



Agency and Autonomy of Older Workers during Career Development in the Federal Public Sector

*Agência e autonomia dos trabalhadores mais velhos durante a
construção de carreira no contexto do Setor Público Federal*

*Agencia y Autonomía de los Trabajadores Mayores durante el
Desarrollo Profesional en el Sector Público Federal*

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To understand the influence of the aging process on the career adaptability of older civil servants at a Brazilian Public Higher Education Institution. Career adaptability has four dimensions: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. The adaptive performance cycle is comprised of five career stages: orientation, exploration, establishment, management, and disengagement. **Methodology:** To conduct this qualitative research, 16 education technical-administrative staff aged 45 or older were interviewed. Thematic narrative and biographical analysis was used for data analysis. **Originality/Relevance:** From the perspective of Career Construction Theory, this research articulates the dimensions of career adaptability and the adaptive performance cycle based on the experiences of aging-related gains and losses and reflections on older workers' careers. **Main findings:** Control is the central dimension of career adaptability, primarily due to the agency and autonomy of respondents due to their tenure in public office and the fact that most respondents are in the career management stage. **Theoretical contributions:** The study proposes an explanatory model for respondents' career adaptability. The analyses suggest that context, the aging process, and career stage influence the dimension of career adaptability that will be central at a given point in a career. **Contributions for management:** The research highlights the need for organizational policies and practices that value diversity, professional training and qualifications, and retirement preparation.

Keywords: Aging. Career adaptability. Career construction theory. Public Administration.

RESUMO

Objetivo: Conhecer a influência do processo de envelhecimento na adaptabilidade de carreira de servidores públicos mais velhos de uma Instituição Pública de Ensino Superior brasileira. A adaptabilidade de carreira possui quatro dimensões: preocupação, controle, curiosidade e confiança. O ciclo de desempenho adaptativo é formado por cinco estágios de carreira: orientação, exploração, estabelecimento, gerenciamento e desengajamento. **Metodologia:** Para a realização da pesquisa qualitativa, foram entrevistados 16 técnico-administrativos em educação com 45 anos ou mais. A análise de narrativas e biografias do tipo temática foi utilizada para a análise dos dados. **Originalidade/relevância:** Sob a perspectiva da Teoria de Construção da Carreira, a pesquisa articula as dimensões da adaptabilidade de carreira e o ciclo de desempenho adaptativo a partir das experiências de perdas e ganhos relacionadas ao envelhecimento e das reflexões dos trabalhadores mais velhos sobre a carreira. **Principais resultados:** O controle é a dimensão central da adaptabilidade de carreira, principalmente em virtude da agência e autonomia dos entrevistados devido à estabilidade no cargo público e pelo fato de a maioria dos entrevistados estar no estágio de gerenciamento da carreira. **Contribuições teóricas:** O estudo propõe um modelo explicativo da adaptabilidade de carreira dos entrevistados. As análises sugerem que o contexto, o processo de envelhecimento e o estágio de carreira indicam a dimensão da adaptabilidade de carreira que será central em determinado momento da carreira. **Contribuições para a gestão:** A pesquisa aponta a necessidade de políticas e práticas organizacionais que valorizem a diversidade, a capacitação e qualificação profissional e a preparação para a aposentadoria.

Palavras-Chave: Envelhecimento. Adaptabilidade de carreira. Teoria da construção de carreira. Administração Pública.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Comprender la influencia del proceso de envejecimiento en la adaptabilidad profesional de los funcionarios mayores de una Institución Pública de Educación Superior de Brasil. La adaptabilidad profesional comprende cuatro dimensiones: preocupación, control, curiosidad y confianza. El ciclo de desempeño adaptativo comprende cinco etapas de la carrera: orientación, exploración, establecimiento, gestión y desvinculación. **Metodología:** Para realizar esta investigación cualitativa, se entrevistó a 16 funcionarios técnico-administrativos del sector educativo de 45 años o más. Se utilizó un análisis temático narrativo y biográfico para el análisis de datos. **Originalidad/Relevancia:** Desde la perspectiva de la Teoría de la Construcción de Carrera, esta investigación articula las dimensiones de la adaptabilidad profesional y el ciclo de desempeño adaptativo con base en las experiencias de ganancias y pérdidas relacionadas con el envejecimiento y las reflexiones sobre las carreras profesionales de los trabajadores mayores. **Principales hallazgos:** El control es la dimensión central de la adaptabilidad profesional, principalmente debido a la agencia y autonomía de los encuestados debido a su antigüedad en cargos públicos y al hecho de que la mayoría de ellos se encuentran en la etapa de gestión de carrera. **Contribuciones teóricas:** El estudio propone un modelo explicativo de la adaptabilidad profesional de los encuestados. Los análisis sugieren que el contexto, el proceso de envejecimiento y la etapa profesional influyen en la dimensión de la adaptabilidad profesional que será crucial en un momento dado de la carrera profesional. **Contribuciones para la gestión:** La investigación destaca la necesidad de políticas y prácticas organizacionales que valoren la diversidad, la formación y cualificación profesional, y la preparación para la jubilación.

Palabras clave: Envejecimiento. Adaptabilidad profesional. Teoría de la construcción de la carrera profesional. Administración pública.

■ INTRODUCTION

The aging process entails a complex relationship between gains and losses. On one hand, negative elements of aging can be highlighted, such as diseases, dependency, loss of status, fragility, loneliness, incapacity, resistance to change, finitude, and physical, cognitive, and social decline (Santos et al., 2018).

From an organizational standpoint, older workers may experience ageism (age-based prejudice and discrimination) (Fineman, 2014; Peroni & Martins-Silva, 2025), the specter of uselessness and obsolescence (Sennett, 2006; Thomas et al., 2014), and the phenomenon of invisibility and career downward mobility (Sennett, 2006).

In the context of the Brazilian public sector, Cepellos et al. (2019) report on the phenomenon of symbolic dismissal or retirement. Symbolic dismissal entails the removal of the public servant from their role or activity by another worker, without formal dismissal. Symbolic retirement, on the other hand, occurs when the older public servant chooses to retire while still working. According to Cepellos et al. (2019, p. 282) “the professional falls into idleness and becomes complacent; it is a period in which they do not withdraw from work but cease to be productive.” Symbolic dismissal and retirement are associated with uselessness and obsolescence, and the stability related to public office.

