

# Why Now? Causal Attributions for Unemployment in Older People in Spain, Based on Their Life Experiences

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*In a society marked by commerce and competitiveness, age has become an exclusion factor in employment, which affects people aged over 45 years. Based on the voices of the affected individuals in the Spanish context, this study explores the perceived causal attributions for their unemployment situation along with their experiences of job success. We conducted a multi-case study from an autobiographical perspective with ten participants, using in-depth interviews and reflective dialogue around life experiences. The results reveal, from a relational approach, the main attributions that emerged during the discourse. In spite of their singularities, the results indicate that the discourses generate shared identity traits, although there is an agreement in indicating age discrimination as one of the main determinants.*

**Key words:** social inequality, unemployment, training, employment opportunities, adults.

## INTRODUCTION

Along with the loss or absence of employment, there are multiple and diverse factors that can put the individual in an unfavourable social position and, therefore, making them vulnerable to crisis situations and at risk of labour and social exclusion (Tezanos, 2004; Insarauto, 2021). The economic, educational, residential, and social spheres, among others suggest a variety of exclusion factors that can move the individual to the margins of the inte-

gration zone defined by Castel (1997) and push them to areas of greater vulnerability and even of social exclusion. Among all these factors, age is notably one of the three cornerstones of social inequality (Subirats, 2004), transversal to the rest and capable of generating cases of multiple discrimination when combined with other exclusion factors.

The advancement of age, despite being an ineluctable process in every human being, constitutes a clear factor of social and

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labour exclusion. This process of discrimination, based on age, is known as “ageism” (Butler, 2009). Ageism generates processes of exclusion based on stereotypes towards people based exclusively on their age and is a form of discrimination that also has a negative impact on employment. Therefore, advancing years leave certain age groups at a disadvantage when it comes to employment.

Furthermore, the issue of the elderly in relation to unemployment is an issue that is silenced by media discourses (Authors, 2016), and this invisibility is an added burden that pushes them to oblivion and social exclusion (Authors, 2018). People over the age of 45 who are unemployed face age-related discrimination on a daily basis (Rubio, 2013), and their search for employment is hindered by this inescapable barrier that is beyond their control.

This situation generates different understandings and, therefore, evokes differing opinions on the subject, including confrontational positions such as the idea that the elderly are being victimized or blamed (Authors, 2017), with discourses indicating that only on a few occasions a voice is given to those involved.

From the context and casuistry of Spain, the present work contributes to giving a voice to this group, since the discourse of the elderly in unemployment contains, both explicitly and implicitly, attributions of job success achieved in the stages of employment and factors perceived by people as determinants of their unemployment or the maintenance of this situation. From these personal stories, unique and non-transferable plots, milestones, and regularities can be gathered that bring us closer to a contextualized understanding of their particular casuistry and the associated implications and needs.

This study answers the following re-

search question: What causes do unemployed people over 45 years of age in Spain attribute to unemployment and professional success? From this question, the main purpose of this study is to identify and understand, from the dialogues of the cases studied, the causes to which 45 older people attribute their current unemployment situation, along with their experiences of professional success throughout their career. The aim is to provide clues to understanding the context and the issues that could help improve future career guidance initiatives and training responses in order to enhance their chances of accessing employment, increase their social visibility, and eradicate ageism.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In a society marked by individualization (Sennett, 2000), where productivity and maximum profit at the lowest cost are paramount (Gaggi and Narduzzi, 2006), many people are pressured into adjusting to economic and business dynamics in a rampant competition to be the most profitable candidate and to access a desired position or to ensure their permanence in the company.

Those who fail to adjust to the difficult and transitory demands of the business world and who do not enjoy good “employability”, are relegated from the market and face labour exclusion and unemployment. The term employability (compendium of employment and skill), is predominant in social and media discourses, suggesting that this is key to accessing the labour market (Suárez-Lantarón, 2016). From this perspective and in today’s society, as criticized by Han (2014), an individual feels that they must take full responsibility for their professional development and even for their employment situation, and with this the commit-

ment to acquiring new professional skills for redefining their career and improving this employability. This mercantile logic, which makes the subjects responsible for their employment status, pressures people into continuing their training throughout their lives. Therefore, lifelong learning becomes an external imposition (Hohmann, 2004), which increases self-demand (Han, 2014), under the pretext of remaining “employable” and having or maintaining a position in the labour market. In relation to this idea, Lima (2019: 23) ironically expresses that the labour trend could be summarized with the motto “learn to adapt and maybe you will survive”. Thus, learning throughout life, traditionally understood as continuity in all facets, contexts and life moments of the subject (Rubio-Herráez, 2007), can come to be viewed as an imposition of the market.

