability of the jobless. In general, programmes proposing intervention in attitude change tend to use methodologies close to motivational approaches, but they do not typically use the excellent potential developed by psychotherapy and its corresponding intervention techniques, which come from a range of domains and approaches.

On the other hand, psychotherapy presents a difficulty which blocks its way as a resource in the psychosocial intervention domain. People go to therapy when they

have problems. Basically every description of the work done with patients is aimed at solving a certain problem, a problem which, depending on the approach, is located into the individual, in the environment, in behaviour, in feelings, etc. But if our users do not perceive that they have any problem, our intervention collides head-on with the perception of the client group to be attended. For example, the unemployed person usually does not perceive that the situation of unemployment has to do with oneself; the "social shock-absorbers" continually repeat that he/she is a victim of the crisis, of the government, of business, etc. He/she can admit having a problem (not having a job), but rarely makes a balanced and realistic attribution of causality. It is difficult to do so, since external causal attributions free us from responsibility and, in turn, distance us from potential solutions to the situation. Fortunately, in the last few years psychotherapy has developed methodologies centred on solutions, not on problems, which allow us to plan alternative work formulas in this line (Shazer, 1985; O'Hanlon and Weiner Davis, 1988; O'Hanlon, 1992).

Thus, intervention to be made in these groups, and which pretends to facilitate a change of attitude towards flexible constructions of reality, aimed at solving difficulties in, for example, the employment domain, should have access to a methodology that uses technical resources for change, and which focuses on solutions, rather than problems.

PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS INVOLVED IN UNEMPLOYMENT

We are aware that the unemployment situation is a structural one, that is, unemployment is inseparable from the economic and production system in which we are immersed. Getting a job depends, of course, on external factors: the political and economic situation, the industrial fabric, the labour market, the production system, investment confidence, entrepreneurial factors, and so on. Simultaneously, however, there are several internal factors which can improve the possibilities of labour market insertion for the unemployed. For example, when a jobless individual is selected to follow an employment-training course over two years -for instance, in an *Escuela Taller* (workshop school)- with the aim of learning a new job, if his/her performance on the programme is good, he/she will certainly greatly enhance the possibilities of insertion, since capable/well-trained workers are always required. However, if the individual's attitude

during the course fits an attributional model, with an external locus of control, where responsibility for and the solution to the situation is "out there" (business, government, economic situation); if work does not occupy a prominent place in the individual's scheme of values; if levels of disposition are low; if coping style (effort, constancy) is deficient - then his/her performance and learning will be significantly affected.

The factors mentioned above were highlighted as the most influential psychosocial factors in the labour market insertion of unemployed people, according to a study made by the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona (UAB) and the INEM (Barcelona) during 1984 and 1989. The author, J.M. Blanch (1990) remarks: *"In other words, what is actually suggested here is that the probability that an unemployed job-seeker obtains a job depends, naturally, on the objective structure of labour market opportunities, and also on the degree to which he/she wishes to be employed, considers to be personally involved in solving the work problem, actively searches for employment, and is both convinced of his/her capacity to work and disposed to accept certain conditions required by the post in question"* (p.272).

To sum up, the psychosocial factors on which we might focus in attempting to improve the employability of job-seekers are: the centrality of work in the subject's value scheme (1), a suitably-established causal attribution of the unemployment situation (2), an energetic and consistent coping style used in the unemployment situation (3), a positive personal and professional self-concept towards work (4) and, finally, the subject's disposition with respect to labour market requirements (5). There is abundant literature referring to these factors (on which DAPO's objectives were based) and expanding upon some of them: (Alvaro Estramiana, 1992; Torregrosa, Bergere y Alvaro, 1989; Del Río, Jover y Riesco, 1990; Buendía Vidal, 1987; Garrido Fernández, 1986, 1990, 1991; Peiró y Moret, 1987).

METHODOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Some epistemological and methodological premises to aid the understanding of our perspective might be indicated. We favour the contributions of systemic approaches of a constructivist nature, especially those derived from social constructionism.

The social construction of unemployment

The construction of personal, emotional and relational identity is social in nature. According to K. Gergen (1991): *To the extent to which our acts are understandable, they are so within a meaningful system; and meaning is not the product of individual minds but of relationships*", and later *"an individual is not born, nor does he die isolated; he is born within a relationship, and is defined by and defines it at the same time. When you die, a pattern of relationships dies"*. According to the constructivist perspective, reality cannot be apprehended as such, but rather we construct it through our interactions and relationships; it is co-constructed within social systems. *"It is the process of defining who we are, in interaction with the meanings perceived by others with regard to us. It is a recursive process. We shape the world in which we are living and, hence, create our own "reality" within the context of a community of other individuals. Political, economic, social and cultural restrictions and possibilities set the limits of our narratives, and our possibility to choose is not unlimited, but occurs within certain contexts. This narrative, or sense of the self, does not only arise through discourse with others, but is our discourse with others"* (Lax, 1992). Marcelo Pakman (1995) notes that *"self-observation is only possible as an act of mutual observation, as "mutuality" (F. Steier, 1992), or "through the eyes of others" (Foerster, 1991)"*.

As Anderson and Goolishian correctly point out, the meaning and comprehension we have about what is happening to us and what is surrounding us is socially constructed in a communicative act; it is in this act that "reality" is born, *"we don't gain access to meaning or comprehension if we don't have communicative action, that is, if we don't enter into a discourse or dialogue generating meaning within the system for which the communication is relevant"* (Anderson and Goolishian, 1992).

With regard to the specific case of the unemployed person, especially when belonging to a group with difficulties of labour market insertion, the construction of personal, social and relational identity with respect to work, unemployment and employment is inevitably fed by the assumptions of the social system and its corresponding subsystems: *"In the end, the meaning of unemployment -as well as the pathological effects of this experience- do not derive so much from the intrinsic nature of the objective lack of a job as from the prevailing system of consensually accepted social meanings produced and*

reproduced in a given space and time. That is, its reality is inseparable from its meaning" (Blanch, 1990).

