

Ewa Rzechowska

John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (KUL)

50+ workers at risk of redundancy, or what counsellors should know: A psychological perspective

The article aims to outline the disintegration of behavioural organisation, occupational and family engagements in 50+ workers faced with increased job insecurity. The first part sketches a developmental portrayal of middle-aged people,¹ precarious job situations and its psychological consequences. The following parts draw on the findings of research on employment of 50-plussers as perceived by employers and social workers. This provides a multidimensional background for examining changes in the behaviours of people aged 50 and over as the threat to their jobs becomes more severe. To theoreticians, the article offers insights into interrelationships of various human behaviours and into the advancing process and mechanisms of behavioural disintegration in the situation of increasing threat. Labour market practitioners will obtain details concerning middle-aged people's behaviour in the unstable labour market, thereby extending their assessment beyond the "well-defined" vocational competencies. This may enhance opportunities for accurate identification of individual potentials underpinned by diverse ways of engaging with family and vocational pursuits, and consequently optimise the selection of helping interventions.

Keywords: middle age, 50+ workers, threat of job loss, a sense of security, consulting

The article addresses psychological changes in the behaviour of middle-aged people in the situation of growing perceived job insecurity. These issues are individually and socially impactful especially that the recent pension and retirement legislation, stipulating higher retirement age, has contributed to increasing the occupational activity rates in the middle-aged group. According to the latest data, 54% of 50-year-olds and 44.8% of people aged 55-64 are vocationally active (MPiPS 2013, Eurostat,

¹ Throughout the article, "middle age," "middle adulthood," and "mid-life" are used interchangeably. They correspond to the characteristic changes which take place in human development between age 35/40 and 60/65 (Appelt, 2005). The research presented here included respondents from the second half of middle adulthood, i.e. people aged 50 to 65; the same group is referred to as 50-plussers or 50-year-olds.

2014). Many of them are confronted with a constant risk of redundancy. Today's 50-plus generation have directly experienced the effects of successive political and economic transformations, while the prolonged economic crisis and volatility of the labour market do not warrant them secure employment. These observations are corroborated by current research.² A processual approach to the problem and the application of the *Strategia Rekonstruowania Transformacji Procesu* (the *Reconstruction Strategy of the Process Transformation*) (Rzechowska, 2014) made it possible to identify various forms of disintegration of individual behaviour patterns. Based on such analyses, an empirical model was constructed which reflects the disorganisation of activity in 50+ workers, which exacerbates along the growing subjectively-experienced threat. Further investigation of the problem may prove useful to a range of professionals. A deeper knowledge of the middle-aged generation's activity in the precarious labour market could benefit labour market practitioners by enabling them to go beyond the traditional assessment of "well-defined" vocational competencies and facilitating a more accurate identification of individual potentials underpinned by diverse ways of engaging with family and vocational pursuits. Researchers, in turn, could use the argument presented here to obtain an insight into interrelations of various aspects of human behaviours and the processes and mechanisms of behaviour disintegration in the context of the growing perceived threat. Both researchers and practitioners could derive from it an inspiration to devise new methods of counselling and research interventions.

Psychological portrayal of the middle-aged employee: Autonomy, distance, generativity and wisdom

People aged 50 and over experience significant changes in personal development, performing heightened self-assessment, scrutinising their life achievements in retrospect and inquiring about the meaning of life (Oleś, 2012; Oleś, Batory, 2008; Appelt, 2005). Generally, the researchers of middle adulthood fall into two broad categories: one of them focuses on the downsides (e.g. lowered ability, impaired capacity, aggravating health issues, etc.) and the other underscores the advantages (considerable developmental potential and compensation skills) ascribed to this age group. Ever more frequently, the concept of mid-life crisis is getting interrogated and dismissed (Shweder, 1998; Freund, Ritter, 2009), while developmental characteristics of middle age and younger generations are juxtaposed to contend that the

² The detailed description of the research procedures and tools, as well as a preliminary analysis of findings, was presented in: Rzechowska, E. (Ed.), (2010) *Dojrzały pracownik na rynku pracy: Jak zabezpieczyć przed wykluczeniem społecznym osoby 50+?* The total sample included 500 50-plussers, therein people at risk of redundancy, unemployed people and early retirees (cf. footnote 4). The very extensive database collected throughout the study has served as a basis for a series of analyses. The article presents outcomes of one of them. For examples of other analyses, see, among others, Rzechowska, Dacka, 2014, 2015 (forthcoming).

alleged benefits of youth are merely illusory (Strenger, Rottenberg, 2008). What is increasingly underscored, instead, as a solid asset is middle-aged individuals' growing autonomy, founded upon self-awareness of priorities, capacity for self-control and self-reflective aptitude.

Middle age is a period of the greatest personal and social independence as well as the apex of career achievement. In middle adulthood, distance to oneself and the world grows, which provides a basis for self-revaluation in two basic areas: vocational career and interpersonal relationships. (Pietrasinski, 1990). Self-distance translates into better capability of correcting plans and revising wishes, without undercutting the person's sense of life meaningfulness. Distance to the world, in turn, is displayed in lowered vulnerability to social pressures and expectations and concomitant increased independence from others' judgments, opinions and beliefs. Autonomy and distance enable individuals internally to integrate three temporal perspectives: the past (in terms of both the personal life history as well as seminal historical events), the present and the anticipated future (assessment of the hitherto achievements and failures in life and conscious planning of a life to come). Occasionally only are those replaced by defence mechanisms: an escapist idealisation of one's situation in life or an excessive focus on social expectations (good performance of parental, spousal and/or work roles).

Middle-aged adults are less preoccupied with satisfying their own needs. Rather, they shift focus from "me" onto "others" and derive satisfaction from constructive rapport with the younger generation (transfer of values, sharing knowledge, skills and experience, financial support, etc.) as well as from involvement in caring for people, products and ideas (cf. generativity in Erikson, 1997).

People are more likely to succeed in such pursuits if they are capable of reflective, experience-informed, objectivised problem-solving in which the life contexts, perspectives, needs and expectations of all the parties involved are taken into consideration. Understanding of the nature of human existence and orientation toward the common good make it possible to relinquish guilt-attribution inclinations and embrace an in-depth empathetic examination of problems at hand (cf. dimensions of wisdom in Kekes, 1983; Baltes, Glück, Kunzmann, 2004). A potential decline of (energy, motor, sensory, cognitive) capacities is compensated for by a recourse to unique strategies of action and thinking.

The generation aged 50 and over is located "in-between" the aging parents and the children on the verge of adulthood, the two groups demanding different types of engagements (cf. *sandwich generation* in Miller, 1981). 50-plussers, thus, find themselves in a complex network of ever mutating family and occupational relationships and obligations. Emphatically, work-related issues are crucial for this age-group as career engagements essentially stabilise their situation in life.

50-plussers in the labour market

Middle-aged employees boast an impressive range of assets, which unfortunately tend to be underestimated, if not overlooked altogether.

