

REPRESENTATIONS OF WORK AND DECENT WORK AND LIFE PLANNING. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON A GROUP OF SOCIALLY VULNERABLE PEOPLE

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The ideas that people have about work can greatly influence the ways in which they characterize their careers and their lives. Decent work refers to an opportunity for women and men to experience productive work in the conditions of respect for human rights. However, respect for the principles of decent work seems rather far from always being applied. This study presented the results of a qualitative research study on perceptions of the future and of decent work for people in situations of social vulnerability. Data were collected through focus groups. A semi-structured interview was used to explore the differences in representation between work and decent work and the representations of their work in the short and medium terms. The data were processed with N-vivo software, which was used to highlight the most recurring meanings related to the representation of “work” and “decent work.” Moreover, the results showed some gender differences. Implications for career counselling practices are discussed in this paper, emphasizing the possibilities of designing paths and actions that convey the idea of decent work.

Keywords: Work; Decent work; Vulnerability; Career counselling.

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Among the challenges that psychology experts have been willing to confront in recent years is the promotion of decent work for all. Talking about decent work, the International Labor Organization (ILO), in 1999 established four strategic objectives (the promotion of rights at work, employment, social protection, and social dialogue) that converge on the definition of decent work, that is productive work for women and men, in conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity.

In recent years, this problem has become so urgent that in September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. Its objectives included the following: “to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all” (Goal 8).

Traditionally, when decent work was mentioned in the literature, the references were above all for economic and legal disciplines; however, many authors are convinced that work psychology has the tools to operate in this area and has the social duty to give a contribution to the conceptualization of decent work (Blustein et al., 2019). Among the various ways in which psychology can contribute to the spread of good practices in this field is the facilitating of access to decent work through the promotion of equality and hu-

man rights (Di Fabio & Maree, 2016; Psychological Coalition at the United Nations [PCUN], 2012). However, the ability to find decent work depends, on the one hand, on the possibility of having access to legal work, and on the capacity to know one's rights. On the other hand, it is linked to individual psychosocial resources, such as self-esteem and self-efficacy, self-awareness of one's own competences and personal worth, and the possibility of improving people's representations of work and decent work (Haiming & Yan, 2020).

This is a challenge for career counselling psychology: the paradigm of life design (Savickas et al., 2009) — concentrating on contextual possibilities, dynamic processes, nonlinear progression, multiple perspectives, and personal patterns — provides the framework for giving much attention to the needs of people with “diverse” characteristics (i.e., poor and unstable schooling, long-term unemployed), thus offering the opportunity to create ad hoc tailored interventions (Setlhare-Meltor & Wood, 2016).

Unfortunately, an adequate knowledge of what decent work is and its features has not been sufficiently spread, especially among people who are at risk of performing undignified work due to their economic needs. Thus, in a career counselling intervention, it is a very important starting point to understand the ideas and the representations that people have about the concepts of work and decent work, especially with socially vulnerable people. The ideas and the representations of work, in turn, can influence the ways in which people make decisions, characterizing their careers and their lives (Ferrari et al., 2008). Career counsellors are invited to understand what their clients think about work with the aim of promoting decent and meaningful work (Dik et al., 2009), as well as decent and meaningful lives (Di Fabio & Kenney, 2016).

The intent of this paper is to contribute to this topic starting from the description of the concepts of work and decent work. It also presents the results of a qualitative study on the representations of work and decent work for a group of people characterized by social and economic vulnerability, as well as the implications for career counselling interventions.

WORK, DECENT WORK, AND SOCIAL VULNERABILITY

Work is defined by Drenth (1991) as the activity that allows people to provide the necessities of life and that allows for personal fulfilment. Richardson (1993) underlined the aspects of work that are related to personal satisfaction, self-affirmation, and the possibility of connecting individuals and society. However, some authors (Warr, 1984) underlined that work also involves negative aspects, such as stress or physical and psychological efforts.

A more recent definition of the concept of work is in line with the psychology-of-working framework (PWF; Blustein, 2001, 2008), according to which people can meet three basic needs with work: (1) survival and power needs, (2) relationship needs, and (3) self-determination needs. Many people work primarily to meet survival needs (Blustein, 2006); however, work can help to meet higher-order needs that are related to relationships with colleagues and intrinsic rewards — factors that are related to meaningful work (Blustein et al., 2008; Grant, 2007). Meaningful work positively predicts life satisfaction (Magnano et al., 2019) and influences personal fulfilment (Kahn, 2007).