As Blanch (1990) also comments: *"Unemployment constitutes a personally and socially objective situation, but also an inter-subjectively and socio-culturally-constructed representation"* (p. 158). This social construction aspect of unemployment has been insufficiently considered. The way in which the social system observes, gives meaning to and evaluates the fact of being out of work has much to do with the way each subject belonging to the system will understand, give meaning to and evaluate his/her own unemployment situation. At the same time, each of us is immersed in numerous relationships and various subsystems that re-interpret the "official" reading of the phenomenon and integrate it in their construction of reality, amplifying or reducing certain aspects. It should be understood that the prevailing social system promotes an interpretation and a position with regard to the unemployment phenomenon that is passive; it needs this position among its members -for what kind of resources can the prevailing social, productive and economic system use to face a phenomenon which results from its own structure, which is inherent to it?

The subsystems included in the macrosocial system, especially the family, modulate these views by amplifying or reducing them according to their own characteristics. For example, a family may overwhelmingly amplify the "son/daughter-victim of unemployment" reading by supporting this viewpoint through an excessively protective position, thus ensuring a comfortable home environment, preventing necessary confrontations for him/her and, finally, impeding his/her daily immersion required by the labour market; in turn, the son/daughter in this family may find important reasons for not actively seeking work or not assuming the responsibility of a personal labour market insertion project.

Continuing with our example, the family will play a catalytic role by triggering diverse reactions corresponding to a partial reading of the unemployment phenomenon which would be based largely on solid convictions related to the emotional survival of the family system itself (De Pablo, 1995). We understand by emotional survival not the real maintenance of the family as a system in time and space, but of those beliefs held by its members in relation to leaving home, the loss of one of its components when a new family is formed, the parental couple's loss of power to offspring earning their own money, and the modification of roles involved in the

necessary and inevitable adaptation of a family system in evolution (De Pablo, 1994).

Alternatively, in other cases, the family system may attenuate certain socially-accepted interpretations and promote a process in favour of autonomy for its younger members. Similarly, peer groups exert an absolute influence on the construction and interpretation of meanings attributed to unemployment; these groups co-generate adaptive views, since they safeguard their members from an obvious conflict, but, as time goes by, these readings of the unemployment situation -supported and fed with new arguments daily- finally triumph over alternatives options that permit an efficient and positive search for solutions.

Language as constructor and vehicle for intervention

As a consequence of the first premise, we must now focus on the basic element in social interaction: language. It is the vehicle through which we give form to meanings, up to the point that it is language itself which finally determines what we are and how we understand one another. The use of language -the specific words with which we explain ourselves, the metaphors we use about what happens to us- constructs our experience and provides it with the quality that defines us. Narration works as a model or lens where we observe and give meaning to ourselves. Tom Andersen (1992) notes: *"I arrive at the conclusion that we not only construct our speech with metaphors, but also our thinking"*, and he adds *"Speaking to ourselves and to others is a way of defining ourselves. In this sense, the language we utter makes us who we are at the moment we use it"*.

Thus, narration is the basic element with which to work. People continuously unfold their narratives, explain what is happening to them, why it happens, the consequences deriving from it, in an exquisite and careful, continuous work of co-construction. Our opportunity is to work with these narratives, for them to facilitate options re-explaining what is happening. To open up alternative accounts generating new routes of action, which up to now had been censored in the official narration we are presenting (Maldonado, 1994).

The official narration presented by the job-seeker (for example: "I'm unable to go to an interview, I get too nervous...") fits perfectly with certain self-evaluations (incapacity, awkwardness...); it is supported by data from one's own experience ("it was the same in oral exams at school..."); it is explained by particular charac-

teristics of a personal kind ("I get very nervous.."); certain consequences are taken for granted ("The interviewer quickly notices it ..."); it is associated with certain idiosyncrasies ("My hands sweat a lot..."); and it is self-fed ("So I know I've got no chance.."). We have called this a recursive account. It is an account describing what happens, which satisfies certain requirements (it seems reasonable) and which constrains the individual in his/her observations and behaviours. If we spoke for a long time with this type of person, we might hear from him/her some accounts which show some differences or contradict the official story (for example: "I presented a model of an installation to a company and they found it interesting..."). We call these alternative accounts.

Professor Carlos Sluzki explained it as follows: the official account, in a figure-ground situation, shows as the figure, as the thing standing out, the most important thing, establishing the laws of discourse. Behind, in the background, numerous alternative accounts remain which only from time to time can stand out as the figure and acquire more importance, and only for a short time. They are experiences as real as the first ones, though not explained in the "official" context, unable to be included in the logic of discourse, in the narration of events. The work, in this case psychotherapeutic, consists in the deconstruction of the recursive accounts, that is, in making these accounts fade, begin to merge into the background, lose prominence and weight, in order to allow the emergence of alternative accounts, sometimes only slightly different, with the aim of generating new paths where solutions may appear, free from the restrictions of the official accounts. Later, these alternatives are underpinned through the co-construction of meanings (only co-construction is possible), so that they gain weight, explain events of experience and widen the subject's margins for action. A productive reading of this methodology is that made by Marcelo Pakman (1995), when he notes: *"we may understand that the advantage that some types of trimming of the network of possible narratives have for organising our life are based on the fact that it is that these aspects that are taken as the basis for decision-making: in this way, socially observable facts result, and are reaffirmed by the others' looks when they make us feel "ourselves" (what we are in terms of identities) as the subjects of these stories. It is this dominance that must be questioned, either by openly confronting it or by using the logic of these stories to show the "dead-end streets" to which it leads..."*.

The group as the element generating and supporting change

The third premise is presented as a direct consequence of the two previous ones. The group must be the indispensable element for change, since the dominance of a story or account is maintained by the constant ebb and flow in each subject's relations with the people around him/her. This process occurs recurrently, with a continuous circularity, and obviously continues indefinitely. Each of the steps taken will refute or confirm our beliefs about ourselves and others, and, in turn, the others will confirm or refute certain beliefs about us and themselves. This is why a great part of classical psychotherapy saw change as a difficult objective. Although a great deal of work was indeed carried out, for example in mental health consultations, it was intended that a significant therapist-patient interaction became powerful enough to refute multiple significant relations external to that therapeutic relationship. Family, friends, workmates, neighbours, are tacitly aware of the fundamental interaction patterns that have been co-constructed with us, just as we know the steps we must take with each of them.