On the other hand, aging also carries positive elements, such as prestige, maturity, respect, loyalty, commitment, wisdom, and experience (Santos et al., 2018). In addition, older workers may be seen as valuable assets (Chand & Tung, 2014; Vasconcelos, 2018). Older professionals can contribute with important competencies that benefit the organization, such as a sense of responsibility, the capacity for disseminating organizational culture, and behaviors consistent with organizational norms and values (Cepellos, 2018).

Population aging (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2021) entails economic, sociocultural, and organizational consequences, and implies the aging of the workforce (Cepellos et al., 2019; Chand & Tung, 2014). Although workers’ decision to extend or not their professional life depends on a combination of several factors (Peroni & Martins-Silva, 2023), such as the increase in longevity and the pension reform (Constitutional Amendment No. 103, 2019), particularly the establishment of a minimum retirement age, favor the extension of professional careers. In some cases, older workers are encouraged to remain in their jobs beyond the retirement age (Fasbender et al., 2019). In this context, the aging of the workforce requires People Management (PM) initiatives tailored to older professionals.

Research on aging has some specificities. Although older workers possess the capacity to adapt to contextual changes (Schneider & Irigaray, 2008), they focus less on “growth and development goals, and more on maintenance goals, prevention of losses, and emotional meaningfulness” (Zacher et al., 2018, p. 4). In this sense, the meaning of work, objectives, focus, and career plans change or are reinvented as people age (Smyer & Pitt-Catsouphes,

2007; Zacher et al., 2018). In addition, the proximity of retirement implies an imminent reduction of older workers' social status, given that retirees are seen as less productive in contemporary society (Peroni & Martins-Silva, 2023).

In this landscape, the central theme of this article is aging in the workplace through the lens of older workers. Although there is no consensus on the definition of older worker (Cepellos et al., 2019), in this study, older workers are defined as those aged 45 and older — that is, individuals who have moved beyond young adulthood and passed the midpoint of their careers. The term “older worker” has been widely used in national and international studies (Vieira & Cepellos, 2022).

Fasbender et al. (2019) highlight that research on the career construction of older workers is scarce, particularly studies involving individuals whose most imminent career transition is retirement. This represents a gap in career construction research, which does not adequately address the following situations: (a) how the experience of gains and losses of the aging process affects the career construction of older professionals; (b) how older individuals' reflections on past experiences influence the construction of a future career (Fasbender et al., 2019).

In light of the above, Career Construction Theory (CCT), originating from vocational psychology, was adopted as the theoretical approach. It focuses on the continuous and incessant adjustments between individuals and their social context throughout career construction (Savickas, 2005, 2013). In other words, CCT seeks to understand the dynamics of an individual's career construction within a specific social context. The theory adheres to the transformations of the social organization of work, as well as the contemporary career model. Thus, career adaptability becomes a necessary psychosocial resource for career construction in the current world of work (Savickas, 2012, 2013; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

Baruch and Sullivan (2022) highlight the importance of dialogue between the field of administration and other fields that also study careers. In this regard, this article contributes to management, Organizational Studies (OS), and the field of People Management (PM) by adopting a theory that brings an innovative and contemporary perspective to the study of careers.

In order to challenge and expand CCT, this article seeks to understand the career adaptability of older workers in the relatively stable context of the Brazilian federal public sector. The norms and organizational culture of the public sector differ from those of the private sector. Furthermore, the public sector context contradicts the instability and individualization of career construction prevalent in the private sector, given that public servants enjoy job stability, and career development is the responsibility of the State. Apparently, job stability in the public sector affords individuals greater control over their career construction. According to Savickas (2005), the concept of control in career refers to the belief that individuals possess agency and autonomy over the construction of their vocational future.

Castro and Oliveira (2022) affirm that there is a “mismatch between careers in the Brazilian federal public service and the evolution of theories dealing with the subject, with the public sphere being outside the reality of the market.” Furthermore, Castro and Oliveira (2023) point to a partial alignment between individual careers and institutional careers. Public servants are “placing less value on traditional concepts such as loyalty, authority, seniority, or promotion.”

Against this backdrop, this article seeks to answer the following research question: how do the experiences of older workers related to the aging process influence career construction in the context of the Brazilian federal public sector? More specifically, the objective of the present study is to **understand the influence of the aging process on the career adaptability of older public servants at a Higher Education Institution (HEI)**. To achieve this objective, a qualitative study was conducted in which 16 educational administrative technicians (EAT) aged 45 years or older working at an HEI were interviewed. Thematic narrative and biographical analysis was adopted for data analysis.

The theoretical framework, methodological procedures, empirical research results, and discussion of findings are presented below. Finally, concluding remarks are outlined.

■ CAREER CONSTRUCTION THEORY

Career Construction Theory adopts a subjective definition of career in which the narratives of an individual's occupational experiences produce a story with personal meaning (Savickas, 2005, 2013). From this perspective, career is related to life trajectory, as people gradually project and construct their own lives, including their professional paths (Duarte et al., 2010).

In recent decades, a transition from the traditional career model to the contemporary career model has taken place. The traditional career model refers to a linear and ordered life course (Smyer & Pitt-Catsoupes, 2007), marked by stable employment relationships and hierarchical dependence (Duarte et al., 2010). In this case, maturity is the central element of career (Savickas, 2005, 2013). The contemporary career model, in turn, adheres to the unstable context of work and life aligned with the era of information and globalization (Duarte et al., 2010; Hartung, 2019; Savickas, 2012, 2013). Thus, there is a shift from stability to mobility in employment and, above all, the individualization of career construction (Savickas, 2005, 2012, 2013). As a result, uncertain biographies and flexible life courses have become commonplace (Taylor et al., 2016). In this context, adaptability is the central element of contemporary careers (Savickas, 2013).

It is worth noting that CCT corroborates a radical view of career evolution in which a transition occurs from a traditional to a contemporary career model (Duarte et al., 2010; Savickas, 2012; Taveira, 2011). However, this dichotomous view does not necessarily represent "the ways in which people are actually constructing their identities in and outside work environments" (Taveira, 2011, p. 78). Accordingly, careers may be characterized by one or more models — that is, the traditional career model cannot be ruled out (Taveira, 2011). The characteristics of Brazilian public administration exemplify the critique put forward by Taveira (2011), as careers in the public service contain elements of the traditional career model.