However, work is experienced differently by different individuals: for someone, it could be a source of professional fulfilment, and for others, it could represent a source of stress (Blustein, 2006). Previous qualitative research highlighted that people give different meanings to work based on their social, economic, and cultural characteristics (Blustein et al., 2002; Chaves et al., 2004; Phillips et al., 2002). For

example, people with higher socioeconomic levels define work as a mean of expressing themselves, whereas people with lower socioeconomic levels consider it to be a way to ensure their survival (Blustein et al., 2002). Precisely for this reason, it becomes important to ensure that career interventions are conducted taking into consideration the way in which people define work (Chaves et al., 2004).

The concept of decent work, introduced in 1999 by the director general of the International Labor Organization (ILO) to the International Labor Conference, has been subsequently enriched by Anker et al. (2003), including six dimensions associated with work: decent work (1) implies paid work; (2) requires working in conditions of freedom; (3) is productive work; (4) is fair work, involving work-life balance and equal treatment and opportunities in work, in the absence of discrimination; (5) includes the concepts of safety and security; and (6) means working with dignity and respect.

These features linked to the concept of work are undoubtedly considered to be essential at a political, economic, social, and scientific level. The existence in the current labor market of many examples of illegal, underpaid, and dangerous jobs tells us that there is still a lot of room for the application of these principles (Magnano & Zammiti, 2020). However, promoting and defending decent work has become an essential issue from a social, economic, and psychological point of view, as it is a tool for fighting poverty (Sengenberger, 2001), and it is a prerequisite for the psychological health of individuals and groups (Blustein, 2008; Paul & Moser, 2009).

This is a challenge in which people with social vulnerability are involved: they should be the direct targets of actions aimed at increasing the decent work culture. By social vulnerability, we mean those people who are exposed to risky situations, which include the uncertainty of their social and economic conditions. The dimensions that are taken into consideration and that can determine the condition of vulnerability are as follows: education level, family structures, housing conditions, participation in the labor market, and economic conditions (Italian National Institute of Statistics [ISTAT], 2019).

Socially and economically vulnerable people have fewer choices and often do not have the opportunity to understand the various options available, so they are likely to choose inappropriately (Chakravarti, 2006). Similarly, vulnerability negatively affects adaptability (Maree, 2017; Ribeiro, 2017; Schmitt & Pilcher, 2004; Thompson, 2015), the ability to enjoy life and to avoid pain (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Kahneman et al., 1999), and the ability to use their own resources (Ryff & Singer, 2008; Vázquez et al., 2006).

Career counselling and work psychology have not dedicated much research to the career construction of vulnerable people and the present study responds to the call to advance knowledge about lifestyle choices not only for the middle class, but also for persons who have very few opportunities to significantly construct their careers (Blustein, 2006, 2011).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this study was to investigate the perceptions of work, decent work, and the future in people who are in situations of social vulnerability. This type of target group represents a particular group of people who are at risk of undertaking “undignified jobs” because this is driven by the need for economic subsistence. The questions that prompted the research are the following:

- (1) Are there differences between the representations of work and decent work in people who are in situations of social vulnerability?
- (2) How do people with social vulnerabilities think about themselves in the future?

PARTICIPANTS, METHODOLOGY, AND DATA TREATMENT

To understand how people with social vulnerabilities define work, decent work, and how they view themselves in the future, we conducted an analysis of the contents related to relevant categories and themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This type of analysis allowed us to use an inductive approach, based on the available data, and allowed us to draw conclusions without creating hypotheses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). For this reason, in the analysis of the results, we did not take into account the structures of work and decent work as presented in the introduction. Rather, we allowed potential themes to emerge from the data.

The research study was observational and exploratory, and therefore mainly qualitative, and involved 10 participants with social vulnerability. Participants were recruited from a community for people with social vulnerability and their educational level, work history, nationality, and places where they lived were collected during the focus groups. The people who took part in the research include five males and five females, aged between 34 and 62 years. Most were unemployed (eight of them), and only two of them worked at the time of the study, and the education level were junior high school degree for eight of them and high school graduation for two of them. All of them were born and lived in Italy. In the data analysis, at the request of the participants, personal information was not considered except for gender.