When a job-seeker manifests personal barriers for his/her job market insertion, we know that a large part of his/her interactions are reaffirming certain beliefs; he/she feels quite self-confident because he/she is maintaining a self perception, an identity, even though this identity is restrictive for him/herself. Work on attitude change for employment, in the development of personal traits to improve employability, focuses on the creation of a substitutive social group, a relational reference framework to feed positive beliefs about taking responsibility for one's own labour market insertion project, orientation towards achievement and the attainment of a valid coping style for the unemployment situation.

The group that looks at our responsibility makes us responsible, the group that looks at our effort makes us make an effort, the group that looks at our constancy makes us constant in our efforts. In contrast to the "official" inability to get a job, potential solutions arise through alternative accounts that the group constructs and underpins. Thus, the action of DAPO will be preferentially conceived in a group design. We consider that the creation of a small substitutional social system facilitates the temporal maintenance of potential changes, since there is generated a relational network as a frame of reference in which the job-seeker can see him/herself in a different way. The group would work as a social

referent for providing new representations and sustaining them over time, as a network of alternative meanings.

The technician: facilitating and maintaining a posture of "ignorance"

When one attends to unemployed people, there is often a sensation of acting like bearers - it is as though we had to push or lift up the person sitting in front of us. And the more we do so, the more we notice the weight of this opposing force acting upon us. Let us look at a transcription of a typical interview where this occurs:

Technician: *What are you thinking of doing?*

Job-seeker: *Nothing. There's nothing I can do...*

Tech: *You know you'll have to go on a training course?*

JS: *Yes, but courses are useless. You spend two or three months on them, and then....*

Tech: *But it would help you to improve your chances*

JS: *I already did some, but they didn't help me at all...*

Tech: *You told me an interviewer said that if you could use a computer he'd have taken you on...*

JS: *Yes, but there are loads of people who can. Anyway, it was a "rubbish" contract. They pay you next to nothing...*

As it can be seen, it is like a tug of war in which any movement is automatically neutralised by the interviewee. In meetings between technicians and unemployed people, the meeting context itself facilitates this reading. "I, being on the dole, am called by the technicians of the employment services. I expect you to tell me what you have for me, and I'll see if I'm interested. You're responsible for the situation and I hope you can give me a solution". When they are informed about the importance of an active search for employment, the reaction is contradictory: "Why do you call me to tell me to look for job?". Then, the above game begins. The technician struggles to get the unemployed person out of the chair and stand him/her up; the interviewee maintains a defensive posture with the corresponding answers.

This leads us to an important consideration. We cannot facilitate the activation of unemployed groups when our meetings start out from the following premise: the technician knows and teaches, the unemployed person is ignorant and learns. This is not something that is consciously thought, but something that is implicit in the way the actors behave. The technician gives an informative session, speaks, points things out, and sometimes corrects. The jobless person listens, nods, protests. In

terms of this scheme, the power, the knowledge, the responses are located in the wrong place. How can they know their potential if we do not let them begin to realise it? They always surprise us with information we do not possess, or, if we meet them outside the interview context, they impress us with a display of resources we were unable to detect.

In view of the above, our next step concerns the technician's posture: they must go from being "teachers", "counsellors", "experts" to becoming providers, creators of spaces which allow the emergence of the resources each person already possesses. Traditionally, the technician of occupational counselling and information has started out from a directive model, in the sense of being a transmitter; from an "educational", "teaching" scheme where knowledge and information are imparted, or from a counselling scheme where orientation and advice is provided. Our proposal is radically distinct from this. Technicians must refrain from directly intervening, wherever possible, in the situation of group members. The group itself must do that. This proposal could be understood to mean that the technician should be a passive element, but this would be wrong. This is not what we mean. Technicians have an indispensable role. Their function consists in providing spaces for change, in guiding group conversations, but without giving "solutions" of their own. For example, if a member shows his/her curriculum vitae to the group, the technician - accustomed to teaching job-seeking techniques, may tend to point out mistakes to him/her, or suggest some modification which, no doubt, would improve its appearance and make a better impression on employers. However, if things occur in this way, how are the group members expected to assume responsibility for improving their own instruments? If the group is given time, another participant will always come up with interesting ideas and suggestions that could be integrated. The group has the knowledge and the technician's task is a difficult one. He/she must be able to guide the conversation so that the questions and the answers come from the same place: from the group members.

Lynn Hoffman (1992) describes this position from the family therapy perspective through Harlene Anderson and Harry Goolishian of the Galveston Family Institute: *"the distinctive feature in the Galveston group is a kind of deliberate ignorance. When they describe what they do or how they teach, they state that they come from a "don't know" position. This frequently irritates people watching*

them work, since it is obviously false that they "don't know". The importance of an "ignorance" position has to do with the fact that -as occurs in every system needing responses- these responses come from members other than the technician. This will provide participants with:

- the possibility of re-situating themselves to look for future responses and, hence, to support an internal and positive attribution of solutions.
- a validating increase of personal and occupational self-concept ("I know"),
- the generation of expectations derived from the proposed solutions.
- the establishment of goals resulting from those expectations
- the execution of behaviours oriented towards the goals and solutions.

How can this be done? The key to facilitating this approach lies in the technician's formulas of intervention and participation. The formula suggested as most suitable is an interrogative one, and one that, most importantly, involves circular questions.

Direct questions (those made by the technician for a group member to answer) favours contact with the technician - it gives this contact a central role. In contrast, circular questions work as connectors between the group members. If, for example, we ask a participant: "Luís: How did you manage to get an appointment with the manager?", Luís will probably tell us what he did, he will look at us, we will look at him, and the rest of the members may think that what is happening has nothing to do with them - that it is just the technician asking Luís a question. Imagine, though, that the question is addressed to another member: "María, how do you think Luís managed to get an interview?", and that, after María's answer and the nodding in agreement of another member, we ask: "Pedro, you seem to agree with what María said...", and so on. In this dynamic of circular interrogation, the technician does not give an opinion, he/she merely asks. The members of the group feel involved in what is happening -they are the ones giving the answers and reinforcing the achievements made. Luís will find himself in the middle of the cross-fire about his ability to achieve; his achievement will be emphasised and become more durable, since it is the social network which is looking at his success, and in which he will be able to see himself reflected in the future.