- (1) They have extensive life and vocational experience. They grasp the complexity of problems, scrutinising them from various perspectives and in changing contexts. Their goal-setting is, as a rule, realistic and their action plans quite meticulously designed. They are credible, responsible and perseverant. They are not easily discouraged and do not shun tackling difficult issues. In challenging situations, they focus on problem-solving. They have a considerable tolerance for ambiguity and are receptive to new information. They are more effective at self-organisation in work settings and cope with stress more efficiently than the young do. They patiently handle repeatability and routine, better perform in imposed tasks, are experts in time management and are more easily reconciled to limitations and inconveniences.
- (2) Although, statistically speaking, their formal education and some mental functions are lower, older employees skilfully utilise distinct compensation strategies (effective organisation of information, apt assessment of the relevance of particular factors in a problem, focus on the most important parts of a tasks, recourse to tested solutions highly likely to yield the desired result, etc.) (Chase, Simon, 1973; Charness, 1981; Pietrasiński, 2001; Olejnik, 2011; Baltes, Glück, Kunzmann, 2004).
- (3) They are experts in their respective fields (find information more effectively and adequately select, organise and interpret it), because their vocational careers have for the most part unfolded in the market economy with an access to modern technologies. They are open to new experiences and, at the same time, equipped with a developed critical sense. They derive more satisfaction from their jobs.
- (4) Mature employees know their organisation inside out. At the same time, they are ready to do thing for others and are less guided by self-interest (cf. generativity – a desire to leave something of value behind). They can manage a young team and be effective mentors (they are competent, more lenient about their colleagues' mistakes and capable of owning to their own errors). The workplace tends to be their basic site of making, sustaining and developing contacts with others, while their altruistic approach to co-workers and the superiors' assessment are positively correlated with job satisfaction (Weiss, Nicholas, Daus, 1999; Lyubomirsky, King, Diener, 2005).
- (5) They are loyal employees and display a strong attachment to the employer. They are more available and reliable. They are conscientious, dedicated, scrupulous, hardworking and punctual. They fall ill less frequently and boast low absenteeism rates. In the course of time, they make ever fewer mistakes in task performance. Older employees are statistically less prone to accidents at work.

As their turnover rates are relatively low, investments in upgrading their skills bring better returns (Norman, John, Glenn, 2006).

Middle-aged employees are aware of their assets and, in evaluating their various competencies, perceive themselves as highly competent technologically (service, assembly, repair and maintenance of machines and appliances), interpersonally, organisationally and managerially (communication skills, interpersonal contacts, team work organisation, coordination and monitoring of co-workers). In terms of occupational engagements, they also typically describe themselves as self-reliant, observant of deadlines, available, prepared to work flexible schedules, logical and analytical (BKL report, 2013).

However, in a culture which prioritises youth and is fraught with permanent job insecurity, the assets of 50+ workers, unfortunately, often go unnoticed.

Attitudes of labour market actors to 50-plussers as employees

The literature on the subject repeatedly dwells on employers' stereotyped assessment and grievous underestimation of older employees and their assets, based on the widespread notions about an alleged maladjustment of the "socialism-affected" generation to the labour market modes and requirements. Employers themselves admit that they are reluctant to hire mature employees since people aged 50 and over are popularly perceived as an economic burden (deteriorating health status, lesser efficiency, a greater sense of entitlement, "snatching" jobs away from the young, etc.) as well as an unpromising personal investment (lower education, computer illiteracy, poor command of foreign languages, aversion to novelty, withdrawal, lack of self-reliance, low self-confidence, anxiety about competition from the young, etc.) (Raport Ekspertki Manpower, 2008; Sweet, 2007, Boni, 2011; Mól, 2008). At the same time, employers often fail to realise how inconsistent they are themselves in spelling out their requirements for employment. Two thirds of employers demand experience and a half expect responsibility, work ethics and honesty. The list of sought-after employee features includes also good contact with customers, communication skills, cultivated manners and availability (BKL report, 2013). All these are natural properties of middle age rather than of youth. And yet, if choosing between a young candidate and a middle-aged applicant of similar qualifications and salary expectations, 52% of employers would hire the younger one. Only 19% of employers would "rather choose the older candidate" and the meagre 4% would "definitely" hire the older person.³

Recent research disproves the pernicious stereotypes (cf. *Polacy na temat aktywności zawodowej seniorów [Poles on vocational activity of senior citizens]*,

³ The study was commissioned by Akademia Rozwoju Filantropii (Academy for the Development of Philanthropy) and carried out by IPSOS.

OBOP, 2011). Older employees are appreciated as equally or more competent (79%) and efficient (69%) than the young. And the charges insinuating that senior citizens' are particularly reluctant to upgrade or acquire new competencies (16% in the 60-64 years-of-age group) can be easily countered by citing the general statistics, which reveal that over the last year as many as 64% of all Poles (irrespective of their age) have done nothing to improve their competences while 37% of the adult Polish population have never enrolled in any training course (BKL report, 2013).

Clear differences in defining 50-plussers' problems and proposing employment policy solutions are observed also among social workers.⁴ Basically, three major attitudes can be distinguished in the group, falling into "the employer perspective," "the 50-plusser perspective" and "the integrated perspective" (Rzechowska, 2015 forthcoming).

Those who adopt "the employer perspective" describe 50+ workers in stereotyped ways, attending primarily to their utility at workplace. They focus on effecting change in their behaviours and "adjusting" them to the market demands and employers' requirements. The "ideal" they advocate prioritises modes of action typical of a young, educated person, neglecting at the same time middle-age characteristics, which can also be effectively utilised in the labour market. They draw attention to problems that employers may face when hiring an individual aged over 50.

Another group is made up by those who embrace "the 50-plusser perspective" and includes mainly psychologists and trainers employed in social services. They advocate protecting the interests of 50+ workers. They sketch multidimensional portrayals of middle-age, which attend to a considerable multiplicity of and differentiation across situations in life. They foreground 50-plussers' competences and socially useful assets as well as threats inherent in competition rampant in the labour market. The supporters of "the 50-plusser perspective" rarely propose ways of coping with the difficult situation. Instead, they tend rather to define problems and point out whose responsibility it is to solve them. Preoccupied with designing a protection system for people aged 50 and over, they seem largely oblivious to 50-plussers' potentials as well as to other actors' needs and interests though not so to their responsibilities vis-à-vis older employees, which they rigorously underscore.

The third group consists of those who adopt "the integrated perspective" and focus on the system as a whole. They discern various levels on which the problems of 50+ workers may be addressed: an employee, an employee in a team (in multilateral relations with co-workers and employers), an employer in the system (embedded in a network of relations with various labour market institutions, actors and services, including helping services). On each of these levels, they identify problems

⁴ The project titled "Wczesna dezaktywizacja zawodowa osób 50+ a otwieranie rynku pracy dla dojrzałych pracowników" (Early occupational deactivation of 50-plussers vs. opening of the labour market for mature employees) (POKL, Działanie 7.2.1) (Human Capital Operational Programme. Sub-measure 7.2.1). Content manager: E. Rzechowska (cf. Rzechowska, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a).

to be solved so that working conditions should be best adjusted to 50-plussers' competences and capabilities. However, they first of all seek solutions which optimise relationships among the labour market's various actors (relations at workplace; relations among institutions, etc.). They emphasise that keeping people aged 50 and over vocationally active is a socially and economically weighty issue. They, nevertheless, do not articulate any particular solutions targeted at individual people (Rzechowska, 2015, forthcoming).

The analysis of occupations and functions performed by those who voice particular perspectives reveals that "the employer perspective" is usually adopted by vocational counsellors, employment agents and social workers; "the 50-plusser perspective" by psychologists and trainers; and the "system-perspective" by managers and project leaders.

Evidently, the labour-market actors focus primarily on the problems involved in the occupational activity of 50+ workers. They are far more rarely inclined to address the psychological and social consequences entailed in a prolonged experience of the threat of job loss.

The risk of job loss and its psychological consequences

Faced with a risk of redundancy, middle-aged people only very rarely seek counselling help. In the original research cited below, only the respondents who found themselves in the harshest material need sought help, and, symptomatically, they described the experience related to it as "extremely difficult" (Rzechowska, 2010a). None of the respondents used counselling help in the proper sense of the term.⁵ Today's 50-plussers entered the labour market when career course was still largely predictable and dedication to the company, stability of employment and fixed income guaranteed social and mental security. The contemporary labour market is characteristically competitive, which powerfully affects employment and working standards (e.g. relativism of priorities and goals of work; Sennett 2006). The individual's job and position in the organisational hierarchy have come to be the basic determinants of his/her standing in the social structure and a major criterion in assessing his/her utility. Strong work-related stress (insecurity induced by a fear of employment discontinuity, employers' excessive requirements, pressure to perform more efficiently) triggers perceptions of threat which affect occupational engagement and close relations (Retowski, 2012), without however prompting attempts to seek counselling help.