In addition, there are many perspectives that view employability as a framework for justifying inequalities, supported by meritocratic arguments that justify the exclusion of certain profiles, blaming the subject exclusively for his or her career destination (Finn, 2000; Formichella and London, 2013; Han, 2014; Llinares et al., 2012; Carrieri and Moyzes, 2004). Thus, dichotomies arise regarding the causality of unemployment, between the positions that internalize and those that externalize the reasons for the absence of employment, and those that consider them controllable or beyond the control of the subject.

The processes of causal attribution involve inference, as they require perception and understanding of actions (Crespo and Freire, 2014), being a psycho-sociological process in which psychological, social and contextual factors are involved (Crespo, 1982).

In the processes of perception of actions and their attributions, according to Heider (1958), two factors can be dis-

tinguished: internal (located within the person) and external (derived from the environment). Likewise, Jones and Davis (1965) differentiate between external and internal casual attributions (depending on the location of the cause) and the relationship between the two, pointing out that the role of the actor or observer influences the causal attribution process. For Heider (1958), internal attributions can in turn be analysed from two other factors, power (understood as ability) and motivation (related to intention and effort).

Weiner (1982) considers three dimensions in the attribution process: stability (continuity or transience of a factor), control over the situation and place of causality (internal-external), relating this last dimension to the person’s self-esteem.

There is a certain degree of responsibility implicit in personal attributions, as the person is considered to be responsible for his or her situation. These attributions lead to approaches such as the ideology of success, characterised by the belief that results and achievements derive from personal merit and not from contextual factors, or the ideology of recognition, which places value on the positive image of the subject of persuasion (Crespo and Freire, 2014). This leads to the paradox of “the conversion of social processes into psychological processes and the transformation of rights into obligations” (Crespo and Freire, 2014: 277).

The causal attribution that each unemployed person establishes about their employment situation has a strong influence on the experiences of unemployment. Thus, following Buendía (2010), success is usually attributed to internal factors and failure to external factors. Unemployed people have a greater tendency to attribute unemployment to external social factors and fate than employed people, possibly as a self-esteem protection system. How-

ever, once the unemployment situation is prolonged over a long period of time, people tend to blame themselves for their situation.

It is within these theoretical approaches that the present study is framed, focusing on the causal attributions of unemployment of adults who are unemployed at the time of the research. From their experience and perceptions, these people can shed light on the causes and attributions of their employment situation, combining factors such as age and prolonged unemployment in the Spanish context.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative and interpretive approach was adopted for data collection and analysis. Given the complexity of the topic, a mixed design was employed for the methodological approach of this work, with an emphasis on qualitative aspects (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). A multiple case study was made (Stake, 2013), that allowed to explore more than one unit of analysis (Rule and John, 2015), attending to different parallel stories about the study problem. It was conducted from an (auto) biographical perspective (Bolívar and Domingo, 2019; Kaźmiersk, 2020), which has a long tradition in the study of social collectives (Bertaux, 2005). As a data collection technique, we used in-depth interviews and reflective dialogues around life experiences, developing reflective deepening cascades. This approach is based on guided conversations that encourage the discourse without limiting it, allowing informants to express themselves freely and in confidence. The instrument used oriented the conversation around the informants' educational and professional trajectory; work and unemployment experience; and training for employment and lifelong learning. The interviews induced the sub-

jects to reconstruct their professional biographies, using Kelchtermans' (1993) technique of stimulated autobiographical self-thematization and the use of analysers and critical moments through which the informants have passed.

## Contextualization

The study is contextualized in Spain, a country whose professional activity is centred on the service sector. According to figures from the Active Population Survey of the National Statistics Institute (INE, 2022), this professional sector occupied 71.2% of the Spanish working population in the third quarter of 2022. Industry is the next most frequent professional sector in Spain, followed by construction and agriculture.

In the Spanish legislative context, people over 45 years of age, like young people, are recognized in Spanish law as people facing special difficulties in securing employment. The Royal Decree-Law 3/2011 of February 18 put in place urgent measures to improve employability and reform active employment policies. In spite of this, in Spain older people do not enjoy the same visibility or social concerns that are afforded to the younger generations (Authors, 2018). Further, the current Royal Legislative Decree 3/2015, of October 23, which approved the revised text of the Employment Law, makes special mention of the empowerment of labour integration policies aimed, among other groups, at long-term unemployed people aged over 45 years.

However, the regulatory efforts do not appear to be having the desired impact, judging by the high number of unemployed people aged over 45 years in Spain. Despite the fact that the overall unemployment figure, which is still high, has been reduced in recent years (from 24.8% in the third quarter of 2012 to 12.67% in that

period of 2022), the proportion of people over 45 years of age making up the unemployment list has increased (INE, 2022). In the third quarter of 2012, the time before the economic crisis, 29.2% of the total unemployed were aged between 45 and 64 years, a percentage that, for the same months of 2019 (time before the pandemic), reached 37.6% and that, currently, after the health crisis, has increased to 39.6 in the same period of 2022. These data show how unemployment continues to target certain vulnerable profiles, especially in times of pandemic (Couch et al., 2020).