Moreover, circular questions allow for the appearance of different descriptions of events and their meanings,

give tension to the dominant accounts and allow for diversity. *"These questions are focused on the possible different interpretations that may be constructed within the same interactive context. In highlighting the different ways in which each participant evaluates the situation, circular questions divert attention from what are considered "facts" (deriving from the centre) or "right interpretations". Circular questions give participants the opportunity to become observers of their own interaction patterns by facilitating the emergence -in a non-factual way- of diverse interpretations"* (McNamee, 1992).

PSYCHOSOCIAL INTERVENTION WITH GROUPS OF UNEMPLOYED PEOPLE FROM A SYSTEMIC-CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

When we are dealing with a group, for example, discussing things that have occurred to members in their attempts to achieve their objectives, the first important step consists in considering the accounts, the narrations of the different members. These accounts are expressed as stories constructed around events the subject has experienced. In their development, the stories complete the account of the events and explain them, giving them meaning and linking them perfectly into the generic account that the subject normally uses. Thus, we may listen to a member explaining how he/she sent several "curriculum vitae" to companies, and then saying "I know they just throw them in the bin - they don't even read them". If we listen to this same subject's narration for a sufficiently long period of time, we will again hear how useless his/her task is due to "the obvious lack of interest" manifested by companies with regard to his/her efforts at being given an interview. Some intentionality will be attributed to what happened; for example, we may hear "when you arrive at the interview, you've already got no chance - they've already given someone else the job". Considering this kind of comment, it is clear that, for the member, this attribution of intentionality gives meaning to, completes, justifies and explains what is happening.

In the long-term unemployed, these explanations and intentionality attributions are magnified and self-fueled; a reality is constructed with regard to the place in which the job-seeker believes he/she is destined to be within the labour market situation. Such construction, moreover, is constantly reinforced by the prevailing frame of beliefs about employment-unemployment in the social system. Usually, the result is the co-creation of

a complex web of explanations, which gives sense to the unemployment situation in which the subject finds him/herself.

However, this patiently-developed account usually comes to constitute the jobless person's greatest barrier to facing up to his/her own unemployment situation. This hypothetical unemployed person arrives at the selection interview without having made any kind of plan ("What's the use? I've got no chance anyway"), and will respond scornfully to the interviewer. For example, to the question "Do you know how to use a computer?", he/she may think "Here we go, the same old story", and respond with something like: "To know about computers you have to have money to buy one, and I'm on the dole, so I haven't got any". The interviewer may feel this is an insufficient explanation, and that this mixture of couldn't-care-less attitude and arrogance is not a good start. As a result, when the interviewee is dispatched, the decision may well already be made: he/she is not suitable for the post. When our unemployed subject is informed about the result he/she may think: "It was obvious. I could see it on his face from the start. Going through all that for nothing..." Each event ends up fitting in perfectly with the subject's pre-existing account and, in turn, reinforces it by giving it the weight of "truth". "This has happened to me lots of times...". Thus, a recursive feed-back loop is generated. Each step confirms an impossibility, a brake, and each of these impossibilities makes going a step further more absurd.

At the same time, other accounts appear in the group work which, in contrast to those described above, allow the emergence of solutions. These other stories, which we call alternative accounts, come from the same group members as the previous ones; that is, there is no monopoly of either recursive or alternative perspectives. If the experience of working with groups shows us anything, it is the ease with which members adopt complementary positions with respect to the other participants. The group's conversation and posture is only unanimous when a common "enemy" appears - for instance, when the technician makes a mistake which marks him/her out as a focus for opposition.

Usually, when a member becomes especially critical and negative, hampering the work of the group, other members will note this attitude and become more positive in their arguments, providing a good opportunity to widen the perspective of the accounts that have been motivated by the first member's posture. Later, we will

be surprised to observe this “difficult member” showing cooperative behaviour, whilst others who helped the group on previous occasions, and on whom it seemed we could depend, raise negative arguments and hinder the group activity.

The homeostatic trend in groups is remarkable. If we observe a group when the technician is absent, we will see an interesting situation. Members alternate roles; some, for example take up a positive position on the effectiveness of telephone calls to companies when looking for employment, while others vehemently deny that such an effort is worthwhile. Discussion grows progressively, until it is exhausted. There is a short silence before another subject, more or less related, is raised. In this case, roles are swapped; some of those who previously emphasised the ineffectiveness of phone calls begin remarking on the usefulness of speaking personally with the company. In turn, those who supported the previous option start to list the drawbacks of this new one. The discussion continues until it dies out, and the process begins again. We observe and are involved in these situations where the trend is an equilibrium-based, homeostatic one, where there is a great deal of movement but nothing changes. The technician’s role is to break this movement towards equilibrium, to try and focus attention on small changes and exceptions to the official account (Shazer, 1986), guiding things so that the group spends more time focusing on alternative for achievement, and trying to encourage its members to consider new perspectives leading to possible solutions.

A. Focusing on the content of group members’ accounts

The first step to consider is the discrimination and definition of those accounts that are suitable to be admitted as a basis for group work. We should not lose sight of the content, methods and limits that have been pre-established in intervention with unemployed people; that is, we should focus group work on accounts related to unemployment, work, training and employment, and in which appear, also, those psychosocial factors noted by J.M Blanch (1990) as discriminatory for improving job-seekers’ employability, i.e.: importance given to work, causal attributions of the unemployment situation and its derivations, personal and professional self-image, availability for/disposition to work and coping style.

We call this first approach focusing of accounts, that is,

the technician must pay attention to each member’s narration about certain aspects of his/her situation. These accounts have two levels:

1. The specific level, that is, related to causal attributions of unemployment situations, to the importance of work in the subject’s scheme of values, to the group member’s degree of availability for/disposition to work, to the participant’s personal and professional self-image, and to coping style.
2. The general level, that is, related to the same aspects (attribution, availability/disposition, etc.) but not in direct connection with employment, unemployment and work. For example, concerning self-image aspects related to family relationships, causal attribution aspects related to peer group relationships, etc.

Focusing consists in concentrating exclusively on the specific level, given that the second level corresponds to the fields of psychotherapy and clinical psychology, rather than social services employment advisers. Psychosocial intervention with the unemployed requires the strict establishment and maintenance of the limits of our participation and of the content that concerns us. Focusing, as an initial step, will help to prevent us from using the wrong perspectives, which may produce misunderstandings and undesirable situations. Through a suitable focusing of accounts, we can establish the intervention to be undertaken.