Based on the definition of ISTAT (2019) already cited, all participants found themselves in vulnerable conditions due to at least one of the following reasons: disability, addiction problems, or the loss of relationships with family members.

The research study was conducted through focus groups: the 10 participants were divided into two small groups of four and six people, respectively, and took part in two focus groups lasting between 40 minutes and about one hour each. The focus groups were attended by a conductor (member of the research team) and an observer who took care of the transcription. In both cases, after the objectives of the research study were explained, discussion stimuli related to the following areas were proposed: (1) sociodemographic information, (2) the meanings of work and (3) decent work, and (4) expectations regarding the future. Examples of questions include: what is work for you? what is decent work for you? what are you expecting for your future?

The narratives that emerged in the focus groups were recorded and transcribed. All participants provided their consent for participation in the research study and for the recording.

The text was analyzed through the use of NVivo 12.0 software, but first, it underwent a pretreatment consisting of the correction of spelling errors and of the translation of some words or phrases from the dialect to the Italian language. The application of the analysis has allowed us to (1) identify the most used words and nodes in the description of the key concepts, (2) analyze the sentiments with respect to the proposed themes, and (3) find eventual gender differences.

Two researchers, belonging to the research group, carried out the coding of the text separately. The two researchers agreed on 85% of the encodings. For the remaining part, the researchers reached an agreement with the help of another researcher (part of the research group). Definitely, we found eight nodes and 119 references, and we coded a single attribute related to gender.

RESULTS

Data Analysis of the Concepts of Work and Decent Work

The text was codified through the instrument “nodes” and analyzed subsequently through “queries.”

We first used the “word frequency” query applied to both focus groups. This is a methodology that can help the researcher to identify eventual nodes (QSR International, 2014). We included in this search the words that were formed by at least five letters (in the Italian language) and that have appeared more than seven times. In addition, we excluded all of the articles and the names of people by inserting them into the “stop words list.” Table 1 shows the results of this query. In the table, some words that were expressed in singular and plural have been merged. We noticed references to needs (*money, need, live, support*), context (*Catania, Italy, context, possibility, availability, Sicily*), personal satisfaction (*pleasure, passion*), and values and rights (*respect, contract, value, rights*). There were also many references to social relationships (*father, people, friends, family, wife, son*), territorial institutions (*school, company*), and things that relate to the past, present, or future (*future, immediately, I would, choice, retirement, time*).

TABLE 1
 Word frequency

Word	<i>f</i>	Word	<i>f</i>
Work*	216	Wife	10
All	36	To live	10
Always	33	I would	10
Father	24	Career	9
Catania	23	Contract	9
Future	23	Rights	9
People**	22	Italy	9
Advance	18	To find	9
Pleasure	17	Context	8
School	17	Son	8
Company	16	Possibility	8
Respect	16	Problems	8
Need	15	Choice	8
Money	15	Pathway	8
Passion	14	Depression	7
Immediately	12	Availability	7
Helped	10	Retirement	7
Friends	10	Sicily	7
Decent	10	Time	7
Family	10	Value	7

Note. * Includes references to work (singular and plural) and the verb “work.” In Italian, these words are “lavoro/i,” “mestiere/i,” “professione/i,” and “lavorare.” ** Includes references to the words “person” and “people.” In Italian, these words are “persona” and “persone.”

Results

In the description of the concept of work, we started from the definition of the work as “a central aspect of life, providing a source of structure, a means of survival, connection to others, and optimally a means of self-determination” (Blustein, 2013, p. 1).

We have identified four nodes: (1) *work as survival*: this definition includes all of the definitions of work as something that is needed to survive (examples are: “work is survival because it gives you to live and eat” or “their work is what allows you to live”); (2) *work as a contextual problem*: all definitions of work as a problem related to the context or politics of a country fall within this node (examples of answers that fall into this category are: “I don’t think that in this context, in Sicily, there are job opportunities” or “here in Italy, there are no job opportunities; the problem is here, at the level of institutions or contracts”); (3) *work as a professional achievement*: in this node, all of the descriptions of work as professional realization have been inserted (e.g., “having a job makes a person fully integrated into society” or “the job gives you self-esteem, it makes you feel good, brings you honor”); (4) *work as value*: this node includes all references to work as something that gives value to the individuals (“work is something that gives value to your life, as person” or “when you have a work, you are worthy”). Table 2 illustrates the nodes selected for the concept of work, and for each of them, it shows the number of times the node was found (references).