### Selection of case studies

The sample was composed of a total of 10 key informants in this multi-case study. These were intentionally selected through a reference chain or snowball sampling process (Mendieta, 2015). All of the participants met the following criteria: 1) be over 45 years old; 2) having experienced unemployment above the age of 45 years; and 3) have an accumulated period

of unemployment equal to or greater than twelve months. In addition to meeting these requirements, the informants were selected for their enriched personal and professional experience and for their willingness to participate in this study. In addition to age or gender, in order not to skew the results of the study towards variables other than age, the informants did not present other exclusion factors that could lead to the situations of multiple discrimination (functional diversity, foreigners, etc.).

Table 1 displays the data of the participants regarding age, gender, marital status, initial formation, professional sector, the number of years they have been unemployed since the loss of their last job and their pseudonym that was used in order to preserve the identity of the informants. The use of names of Greek deities as a pseudonym was chosen as a sign of appreciation towards the participants, choosing mythological characters who shared some quality or virtue with the informants.

Table 1  
Sample Description

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Marital status	Initial training	Years of unemployment since last job	Professional sector
Atlas	56	Male	Married	Secondary Education	1	Electricity and electronics
Calliope	47	Female	Widow	Higher Education	3	Sociocultural and Community Services
Orpheus	61	Male	Married	Primary Education	3	Mechanical manufacturing
Athena	4.5	Female	Single	Secondary Education	1	Sociocultural and Community Services
Demeter	59	Female	Married	Primary Education	9	Agrarian
Apollo	57	Male	Married	Primary Education	3	Graphic arts
Hyperion	45	Male	Single	Secondary Education	5	Graphic arts
Themis	46	Female	Married	Higher Education	5	Administration and management
Hestia	49	Female	Married	Secondary Education	17	Commerce and Marketing
Zeus	57	Male	Married	Secondary Education	4	Glass and ceramics

Source: Own elaboration.

As can be seen in Table 1, the informants make up a heterogeneous and diverse group, in terms of their life and professional trajectories, and therefore, they generate a polyphonic discourse that helps to understand the reality studied from different approaches, perspectives and realities. The principles of a situated research ethic (Abad, 2016) and of an inclusive (Parrilla, 2009) and alternative (Páramo and Otálvaro, 2006) approach were taken into account both in the formal approaches and in the analysis and treatment of the data, with the purpose of interpreting the realities of the participants. All the participants were given prior information of the purpose of this study before agreeing to share their experiences for this purpose.

### **Information encoding and analysis process**

Firstly, a vertical analysis was conducted by the informants in order to understand each case, with its milestones, leitmotif, people, and critical moments that constitute both the plot and the setting of the life stories. In order to gain an understanding of the reality studied, based on the informants' words, a process inspired by the grounded theory of reflective deepening was used, extracting a set of categories and themes that emerged from the stories themselves (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). These categories were then integrated and supplemented with a critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 2002), in order to locate and understand what was said, including why and in what context or sense. Following this, a relational and cross-sectional analysis of the ten participants was carried out. The results of this analysis are presented in this work taking into account the attributions that the participants make of their experiences of work success and their unemployment situation. It should be noted that the experiences and experiences

of each informant, as well as the context in which they are situated, influence their evaluations and interpretations, therefore, a third dimension is included that, as well as those factors that raise certain controversies among the informants, cannot be located in any of the two previous dimensions.

Using version 12 of the NVivo software, the main relationships between the categories were obtained through cluster analysis, using coding similarity measurements from the use of the Jaccard Coefficient or Index (JI). This coefficient is used to measure the degree of similarity between the categories, taking into account their coding. The relationship between categories is strong when the resulting value approaches 1. From a biographical perspective, the narrative included in the results is constructed from the cluster maps resulting from the analyses and from the coefficients that show the strongest correlations. These analyses serve as structural support for the exposition of the narrative that this work gathers around its ten protagonists, taking into account the dimensions of the study.

## **RESULTS**

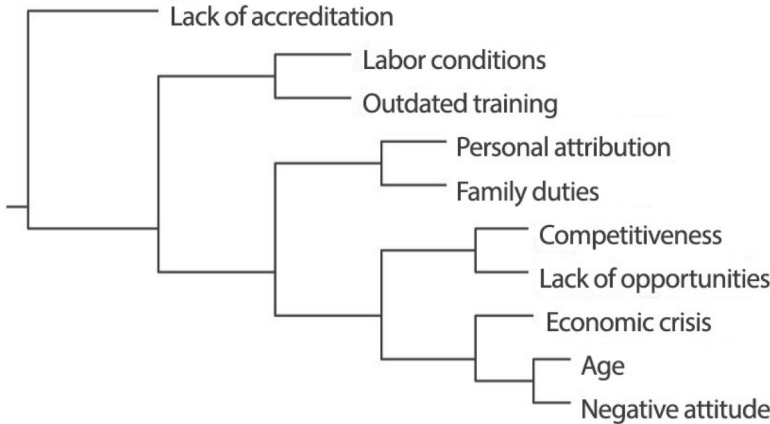
The first three blocks of results correspond to the three dimensions independently analysed: causal attributions for unemployment, causal attributions for success, and issues of controversy that emerged in the discourses. In these sections, each of the categories that emerged from the discourse and the main relationships established between them are narrated, using the branching map generated by NVivo as a structural or discursive framework. The fourth block of results shows the main correlations between all categories, through a global cluster analysis.