It is so even though the threat of job loss entails a prolonged experience of anxiety, frustration and powerlessness while also increasing vulnerability to evaluation, suggestibility (Chudzicka-Czupala, 2004) and difficulty in decision making

⁵ The respondents did not consider such an option. Help was sought only by people whose livelihoods were insufficient, despite working.

(Borucki, 1990; Gamian-Wilk et al.2008). A waning sense of control over the situation is accompanied by changes in the patterns of family- and work-related activity as well as by a considerable decrease in life satisfaction. The “temporal perspective” is also subject to re-drawing: the dominant tendency is to focus on the present and refer to the past. A reduced sense of control over life initiates a chain reaction of changes which culminate, among others, in the loss of perceived stability, narrowing down of life prospect and unsettling of the established order in family and personal life (Bańka, 1992). The vision of future is overcast with anxieties about job and financial security (Chudzicka-Czupala, 2004). The fear that subsistence is in jeopardy goes hand in hand with destabilisation of family life. Irrespective of the family’s actual reaction and feedback, guilt feelings, fading self-esteem and a decreased sense of authority impress themselves on relationships with children and spouses. Individuals who experience risk and threat seek support from family, thereby not infrequently displaying self-deprecating and self-marginalising attitudes themselves. Sometimes, they vent off their own frustrations in contacts with kin and friends.

The instability of employment negatively affects also the quality and efficiency of their performance and relationships at workplace. People at risk of redundancy are preoccupied with retaining their position, feel isolated and go through difficulties in communicating with the team (De Cuyper, De Witte, Vander Elst, Handaja, 2010). Their motivation for work declines in parallel with their job satisfaction. Concurrently, their loyalty toward co-workers dwindles while distrust of supervisors and absenteeism grow. Often, a full-fledged “survivor syndrome” develops.⁶

With retirement age postponed, people aged 50 and over, instead of finalising their vocational careers, are persistently exposed to a heightened risk of job loss.⁷ Usually, they decide to seek help only when they find themselves beset by grave financial exigencies and, in such circumstances, expect material support. At the same time, social services workers have a very limited knowledge of the mental status and behaviours of 50-plussers in a threatened job situation, which makes their helping interventions less effective.

Below, I present the findings of research which examined the processes and mechanisms involved in behaviour disintegration progressing when the perceived threat intensifies.

⁶ Cf. Kinnie, Hutchinson, Purcell, 1998 (motivation); Redman, Keithley, 1998 (job satisfaction); Armstrong-Stassen, 2002 and Peterson, Herting, Hagberg, Theorell, 2005 (loyalty); Greenhalgh, Rosenblatt, 1984 (distrust) (Campbell-Jamison, Worrall, Cooper, 2001; and Gandolfi, 2005 (absenteeism); Baruch, Hind, 2000; Gandolfi, 2008 and Gandolfi, Hansson, 2011 (“the survivor syndrome”).

⁷ Interestingly, the labour market insecurity is a generation-specific phenomenon affecting primarily the youngest and the oldest employees.

Research method

Capacity for work is not a simple outcome of age. As the time passes, it becomes growingly diversified: some people remain capable, effective and engaged, while others display a tendency to withdraw from tasks. The complex situation 50+ workers find themselves in is further complicated by developments in the labour market and subjective reactions to the risk of redundancy.

Discussing unemployment, Sylwiusz Retowski (2012, p. 10) observes that: “the changing conditions of employment make unemployment not so much a state as rather a process of becoming a jobless person.” Analogically, job insecurity can be envisioned as a process involving an aggravating felt risk of job loss, a decreasing sense of security and changes in the personal functioning and engagements in various spheres of life.

The above general outline of development and occupational assets characteristic of middle age pertained to individuals who find themselves in what is referred to as a comfort zone. This provided a starting point for research into the changes in behaviour organisation in 50+ workers experiencing an increasing sense of job insecurity. To my knowledge, no such research had been carried out previously. Rather, researchers had tended to focus on identifying direct (or mediated) correlations between selected, work-environment-related contextual and personal characteristics on the one hand and the threat of job loss on the other. Thereby, they had not inquired into qualitative transformations which occur in human functioning in the context of a growing threat.

Defining the object of research and its methodological implications

Within the research framework presented here, the inquiry into how 50-plussers function in the situation of job insecurity was based on examining the current structure of their lives (personal development and the nature of their engagements in close relationships and vocational activity) complemented with looking into their heretofore life-course as well as future anticipations. This complex whole was considered against the backdrop of political and socio-economic changes. The individual life-course was defined as a life-path and “split” into engagements in family, friendship and career repositioned over time, with individual personal changes being also subjected to scrutiny (cf. Fig. 1).

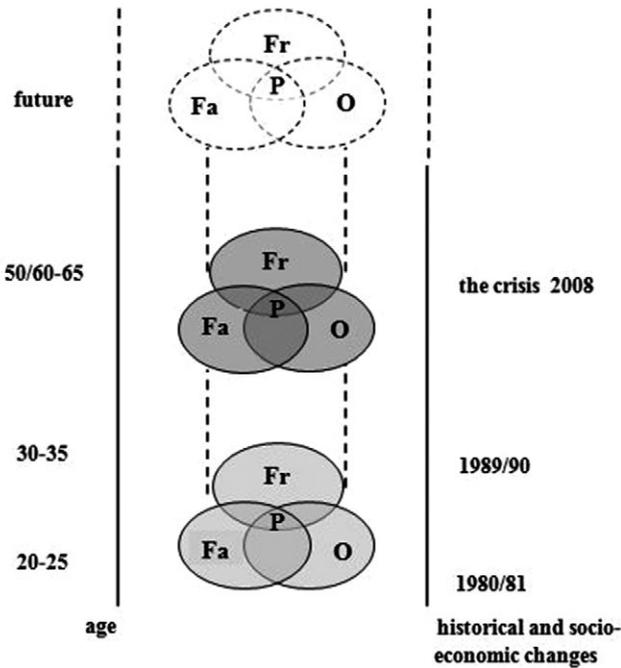


Fig. 1. Reconstructing the individual life-path: reproducing the course of life by distinguishing the personality changes (*P*) and the spheres of activity (*O* – occupation, *Fa* – family, *Fr* – friends and acquaintances) against the backdrop of political and socio-economic transformations

With the object of research being defined in such complex terms, it did not seem feasible to acquire comprehensive knowledge of the phenomenon (its variability, genesis, mechanisms, etc.) sufficing to construct a theoretical model, put forward hypotheses and verify them. At that point, the processual approach offered itself as a viable method, aided by the *Strategia Rekonstruowania Transformacji Procesu* (the *Reconstruction Strategy of the Process Transformation*) (Rzechowska 2014).

Research problem. The research was driven by a broadly formulated question: *What transformations are observable in the functioning of a middle-aged person who experiences an increasing sense of threat?* It was assumed that “an increasing sense of threat” is latent and surfaces in the inner organisation⁸ of individual lives. Investigating individuals’ current behaviours within the context of lifelong changes makes it possible to reconstruct how they “have come” to function the way they do “here and now” (i.e. how their experiences, goals, motives, motivations, systems of meaning, coping strategies, etc. have developed). Knowing the genesis of the present behaviours helps interpret the seemingly identical activity of various people

⁸ It means that a detailed description of individual behaviours (and their transformations) becomes a starting point for revealing the inner structure of the process.

with more accuracy and differentiation. Given these tenets, the research question was specified into *How have personal development and vocational and non-vocational engagements of middle-aged people at a heightened risk for job loss unfolded and how are they expressed now?* The answers were sought by analysing individual case studies (of reconstructed life-paths) and were supposed to underpin a hypothetical model of disintegration of personal functioning and engagements in personal and vocational relationships – a disintegration intensifying as the job continuity was more and more threatened.