In this context, career adaptability is the central concept of CCT and refers to a self-regulatory, transactional, and flexible competency that allows individuals to cope with unknown, complex, and ill-defined problems throughout their careers (Savickas, 2005, 2013; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Career adaptability comprises four dimensions: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence.

Concern denotes an orientation toward and preparation for the future. Planning refers to the hope and optimism that are attitudes guiding individuals to become aware of vocational tasks, occupational transitions, and choices to be made in the future (Duarte et al., 2010; Savickas, 2005, 2013; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). According to Savickas (2005, p. 54), “thinking about his or her work life across time is the essence of career because a subjective career is not a behavior; it is an idea — a reflection on the self”. Thus, concern carries a notion of continuity fostered by the belief that past experiences and present efforts enable future aspirations and visions.

Control means “that individuals feel and believe that they are responsible for constructing their careers” (Savickas, 2005, p. 54). Thus, control represents the individual’s agency and autonomy over their own vocational future (Savickas, 2005, 2013). According to Duarte et al. (2010, pp. 399–400), control “is based on the conviction that it is advantageous to be able not only to use self-regulation strategies to adjust to the demands of different contexts, but also to exert some form of influence and control over the context.” Control pertains to assertiveness, decisiveness, discipline, responsibility, intentionality, determination, and engagement in the accomplishment of tasks and transitions (Savickas, 2005, 2013).

Curiosity involves the exploration of the fit between possible ways of being and occupational opportunities (Duarte et al., 2010; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Exploratory experiences provide learning about oneself and about the world of work (Savickas, 2013). Thus, curiosity is associated with exploration, experimentation, willingness to take risks, self-knowledge, and the search for occupational information (Savickas, 2005).

Finally, confidence is related to “the individual’s ability to successfully execute a course of action needed to make and implement suitable educational and vocational choices” (Savickas, 2005, p. 56). In other words, confidence pertains to the belief that individuals are capable of implementing the choices necessary to sustain their aspirations and achieve personal goals (Duarte et al., 2010; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Career choices require confidence to master and overcome challenges and obstacles (Savickas, 2005). Thus, confidence emerges from attitudes such as self-esteem, self-acceptance, self-efficacy, persistence, effort, commitment, and encouragement. Mistaken beliefs and prejudices related to gender, race, age, and social roles produce internal and external barriers that inhibit confidence (Savickas, 2005, 2013).

Fasbender et al. (2019), Hirschi et al. (2015), and Rudolph et al. (2017) suggest that the dimensions of career adaptability are theoretically and empirically distinguishable, yet highly interrelated. Furthermore, Savickas (2005, 2013) and Tomaz and Zerbini (2025) establish a hierarchy of importance among the dimensions of career adaptability. According to these authors, concern is the most important dimension of career adaptability, followed by control, curiosity, and confidence. This may be attributed to the fact that most research in this area has been conducted with university students or young workers (Fasbender et al., 2019).

Recent research have articulated career adaptability with other concepts and theories, and have examined the influence of context, gender, age, ethnicity, qualification, and stability on the dimensions of career adaptability (Nyathi & Oothuizen, 2023; Tomaz & Zerbini, 2025). In this regard, the quantitative study conducted by Nyathi and Oothuizen (2023) with workers

in the investment sector in South Africa concluded that the age variable presented significant differences only for the curiosity dimension.

The dimensions of career adaptability are formed by a specific set of attitudes, beliefs, and competencies that, in turn, shape coping behaviors (Savickas, 2013). Thus, concern is associated with awareness, involvement, and preparation; control with assertiveness, discipline, and intentionality; curiosity with experimentation, risk-taking, and inquiry; and confidence with persistence, effort, and diligence (Savickas, 2013).

Furthermore, coping behaviors comprise the career stages: orientation, exploration, establishment, management, and disengagement (Savickas, 2005, 2013; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Career stages refer to five sets of behaviors that form the adaptive performance cycle (Savickas, 2005, 2013). The adaptive performance cycle can be understood longitudinally across the lifespan — also referred to as the maxi-cycle of career stages — or occur transversally, also known as the mini-cycle.

From the perspective of the maxi-cycle of career stages, individuals are expected to develop their vocational personality during childhood in the orientation phase. Subsequently, individuals engage in exploratory activities during youth and early adulthood — for example, academic and professional choices aligned with their vocational personality and occupational information. Following the exploration stage, individuals establish themselves in a particular occupation and subsequently seek to manage and maintain their position through professional updating and the innovation of work routines. At some point, however, individuals may leave work. To this end, individuals begin to decelerate at work and transfer responsibilities to other workers. During career disengagement, individuals may change jobs and thereby restart the occupational life cycle or, as the case may be, prepare for retirement (Savickas, 2005, 2013).

However, the social organization of work and the labor market context of contemporary society give rise to non-standardized life trajectories and more frequent occupational transitions. Accordingly, the mini-cycle perspective proposes that career stages may recur throughout the lifespan and may disrupt the continuum of vocational developmental tasks. Thus, the adaptive performance cycle repeats whenever individuals need to adapt to a contextual change (Savickas, 2005, 2013).

The following section presents the methodological procedures adopted for conducting the research with older workers.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

In order to understand the influence of the aging process on the career adaptability of older public servants, an analysis of personal biographies and career narratives was conducted. Accordingly, a qualitative methodological approach was adopted, along with the investigative strategy known as narrative research (Gibbs, 2009).

The study was conducted at an Higher Education Institution (HEI) located in the southeastern region of Brazil. The study participants were active Educational Administrative Technicians (EAT) public servants aged 45 years or older. At the time, 1,948 EAT public servants were employed at the HEI,

of whom 52% were aged 45 or older. The chronological age delimitation was necessary for the selection of workers who are approaching old age or are already elderly and are close to retirement. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic context, the data collection method known as virtual snowball sampling was adopted for participant selection, with the aim of ensuring the safety of both interviewees and researchers (Ribeiro et al., 2024).

Sixteen public servants participated in the study (eight men and eight women). Participants' ages ranged from 47 to 66 years. Table 1 lists the social and demographic data of the study participants.