### Attributions of unemployment

From the discourses, a total of ten emerging categories were obtained that revealed the main causal attributions for unemployment perceived by the infor-

nants. These are displayed in the horizontal dendrogram shown in Figure 1, which grouped the elements according to coding similarity.

Figure 1  
Horizontal dendrogram on the attributions of unemployment



Source: Own elaboration with NVivo 12.

Figure 1 shows that the strongest relationships were established between age and the negative predisposition of the labour market towards hiring people over 45 years of age. This correlation obtained the highest Jaccard coefficient (0.86) among the categories of the attributions for unemployment.

Age is therefore regarded as an obstacle to employment, since it generates a negative tendency for companies to hire them. Zeus, among others, spoke on this matter. This participant demanded a greater willingness of employers to hire older people, claiming that, otherwise, the efforts of the unemployed will be useless: *“There is a lack of willingness on the part of the employer, and this is not worth anything [the actions of the unemployed] if the employer is not “willing”.*

This idea is intensified in the discourse of the interviewees due to the econom-

ic crisis, which is regarded as one of the main causes of unemployment, and which presented a strong correlation with the categories “negative predisposition” and “age”, with a Jaccard’s coefficient of 0.77 and 0.85 respectively.

In addition, the discourses pointed to the idea that the economic crisis has generated a greater lack of opportunities and competitiveness (relationships with a Jaccard Index of 0.66), which only serve to accentuate the negative predisposition of the employer. This was reflected in the high correlation rates found between the categories and in the words of informants who feel at a disadvantage in comparison with younger candidates. The high competitiveness of the market was manifested in the words of Atlas, who showed his despair by claiming: *“You provide a CV to a company and they tell you: Well, I have 50*

who are younger and more agile than you are.” Or Demeter, who states:

*“There are people who are young, qualified, with careers and with many things that I do not have. No, in that I see myself already null and void. [...] There are a lot of qualified people, with careers and things that come before the rest, and they are not going to hire a person in their fifties, they will hire a young woman, right?”*

The lack of employment opportunities was also reported by several of the informants, although this was particularly highlighted by Demeter, who claimed that he has had to dedicate himself to working in the countryside because “here [in his area] there is nothing else”.

All of this is added to the family burdens that many of the people of this age group experience along with the (frequently observed) personal reasons attributed to the unemployment situation, which were evident in the cases studied, with a JI of 0.6 between the two categories. Family worries appeared to be more prevalent in the discourses of the women, with statements such as “they want young people who have no family responsibilities and who are free” (Themis), while only one male interviewee hinted at this cause. The personal attributions present in the discourse refer to past decisions that they felt were wrong, as in the following example from Orfeo’s life “they wanted to make me a company partner; I refused it, which will be weighing on me all my life, now I could be retired from the company and earning two thousand or so euros”. In addition, actions or lack of action of the subject were perceived as impediments to employment, visible in Themis’s words: “it is not that I have moved much, the truth, I admit it” (Themis); whilst there were also perceptions of a lack of ability or competence to perform a job, as evident in Hyperion’s discourse:

*“The problem I have is that I do not value myself, that is, I am the one who wears the no [...] “But I am not going to be able to do it”, I tell myself, but of course, when telling myself this, I am already with that handicap and I say: “I will not go because I will not be able to do it”.*

The discourses highlighted a lack of training as another cause of unemployment, as some of the informants considered that their training was somewhat obsolete, which made it difficult for them to access a job, with Zeus claiming that the advancement of technologies “for people over 45, in a large number of cases, this catches them by surprise and I get involved, this catches us by surprise”. The same idea can be illustrated with an example taken from Hyperion’s discourse:

*“When I studied computer science, the monitors, apart from being old, were green phosphorous, they had no colors, they were shades of green, someone who is going to hire you, is not interested, what you learned has no validity, and so I would have to train again”.*

Working conditions also emerged as a significant barrier to accessing employment in those over 45 years of age, particularly in relation to the feeling that their training was out-of-date, the high level of competitiveness with younger candidates and the need to adapt to a meritocratic system and, in this regard, the negative predisposition of employers when it comes to hiring older people (with a JI of 0.5). The discourses of the informants revealed that, at their age and in their situation, they cannot accept the labour conditions of the current market that demands high professional and training demands at very low cost. These conditions were criticized by Atlas when saying “now they give an apprentice 500 euros and I have a family home and I



cannot earn 500 euros, I have to earn to be able to feed my people”.