B. Identifying the type of account

The accounts we shall hear will be of two kinds: recursive and alternative.

Recursive accounts are defined by a series of conditions:

1. They are closed accounts; that is, their structure does not lead to conclusions other than those previously established.
2. They tend to be repeated in the subject’s narration in a periodic and reiterative way, not so much with regard to their content as to the argument structure employed.
3. They are absolute accounts; that is, they frequently use terms such as “all”, “nothing”, “always”, “never”, “impossible”, “absolutely”, “completely”, etc.
4. They are arranged around needs (of an imperative and non-postponable nature) or obligations (such as unavoidable duties).
5. They use disjunctive constructions of the “either...or...” type.

6. Their content revolves around their problems.
7. They self feed-back; that is, they are accounts that become more certain the more they are used.

For example, a group member says: "Being 44 years old, I have no chance of being taken on. Either the state pays me unemployment benefit or it gives me a job, because all my attempts to get one have been useless. And, of course! - who's going to give you an opportunity when there are so many young people, with better qualifications, looking for work? I can't wait any longer. I need a solution...". It can be seen that, in spite of the data on socio-economic-labour market reality used, it is an account that has the specified conditions, i.e., it is closed, reiterative in its arguments and structure, focuses on the problems, is absolute in its expression and disjunctive in its solutions, is expressed as a need and is self-justifying.

On the contrary, the so-called alternative accounts have the following characteristics:

1. They are open accounts; that is, their structure allows modifications and diverse solutions. The arguments are unfinished, with room for different conclusions.
2. They are flexible accounts, involving a variety of options (e.g. "Sometimes this happens to me...")
3. They revolve around preferences (as mere guidelines for the direction of action) or wishes (as formulas driving action).
4. Their content revolves around achievements, solutions and exceptions; or the positive reformulation of arguments.
5. They use conjunctive schemes of the type "this and that".
6. They focus on resources and enhance them.
7. They self-feed-back, acquiring more certainty the more they are used.

For example, the same group member says later: "in the interviews I've had, I sometimes used expressions the interviewer didn't like; I always thought being sincere was important, and maybe, I got carried away, I was too natural. Later, I tried to change this, avoiding that type of expression, and in my last interview it wasn't that difficult to do; you can be natural without treating the interviewer like a workmate. Let's see next time...". These are not model accounts, they are real and they focus on potential, viable solutions. They include diverse possibilities that are not mutually exclusive (being natural and keeping one's distance), enhance goal-directed actions and increase the desire to improve.

C. De-construction: 1. The blurring of recursive accounts

Accounts need to be reaffirmed by the social reference group; a story which is not heard or justified cannot be maintained. On the other hand, each account grows to the extent that it is allowed to occupy a space and a time, permitting feed-back.

We can determine two intervention strategies to deconstruct or blur recursive accounts within the group. Here there is minimal participation by the technician, whose aim is the diversion of group attention from the members' recursive accounts. The two -qualitatively very mild- strategies mentioned are:

- a) Not listening to them, not devoting attention or time to them. Group members soon learn that certain approaches are not very successful, and are not of interest with regard to the group's task.
- b) Making them relative, that is, subtracting weight and relevance from them, though without actually arguing about them (e.g.: "Are you sure what you're saying is right?")

The advantage of these blurring strategies is that they prevent the technician's work with the group from focusing on problems, which is what any task with recursive accounts aims to do. These strategies reduce the prominent role of problems. People do not just talk about what is always worrying them.

C. De-construction: 2. Confrontation and direct techniques

Confrontation as an intervention formula for the deconstruction of recursive accounts about employment-unemployment-work-training is most suitable in individual interviews or at particular moments in group work. The problem of confrontation as an instrument for group deconstruction derives from the fact that -as in any case where something is called into question- it is based on doubting, on pointing out inconsistencies, on active discussion about certain beliefs of a subject. If the group is present, the subject feels questioned up to the point of seeing his/her position or the esteem in which he/she is held by the group threatened by the others, which forces the breaking of the cohesion and the necessary relations on which we must base the later co-construction work. Thus, it is advisable to restrict confrontation to personal interviews, to proceed with caution, and to follow these steps:

1) The clarification of accounts, trying to make them as specific as possible. This could be done by:

- asking for very specific information about what is said in them; for example, faced with the statement "Looking for a job is a pain", the following pattern may be established:

Technician: *What do you mean by a pain?*

Job-seeker: *It's a drag...*

Tech: *Sorry, I don't understand, what do you mean by a drag?*

JS: *I don't know... I mean - it's very tiring*

Tech: *Oh, I see... so it's tiring. And in what way is it tiring?*

JS: *Well, you know - getting up, going to the industrial estate and asking around...*

As can be observed, the task consists in reaching a position where it is possible to work and understand one another in the clearest and most behaviourally specific way possible. We cannot work with "a pain" or "a drag", but we can do so with "getting up and going to the industrial estate". These questions usually lead the job-seeker to see the situation as somewhat absurd: it is typically assumed that everybody understands the words one is using, and we will have to endure the initial irritation produced in the user by this interrogative formula. On the other hand, after conversation has gone on for a while, the subject will begin to perceive the lack of solidity of his/her account (perhaps he/she has only been to an industrial estate a couple of times), and the way becomes laid open for overcoming the first barrier, that of the generalisation of language.

- filling in gaps in the other's discourse is another of the resources that can be used. The recursive account is full of holes, of blind spots, which apparently explain without explaining anything at all. For example:

Job-seeker: *No, doing a training course, no....I'm no good at studying.*

Technician: *Studying? I don't know what studies you're talking about.*

JS: *Well, I mean at school, maths, for instance...*

Tech: *But that's not what you were talking about now. Have you done any courses?*

JS: *Yes, a car mechanic one and an electrical fitter one.*

Tech: *I see. And how did they go?*

JS: *OK, I got through them.*

- expressing doubts about assumptions is another important factor. Recursive discourse often uses socially "correct" and "reasonable" assumptions in its explanations:

JS: *Since I had to look after my mother, who was ill, I didn't look for a job.*

Tech: *What was wrong with your mother?*

JS: *She had arthritis; she couldn't do anything strenuous.*

Tech: *How did you help her?*

Dem: *Well, I used to go shopping, tidy up the bedrooms... Anything she needed doing!*

Tech: *How long did it take you to do all that?*

JS: *The morning - not the whole morning, but it was the mornings when I most...*

Tech: *So you had some time of your own?*

JS: *Yes, of course. I had some time of my own.*

These three cases: specifying accounts, filling in gaps and expressing doubts about assumptions, are just some of the formulas that allow us to make recursive accounts clear or to question them. It is an active questioning that does not instruct, but permits the user him/herself to be the one who discovers the inconsistencies of his/her account.