TABLE 2
Nodes and references for the concept of work

Nodes	References
Work as survival	24
Work as contextual problem	16
Work as personal achievement	11
Work as value	5

For the concept of decent work we have used the following definition as starting point: decent work helps all workers attain a sense of self-respect and dignity, experience freedom and security in the workplace, and (as far as possible) affords the opportunity to choose and execute productive, meaningful and fulfilling work that will enable them to construct themselves adequately and without restrictions and make social contributions. (Di Fabio & Maree, 2016, p. 36)

Authors identified six categories of decent work: freedom, equity, security and safety, respect of human rights, economic remuneration, and individual development.

In the present study, a single node emerged: *decent work as respect for rights and duties*. This node includes those responses that have to do with respect for rights and duties in the workplace (e.g., the following are answers that fall within this node: “first of all, decent work is respect for human rights” or “decent work means respect on both sides: the employer who respects the worker and the worker who respects his obligations”). This was found a total of 19 times (references).

We verified whether the general tone of the contents was positive or negative through the analysis of sentiments. Sentiment nodes in NVivo behave differently from other nodes. In fact, in this case, there were two parent nodes: positive and negative. Each parent node has two children: very and moderately. The software has automatic settings such that the encoding in the child nodes aggregated to the parents (QSR International, 2014). There was also the possibility of having a neutral sentiment.

As shown in Figure 1, regarding the issues related to the concepts of work and decent work, most of the sentiments were neutral and no positive sentiments were found.

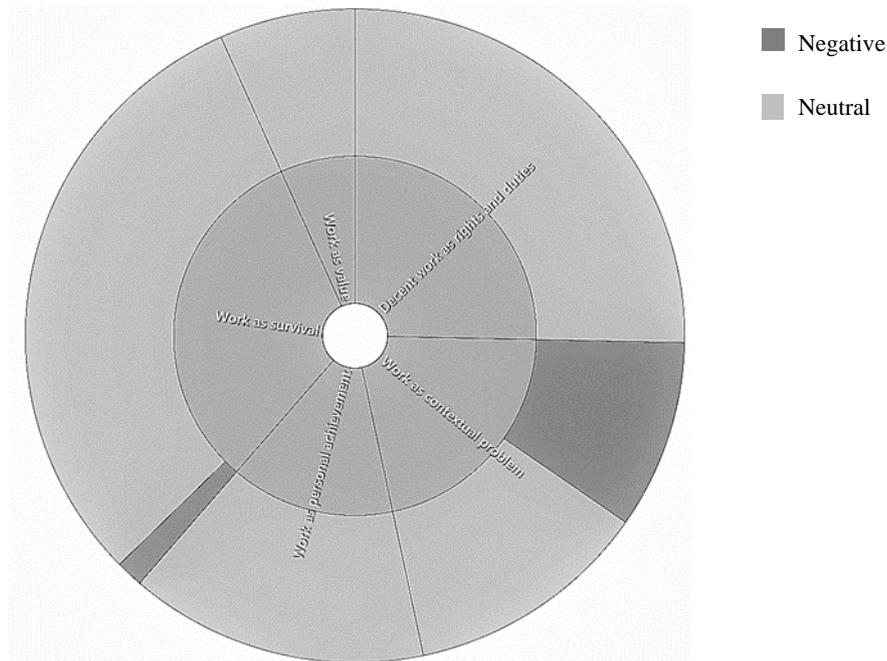


FIGURE 1
Sentiment for the nodes of work and decent work.

One case of negative sentiment emerges in the case of the *work as survival* node (e.g., one participant said “I need to work urgently. I am really in trouble, I am desperate”) and seven encodings of negative sentiment in the case of the “work as contextual problem” node (e.g., a participant said “I don’t think that in a context like Sicily I would have had the same opportunity. Here I see that it is very hard, it is different,” and another said “Sicily is a scorched land. This is Sicily, now it’s over”). Sometimes, the participants showed that these negative sentiments are linked to the low confidence in the functioning of the political system (e.g., someone says “we (Sicilians) have everything: tourism, agriculture, industries, but we do not exploit it. And it is also the fault of politicians” or “politicians think only of themselves. We cannot trust these people”).

We used the query of matrix coding to compare the group of male participants with the female one with respect to work and decent work (QSR International, 2014). The results did not show great differences related to gender except for the *decent work as rights and duties* and *work as value* nodes, which featured more references to males than to females. The graphical representation allows for better visualizing the differences found (Figure 2).