Table 1*Social and Demographic Data*

Fictitious Name	Age	Sex	Job Position
Lorena	47	F	Administrative Assistant
Isabela	49	F	Laboratory Technician — Field: Nursing
Marcos	50	M	Mechanical Technician
Maria	50	F	Executive Secretary
Gabriel	53	M	Administrative Assistant
Nicolas	53	M	Administrative Assistant
Helena	55	F	Pantry worker
Bernardo	56	M	Administrative Assistant
Alice	57	F	Administrative Assistant
Elisa	57	F	Executive Secretary
Heitor	58	M	Administrator
Lucas	58	M	Economist
Diego	60	M	Administrator
Laura	62	F	Laboratory Technician — Field: Nursing
Mateus	65	M	Administrative Assistant
Sofia	66	F	Administrative Assistant

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The data collection technique used was the semi-structured in-depth interview (Gaskell, 2002). The interview guide addressed questions related to significant career transitions and adaptability resources for coping with changes, as well as questions about the experience of aging and the influence of the aging process on career construction. Most interviews were conducted via video call on the WhatsApp application. Data collection was concluded upon reaching the saturation point (Gaskel, 2002).

Thematic narrative and biographical analysis was adopted for data analysis (Gibbs, 2009). The data analysis was carried out in five stages: (1) data organization, specifically the transcription of audio recordings and proofreading the transcripts for spelling and grammar; and (2) thematic coding and categorization. Coding sought to organize broad units of accounts by themes — for example, theoretical or descriptive ideas, phenomena, activities, and

explanations that shared similarities. In some cases, broad units of accounts received more than one code. In such instances, codes were classified as primary or secondary, with the primary code being the one that best expresses and represents the theme of the broad unit of account. Subsequently, a code hierarchy was constructed and similar primary codes were organized into thematic categories. The construction of thematic categories is based on thematic comparisons, that is, identifying differences and similarities between narratives about specific topics or similar events. Accordingly, codes and thematic categories were constructed a posteriori; (3) the organization of thematic categories into theoretical categories. To this end, the theme and content of the thematic categories were compared and correlated with the theoretical description of the career adaptability dimensions; (4) the identification of interrelationships among thematic categories, grounded in the relationship between primary and secondary codes, given that some broad units of accounts were directed toward certain thematic categories but also contained secondary codes addressing themes pertaining to other thematic categories. As a result, the contents of the categories are complementary and interconnected; and (5) the proposition of an explanatory model of career adaptability for older workers at the HEI.

The results of the empirical research are presented below, followed by a discussion of the findings. Fictitious names were assigned to the interviewees to protect their identity and ensure anonymity.

■ RESULTS

Data analysis led to the construction of ten thematic categories, organized according to the four dimensions of career adaptability.

Concern

This theoretical category encompasses thematic categories related to retirement and professional qualification and training.

■ RETIREMENT: THE MAJOR FUTURE CAREER TRANSITION

Pension reform, the minimum retirement age, the political and economic context, fears associated with old age and retirement, the lack of retirement planning and preparation, and outdated stereotypes underpinning ageism against retired individuals or those approaching retirement are elements that influence career concern. For example, Gabriel narrates the fear of retirement experienced by some of his coworkers. The interviewee states that “*retiring is like reaching the end of the line*” (Gabriel) for the worker. The expression “end of the line” evokes the fear of uselessness and obsolescence, and of death in old age.

Job stability in the public sector and certain legal norms governing retirement favor planning for career disengagement at the HEI and for retirement. The accounts indicate that some older workers manage their ca-

reers and remain in their positions until retirement, and are also responsible for decisions regarding whether or not to extend their professional lives. For example, Heitor states that he has already done “enough for the campus... *It’s about following this routine we’re in... it seems to me that I’m now heading toward the... twilight, you know? In eight years, I’ll be retiring.*”

In this regard, Laura reports a sense of tranquility and security in making choices and decisions at the current stage of her career, given that she has the prerogative to retire in situations that conflict with her personal convictions. According to the interviewee, “*I am not obligated to anything today! I can just retire — my letter of manumission has already been signed!*” (Laura).

Finally, it is worth noting that some interviewees intend to take on new professional activities in order to maintain productivity after retiring from the HEI. For example, Sofia states that she has several “*projects outside the HEI. So, it [retirement] will not affect me.*”

■ PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATION AND TRAINING

Overall, the results indicate that aging does not prevent professional qualification and training. For example, Maria completed her undergraduate degree at around forty years of age and completed her master’s degree at fifty. Furthermore, professional qualification and training become elements of resistance against the specter of uselessness and obsolescence in old age. For example, Laura states that “*I take care of my aging in this way, by keeping myself updated.*”

With regard to the career plan for educational administrative technician positions (PCCTAE) (Law No. 11.091, 2005), public servants can reach the top of the career ladder within 17 years of work. As a result, older public servants with more than 18 years of service at the HEI have no incentive for career development.

In sum, the incentive for professional development provided by the PCCTAE, institutional people development policies, as well as the possibility of working and studying at the HEI are elements that favor career concern. However, the inadequacy of the PCCTAE and the lack of institutional qualification and training policies that address the specificities and particularities of older workers interfere with career concern.

The next theoretical category brings together the thematic categories that portray the second dimension of career adaptability, namely career control.

Control

This theoretical category brings together thematic categories on agency and autonomy, productivity and proactivity versus uselessness and obsolescence, and the control of the aging process in the career.

■ AGENCY AND AUTONOMY

This thematic category presents some elements of agency and autonomy in the career construction of older workers, namely: 1) enthusiasm and optimism regarding one's career. According to Bernardo, *"today, I feel fulfilled. For all the choices [decisions] I had available in my life"*; (2) decision-making competencies, assertiveness, and determination during career transitions.