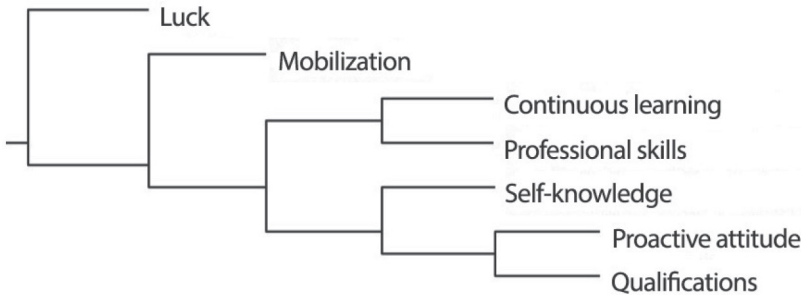
Although generally less predominant in the analysed discourses, the “lack of accreditation” cause still appears in the discourses of three women interviewed. They indicated that at some point in their job search they needed accreditation that they did not have. This is the case of Hestia who stated that “they were already asking you for titles, they were asking you for

things that I did not have either”, to which she added “today you cannot say: I know how to sew”.

### Attributions of success

The discourses revealed seven emerging categories of words that indicate the causes to which they attributed the success of their professional experiences during their work career. These categories, organized in clusters, are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2  
Horizontal dendrogram on the attributions of employment success



Source: Own elaboration with NVivo 12.

The strongest relationship was established between qualification and lifelong learning categories, with a JI of 0.86. This is evidence of the need perceived by informants to continue learning, not only for professional improvement and updating their training, but also to have the necessary qualifications to access a labour market marked by meritocracy. There was also a close relationship could be observed between qualifications and the maintenance of a proactive attitude regarding the attributions of success (JI: 0.66). This relationship was clearly seen in Apollo’s discourse, which indicated:

*“If you don’t have a degree, they can’t hire you, so me, being on the beach, looking at the newspaper, I saw that a geriatric assistant course came out*

*[...] and then, I saw it and I went and filed the papers to do it. I say: well, I’ll do it and then I will have experience of another way of working”.*

In a similar vein, Athena and Calliope attributed most of their previous professional successes to having the appropriate degree, as indicated by Caliope’s words: “I have worked in the Infant School because I am a teacher, otherwise I would never have entered life there”.

Being a competent professional was a quality that most informants considered to have opened doors for them in the professional sphere and this has helped them to maintain their employment for a number of years. Professional competence is related to self-knowledge in the informants’

discourse (JI: 0.5). They feel that knowing their potential helps them to develop professionally, as Calliope expresses when advising “If you have a quality, you have to develop it and exploit it”, and it also helps them to orient their efforts on the basis of their possibilities, as Zeus indicates: “I know where my shortcomings are and I know which door I should not knock on”.

Self-knowledge and a proactive attitude, as factors promoting successful employment, were particularly highlighted by Apollo, who, in his discourse, made continuous reference to the importance of taking advantage of opportunities and strategically planning the steps to be followed in his job search, with a proactive attitude, which he called “looking for beans” always secure in the knowledge of their own abilities and personal capacity to be able to “sell themselves well”.

Present in the discourse, although with a medium-low intensity ratio (JI: 0.4), lifelong learning, along with professional competence, were the main attributions for success that were mentioned by informants, aware that professions demand continuous updating. In the words of Atlas, “I started as a lackey, then an apprentice, then a third-class officer, then a sec-

ond-class officer, then a first-class officer and then, in charge. Why? Well, because I have gone through all the stages of learning, learning my profession”.

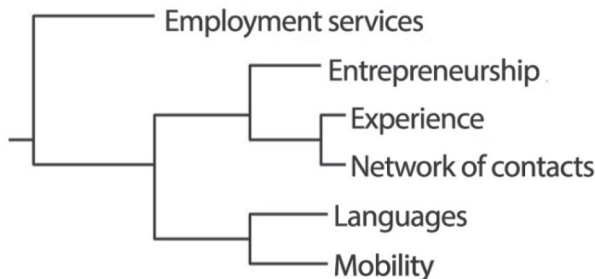
With a lower presence in the discourse and a low relationship with the rest of the categories, “mobilization” and the “luck” factor emerged. Social mobilization as a protest response was only mentioned in Zeus’ speech, which placed great emphasis on this, in expressions such as “I think we can do something by uniting”. The notion of “luck” was the only independent attribution linked to the actions, efforts or merits of the subject and was very present in Hyperion’s discourse, in phrases such as “I had a kind of lucky break because I found a job related in some way to graphic design.”

### Controversies

From the analysed discourses, six factors were extracted for which there was no agreement among the informants on their relevance for access to employment, since they were lived and interpreted by the informants from different perspectives based on their personal biography. These are shown as a cluster in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Horizontal dendrogram to show the controversies that emerged in the discourses



Source: Own elaboration with NVivo 12.