So, mainly, the male participants said: “Work is value for me,” “Yes, it is also a value for me. With the precariousness that we live, work has become an important value.”

With regard to decent work, mainly the males said that “in work it takes respect for rights,” “respect must be mutual,” or “decent work is that in which you are treated as a worker with all rights.” However, women highlighted a topic that has to do with respect: violence. Talking about respect for rights for a decent job, women said: “I hate being mistreated, I hate abuse on women; now the women are lost,” and “first of all I put respect for human rights, that is, I don’t want any kind of abuse in the workplace, no kind of exploitation. I talk a lot about human rights.”

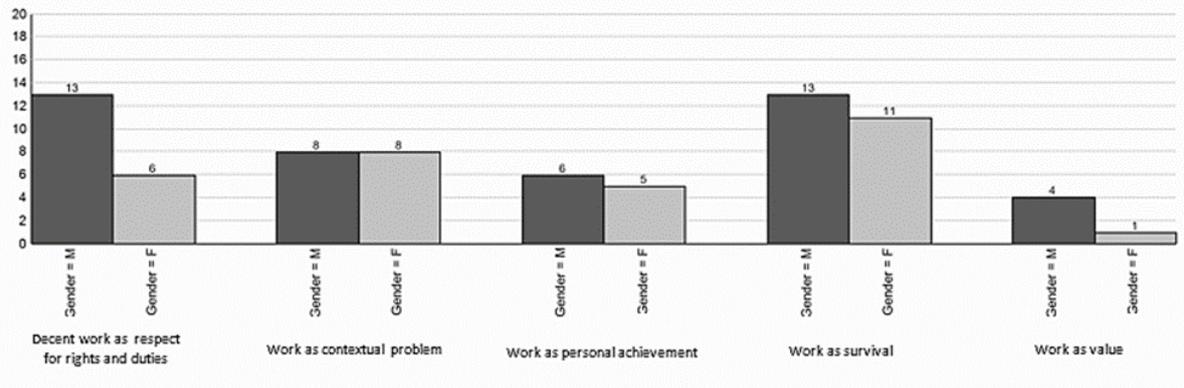


FIGURE 2
 Matrix coding for the concepts of work and decent work: Differences between males and females.

Temporal Dimension

During the focus groups, three issues emerged concerning the temporal dimension of the participants' lives: past, present, and future. The first node was coded 17 times, the second 11 times, and the future node 16 times as shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3
 Nodes and references for the temporal aspect

Nodes	Reference
Past	17
Present	11
Future	16

We noticed with respect to these nodes that different and contrasting emotions emerged toward them, which we codified as “sentiments” of positive-negative polarity using the four categories provided by the NVivo 12 software: very positive, moderately positive, moderately negative, and very negative. “Neutral” implies the non-inclusion of that text in the encoding of sentiments. The results are shown in the Figure 3.

When the participants talked about their *past*, negative feelings related to their experiences emerged above all; the negative descriptions of their experiences were sometimes accompanied by crying crises, as in the case of a participant who said: “I ... then ... I was a computer technician and a sales agent, I worked with agencies. I have nothing anymore.”

When the participants talked about their *present* we found negative reactions (such as, e.g., the phrase “at this moment we all need psychological help” accompanied by tears) and also positive sentiments, very often linked to a supportive climate experienced within the community: “Here I have known met a very important person. For me he is as a father,” “This is a house ... a house. Here we fight, then we embrace, we do everything,” or “I met another lady and I am very well. I am their mascot. They love me very much, few people like that.”