For example, Alice states the following: *"I am very driven — I have focus... So, these changes have always been... very well resolved for me, you know?... If I had to make some sacrifice, I would make the sacrifice"*; and (3) responsibility for one's actions and decisions. According to the interviewee, *"my husband never wanted me to study Law. He even said that if I studied Law, I would have to choose between him and Law. I said 'I will choose Law.'" In this regard, Alice underscores her responsibility for her actions and her capacity to remain true to her personal convictions and to what she considered right for her professional life in the face of career obstacles.*

In contrast, the interviewees point to some elements that restrict the agency and autonomy of older public servants in career construction, namely:

- (1) the aging process articulated with family relationships. For example, Lucas affirms that the responsibilities of adult life — particularly family relationships — influence the decisions and career choices of older workers. According to the interviewee, *"making a decision today, as a married man with a teenage daughter, is not the same thing as for a 22-year-old guy, like when I graduated"* (Lucas); and
- (2) the norms governing admission and progression in the public service. The professional qualification of a public servant does not enable a career change within the institution, given that the Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil (CF/1988) stipulates that admission to a public service position requires approval in a competitive public examination. Thus, an EAT public servant holding a level C classification position who completed a master's or doctoral degree during their career development must undertake a competitive public examination in order to transition to a level E classification position or to become a faculty member in higher education at the HEI.

■ PRODUCTIVITY AND PROACTIVITY VERSUS USELESSNESS AND OBSOLESCENCE

Some older workers who are productive and proactive are considered "less old" than workers of the same age group who are not seen as productive and proactive — that is, a decline in productivity and proactivity signals old age in the organizational environment. For example, Sofia states that her coworkers frequently tell her she is a *"fake old person... Because I have so much more drive, so much more energy... than the vast majority of my team... I don't even have the right to feel old! [Laughs]."*

Elisa, in turn, demonstrates concern and reluctance about being redirected to a work activity inconsistent with her position's duties due to the aging process. According to Elisa, *“the day they assign me to a little reception desk... I'll request my retirement!... Another thing that I won't do [laughs], is hang around making coffee and going to the break room.”*

The interviewee's account demonstrates the fear of downward career mobility, points to ageist practices typically directed at older workers, and highlights activities commonly attributed to older women. Accordingly, the interviewee takes responsibility for maintaining her productivity and proactivity in order to be recognized and valued, and to avoid marginalization and downward career mobility.

On the other hand, some older workers exercise their rights and remain in their public service positions, despite experiencing uselessness and obsolescence in the public service. In this regard, Gabriel adopts the term “jurassic” to characterize older workers who experience uselessness and obsolescence. According to the interviewee, *“Jurassic refers to when a guy [an older worker] does not do any work anymore. The guy comes to work just to clock in... He just sits there, idle, and ends up feeling completely useless!”* Thus, “jurassics” are older workers who are idle, outdated, and unproductive.

It is worth highlighting that the term “jurassic” expresses ageism against older workers. Older workers who are considered unproductive and obsolete are generally abandoned and forgotten in the organizational environment. Gabriel states that, *“we treat... those people [jurassics] as if they no longer existed”*.

However, it is worth noting that the data also indicate that many older workers seek efficiency and continuous professional development, strive to become a reference in the workplace, and pursue productivity and proactivity as a way of experiencing aging in their careers.

■ CONTROL OF THE AGING PROCESS IN THE CAREER

The data indicate individual (self-)accountability for preventing health problems associated with aging. Thus, older workers report the need for healthy eating, physical exercise, regular medical check-ups, healthy relationships, and hobbies.

In this regard, Heitor takes responsibility for maintaining his health and quality of life in old age in order to prevent aging from negatively affecting his work. According to Heitor, *“I have to focus on my health, on my quality of life, so that I can be well and working — wherever that may be!”* Agency over the aging process is related to the mitigation of fears associated with aging — for example, illness, physical and mental/cognitive impairments, death, uselessness and obsolescence at work, and downward career mobility.

Controlling old age requires older workers to behave in accordance with age norms and standards, as well as to remain “young” in order to be respected and recognized in the workplace. Age norms and standards establish the appropriate attitudes for a given age in the organizational environment. In this regard, Alice states that *“I'm already aware that I should act as a person of my age, you know? I can no longer use certain language..., clothes... and present behaviors that are inappropriate for a 57-year-old person!”*

The next theoretical category discusses career curiosity, particularly exploratory experiences.

Curiosity

This theoretical category addresses the exploration of the environment for making educational and professional choices, the pursuit of personal and professional growth opportunities, and the investigation of occupational tasks.

■ EXPLORATORY EXPERIENCES

Job stability in the public sector and the aging process do not prevent the development of exploratory experiences, as older workers evaluate and explore various opportunities throughout their careers. For example, Helena states the following: *“I see myself doing so many things, and at the moment, also discovering others — for example, cooking... I enjoy selling things... My age does not prevent me from doing anything!”* Thus, the interviewee points to the pursuit of personal and professional growth opportunities alongside career development at the HEI, and highlights that the aging process is not an obstacle to engaging in new work activities.

Change and continuous career development become important during old age. For example, Maria associates the lack of exploratory experiences with death: *“a human being, as long as they want more, they will do something for themselves and they will evolve! If I hadn’t done this, I would be... headed toward death!”*

In this regard, some interviewees report the beginning of a new phase in their professional career at the HEI (Laura, Lorena, Diego, Elisa, and Nicolas). For example, Laura states that she requested a transfer from an inland campus to the HEI’s central campus.

On the other hand, some accounts point to the influence of aging on the pursuit of exploratory experiences in the career. For example, Isabela states that she intends to remain in her position and carry out the same activities until retirement.

The next theoretical category brings together the thematic categories that portray the last dimension of career adaptability, namely career confidence.

Confidence

This theoretical category discusses maturity combined with professional knowledge and experience, the execution of actions necessary to make and implement professional choices, the pursuit of efficiency at work, and the mastery of information technologies.

■ MATURITY, KNOWLEDGE, AND PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

From the perspective of some interviewees, aging and length of service at the HEI can foster maturity, professional knowledge, and experience. In this regard, Diego states that age influences his work due to *“experimentation: the things I have already lived through in my life — the knowledge I have acquired over time... maturity, balance. Because you see the world differently!”*

In contrast, some interviewees point out that aging and length of service at the HEI do not necessarily foster maturity, professional knowledge, and experience. For example, Lucas states that not all older coworkers *“at my age have this experience. And many younger people already have even more experience than I do [Laughs]. So, I don’t know if it’s... age.”*

Furthermore, some older workers report immaturity in overcoming obstacles in their professional careers at the HEI. For example, Helena states that she was immature during a recent position change at the HEI: *“my posture was immature... I followed a straight line and did not take into account the valleys, the curves, the mountains...”*

In this regard, Laura affirms that the development of professional knowledge and experience depends on the worker’s engagement in living through experiences and learning throughout their professional career, and is independent of age. From the interviewee’s perspective, a lack of engagement in the development of professional knowledge and experience in one’s career is associated with the experience of uselessness and obsolescence.