There is a strong relationship between experience and the network of contacts, with some informants such as Atlas, stating that *“experience and your good name always gives you work, and always gives you “casual jobs “[specific jobs within the underground economy], it always gives you an outlet”*. However, securing a job through the use of a network of contacts was understood by many of the informants as the colloquially named *“a way in”* (obtaining a job or employment by recommendation); fortuitously you can have it or not have it and it does not always guarantee success: *“for many recommendations and many ... but they have not called me back to the place, we are there waiting to see ..., because many people say by ways in, by contacts, well it has not served me very well”* (Atenea).

Experience, whilst it expands the network of contacts and all informants agreed on its value for professional performance, as expressed by Demeter’s phrase *“practice has made me a teacher”*, there is no agreement among the informants that it opens doors to employment. Many of the informants considered that experience is a powerful factor in the return to the labour market. This is the case of Hyperion, who, for example, claimed that at his age *“if you don’t have much experience, nobody will hire you to train you.”* However, from the discourses the idea also emerged that, beyond certain ages, professional experience is not valued by companies. As Orpheus stated, *“we have more experience, but no ... no one values that”*, (Orpheus). This can be understood by the employer or even by the unemployed himself, as a factor of resistance to change. As Atlas states, *“the first thing is, that you are already at an age, you don’t want to go back and start from scratch because you already have your profession learned and you are a specialist in your profession”*.

In the discourses, mobility, understood as the change of temporary or permanent residence in order to take a job, was found to be correlated with the command of foreign languages that opens up new opportunities (JI: 0.57). However, both factors aroused discrepant viewpoints among the informants. Some interviewees ruled out mobility as a work option, usually for family reasons, while others would accept a job, even if it implies a change of residence. Regarding language, there is a clear controversy. There are several who were training in foreign languages, seeking a professional outlet, since they considered that *“languages are wild cards that always come in handy”* (Atenea); while others claimed that it is not an essential part of training in their professional sector: *“If I am going to hire you as an electrician, why do you want to speak six languages?”* (Atlas).

Entrepreneurship was an option rejected by practically all the interviewed subjects. Only one of the informants, Themis, remotely mentioned, albeit with fear and reservation, the possibility of adopting this approach. Atlas and Apollo considered that age is an impediment to entrepreneurship, since according to their calculations, they would not have time to recover the initial investment that the creation of a company would entail, and also their pensions could be diminished in the future. In this regard, Atlas claimed, with a touch of irony, that *“If I am self-employed, and I am six years self-employed and do very well, and when I retire I have been self-employed... What pay will I have? What pay do I have? A pittance!”* Zeus added that entrepreneurship is not a valid alternative for all people, so he did not trust the viability of this option to avoid unemployment.

Regarding the effectiveness of public employment and support services, there were enormous discrepancies between the

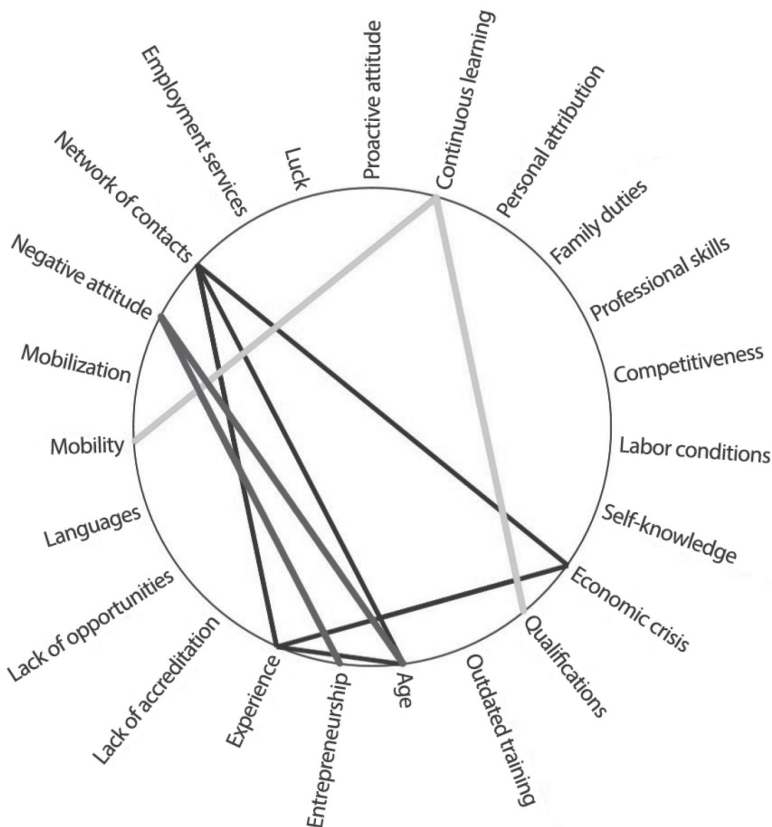
informants interviewed. Calliope, Athena and Themis confirmed that on some occasions they have been given a job opportunity due to being registered as jobseekers. However, Themis compared the probability of receiving a call from the employment service with that of winning the lottery, emphasizing the low faith in these services. Apollo also argued for the importance of support services, particularly in relation to professional advice and CV development. In contrast to these perspectives that valued to a greater or lesser extent the public services offered in terms of employment,

were Orpheus and Hestia's perceptions in relation to this. For Orpheus, the support service is nothing more than a "story" that "doesn't work".