Respondents. The research sample included 173 people,⁹ whereof 97 were females and 76 males, aged 50-65 (50-59 for women and 50-65 for men), who were vocationally active and subjectively perceived themselves as at a risk of redundancy. The respondents were inhabitants of the Lublin Province (cf. Rzechowska, 2010a).

Data collection: research scope and instruments

Delineating the research scope. In processual research, the lines of inquiry are delineated by the dimensions inhering in construction of individual life-paths over time, therein among others:

- ◆ personal characteristics which determine the subject's activity and development: e.g., objectives and goals, plans for life, motivations, values, preferences, evaluations, action strategies, interests;
- ◆ activities and relations involving family, friends and acquaintances;
- ◆ activities and relationships in the career sphere (e.g. tasks, training, initiatives, relations with supervisors, subordinates, colleagues, etc.);
- ◆ socio-economic changes of 1980/1981 and 1989/1990, and the recent crisis.

Research instruments. The idiographic data concerning the respondents were collected by means of: (1) an explorative interview: *Aktywność zawodowa i pozazawodowa osoby 50+ (wywiad)* (*Vocational and non-vocational activity of a 50-plusser: Interview*) and (2) questionnaire: *Aktywność zawodowa i pozazawodowa osoby 50+ (kwestionariusz)* (*Vocational and non-vocational activity of a 50-plusser: Questionnaire*) (Rzechowska 2010b, pp. 123-132). Both tools served to gather as much potentially relevant data as possible, concerning personal development, involvement in close relationships and vocational engagements. Also the manner in which the interviews were administered was important. The interviews aimed at re-creating the respondents' respective individual paths with a focus on changes in successive lifespan stages: entry into adulthood, changes in early and middle adulthood, the current status at the time of research and the potential reflections of the concomitant political and socio-economic shifts (information on the respondents' reactions to and perceptions of the transformations, their involvement, hopes, anxieties, interpretations, anticipations, hardships, profits, losses, etc.). Correspondingly, the

⁹ The research is an independent entity under the project defined in footnote 3.

interviews were designed and the questions formulated with these objectives in mind (cf. Fig 2).

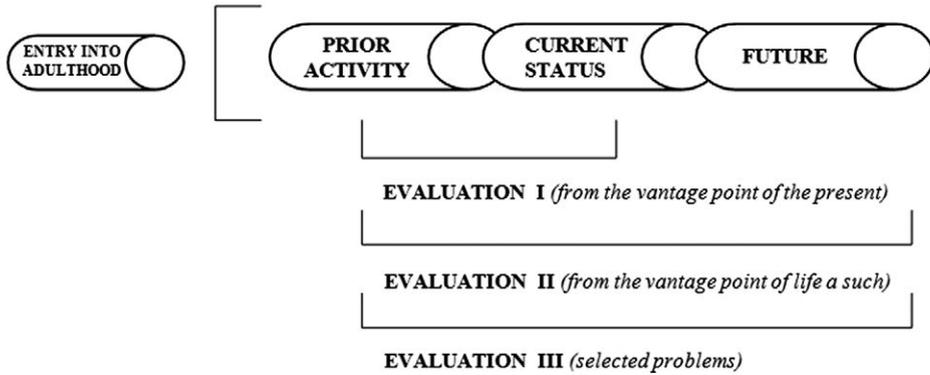


Fig. 2. Interview outline

The questions were rather general so that the respondents' answers could express in the possibly fullest way the unfolding of their life-courses and reflect the subjects' inner changes and engagements in various spheres.

Research procedure. The interviews were administered individually. Each took approximately two hours, and its venue was chosen by the respondent (e.g. at his/her home). All the answers were either written down during the interview or recorded with the respondent's consent. The respondents were recruited based on the information obtained from job centres (information on the planned downsizing or lay-offs), institutions providing training for people aged 50 and over or private sources.

The RPT Strategy: Levels of the data analysis

The analysis was based on the *Strategia Rekonstrukcji Transformacji Procesu* (the *Reconstruction Strategy of the Process Transformation*) (the RPT Strategy) and carried out on two levels. The data obtained from one respondent add up to a set of his/her individual characteristics. On each level of the analysis, the individual respondent's data make up an indivisible whole.

Level I: Case study analysis. The analysis aimed to identify characteristics reflecting individual life-paths explored in the context of socio-economic transformations (cf. Fig. 1). It included, successively¹⁰: (1) detailed reconstruction and transcript of the utterances; (2) preliminary analysis, thematically classifying and structuring the collected material; (3) objectivisation of particular life-path images through recoding by means of an empirically developed grid of analytical catego-

¹⁰ For the detailed procedure of data processing, see Rzechowska 2010a, pp. 55-67.

ries. The material obtained in this way served to construct the primary database. Initially, the database contained a few hundred data, including detailed personal data, which could be relevant in explicating the phenomenon (cf. Fig. 2).¹¹ Reconstructing the inner organisation within the course of individual life-paths is a preliminary to studying the phenomenon in-depth.

Level II: Analysis of a set of cases. At this level, the analysis aimed to reconstruct partial models of 50-plussers' functioning, representing changes in their personal functioning and engagements as a result of the growing threat of redundancy. The analysis of partial models and their mutual interconnections led to developing an empirical model of disintegration of behaviours and engagements in the person experiencing an ever greater threat of job loss.

At *Level II*, the analysis included: (1) distinguishing sets of cases (sets of life-paths which shared similar characteristics) by means of Quinlan's C4.5 algorithm (Quinlan, 1993); (2) analysis of the decision tree and formulation of seven partial models (henceforth called variants or sub-systems) of behaviour organisation in people worried about continuity of employment; (3) construction of a hypothetical model reflecting the spectrum of states of the transforming phenomenon, here a model of disorganisation of personal functioning and changes in the nature of engagements, aggravating alongside the growing risk of redundancy.

Research validity. In the analysis, the content validity of research was safeguarded through having independent competent arbiters process (code, structure and decode) the results. In the analysis of sets of cases, the validity of research was assessed by determining (1) error in the decision tree (here: 1.8%, with the permissible level of 25% of wrong classifications) and (2) internal coherence of (a) each of the partial models and (b) organisation of models as a whole.

50+ workers' behaviours in the situation of growing job insecurity

The data analysis yielded images of 50-plussers' behaviours changing in parallel with the increasing threat of job loss. The sub-models (*Variants R₁-R₇*)¹² represented the successive stages of the breakdown of inner behaviour organisation. The names of the consecutive variants correspond to the character of the identified transformations:

¹¹ Detailed personal data, including education, employment, information on job changes (the number and kind of workplace changes, reasons for the changes, income), marital and family status, etc., are typically considered as conditioning the phenomena under study. In my research, which focused on analysing inner transformations, phenomena did not appear in a "pure" form (in the decision tree). The reconstructed, hypothetical model of disorganisation of personal functioning and engagements, progressing alongside the growing sense of impending job loss, suggests a personal and relational genesis of the phenomenon.

¹² The *R* in the *Variants* stands for "at risk for redundancy," corresponding to the threat of job loss as experienced by the respondents.