■ OVERCOMING PROFESSIONAL OBSTACLES

Some interviewees report persistence, resilience, confidence, courage, and determination in problem-solving and overcoming professional obstacles. For example, Laura was experiencing an imminent departmental transfer at the HEI. According to Laura, *“I am not worried [about her new department]... I will go in the way I have always gone, present myself the way I always have — willing to collaborate.”* Thus, Laura demonstrates confidence and determination in overcoming the professional challenges and obstacles related to the departmental change at the HEI, and commits to carrying out tasks in the best way possible.

On the other hand, some interviewees report confidence during the early stages of their career and a behavioral shift and attenuation of confidence as they aged. For example, Elisa states that she had more confidence during the early stages of her professional career up until joining the HEI at the age of 40. During that phase, Elisa states that she did not hesitate in solving problems and overcoming professional obstacles: *“I went... all in!... Because when you are fresh, you go for it! Now... look at how things change.”* In the current phase of her career, Elisa states that she feels “paralyzed” and insecure when faced with professional problems and obstacles.

Furthermore, Elisa states that *“my career curve has started to decline. Because... it is the natural law of being human!... It is becoming a challenge because then I realize that it is time for me to change or to stop [retire].”* Thus, aging in the career brought about a change in coping behavior toward pro-

professional problems and obstacles — fostering moderation, prudence, and inhibition in the current career phase. As such, aging can itself become a challenge and obstacle in the career.

■ BEING EFFICIENT AND A REFERENCE IN THE WORKPLACE

Some older workers seek to perform their jobs as effectively as possible, respecting their personal abilities regardless of age. For example, Nicolas states that *“the same seriousness I had when I started out, I still have today. I try to do the best I can.”* In some cases, age contributes to efficiency at work, as older workers consider themselves more committed to their jobs and organizations than younger workers.

Aging fosters competence, quality, credibility, recognition, respect, and trust in the workplace. Gabriel states that *“age... can be a good ally because it allows you to inspire confidence. You convey credibility to those seeking your services.”* Apparently, age and aging contribute to making older workers a reference point within the organizational environment. For example, Mateus states that he works *“with people who are old enough to be my children... They rely heavily on me because I am older, of age, and... because I have spent more time working in this field.”* Thus, older workers’ self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-acceptance stand out as important resources for carrying out occupational tasks.

■ MASTERY OF TECHNOLOGY

Mastery of technology is related to career confidence due to the need for continuous learning of new skills within the organizational environment. Furthermore, obsolescence and a lack of technological proficiency can become obstacles to career development.

Overall, age and aging do not prevent mastery of technology. Alice states that *“we have experienced many technological changes in our work... My age was not an obstacle to mastering [these technologies].”* In addition, Gabriel states that *“either you keep up to date [with technology] or you will become ‘jurassic.’”* According to Gabriel, *“I embrace technology as a way to keep myself updated and young up here [the interviewee points to his head].”* Thus, Gabriel argues that mastering technology is a way to resist uselessness and obsolescence and maintain productivity in old age.

On the other hand, some older workers report limitations and difficulties in using information technologies. For example, Maria states that *“I come from the typewriter era. So, I have difficulty using computers!”* In addition, some older workers may show resistance to the use of technology. For instance, Elisa reports that some older workers do not want to *“even touch a computer!”*

The next section provides a general analysis of the influence of the aging process on career adaptability.

■ DISCUSSION

Analysis of the data reveals the different realities under which individuals construct their careers (Taveira, 2011). The data suggest that public-sector careers are hybrid in nature, incorporating elements of both traditional and contemporary career models. With regard to traditional career elements, the Brazilian state is responsible for the policies and regulations governing career development. In addition, public-sector careers offer stable employment relationships and a linear, orderly life course. With regard to contemporary career elements, some older workers report exercising agency and autonomy in constructing their careers within the HEI, while also seeking professional challenges outside the institution. Overall, the results indicate dissatisfaction among participants regarding career progression in the public sector and even a certain degree of frustration with the organization of public service, due to the limitations imposed by the legal regulations governing public-sector careers, which prevent individuals from managing their own careers.

The aging process in public-sector careers involves a complex interplay of gains and losses. On the one hand, several findings point to the benefits of aging for one's career, including: (1) maturity, knowledge, and professional experience, which are reflected in attitudes and behaviors developed throughout the career, such as engagement, self-acceptance, and self-esteem; (2) proactivity, engagement, and productivity; and (3) efficiency and the desire to serve as a reference for other workers. From the participants' perspective, older workers are valuable assets (Chand & Tung, 2014; Zacher et al., 2018) and a source of organizational wisdom (Vasconcelos, 2018).

On the other hand, some findings point to losses associated with old age, including: (1) physical or mental/cognitive limitations, such as illness, slower performance, forgetfulness, and reduced willingness to work; (2) experiences of uselessness, obsolescence (Sennett, 2006; Thomas et al., 2014), unproductivity, disinterest, and idleness, resulting in becoming a negative reference for other workers; and (3) resistance to change and innovation in the world of work, particularly with respect to information technologies. Overall, these losses and negative stereotypes associated with old age are attributed to other older individuals or social groups. Thus, some participants seek to differentiate and distance themselves from the losses and negative stereotypes associated with old age, as well as from the processes of disqualification and stigmatization that affect older public servants.

Analyzing aging in careers through the lens of CCT helps to deconstruct certain social beliefs and outdated stereotypes directed toward older workers. In this regard, the adaptive performance cycle perspective (Savickas, 2005, 2013) suggests that older workers may begin a new career stage regardless of their chronological age. For example, disengagement from a public-sector career may signify the beginning of a new professional phase, as many older workers are willing to take on new professional challenges after retirement. Moreover, older workers may begin a professional career at age forty, just as they may complete a master's degree at age fifty.