### General cluster analysis

Global analysis revealed the strongest relationships established between the categories of the three dimensions analysed. Adjusting the lower limit of the similarity index to 0.8, Figure 4 shows the relationships with Jaccard coefficients higher than this value.

Figure 4  
Pie chart of all elements



Source: Own elaboration with NVivo 12.

In Figure 4, three relational systems are distinguished, showing the strongest correlations between them. These systems have been marked with different shades to clearly differentiate the structures formed.

Age is part of the most complex structure of relationships shown in Figure 4, whose lines are drawn in black, denoting the categories of network of contacts, experience, and economic crisis. The discourses highlighted the contradictory idea that age allows for the accumulation of experience, which, although having a high professional value, if it is associated with age (which is precisely what makes it possible), it is not valued by the labour market, particularly in times of economic crisis. Age and professional experience, in turn, allow for building a network of contacts that, although potentially useful for accessing the job market, their effectiveness is diminished due to the economic crisis.

With regard to age, a second relational structure was generated that links this, through dark gray lines, to the categories of negative predisposition and entrepreneurship. This strong relationship highlights the employer's negative predisposition towards hiring people over 45, which is felt by the unemployed themselves, as revealed by Orpheus' harsh words denoting ageism, as experienced first-hand: *"Older people are not wanted anymore, not anywhere. They think we are old, and old people should go to IMSERSO [Institute for the Elderly and Social Services]"*. This difficulty in accessing employment as an employee brought to light the debate on entrepreneurship in the discourses, which was flatly rejected by most of the informants, who considered that it would only aggravate their situation of vulnerability: *"Autonomous means to put yourself on your own and compete at a time when work was booming, but if there is no*

*work, why are you going to become autonomous? Yet again, further ruin* "(Atlas).

Another powerful relationship structure was formed by the categories of continuous learning, qualifications, and mobility, indicated in light grey in Figure 4. The relationship between them showed the harmony between the continuity of learning throughout life and the need for such learning to be accredited in order to remain competitive in a demanding labour market, whilst mobility is presented as an opportunity to access employment, which most informants preferred not to use, mainly for family reasons.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

All unemployed older people have their own experiences and life trajectories in relation to this issue. In general, they share a perception of marginalization, invisibility and loss of labour rights that radically questions their abilities and impacts their employment and trajectory, with undeniable negative effects. However, despite the uniqueness of their experiences, they share in common a phase of professional identity crisis (Dubar, 2002; Chen and Reay, 2020), with a strong emotional component (Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto, 2015). All the stories share certain common elements in their narratives, generating a shared identity regarding age and the difficulties in accessing employment, which is nuanced in terms of casuistry and specific experiences.

There are multiple responses, justifications, reasons and past burdens that the unemployed hint at when they talk about their professional situation. In their discourses, the causes they perceive as determining their current situation emerge, in many cases loaded with guilt and repentance, are in accord with the assertions of

Underlid (2013) and others, mitigating the misery with allusions to external adversities (Rihter and Kobal, 2007; Schraggeová and Kopcová, 2009).

It should be noted how external attributions of unemployment are the ones most commonly observed, since the informants speak mainly of their situation as something that is independent of their efforts or personal capacities and beyond their control, which helps the subjects to attenuate their despair and frustration in the face of job loss, as also reported in the study by Tiffon (2003). It is important to note at this point that the Spanish labour market is difficult for older people looking for a new job opportunity, as supported by figures from the National Institute of Statistics (INE, 2022), and that informants are aware of this reality first-hand. This is reflected in the strong relationship between age and the perceived negative predisposition to hire people over 45, driven by the economic crisis. In addition, the informants allude more to the causes of unemployment rather than success, which can be taken to indicate that discouragement and psychological distress are generated by unemployment (Fernández-Valera et al., 2019), that intensifies with the age of the unemployed person (Climent-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Moyano-Díaz et al., 2013).

However, while a large part of the attributions of unemployment mentioned by informants are due to circumstantial external causes (crisis, lack of opportunities, etc.), it is surprising that most of the attributions of success are associated with factors internal to the individual. This reveals an unconscious personal attribution of the employment or unemployment situation.