- Variant R₁*: Integration of engagements in various spheres and a broad take on socio-economic transformations
- Variant R₂*: The active self in the world: Engagements shifted into the relational sphere. A reductive take on socio-economic changes
- Variant R₃*: The self vis-à-vis the world: Valorisation of close relationships. National changes as a background of self-presentation
- Variant R₄*: Reduction of close relationships. A sense of threat to financial independence
- Variant R₅*: Social isolation and focus on securing subsistence
- Variant R₆*: Social isolation and material dependence on institutional help
- Variant R₇*: (Quasi-)autonomy and building of supportive (quasi-)relationships

Below, the consecutive variants are characterised in terms of vocational activity, close relationships, ways of defining oneself and the world in the context of political, economic and social transformations, gender-related differences in life-paths and subject autonomy. A decreasing sense of security translated into personal disintegration, a breakup of engagements in various spheres of life, a focus on oneself and the present, a decline of gender-related differentiation and a decrease in autonomy. The identified changes are synthetically presented in the section titled ***The model of breakdown of engagements in the situation of increasing job insecurity.***

Variant R₁: **Integration of engagements in various spheres and a broad take on socio-economic transformations**

Vocational activity. The individuals in *Variant R₁* are the only group that found vocational activity – alongside mature family involvements – an important factor in personal development. New challenges and tasks at workplace afforded them opportunities to develop a sense of achievement. In all stages of development, their internally motivated vocational choices and pursuits were integrated with engaged relationships with their families.

Close relationships. For the respondents from *Variant R₁*, family relationships constituted the basic value which underpinned the building of close relationships, enactment of roles and task performance as well as coordinated actions undertaken in other spheres. The members of *Variant R₁* had good memories of childhood and relationships with parents. The experience of supportive relationships in childhood translated into (1) ways of making life choices (e.g. autonomous or parental experience-informed decision about educational track and future vocation), (2) ways of performing adult roles (e.g. caring for the family: fulfilling conjugal and parental tasks, educating children, securing subsistence, etc.) and (3) ways of handling everyday life situations (e.g. conversation as a standard problem-solving procedure). Bonds of friendship were cultivated alongside family ties. The individuals in *Variant*

R_1 were eager helpers and recipients of help. They had a positive attitude to young people, encouraging them to uphold values and practise self-control (to be guided by reason).

The 50+ worker and the world against the backdrop of political, economic and social changes. The members of *Variant R₁* produced realistic accounts of their life-course, locating it in the context of historical and on-going political and economic transformations (the 1980/1981 shift and the 1989/1990 breakthrough). At the same time, they were knowledgeable about the current situation in Poland, including the labour market challenges and precariousness of employment. This provided a vantage point from which they viewed their job situation.

Gender and diversification of life-paths. A further analysis of life-paths, which ground the structure sketched above, reveals differences in how they are enacted. Below an outline is provided of characteristic female and male (1) difficulties in vocational role performance; (2) attitudes to the young; (3) future anticipations; (4) broad approaches to the labour market transformations in progress; and (5) features of autonomy structures¹³:

- (1) *vocation-related difficulties*: sense of entanglement (incapability of satisfactory engagement in work despite a lack of objective work-related difficulties) vs. difficulties in task performance (responsibility for task fulfilment, ascription of difficulties to one's own actions combined with a concurrent analysis of external impediments);
- (2) *attitude to the young*: admiration which motivates young people and triggers their activity vs. authoritarian stance (admonishing, for example, against reckless behaviours);
- (3) *future anticipations*: indirect expression of worries about employment continuity (citing peers' difficulties with maintaining jobs) accompanied by a clear vision of post-occupational future (building of relationships: care for children and family life, developing bonds of friendship; vocational activity relegated to the margin) vs. anticipation of difficulties in continuation of occupational activity accompanied by a declared desire to keep it up;
- (4) *approaches to the labour market challenges*: addressing employees' actual situation (referring to acquaintances' experience or peers' life situations) vs. reflecting on the nationwide economic situation and possible solutions in systemic terms (assessment of the impact of political and economic changes as well as the current crisis on one's own situation and viability of vocational plans);

¹³ In each of the 5 aspects, characteristic female behaviours are presented as the first element in the pair. They are juxtaposed with characteristic male behaviours. In the following *Variants*, the progressing breakdown of behaviour structures will obliterate differences between the female and male modes of functioning.

- (5) *autonomy construction*: declared self-autonomy¹⁴ entwined with a perceived lack of independence in the occupational sphere (despite a lack of difficulties at work) and in personal life (burdens of coordinating family- and vocational obligations) vs. a strong sense of autonomy, particularly in working life.

Manifestations of subject autonomy. A member of *Variant R₁* is a person whose life history has been intertwined with seminal national events. S/he has succeeded in integrating activities relative to various spheres, fusing the personal, the relational and the vocational. This results and, at the same time, is revealed in personal development. Work is seen as a source of challenges, the meeting of which entails effort, perseverance, a sense of achievement, consolidation of inner control and responsibility. Gender is a differentiating factor in the nature and genesis of the perceived autonomy.

People in *Variant R₁* are the only group among the 50-plus sample who function within what has come to be called a comfort zone (cf. Retowski, 2012).

Variant R₂: **The active self in the world: Engagements shifted into the relational sphere. A reductive take on socio-economic changes**

Vocational activity. In *Variant R₂*, the role that the job plays in the respondents' lives is subject to essential alterations. Success is re-defined and no longer bound up with successful performance in work-related tasks. Instead, success is considered in the context of family-oriented involvements and building of close relationships.

Close relationships. The structure of life is re-drawn. Vocational activity is pushed to the background while fundamental engagements unfold in family life. Precedence is given to family and enactment of traditional values. The individuals in *Variant R₂* build on the positive experiences of their previous family life. Supported by their parents, they made autonomous decisions about career paths. They describe their married life as happy, are satisfied with their children and find gratification in family life. They also cherish very rewarding friendships. They are eager helpers and grateful recipients of help. They have a positive attitude to the young, encouraging them to abide by values and be guided by reason.

The 50+ worker and the world against the backdrop of political, economic and social changes. Like the members of *Variant R₁*, the respondents in *Variant R₂* see their life histories as related to the political and economic changes. However, their notion of this entwinement is narrower, devoid of complex references and focused on the evaluation (rather than on an analysis) of the impact of the transformations on individual lives. The respondents of both genders claim that the 1980 breakthrough favourably affected their entry into vocational career, while the current

¹⁴ Interestingly, women emphasised that the decisions they made early in life were independent and associated adulthood with a loss of independence. At the same time, they did not mention autonomy in the context of family engagements even though they are the organisers of family life.

crisis has not effected any major changes in their lives. Assessing the present labour market situation, they adopt a broad perspective, but speak about socio-economic problems predominantly, if not exclusively, in evaluative terms. They find the situation difficult and regard older employees' opportunities as scarce. They go into more palpable details when reporting their own difficulties. Without actually analysing them, they articulate several anxieties.

Gender and diversification of life paths. Females and males differ in identifying the sources of current difficulties and in defining the anticipated directions of future action.

- (1) *sources of difficulties*: work vs. family, i.e. women perceive difficulties in the occupational sphere, seeing themselves as instrumental to them, while men identify difficulties in family life, compensating for them by engagement in relationships with friends;
- (2) *future anticipations*: focus on family-related matters, the desire to continue in the job, without envisioning changes vs. refraining from addressing the current vocational activity while signalling a wish to change the job.

Manifestations of subject autonomy. Neither females nor males tackle the question of autonomy. Women imply that they lack it in work-related contexts. Men, who in the previous variant dwelled on their vocational independence, do not address the issue altogether. However, their withdrawal from action and/or eagerness to defend the status quo, combined with hinting at anxieties, seem to imply a reduced sense of autonomy.

Variant R₃: **The self vis-à-vis the world: Valorisation of close relationships. National changes as a background of self-presentation**

Vocational activity. The respondents from *Variant R₃* do not associate the sense of achievement with job performance (Cf. *Variant R₂*). They do not mention either vocational successes or work-related difficulties. They speak neither about choosing their career path nor about their current occupational activity. They express anxiety about vocational future (possible redundancy). Despite the perceived labour market challenges, they want to continue in their careers.