- 2) "Confrontation with contradiction" is another intervention model that corresponds to the technician's deliberate "ignorance" position. It consists in pointing out contradictions, exceptions and differences in the accounts of the same subject, as a method for underlining inconsistencies in the narration. It allows us to de-construct one of the accounts (that centred on problems) and to amplify the other (that centred on solutions). Imagine that a certain woman has frequently spoken about her "impossibility of being taken on because she has young children". Later she says that she was hired to work as a cleaner for three months. Confrontation with contradiction will consist in simply juxtaposing these two conflicting accounts: "it is impossible to get a job" and "I worked for three months". Similarly, small modifications in the account are extremely important: something *impossible* (a term used by this woman in her account) is different from something *difficult*. Language builds up our reality, and a job that is impossible to get is different from a job that is difficult to get. The first shows no way out, while the second allows a search for solution strategies.

- 3) Direct techniques considerably extend our intervention resources, and also involve greater participation on the part of the technician, so that one must be cautious about using them. Below we describe three basic formulas:

- through modifications: That is, any change introduced into an account gives it more tension. We should remember that recursive accounts are rigid, barely malleable and absolutist in their arguments, so that it is easy to call them into question; hence, the introduction of modifications is an element of capital importance.

(a) Changes in intensity: centred on the “more-less” (strong, hard, difficult, easy, complicated, accessible, suitable) dimension of the adjectives used. This allows us to relativise certain absolute statements about “reality”, opening the way for working on exceptions or recursive accounts, on improvements and achievements:

Job-seeker: *It's really difficult to get to speak to a company's personnel manager.*

Technician: *How many times have you tried?*

JS: *Several. Maybe four or five.*

Tech: *Of those four or five times, which was the easiest?*

JS: *None of them was easy.*

Tech: *Not every situation is the same. Which one was the least difficult, then?*

JS: *Maybe the third time, it was a...*

(b) Changes in frequency: centred on the “more times-fewer times” dimension. As in the previous case, it allows us to make absolute argumentation more flexible, only now we work on the frequency of a given event:

JS: *My mind always goes blank when they ask me questions in interviews.*

Tech: *Right, but you told me before you'd had lots of interviews.*

JS: *Yes, I go to them. But this happens so often...*

Tech: *Which was the interview where it happened least?*

JS: *Maybe in the last two. But it still happens.*

Tech: *How did these last two interviews go?*

(c) Changes in space: centred on places associated with the recursive accounts:

JS: *I go to my room to study and my mind starts to wander.*

Tech: *In your room?*

JS: *Yes, I tidy up my desk, look at the list of subjects I have to revise, and that's it - before I know it my mind's just wandered right off.*

Tech: *Do you always study in your room?*

JS: *No, not always. Sometimes I do it in the living room at night.*

Tech: *How different it is to study in the living room instead of your room?*

(d) Changes in time: centred on different time periods:
JS: *In the morning, I lie in until late - I can't seem to get up early. When I do get up, there's no time to do anything.*

Tech: *You say this happens in the morning...?*

JS: *Yes, I never seem to get a lot done. I don't even manage to get an hour together to send off the CVs I have to send.*

Tech: *How much time do you think you need for that?*

JS: *Maybe a couple of hours...*

Tech: *What solution can you think of?*

JS: *Maybe I could try in the afternoon...*

- Re-definitions consist in the re-interpretation of a subject's meaning or position in the account, and aim to permit a new reading of the same text, as though it were a new perspective on the subject's role within the story he/she presents. It requires the introduction of a viewpoint that has not been considered up to that point:

JS: *I definitely don't think answering advertisements in the press is any use. I don't believe that when they get your application they think you're got anything interesting to offer them.*

Tech: *Have you been sending CVs in reply to adverts?*

JS: *Yes. In the last two weeks, around twenty to twenty-five.*

Tech (surprised): *Twenty to twenty-five! How did you manage that?*

JS: *What do you mean?*

Tech: *I mean, how did you manage to do all that work?*

JS: *Well, I read the papers and marked everything related to my qualifications and experience, then I sent off the CVs.*

Tech: *Yes, I see. But, really, how did you manage to do so much work being on the dole?*

As can be observed, such a re-definition radically changes the position occupied by the subject in the story. He passes from being a victim with nothing to offer, dejected and ready to give up, to re-situating himself on the basis of the success implied by such an enormous amount of work in his search for employment, which, moreover, will sooner or later bring the desired results.

Re-definitions may also be used to change the role assigned to some members in the group. We know how the different roles are shared out by the group among its members; not everyone is lucky enough to be establis-

hed in the place that can give him/her the best opportunities; on the contrary, some may become locked away within limits difficult to overcome. "Scapegoats" arise in every group. They sometimes bring it on themselves, but if we let these positions stick, the group will not have enough support. This situation can be modified through re-definitions: for example, a certain young person stands out because of his/her silence and scarce participation; when he speaks he seems awkward and the laughter of others reinforces this position. His/her situation could be re-defined. For example:

X (during the round of comments): *I don't know... I can't think of anything to say* (the group smiles).

Tech: (to another member of the group): *What do you think X is thinking?*

Y: *I don't know. He never says anything...*

Tech: *I'm asking you because I'm worried...(silence). When a person is very observant, he discovers a lot of interesting things; he has more well-founded opinions, because not everyone knows how to look and to listen. It worries me that many of the things he knows we don't...*

This may serve as an example. It would be much more interesting if such a situation could emerge from the group itself, without the technician's direct intervention, or if the technician could take advantage of some member's contribution and redirect it. In this case, we may act to avoid the subject becoming stigmatised or labelled by the group and his opportunities limited. In the example, we tried to relocate the subject in the distribution of roles, to transform him from being a non-valid member, someone who does not count, into someone occupying his rightful place, considered and valued in a similar way to the rest of the members. Next time the group may listen to him in a different way.