Within this context, the findings of this study indicate that it is inappropriate to adopt a romanticized view of old age (Fineman, 2014), given the losses associated with the aging process. At the same time, social beliefs and negative stereotypes about old age (Peroni & Martins-Silva, 2025; Santos et al., 2018) are equally inappropriate, as the aging process is individual

and unique (Zacher et al., 2018), and older workers may be just as capable of performing their jobs as their younger colleagues.

Work is a central activity in people's lives and contributes to mitigating losses associated with old age (Cepellos et al., 2019; Hartung, 2019; Smyer & Pitt-Catsouphes, 2007). Thus, some negative characteristics are associated with older individuals who are not productive, such as loss of social function, stagnation, and death (Cepellos et al., 2019). However, the findings of this study broaden the discussion regarding the importance of work and employment relationships for older individuals, particularly by bringing the context of the federal public sector into focus. The results suggest that simply having an employment relationship does not necessarily contribute to mitigating losses associated with old age. In other words, work must be associated with productivity, proactivity, qualifications, professional training, and technological proficiency in order to fulfill its function of helping individuals maintain control over the aging process. The articulation between employment relationships and the factors that contribute to mitigating losses associated with old age becomes especially important for older public servants, as the public-sector context may give rise to symbolic dismissal or retirement (Cepellos et al., 2019), as well as experiences of uselessness and obsolescence (Sennett, 2006; Thomas et al., 2014). In other words, having an employment relationship does not guarantee control over the aging process in the public-sector context, as the findings indicate that loss of social function, stagnation, and death were attributed to older workers who remained employed but experienced feelings of uselessness and obsolescence within the organizational environment.

Career control is closely linked to control over the aging process. Older workers report a sense of individual responsibility for managing the aging process throughout their careers, as well as the need to exercise agency over that process. To achieve this, they take responsibility for their health and physical well-being and, in some cases, seek to conform to age-related norms and expectations (Cepellos et al., 2019). The goal of controlling the aging process is to achieve healthy aging, maintain youthfulness, and attain professional acceptance and recognition. That is, controlling the aging process throughout one's career is related to mitigating losses associated with old age and overcoming the specter of uselessness and obsolescence.

Some participants report fearing downward career mobility (Sennett, 2006) as a consequence of the aging process and the specter of uselessness and obsolescence. Sennett (2006) argues that older workers may seek lower-status jobs or underemployment during periods of career transition. However, downward mobility in public-sector careers may occur within the exercise of one's position, given the employment stability enjoyed by public servants. From the participants' perspective, older public servants — particularly those perceived as idle or obsolete — may be assigned tasks that are inconsistent with their job descriptions, such as reception or pantry duties, or may experience symbolic dismissal or retirement.

Thus, the findings highlight the capacity and motivation of some older workers to pursue professional qualifications and training. Ogassava et al. (2023) emphasize the social and individual benefits of learning in old age, including the development of support networks and increased independence and self-esteem. Furthermore, continuous learning and development imply a refusal to legitimize aging in the workplace (Cepellos et al., 2019). Within

this context, professional qualifications and training are essential for both organizations and older workers. In the context of the HEI, employees have the opportunity to work and study at the institution. Moreover, the HEI offers qualification and professional development programs in specific areas for EATs. However, the data points to a lack of professional development policies that address the specific needs and characteristics of older workers.

Overall, the pursuit of qualifications, professional training, and exploratory experiences is related to career management and retirement preparation. From the perspective of the adaptive performance cycle (Savickas, 2005, 2013), most participants are in the career management stage, and retirement represents a vocational developmental task and a future transition that will be fundamental and meaningful in the careers of older workers, although some participants perceive it as a distant prospect.

The findings indicate that some older workers intend to remain in their positions and work sectors, performing the same activities until retirement. Thus, a long professional career at the HEI may foster the perception that older workers have made all the contributions expected of them to the institution. Within this context, some accounts reflect experiences of symbolic dismissal or retirement (Cepellos et al., 2019), as well as feelings of uselessness and obsolescence (Sennett, 2006; Thomas et al., 2014) in public-sector positions. In addition, the findings indicate the absence of human resource management policies and strategies specifically designed for this population. Therefore, public organizations need to adopt human resource management policies and strategies that promote professional competency development, engagement, and the strengthening of workers' attitudes toward their work. Accordingly, people management (PM) policies and strategies should respect human development and the aging process in the workplace, while also contributing to the reconfiguration of aging within public-sector careers (Cepellos et al., 2019).

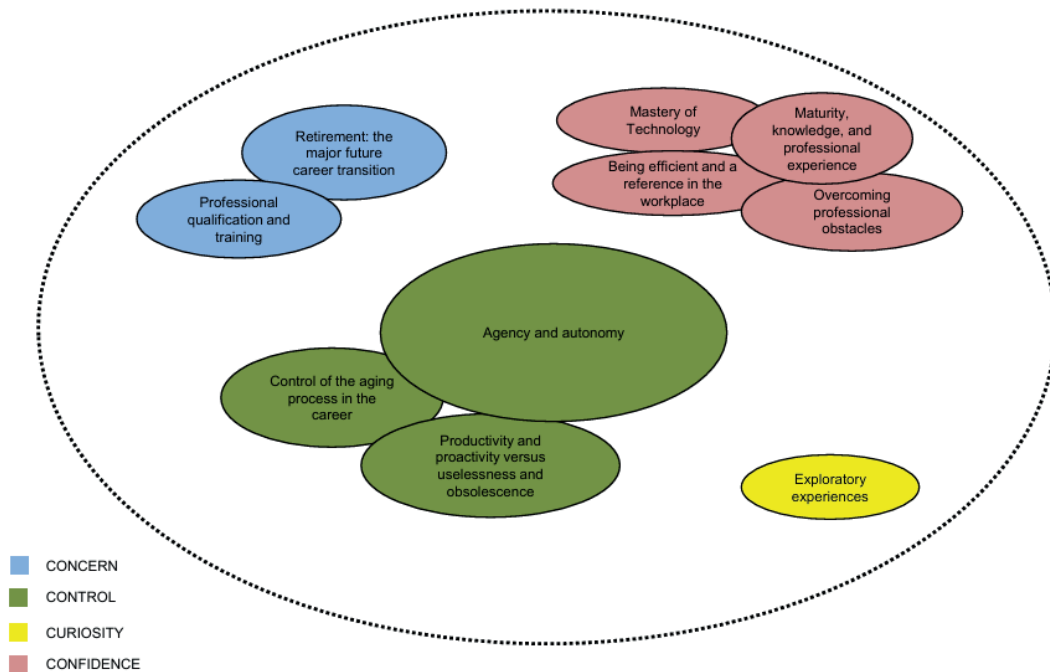
Analysis of the findings indicates that the theoretical and thematic categories comprising the four dimensions of career adaptability are inter-related, as suggested by Fasbender et al. (2019), Hirschi et al. (2015), and Rudolph et al. (2017). These interrelationships refer to the reciprocal connections among the thematic categories. For example, the public-sector context fosters older workers' agency and autonomy in planning career disengagement and retirement, while retirement regulations may also promote agency and autonomy in career construction.