Close relationships. They refer only to their current situations. They still consider family their chief value in life. However, instead of describing their close relations, they articulate evaluative and declarative statements. They are convinced their family life has been successful, yet they do not ground such opinions. Speaking about the family of origin and their own family, they mention only a few facts and offer fragmentary judgments. They say they were raised in "a good family" and "their life at the parental home was good." They do not touch upon the manner of educational choice-making. They declare that they "are satisfied with their married life," "set up a fine family" and "have educated children." In comparison with the

previous *Variants*, they find friendships less rewarding (regarding them as “basically satisfying”). Incomplete satisfaction is more straightforwardly expressed by women. Both genders are involved in mutual help, being both helpers and help-recipients (with women, again, not fully satisfied with the help obtained). Also their attitude to young people is the same as in the preceding *Variants*. The respondents state that they are committed to the matters affecting the young, but their positive remarks sound rather declarative (as in e.g. standard advice that “education is important,” with education being viewed in terms of intrinsic value by women while in terms of utility by men).

The 50+ worker and the world against the backdrop of political, economic and social changes. Presenting their life-course, the respondents mention national transformations, referring to them as chronological orientation points (“I started working before the martial law”) or assessing their impact on their own lives (“the crisis did not change a lot for us”). The perspective they adopt speaking of their life-course is different: the active-self viewpoint opted for in the previous *Variants* is replaced by an evaluative approach to diverse issues. The respondents employ negative terms to describe things that pertain to themselves, their close persons and various time perspectives (the future and the present). They express anxieties and list deficiencies, shortcomings and incapacities. They view the future in terms of impending losses. Their negative attitude to the present seems to encompass an increasing range of current developments.

Gender and diversification of life paths. In *Variant R₃*, the differences between genders result from divergent world perceptions and surface in disparate takes on the difficulties experienced and coping with them:

- (1) *difficulties in family life*: women consent to the *status quo* (shouldering responsibility for the organisation of family life), and men seek recompense for difficulties in social contacts;
- (2) *retaining the job*: women voice fears for themselves and on their peers’ “behalf” while men pass over the problem;
- (3) *fear for oneself*: women are afraid that possible impediments will preclude realisation of their (unspecified) vocational plans, and men are anxious about health.

Manifestations of subject autonomy. While in *Variant R₂*, the issues of independence are either partially indicated (by women) or omitted (by men), in *Variant R₃* both genders indulge in “workaround” solutions. Women experience discomfort in many spheres but conceal it, declaring that they “feel independent on the whole.” Faced with inability to control their own life satisfactorily, men strive to “control” other subjects’ actions, for example devising alternative policies for job centres (such as launching “compact” training schemes: courses supplemented with relevant placements).

In *Variants R₁-R₃* we observe an increasing (in parallel to the rising felt threat) disintegration of behaviours: a change in engagements in close relationships accompanied by a reduced engagement in work, qualitative changes in references to the past and future anticipations, etc. In the following *Variants*, the respondents withdraw from action for others' sake and limit themselves to self-protection and satisfaction of their own needs.

Variant R₄: Reduction of close relationships. A sense of threat to financial independence

Vocational activity. Respondents from *Variant R₄* do not associate vocational success with dedication to work. They present their career choices as a matter of necessity (“I had to choose something”). They do not speak about the development of their careers, work-related achievements or difficulties. Their passivity increases observably. The individuals in *Variant R₄* do not even express either worries about employment continuity or anxieties related to the labour-market volatility. They do not speak of their vocational future altogether.

Close relationships. They are more articulate with regard to relationships with close persons. They had peaceful childhood and good rapport with parents. Speaking of other relationships, they pass value-judgments and voice declarations rather than describe these involvements. Referring to “family,” they do not enumerate particular family members, mentioning neither spouses nor children. They regard their family life as successful without, however, specifying why they think so. In their sole remarks about personal future, they announce that they are not going to make their schedules dependent on the close persons' needs (negation-based qualification, cf. *Variant R₃*). They do not find contacts with friends fully rewarding. They do mention help provision or reception. They are rather indifferent to the young and tend not to give them advice. This may be related to destabilisation of the assessment system, which in the preceding *Variants R₁-R₃* was safely balanced and grounded on values, serving as a basic framework of reference for evaluations and advice. All this implies a substantial reduction in close relationships, which will gravitate toward self-isolation in the following *Variants*.

The 50+ worker and the world against the backdrop of political, economic and social changes. In *Variant R₄*, the structure of external references reaching beyond the present moment is gradually obliterated. The members of *Variant R₄* perceive the relationship between the Solidarity breakthrough and the martial law on the one hand and their own life-course on the other less clearly than the respondents in *Variants R₁-R₃*. They state that the transformations “affected” their education, career and family situation. They do not mention any other seminal events of the last decades. The temporal dimension is reduced to fragmentary mentions of the past, assessments of the present and negation-based references to the future (women do not agree to take family needs into account in their plans).

The analysis of *Variants* R_3 - R_4 reveals a disintegration of the formerly observed structure. At this stage, differences in female and male modes of functioning are obscured.

Manifestations of subject autonomy. Certain details of women's autonomy which signal the direction of changes to be noted in the following *Variants* certainly deserve attention. With the network of relations limited and loosened and the value system destabilised, women address issues related to a sense of independence. Although material values do not dominate their framework of references and actions (cf. *Variant* R_5), women acutely feel a lack of financial independence (again expressed indirectly by negation!). This implies an interrelationship between women's sense of autonomy and material security. Withdrawing from vocational engagements, men do not speak of autonomy-related questions, which suggests an interconnection between men's sense of autonomy and career achievements.

In the last three exclusively female (R_5) and mixed (R_6 - R_7) *Variants*, the question of autonomy does not arise, and the respondents speak of their own life situation applying negation-based terms (loneliness, withdrawal from relations, indifference to the world, sometimes use of institutional support, etc.).

Variant R_5 : **Social isolation and focus on securing subsistence**

Vocational activity. *Variant* R_5 is the only exclusively female group. The respondents from this *Variant* do not speak about work (cf. *Variant* R_4). They only signal a perceived lack of financial independence.

Close relationships. They characterise family experiences as difficult, without speaking about their relationships with parents, spouses and/or children. They do not find values particularly important. They are focused on themselves and the current moment. They neither help others nor obtain help. They are not interested in the fortunes of young people. Unable to build enduring relationships, they feel lonely. In the future, they intend to devote their time to their close ones.

The 50+ worker and the world against the backdrop of political, economic and social changes. Their world is limited to the self focused on securing its own needs.¹⁵ As the vocational career course is not recounted, no references are made to the historical and current socio-economic developments.

Variant R_6 : **Social isolation and material dependence on institutional help**

Vocational activity. The individuals in *Variant* R_6 avoid referencing themes related to career course, fears, plans, etc. (cf. *Variants* R_4 - R_5).

Close relationships. They do not speak about the family of origin and their own family. They are self-focused. They highlight first of all a lack of friends and material

¹⁵ I deliberately use "securing" rather than "satisfying" (one's own) needs in order to emphasise control over the future, scant though it might be. The unemployed who find themselves in the hardest situation, indeed, focus on "satisfying" the pressing needs at hand (Rzechowska, 2010a).

dependence on institutional help. They are the only group among the respondents to fall back on such help. They describe contacts with helping institutions as “a difficult experience.” They ascribe marginal importance to values. Indifference to the young observed in the previous *Variant* mutates into a negative judgment.

The 50+ worker and the world against the backdrop of political, economic and social changes. The world of people from *Variant R₆* is limited to unfulfilled needs. When speaking, they concentrate predominantly on deficits and shortages.

Variant R₇: **(Quasi-)autonomy and building of supportive (quasi-)relationships**

Vocational activity. The accounts of current and future work involvements produced by the respondents from *Variant R₇* are rather enigmatic (cf. *Variants R₄-R₆*). What they emphasise is the importance of attaining financial security.