- Role changes can also be used. The problem of the maintenance of obstructive positions by group members must be worked on. Its use is more effective at the individual level, since, as we have already seen in other cases, its use in the group may produce undesired effects. In the individual context it is a very powerful tool. Let us look at a possible example: a participant holds a defeatist position when we interview him, continually trying to put the brakes on those possibilities that he himself take advantage of. After a short tug of war -which we must inevitably go through- we may propose swapping chairs: "Can I propose an exercise, for a bit of variation. We'll carry

on doing what we've been doing, but now I'll be in your chair and you'll be in mine. I'll be you and you'll be me for a while, OK?"

What usually happens after the exchange of places is that the subject, on the one hand, starts to hear himself saying certain things, suggesting alternative solutions previously rejected without considering them (now he starts to construct new solutions, to conceive them and to pose them) and, on the other, starts to see himself from the outside, and observe himself in an impossible position. Generally, this exercise produces a certain bewilderment in the interviewee, perhaps because we are not used to putting ourselves in someone else's place, nor seeing ourselves as others see us. In the case of groups, this technique can always be used when the attitude we are going to work on in one of the members will not make him/her feel ashamed in front of the others. It is also very useful for making stereotypes or partial viewpoints more flexible, and it allows the adoption of diverse perspectives on events, beliefs and prejudices.

D. Amplification of alternative accounts

The basic axis in group intervention develops in the domain of alternative accounts. Here, the focus is on those constructions of reality that allow the appearance of solutions and exceptions, and which enhance the user's personal and professional self-concept. The continuous exercise of the group, when working on these accounts, projects images of achievement, and is oriented towards activation as a structural element for increasing employability.

Amplification consists in making clear those alternatives, resources and lines of action that recursive accounts deny, contradicting their arguments and their explanation mechanisms. Amplification aims to give room to, pay attention to and allow for the maintenance of options that are diverse, flexible, open to change, adaptive and oriented to achievement. Amplification models are basically of two kinds: quantitative and qualitative.

D1. Quantitative

We refer to an amplification in quantity when, in the group's discursive scheme, the alternative accounts constitute the axis on which the group is focused; that is, they have enough room and presence in the group interaction to appear as a potential alternative. Quantitative amplification may develop through various lines of intervention:

a) devoting more time to talking about exceptions, differences and achievements of participants. Here, we must remember the importance of interrogative formulas and, especially, of circular questions as connectors among group members. When an alternative account that is more flexible and validating for the subject arises, it usually happens that the group, given its trend toward complementary movements, begins, through some of its members, to cancel it out. The task of the technician in these cases is fundamental, and should make it possible for users to maintain certain narratives without them being contradicted or cancelled out by homeostatic movements in the system.

When this mechanism starts up, the technician may generate a space, through the group members, that allows exceptions, differences and potential solutions to persist in subjects' interaction without being automatically displaced:

Job-seeker: *I was waiting about an hour until I finally picked the documents up. Since then I've done nothing. I haven't even read them...*

In this text we observe that we can work on two different accounts: "I waited for an hour and picked up the documents" or "I've done nothing, not even read them". We should observe how each account denies the other, that is, it seems clear that both things occurred, but if our group, on hearing the account, focuses on one of the parts (and this is what usually happens), the other aspect of the narration automatically passes into the background, fades, since, from an emotional point of view, the protagonist of the account either feels constant, successful and vigorous for having finally accomplished the goal despite the long wait, or else feels useless, irresponsible and weak for having done nothing with the documents. It is important to note that this subject can hardly integrate, in an emotional way, the two accounts, since one contradicts the other.

The group, on focusing upon one of these accounts (and the technician is the guide for these conversations) will co-construct an alternative to the official account usually produced by the protagonist of this narration. The time devoted to a narration of achievement made by any of the participants allows the group members' gazes to converge; the subject telling the story creates a self-image which is confirmed by the others observing him/her in this position. The validating self-image is fed by the group. An individual is what we all agree he/she is.

b) Accumulating interactions from various members about a participant's recursive account or exception, we obtain the same co-construction by amplification of alternative accounts. In this case, the time devoted is not so important as the addition of confirmations by the others. For example:

John: *Yes, it's true I waited a long time and finally got what I was looking for.*

Technician (pointing to another participant): *Peter, what did you like about what John did?*

Peter: *I think that if you can manage not to give up, you achieve more things.*

Tech: *What do you mean?*

Peter: *I mean John knew how to put up with the situation. That's very hard for me; I usually give up earlier.*

Tech: (pointing to other members) *This topic seems to be important. What do you think?*

Louise: *John managed to get some information and that's good for us all.*

If we observe this sequence of interactions, we see that the amplification produced has an incalculable value. Moreover, members giving their opinion on John's achievement may later be backed up by John himself. From this moment on, John is open to hearing recursive accounts from others without developing criticisms. In the end we learn to treat others in accordance with what we receive from them.

This accumulation of positive interactions would appear to be the intervention format *par excellence* for the co-construction of alternatives; the best tool for co-creation possessed by the group: a climate of interest in the other is produced, in which everyone is involved; it permits changes in attitudes which are longer lasting, since it will serve as a reference point of one's own about the way one is and behaves, about what one can do and achieve; it becomes a stage on which we can observe ourselves in the future.

c) Future projection through the use of presuppositional language. The use of future projections is an interesting technique taken from the so-called "Crystal ball technique", described by M. Erikson in 1954 in his works on brief therapy and hypnotherapy, and later described with various modifications (for example: "the miracle question"), and especially used in approaches of systemic brief therapy. *"In one way or the other, the client builds up his/her own solution which can then be used as a guide for*

therapy. As I see them, the principles behind this technique are the foundations of therapy based on solutions, not on problems” (De Shazer, 1995).

All the work done through the use of presuppositional language is immersed in this perspective. What is suggested is that the user constructs his/her future through a “here and now” notion. When the participant begins to narrate, for example, how his daily life will be when he is working (here, subjects are required to do this), he will start to re-create an internal space where, inevitably, expectations are manifested and goals indicated which will be of vital importance for the subject’s behavioural direction. Expectations lead us to the setting up of goals, goals to behaviours, behaviours to achievement attributions, and these to the generation of new expectations (Rodríguez Morejón, 1994). This expectations-goals-behaviours-attributions scheme is crucial to understanding the importance of future projection as an instrument for psychosocial intervention based on solutions. Thus, DAPO’s work-scheme requires from participants the setting up of minimal goals to be developed in the environment. These goals have to be extremely specific and, simultaneously, viable, in order to facilitate their integration into a climb towards achievement. Normally, the users set themselves ambitious goals which we must specify and reduce in order to avoid just the opposite of what we want to achieve.