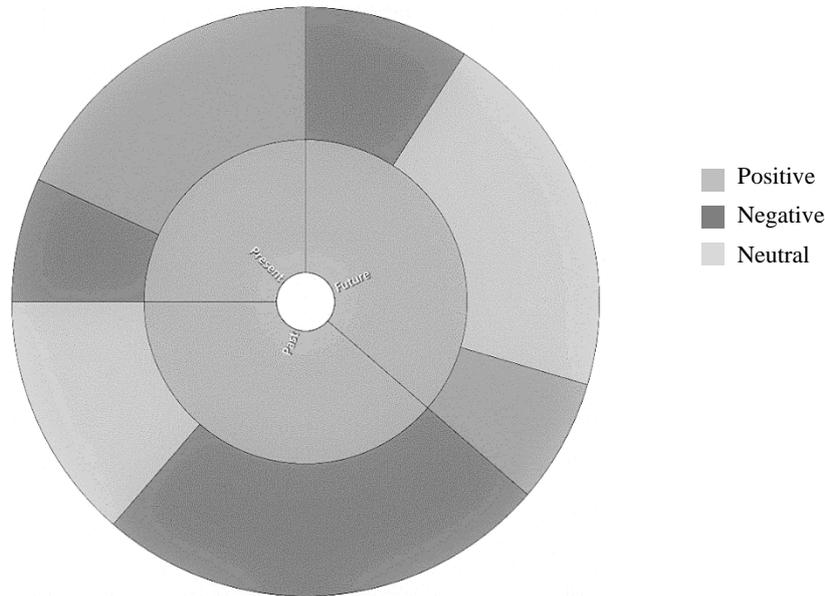


FIGURE 3
Sentiment for the nodes of past, present, and future.

When the participants talked about their *future*, positive sentiments alternated with negative sentiments. For example, to the question “How do you see yourself in the future,” a participant replied:

I don’t have the faintest idea right now. No, no, no. I can’t look forward to it right now. I’m sincere. I don’t want to lie. Right now, I can’t project myself forward. Maybe because of the conditions in which I am at the moment, but I cannot go on. It is useless to say it because I should invent, therefore ...

However, other participants respond more optimistically: “I see my future well. Today I received a job offer,” or “I have managed my life by myself until now, I will do it so.”

The matrix coding presented in Figure 4 shows that there were more references relating to the *past* for women than for men. The references relating to the *future* and *present* nodes were almost similar for both men and women.

In talking about the past, women often referred to traumatic experiences: “I had panic attacks, which I had never had in my life,” or “I had not a job. I was afraid.” Unlike women, men talked about life experiences when talking about the past: for example, “My father wanted me to study and bought me many books.”

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore job definitions, decent work, and the temporal perspective in a sample of people characterized by social vulnerability. Based on what emerged from the two focus groups, four aspects describe work: survival, context, personal success, and value. Some of these themes are consistent with definitions of the concept of work proposed by the literature (Blustein, 2001, 2006, 2008; Budd, 2011; Juntunen, 2006; Richardson, 1993, 2012).

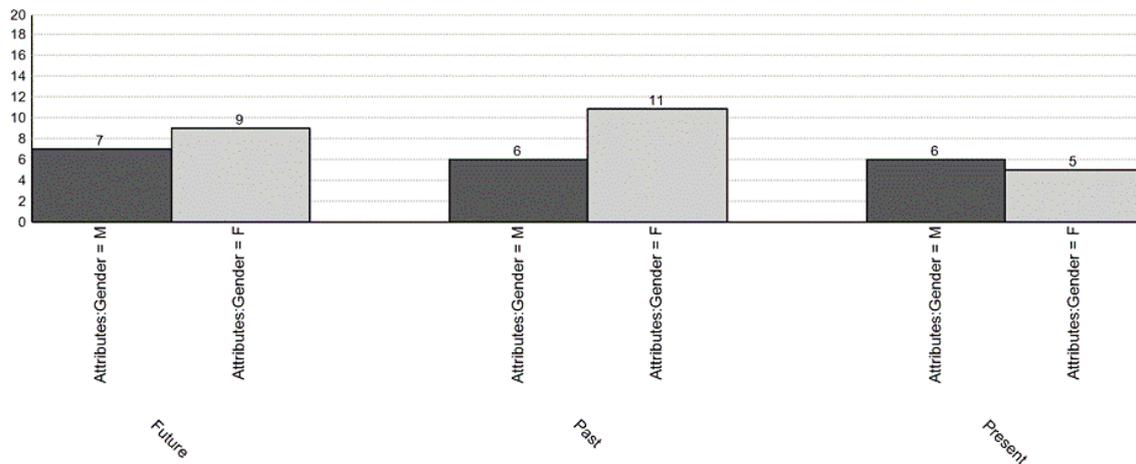


FIGURE 4
 Matrix coding for the node of past, present, and future: Differences between males and females.