Closer relationships. They talk neither of the family of origin nor of their own family (cf. *Variant R₆*). Notably, the respondents implicitly instrumentalise relationships: they use others as a background against which to stand out as those who have succeeded financially. They make themselves into the major point of reference in formulating advice and evaluations. They are critical of the young. Speaking from the perspective of their own material success, they advise young people to go abroad. Surprisingly, such behaviours are more frequent in women, though in the previous *Variants* (cf. *Variant R₃*) women gave precedence to values, such as family, while men approached the labour market entry and continuing in employment instrumentally.

Enjoying relative financial security, they make attempts to overcome social isolation. They describe successful relationships with “friends.” Such “friendships” are treated in purely instrumental terms, particularly by women, who view them as protection against loneliness.

The 50+ worker and the world against the backdrop of political, economic and social changes. Their world is limited to the materially secure self and expanded with a circle of supportive quasi-friends. For women, this circle serves a rather protective function (“So that I am not lonely”).

The details of the transformations progressing as a sense of threat increases are included in Table 1.

The analysis of the inner structure of the *Variants* presented in Table 1 and their interrelationships reveals multiple consequences of a loss of security. Examination of the *Variants*’ inner structure helped construct a model representing the spectrum of engagements, depending on the level of security experienced by people aged 50 and over.

Table 1. Transformations of engagements of 50-plussers: Characteristics of Variants R_1 - R_7

Tiers of analysis Variants	Life-course (self, relations, references, perspectives)			Spatio-temporal construction of life-image	
	The present	The past	The future		
Variant R_1	<p>The self in family relationships</p> <p>Self: integrated self (regulated by values)</p> <p>Engagements: coordination of engagements in various spheres</p> <p>Family relationships: multi- aspect, reflective account of close relationships</p>	<p>Relationships outside family</p> <p>Friends: strong involvement in relations integrated with engagements in other spheres</p> <p>Help: reciprocated</p> <p>The young: positive attitudes; advice informed by values</p>	<p>References to the world: reflection on the political and economic transformations</p> <p>References to the self: associate their own life history with socio-economic transformations.</p>	<p>Work: awareness of job insecurity; realistic analysis of the situation</p> <p>Life vision: specified with vocational activity given primary or secondary precedence</p>	<p>An in-depth account of socio-economic transformations as related to the family and occupational engagements; awareness of the current personal and global situation' broad and in-depth references to the past and the future</p>
	Variant R_2	<p>Self: actualised through roles</p> <p>Engagements: prevalence of family engagements; coordination of actions within various spheres</p> <p>Family relationships: favourable account of family relationships</p>	<p>Friends: involvement in relations</p> <p>Help: reciprocated</p> <p>The young: positive attitudes, formulating values-informed advice</p>	<p>References to the world: fragmentary account of the past; analyses replaced with evaluations</p> <p>References to the self: positive assessment of the impact of events on their life-course</p>	<p>Work: expression of many anxieties</p> <p>Life vision: a wish to maintain the occupational status quo; interest in family matters</p>
Variant R_3	<p>Self: the point of reference for evaluating close persons</p> <p>Engagements: loosening of relationships; declared engagement in family relationships</p> <p>Family relationships: generalised evaluations, satisfaction with family life</p>	<p>Friends: reservations about friends, reduced satisfaction from relations</p> <p>Help: reciprocation, but incomplete satisfaction with the help received</p> <p>The young: declared positive attitudes, lack of engagements</p>	<p>References to the self and the world: expressed through negation (anxieties, shortcomings, inabilities)</p>	<p>Work: expression of anxieties</p> <p>Life vision: a wish to continue in employment</p>	<p>Nationwide events are a background against which to present a fragmentary account of the family past; focus on current problems; negation-based expression of attitudes to various issues</p>

Tiers of analysis	Life-course (self, relations, references, perspectives)				Spatio-temporal construction of life-image
	The present		The past	The future	
	The self in family relationships	Relationships outside family			
Variant R ₄	<p>Self: the point of reference for passing value-judgments</p> <p>Engagements: declared engagement in family life, despite a lack of concrete references</p> <p>Family relationships: generalised evaluations of family; declared sense of achievement in family life</p> <p>Self: highlighting of one's own needs</p> <p>Family relationships: difficult family experiences</p>	<p>Friends: fully satisfied with contacts</p> <p>Help: do not address the issue</p> <p>The young: indifference</p>	<p>References to the world: acknowledgement of the "influence" of the past events on their lives; lack of concrete references</p> <p>References to the self: fragmentary account of childhood, lack of references</p>	<p>Work: aggravating passivity, no expression of anxieties about the future</p> <p>Life vision: do not anticipate engagement in close people's lives</p>	<p>Sporadic and fragmentary references to the past; the present reduced to close relations; exacerbating lack of engagements</p>
Variant R ₅	<p>Self: highlighting of one's own needs</p> <p>Family relationships: difficult family experiences</p>	<p>Friends: sense of loneliness</p> <p>Help: neither help others nor obtain help</p> <p>The young: the issue passed over</p>	<p>References to the self and the world: lack of references</p>	<p>Work: the issue not addressed</p> <p>Life vision: a wish to devote time to close people</p>	<p>The present: preoccupation with securing one's own needs</p>
Variant R ₆	<p>Self: highlighting of one's own needs; recourse to help from social services</p>	<p>Friends: lack of friends</p> <p>Help: institutional help</p> <p>The young: negative attitudes</p>	<p>References to the self and the world: lack of references</p>	<p>Work and Life vision: the issue not addressed</p>	<p>The present: preoccupation with unmet needs</p>
Variant R ₇	<p>Self: highlighting the efficient meeting of one's needs</p>	<p>Friends: quasi-friends</p> <p>The young: critical assessment, recommendation of going abroad for work</p>	<p>References to the self and the world: lack of references</p>	<p>Work and Life vision: the issue not addressed</p>	<p>The present: preoccupation with material security</p>

Loss of security and its psychological consequences

The strategy employed here to reconstruct life-paths departs from the traditionally applied measures. It assumes and, subsequently, reveals many essential variables overlooked so far in analyses of this phenomenon. It discloses its complexity, inner variability and transformations it has been subject to.¹⁶

The model of breakdown of engagements in the situation of increasing job insecurity. The changes captured and identified in the research are illustrated in Figure 3. It shows the model of changes representing the progressing breakdown of the self (I) and differentiation as well as disorganisation of individual engagements in family (Fa), friendship (Fr) and occupational activity (O) (cf. Fig. 1).

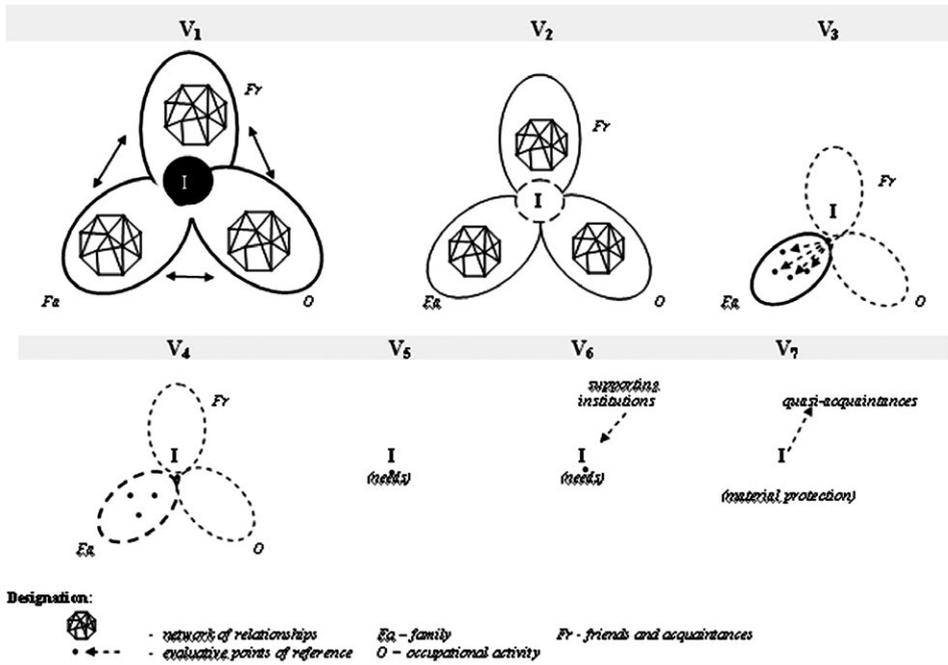


Fig. 3. The model of disintegration of engagements in the situation of a growing risk of redundancy (*Variants R₁-R₇*.)