Analysis of the results and the interrelationships among the categories indicates that career control is the central category for understanding the career adaptability of older workers. Savickas (2013) argues that CCT focuses on individual agency in situations involving change and transition. Accordingly, agency "becomes critical when the occupational plot is lost, ruptured, halted, stalled, or silenced" (Savickas, 2013, p. 155). However, the findings of this study suggest that agency also pertains to maintaining and managing one's position within a career and is not necessarily related to career change and transition. Therefore, vocational developmental tasks in old age within the public sector are intrinsically related to career management, and retirement constitutes the primary future career transition for older workers.

To illustrate the centrality of career control, Figure 1 presents an explanatory model of career adaptability among older public servants.

Figure 1

Explanatory Model of Career Adaptability Among Older Public Servants



Source: Prepared by the authors.

From the perspective of the theoretical categories, control is the central dimension of career adaptability due to the characteristics of the public-sector context, particularly employment stability and the fact that most participants are in the career management stage. Control and confidence are related to the aging process within careers because of the interplay of gains and losses associated with old age that affect problem-solving capacity. Concern is intrinsically related to retirement preparation and to qualifications and professional training aimed at career management and future career disengagement. Finally, curiosity appeared to be of limited relevance because most participants did not anticipate significant career changes within the HEI, with the exception of retirement. Thus, curiosity becomes a peripheral dimension of career adaptability among older public servants.

Savickas (2005) proposes a hierarchy of career adaptability dimensions in which career concern is the most important dimension, followed by control, curiosity, and confidence. Accordingly, the explanatory model of career adaptability among older workers presented in this study proposes an advancement in the literature regarding the relationship between career adaptability dimensions and the context, the aging process, and the individual's career stage. In other words, the context, the aging process, and the career stage indicate which dimension of career adaptability becomes central at a given point in an individual's career. Thus, this study deepens the discussion regarding the relationship between career adaptability resources and the set of behaviors that comprise the adaptive performance cycle.

Overall, the findings suggest that the aging process influences career adaptability, as aging brings about fundamental changes in both personal

and professional life (Zacher et al., 2018). This contribution to the literature supports the study of career construction among diverse populations in different contexts, given that the aging process, career stages, and specific social contexts require different career adaptability resources.

■ FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The analyses indicate that the aging process influences several aspects of career adaptability among older workers in the public-sector context. In summary, control emerged as the central dimension of career adaptability, primarily due to the agency and autonomy exercised by participants in constructing their careers, which are fostered by job stability in the public sector and by the fact that most participants were in the career management stage. The main theoretical contribution of this study concerns the articulation between the dimensions of career adaptability and the adaptive performance cycle. The analyses showed that the context, the aging process, and the career stage indicate which dimension of career adaptability becomes central at a particular moment in an individual's career.

Given the limitations of some theories commonly used to investigate careers within the fields of Organizational Studies (OS) and People Management (PM), it is important to adopt theories that address careers and the aging process from a contemporary and up-to-date perspective (Taylor et al., 2016). The adoption of CCT enabled a dialogue between the fields of management and vocational psychology (Baruch & Sullivan, 2022). More specifically, CCT provided a framework for understanding the dynamics of career construction by individuals who are both agentic and self-aware within a context that influences their career development. As noted by Merino-Tejedor et al. (2025), CCT “considers the possibility that people can go beyond the determinants of their lives.”

The findings reveal a mismatch between an institutionally structured career characterized by traditional features and the aspirations of public servants, which are shaped by a context emphasizing individualization and autonomy in career construction. In this sense, the challenges reported by EATs provide valuable insights for career discussions within the fields of PM and OS, while also fostering debate about careers in the Brazilian public sector and the need for reforms in response to contemporary management challenges (Castro & Oliveira, 2023).

The present study has some limitations, namely: (1) the study is susceptible to participants' denial of the aging process and/or old age (Cepellos et al., 2019), as well as to their lack of identification with the category of older workers (Schneider & Irigaray, 2008); (2) the study is susceptible to the attribution of negative characteristics of old age to other groups of older workers; and (3) the age range (47 to 66 years) resulted in a difference of nearly two decades between the youngest and oldest participant. As a result, some participants were at very different stages of life, as some were only beginning to envision old age, whereas others were already older adults and approaching retirement. Nevertheless, these limitations did not compromise the analysis of the results, given the quantity and quality of the data collected.

Based on the analysis of results, several avenues for future research can be suggested: (1) evaluating the impact of the Pension Reform (Constitutional Amendment No. 103, 2019) on work engagement and retirement planning; (2) examining PM policies and practices aimed at older workers within the context of Brazilian public administration; (3) investigating ageism in organizational settings; and (4) analyzing the intersection of age, gender, ethnicity, disability, and social class (Spedale, 2019).

Discussions of aging in careers reveal several practical and social implications, including: (1) the aging of the workforce requires the adoption of organizational policies and practices aimed at retaining older workers who constitute valuable assets to organizations, as they have priorities and needs that differ from those of younger workers (Chand & Tung, 2014); and (2) the need for PM policies and strategies that value diversity within organizations, promote professional training and development tailored to the specific needs of older workers, and support retirement preparation throughout the life course in order to facilitate a successful transition.

Aging is a complex and dynamic process that influences multiple spheres of society, particularly organizations. Accordingly, there are extensive opportunities for future research on the aging process within organizations, as well as within the context of the Brazilian public sector.



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