The reflection's stimuli are provided by the issue of work as a contextual problem. In fact, if we were to create a definition of work starting from what the participants said, we could say that "work includes intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of the person: in fact, it is an activity that helps with maintaining survival and that allows for the realization of one's success and the feeling of worth. The surrounding context (with a particular reference to the political management of the country) should be the first to put people in a position to find work." However, the confidence that the participants place in the political system is low and aroused negative sentiments during the interview; if, on the one hand, it seems that the possibility of finding a job may depend on an external factor, on the other hand, there are negative feelings toward it. However, we did not find any reference to one's personal resources. A plethora of studies (Lent & Brown, 2013; Luthans, 2002; Savickas et al., 2009) linked the possibility of entering fully into the world of work to one's own personal resources.

With regard to decent work, we extracted a single theme that has to do with the respect for rights and duties. According to the participants in the research, the significant difference between work and decent work is related to the respect for rights and duties. This element is consistent with the definitions of decent work used (Di Fabio & Maree, 2016), but the characteristics of decent work are not fully expressed. Literature about the concept of work and decent work in socially and economically vulnerable persons is scarce. Comparing the results of the present study with the representations of decent work in groups of workers (Buyukgoze-Kavas & Autin, 2019; Vignoli et al., 2020), we undoubtedly obtained less complex definitions lacking in many aspects found in groups of heterogeneous workers, such as reasonable working hours or work-life balance, professional commitment, and personal development. In our participants, all of the dimensions related to self-realization are neglected due to the prevailing survival needs that must be satisfied.

Finally, in our research, we investigated what expectations the participants had about their future, also retracing the past of the participants and the current situation. Many negative sentiments emerged regarding these aspects. Participants described their past in primarily negative terms. In the descriptions of the present, positive feelings related to the support that the participants expressed as receiving from others in the same situation emerged. Indeed, people facing difficult situations can benefit from receiving social support (Mechanic & Tanner, 2007). In the descriptions of the future, the participants appeared uncertain,

alternating between negative and positive sentiments. In general, however, a climate of trust emerged despite the problems experienced so far. Probably, the atmosphere of sharing and confrontation that was created during the meetings of the focus group contributed at that moment to being more confident in one's future.

Limitations and Implications for Practice

The results showed the importance of the concept of work for the people involved, falling under the category of people with social vulnerability. If the definition of work appears to be charged with meanings related to the personal sphere, few references have been made to personal resources. Career professionals should therefore support this type of target group to lead reflections on their sense of personal agency (Bandura, 1989).

In addition, the participants expressed low expectations for decent work. Starting from the six categories described by Di Fabio and Maree (2016), the participants describe only one: respect of human rights. However, for a job to be decent, there are no references to other categories such as freedom, equity, security and safety, economic remuneration, and individual development. For this reason, career's professionals should encourage the raising of these expectations. For example, it is also possible to act in such a way in adolescence that future generations are the bearers of good ideas about decent work; in this sense, career education activities, carried out mainly in areas characterized by socio cultural disadvantages, can contribute to the achievement of this aim (Zammiti et al., 2020).

The present of the participants is characterized by support, but the participants probably need to rework some negative experiences from the past. Career counselling and psychological support in a community and with this target group therefore becomes necessary. In fact, many of the participants, during the focus groups, made explicit references to the desire to meet a psychologist and to be supported by a career counsellor in re-constructing their careers and their lives.

The findings of our study provide improvements in the literature and in the practice on career counselling. Regarding the contribution to the literature, the target of our study, socially and economically vulnerable people, is particularly relevant, as it is very difficult to involve in such type of research and generally neglected by traditional career counselling research.

Then, the practical implications of our study regards career counselling training: the concepts of work and decent work can be used as starting points with the aim to overcome stereotypes regarding occupations, working activities, and job search; they represent the foundations on which construct the career project, increasing the knowledge of the world of work, allowing to discover individual's own resources, providing job search tools without forgetting to increase some dimensions, such as self-efficacy.

In conclusion, these results should be considered in light of some limitations. First of all, the sample size seems to be too low to generalize these results. Future studies should include larger samples. Furthermore, other variables that could not be considered in this research due to the reduced number of participants could be considered in future studies: for example, different levels of education, or different cultural and educational backgrounds. Finally, an important critical point is represented by the heterogeneity of the vulnerability of the participants: maybe the nature of their difficulties in searching and finding a decent work is affected by the type of vulnerability and this has not been considered in the data analysis. Future studies could be focused on more homogeneous targets. In any case, in our opinion, the results provide the basis for reflecting on future research and for conducting career counselling activities with this type of target group.

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