The spectrum of states corresponding to various degrees of the perceived threat. Research findings imply that **the sense of security is a key factor in activity of 50+ workers faced with a risk of redundancy.** It is a primary anticipation, activating a broad spectrum of states corresponding to varying degrees of the perceived threat. They include the following:

¹⁶ Given this, the number of respondents in particular variants is not a relevant factor in the analysis (cf. the description of the processual approach above; cf. also Rzechowska, 2010a, 2011b).

- ◆ *tolerable mental comfort*, with an ability to recognise threat (perception and proper interpretation of important symptoms), construct an adequate image of the situation and take precautions against danger (*Variant R₁*);
- ◆ *crossing beyond the comfort zone*, accompanied by viewing challenges as potential threats (expressing anxiety and concern); resistance to change, effective protection and/or preservation of the status quo provide a sense of security; at the same time, the need to get actively involved in future action is retained (*Variant R₂*);
- ◆ *negation as a way of expressing frustration and sustaining the status quo*: analogically to the above state – a desire to preserve the existing state of affairs, accompanied by experience of self-inefficacy; people are still able to cope with difficulties and recognise positive aspects of their situation, but their anxiety and sense of injury are increasing, which is revealed in their characteristic tendency to define the world through negation (*Variant R₃*);
- ◆ *quasi-safeguarding against the growing perceived threat*, when the breakdown of behaviour organisation (curtailing of contacts, passivity and self-absorption) is accompanied by quasi-actions and activation of defence mechanisms (rationalisations); they all seem to provide a sense of managing reality (world-repair projects in males, underscoring self-autonomy by females; cf. *Variant R₄*);
- ◆ *salvaging the minimum security* by meeting one's everyday needs through one's own effort; there appear self-marginalisation, cutting off of social relationships and focus on the here and the now; the retrospective scrutiny of life reveals a disproportionate share of losses (*Variant R₅*);
- ◆ *entrusting others with providing for one's needs*: support of helping institutions becomes a guarantee of basic material needs being met (*Variant R₆*);
- ◆ *denial of one's difficult psychological situation*: showcasing one's skill and efficiency in satisfying personal needs; deprecation of others and instrumentalisation of relationships aimed at self-protection serve as means in constructing a sense of control over the situation (*Variant R₇*).

As the process of identifying and solving 50-plussers' problems should be individualised, we should also consider the differences between female and male paths of behaviour disorganisation in the situation when employment continuity is threatened.

Female and male variants of the engagement breakdown model when increasingly threatened with job loss. Women who still are in the "comfort zone" (*Variant R₁*) focus on the roles which serve to meet family needs. The stable family situation and effective engagements seem to underpin women's construction of self-esteem. A sense of looming redundancy dents the woman's prior personal structure, altering at the same time her family engagements, which in all likelihood contributes to the further aggravation of the perceptions of threat. Earlier self-definition based

on roles is replaced with attempts at constructing self-autonomy, including, among others, delineating boundaries and planes of self-reliance. This protects the woman against self-marginalisation up to a point. Men, in turn, have the direction of their changes set by the capacity to control the world and decide on how to act, particularly in work-related context. The risk of redundancy seems to undercut this capacity. As a result, men shift from integrated action in various spheres, including career challenges (*Variant R₁*, “comfort zone”), to discounting vocational activity (*Variant R₂*) or producing an illusion of control over the situation by proposing changes in the operations of helping institutions (*Variant R₃*).

To conclude this outline, I would like to emphasise that a number of findings concerning people aged 50 and over presented above are relevant to designing effective support systems in which the complexity of their situation will be adequately addressed and their personal and developmental specificities properly attended to.

Counselling practice in the situation of a growing risk of redundancy

With a risk of redundancy growing, 50+ workers rely on their assets (e.g. autonomy, distance, generativity, wisdom, vocational experience) for protecting their family and reinforcing their own sense of security rather than for embarking on ambitious enterprises in which the difficult situation is viewed as a challenge. Undermined security entails a reduction of engagements in various spheres, primarily in work-related contexts (cf. “survivor syndrome”). Curtailing of social networks goes hand in hand with instrumentalisation of relationships. In the most difficult cases, the individuals’ activity is limited merely to self-protection and securing one’s own needs. Support from family and friends tends to be ineffective. People affected by looming job loss tend to indulge in self-blame, aggression in which frustration is vented off, etc.

Strategies for supporting 50-plussers’ vocational activity are as a rule formulated in rather general terms, and the verbally declared postulates of individualised help still fail to materialise in practice. Policies rarely involve interdisciplinary solutions based on psychological knowledge about how middle-aged people function and aimed at designing individual support paths. To achieve this, support-providers would need to identify who the client is, what his/her personal structure looks like, in what spheres his/her engagements unfold, what relationships they underpin, what roles and tasks s/he performs, how s/he defines his/her current situation and problems, what his/her life resources are comprised of and what part of them s/he is able to actually use in a given situation, etc. Such information can both aid the diagnostic process and facilitate the devising of an individualised support path. In both cases, identification of the severity of behaviour disorganisation would have to be complemented with personal and contextual characteristics of the client’s engagements.

In the case of employees who still inhabit “the comfort zone” (*Variant R₁*), sufficient support could involve relationships with close ones supplemented with information on what to do if the perceived threat exacerbates. It would rather aim at reinforcing the perception of a potentially difficult situation as a situation involving an independently made choice: changing tasks and/or positions, making available job offers or proposing a range of training schemes (e.g. mentoring, coaching).

The employees who tend to curb their engagements (*Variants R₂-R₄*) should be offered support aimed to reinforce activity, to construct a protection system against a growing sense of threat and to increase orientation in the options offered by the labour market if lay-offs actually come to pass. This would involve both vocational guidance and coaching (fostering knowledge of the labour market and active job-seeking methods, but also identifying one’s vocational potential: increased consciousness of who I am, what capacities I have and how they can be enhanced) as well as psychological help aimed to foster/protect self-esteem, objectivise anxieties, control one’s destructive behaviours, sustain good relationships in family, re-build interpersonal relations and construct a network of personal support.

In the case of people focused on self-protection (*Variants R₅-R₇*), individual therapy is one of viable solutions. It would aim to re-build autonomy (working through strong anxiety and passivity, re-working defence mechanisms) and to seek such spheres of engagement in which self-esteem could be disentangled from difficult vocational experience. Psychological help could be supplemented with financial support on the one hand and, on the other, with information on the options of employment in newly emergent vocational activity forms (e.g. subsidised employment) and on opportunities of self-fulfilment in non-vocational spheres.

These conclusions suggest that it is urgent to design interventions focused on individual rather than group work. Individualisation of the support processes facilitates the selection of fitting strategies. The selection of measures may be aided by the model of the breakdown of engagements in the face of the increased threat of job loss outlined in this article. Only when the personal structure and the (re-) building of relationships with others are effectively supported can people aged 50 and over succeed in acquiring substantive skills.

Given this, counsellors should embark upon designing individual helping paths, adopting an interdisciplinary approach which does justice to various facets of knowledge about man and the labour market. One of recommendable resources for counselling professionals and researchers to build on is in-depth psychological knowledge, including insights into middle-age transformations in the context of profound socio-economic, cultural and technological changes, which contemporary 50-plussers experience and participate in.

Translated from Polish by Patrycja Poniadowska

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