As Han (2014) warned, in the current complex society, the “neoliberal subject” emerges who is totally vulnerable to current social trends, believing that they must

own and take responsibility for their actions and the associated consequences, which leads them to situations of self-blame and increasing spirals of self-demand as a way of controlling their behaviour. This leads to the individualistic reduction of social problems, denounced by Crespo and Freire (2014).

In this context, based on the differentiation of causal attributions based on the location of the cause as defined by Heider (1958) and shared by Jones and Davis (1965), most of the attributes of success are internal (except for those included in the “luck” category), and in turn, mostly, dependent on and controllable by the subject (qualifications, lifelong learning, etc.). The internal and relatively controllable nature of these attributes again betrays, although unconsciously, the burden of self-blame felt by the participants, this highlights the process of loss of self-esteem as a consequence of long-term unemployment that Buendía (2010) points out. The informants understand most of the attributes of success as elements that are attainable with effort, work, and study, and are therefore the responsibility of each individual. Whilst this is a good means of stimulating action, it also obviates the implementation of other measures that are needed to respond fairly to the situation of certain priority groups, such as the one in question.

In parallel, the participants perceive ageism to be among the causes of unemployment, since many have felt the age-related discrimination that prevails in the current job market (Nuvaez, 2019; Serrano-Argüello, 2011). Age, being a factor that is internal to the subject, is regarded as an insurmountable obstacle, which determines all their efforts to access employment, as indicated by the abundant correlations established between this factor and the other attributions that are thought to be

age-dependent. This reality contrasts with (and lacks meaning in) a society in which the aging of the population is an issue of increasing concern in Europe, with the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) promoting access to stable employment among the older members of society, to face the difficulties and barriers that the group faces (Green, 2009) and with a normative discourse that both at national and European level, not forgetting this group (Authors, 2017).

The controversies found in the analysed discourses also reaffirm the idea of diversity and heterogeneity of the group. Whilst this is a complex group composed of individuals in different circumstances and with distinct trajectories and perspectives, they share the common problem of “unemployment”, which also requires complex and nuanced responses. Not all tools are valid for all subjects, as the reality of the situation is experienced by each person in a different way depending on their age and prior experiences. This clearly shows the diversity of the group of people over 45 years of age and the need to design personalized proposals that serve specific individuals (Freirer and Senghass, 2021). From this, and as Rozas (2018) has argued, in order to understand and act on social issues such as inequality, there is a need to address the complexity of this scenario, which also requires listening carefully to the people and groups involved.

In short, the diversity of the group, as highlighted in this study, implies the need to design support and training interventions that meet the demands and needs of older people who are unemployed. These initiatives should include individualized measures that are adapted to the multiplicity of cases that affect the group, initiatives that place value on their life history, experience and knowledge, and that are applied to professional development or help them

to readjust their skills and experience to the demands of new career options.

However, it is important to recognize the limitations of training or guidance measures, since these alone cannot fully respond to social problems. Only if these initiatives are accompanied and reinforced by structural measures can we mitigate the difficulties of professional placement faced by older unemployed individuals.

Similarly, it is important to bear in mind that the training measures adopted should not be exclusively aimed at this group, since the problem of unemployment for the elderly is a social problem that has effects and repercussions at all levels. The eradication of age-related labour discrimination, an increase in the opportunities for older people to access employment, and a rise in the visibility of this group are all issues that require the involvement of numerous agents. In this regard, training can play a relevant role, not only in addressing specific needs, but also (and in particular) in promoting education and social awareness. To this end, this proposal aims to contribute to, while recognizing the limitations of qualitative studies focused on the in-depth study of case studies, although it does not allow for the generalization of findings, it helps to understand complex realities and serves to find clues and clues that require educational and social attention.

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### **Sažetak**

## **ZAŠTO SAD? KAUZALNE ATRIBUCIJE NEZAPOSLENOSTI STARIJIH OSOBA U ŠPANJOLSKOJ NA TEMELJU NJIHOVOG ŽIVOTNOG ISKUSTVA**

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*U društvu koje je obilježeno trgovinom i tržišnim nadmetanjem, dob je postala isključujući faktor pri zapošljavanju, što utječe na osobe starije od 45 godina. Na temelju iskaza pojedinaca pogođenih time u španjolskom kontekstu, ovaj rad analizira percipirane kauzalne atribucije situacije njihove nezaposlenosti i njihovo iskustvo uspješnosti na poslu. Proveli smo istraživanje više slučajeva iz autobiografske perspektive s deset sudionika, koristeći dubinske intervjuve i reflektivni razgovor o životnim iskustvima. Prema relacijskom pristupu, rezultati pokazuju glavne atribucije koje su se pojavile tijekom razgovora. Usprkos njihovim singularitetima, rezultati ukazuju da iz razgovora proizlaze zajedničke osobine identiteta, iako postoji suglasnost da je diskriminacija na temelji dobi jedna od glavnih odrednica.*

**Ključne riječi:** socijalna nejednakost, nezaposlenost, osposobljavanje, mogućnosti zapošljavanja, odrasle osobe.