Focusing again on the use of this technique, we may add that this use requires a previous training by the technician applying it. This training is located in the formulation of the questions. We must get used to asking in a way that obliges the user to think in terms of the future and, at the same time, allows him/her to become as fully involved as possible in the development of the answer. The more extensively the participant gets this account of the future moving, and develops it, feels it as the present, the more effective the intervention will be.

Technician: *When you get the sheet metal worker diploma, what will happen?*

Job-seeker: *I’ll be well pleased.*

Tech: *Think hard for a minute, it’s important: tell me in detail how it’ll be.*

JS: *Well, I’ll get up early, not like now. I’ll be able to go out and look for a job.*

Tech: *I don’t live in your house, and I don’t know what it’ll be like unless you tell me step by step.*

JS: *Well, when I get up, I’d get the newspapers and look through the situations vacant section. I could*

look for garages in the yellow pages as well. I’d probably have to note down all the addresses and...

This account will continue developing. It requires an effort from the participant to re-create situations which will allow him/her to have internal guidelines, a potential activity programme, since in the development of this scenario expectations have been generated, goals have been set up, and it has become a frame of reference for the future. This technique may be developed in individual interviews, but also as a group exercise, in which all the participants create a different scenario where solutions are possible. This is the beginning, with a view to the scenario working as a “self-fulfilling prophesy”.

D2. Qualitative

Another formula for amplifying alternative accounts concerns the qualitative aspects of interactions. We all remember scenes that have become engraved on our memory due to their emotional intensity or their relevance at a given moment in our life. In this line, the group may facilitate the amplification of new constructions about reality, and the technician must be attentive to the appearance of these qualitatively significant interactions:

(a) Underlining in a different, significant tone, the appearance of an achievement narration acts as an important element for its maintenance. For example, when, in the group, one participant expresses admiration, surprise or amazement at something said by another, he/she is opening a door for significant interaction and for the co-construction of new possibilities:

Louise: *And I said to the interviewer: Listen, I want to work, above all to work, and I don’t know why you seem to doubt it.*

Joseph: *Bloody hell, that’s hard!*

Tech: (to Joseph) *What did you say?*

Joseph: *I said it’s really hard, saying a thing like that...*

Tech: *It is very hard.*

Joseph: *You must have given him a shock.*

Tech: *Louise: it seems Joseph is amazed at how tough you are...*

Louis: *I can’t believe it myself. And the funny thing is, the interviewer started laughing.*

These interventions are usually spontaneous and make quite an impact on the person who is the object of the intervention. The implicit emotional tone is what allows the highlighting of a given aspect in the account and its

amplification, thus obtaining a base for support during the group work. In this sense, it is important for the technician to be able, when he/she thinks it suitable, to make this type of intervention; it is only necessary to be careful it does not happen too often, since, although not deliberately, the technician is still occupying a significant role for the group participants. Such an intervention made by the technician is of special value, but generates ambivalent feelings in the group.

(b) Positive re-formulation or positive connotation is another qualitative intervention formula for amplification. It refers to the emphasis on a positive perspective in the account. In the extract used in the previous paragraph, the intervention is included. It could have been understood that what Louise said to the interviewer was a mistake; that is, perhaps it is not right to speak in that way to an interviewer. At this moment we are not so much concerned with correctness in the use of job-seeking techniques, as with the reinforcement of the participant's self-concept; and in any case, we cannot be sure that Louise's answer was not the most suitable one in response to this particular interviewer. Thus, the positive connotation is developed by considering strength as a primary element in the narration. Group members start to use those expressions which are emphasised within the group. If "I don't know how to write a curriculum vitae" can be transformed into "I'd like to learn how to write a curriculum vitae", or "I'm no good at interviews" can be converted into "doing an interview is a challenge", we will have made an important step forward. The group is continually throwing in expressions of this kind, which we must know how to pick up and re-direct in a suitable way.

(c) The attribution of achievement is another very important element in work with alternative accounts. When the job-seeker who says: "There's no way I can finish a training course. I always fail...", finally passes the course, and we ask how he/she did it, he/she will reply with a phrase such as: "I don't know - pure luck!". We always find this type of attribution curious: the subject blames the failed attempts on him/herself, and, when something is at last achieved, it is attributed to luck. This is why it is important to establish channels within the group for the attribution of the achievements, of each small success as it is reached.

The simple question "How did you do it?" has an implicit value. We do not have to wait for an answer - the question itself contains the answer within it "It was me that achieved it".

SYNTHESIS

Psychosocial intervention with unemployed people presenting personal barriers or difficulties that impede access to employment requires:

1. The use of a methodology oriented to attitude change, and not focused simply on motivation. For this it is useful to take advantage of intervention techniques developed by clinical approaches in psychology, especially those coming from psychotherapy.
2. An approach centred on solutions, achievements and exceptions, rather than on problems.
3. A preferentially group-based design, in order to permit the co-construction of lasting alternatives which generate a substitutional social network that modulates the influence of prevailing social constructions on unemployment.
4. Attention to job-seekers' constructions of personal and social reality on employment, unemployment, work and training.
5. The maintenance of a deliberate "ignorance" position by the technicians, which allows the salvage of the resources required by job-seekers. A move from an "educational" or "orienting" function to a facilitating function.

In view of the above, an intervention methodology is suggested which is based on a systemic-constructivist epistemology, and which involves:

1. Focusing on the narratives of the unemployed people, with the object of intervening at a specific level, that is, on employment, unemployment, work and training.
2. Discrimination between recursive accounts (closed, absolute, reiterative, invalidating and disjunctive) and alternative accounts (open, flexible, validating and conjunctive).
3. The de-construction of recursive accounts by means of blurring, emptying (of meaning), relativisation or confrontation.
4. The co-construction of alternative accounts by means of quantitative and/or qualitative amplification of their presence in the subjects' frame of reference.

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