Empirical Article

Romantic Attachment and Emerging Adults' Future Expectations: Moderation Role of Self-Regulation

Joana Reis[1], Filipa Nunes[2,3] ⓘ, Paula Mena Matos[2,3], and Catarina Pinheiro Mota[1,3] ⓘ

Abstract

The characteristics of Western societies pose significant challenges to how emerging adults view their futures. In the present study, we analyzed the associations between romantic attachment, self-regulation, and future expectations of emerging adults controlling the sex and age of participants. More specifically, we analyzed the moderating role of goal-setting, decision-making, and learning from mistakes (self-regulation dimensions) in the links between trustful, dependent, avoidant, and ambivalent romantic relationships and future expectations. The sample, collected by convenience in Portugal, includes 571 emerging adults (76.2% were female and 23.8% were male) aged between 18 and 30 years (M = 23.31; SD = 3.35). Our results indicate significant associations between trust, dependent, avoidant, and ambivalent romantic relationships, with different dimensions of future expectations. Findings indicated that goal-setting moderates the association between dependent and avoidant romantic relationships and pessimism. We discuss these findings based on attachment theory, considering the relevance of emotional bonds and self-regulatory processes in future planning.

Keywords

emerging adulthood, future expectations, goal-setting, romantic attachment, self-regulation

Introduction

The future expectations reflect the individuals' generalized expectations for their future (Ginevra et al., 2016). These expectations can be optimistic, pessimistic, or hopeful and are essential to human development as they relate to emotions, thoughts, and action planning (Baumeister et al., 2018). Individuals with optimistic and hopeful future expectations exhibit less vulnerability to mental health problems, including mood disorders and anxiety. Conversely, the opposite pattern is found for individuals with pessimistic future expectations (e.g., Conversano et al., 2010). Although the literature points out the relevance of future expectations to individuals' mental health, little is known about the factors associated with those perceptions in emerging adulthood. Identifying those factors is a promising step to better understanding emerging adults' future expectations and informing interventions that promote a more optimistic and hopeful future orientation.

According to the literature, future expectations are shaped by individual characteristics, relational factors, and the broader social context (Shrira & Palgi, 2014). More particularly, the attachment to significant figures (Kornblum et al., 2021), the self-regulatory capacity (Baumeister et al., 2018), and sex and age have been suggested as important factors in

understanding how emerging adults perceive their future. Nonetheless, the association mechanisms between those variables still need to be addressed. At the relational level, attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1991; Bowlby, 1988) establishes a relevant theoretical framework to study this association. According to attachment theory, the unique, deep, lasting emotional bonds contribute to developing internal senses of security and support, namely regarding active explorations of the self, others, and the world. In contrast, insecure emotional bonds will hinder those explorations (Feeney & Collins, 2019). Even though parents are important secure bases, other relationships gain relevance during emerging adulthood, and the attachment functions are gradually

[1]Edifício da Escola de Ciências Humanas e Sociais, University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro – UTAD, Vila Real, Portugal
[2]Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences at University of Porto, Porto, Portugal
[3]Center for Psychology at University of Porto, Porto, Portugal

Corresponding Author:
Catarina Pinheiro Mota, Department of Education and Psychology, University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro, Vila Real 5400, Portugal.
Email: catppmota@utad.pt

transferred to romantic partners. Young people integrate new relationships with peers and romantic partners, who become safe havens that promote comfort and emotional support through shared interactions and experiences over time (Allen, 2008). Trustful relationships with romantic partners encourage and validate autonomy and achieving self-determined goals (Coy et al., 2012). However, individuals can show maladjustments in the need for closeness and dependence with the romantic partner. Highly dependent individuals tend to seek continuous closeness and constant approval regarding life decisions, which can undermine exploring behaviors. Higher levels of avoidance can highlight feelings of discomfort with proximity and dependence and fear of intimacy, which can foster a negative view of the future (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019; Simpson & Rholes, 2017). Although scarce, some studies underline the importance of secure romantic attachment on exploratory behaviors concerning future orientation (Feeney & Collins, 2019; Kumar & Mattanah, 2016; Nunes et al., 2022). For instance, Kvitkovičová et al. (2017) found that the romantic partner was the most relevant attachment figure in career-related decision-making processes. These findings from a large longitudinal study seem to indicate that trustful romantic relationships are associated with how emerging adults perceive their future.

At the individual level, it is worth highlighting the role of self-regulation, i.e., the processes through which individuals are active agents in their lives, regulating behaviors, emotions, and thoughts (Bandura, 1991). The self-regulation capacity promotes the motivation to achieve goals, the generalized belief of obtaining positive consequences, and the ability to overcome adversities (Lenne & Mann, 2021). Therefore, as an overarching construct, self-regulation is an important individual factor (Carver & Scheier, 2013); nevertheless, some authors highlight the importance of assessing separate dimensions of self-regulation, allowing a deep understanding of how individuals regulate themselves (e.g., Pichardo et al., 2018). According to these authors, self-regulated people define goals aligned with their values, make the necessary decisions to achieve those goals (delaying gratification), recognize their mistakes, and adjust their behavior and actions to move closer to their goals. In summary, these three dimensions of self-regulation work together for individuals to control their behaviors, achieve their goals, and adapt effectively to environmental demands (Pichardo et al., 2018). Evidence shows that different self-regulation dimensions are associated with different indicators of psychoemotional adjustment of individuals. For instance, Páez-Gallego et al. (2020) found that greater decision-making ability was associated with lower anxiety and depression. Another longitudinal study found that as goal-setting ability increased, so did psychological well-being (Hill et al., 2011). Moreover, Bishop and Gagne (2018) found that as participants' capacity to learn from mistakes increased, their self-efficacy also increased. Therefore, the results of these studies emphasized the importance of each of these dimensions of self-regulation for

different socio-emotional aspects and dimensions of emerging adults, which in turn can be differentially associated with their perspectives about the future.

Furthermore, it is worth highlighting that studying these three dimensions of self-regulation in conjunction with the future expectations of emerging adults is particularly relevant today. In recent decades, the sequence of life stages in contemporary Western societies, to which Portugal belongs, has become more diversified and unpredictable (Mota et al., 2022). The transition from childhood to adulthood is characterized by delaying the assumption of adult social roles due to sociocultural changes involving more significant investment in educational trajectories, professional careers, economic precariousness, and job insecurity (Mota et al., 2022). Such unpredictability and lack of control significantly constrain future planning and require greater capacity for goal setting, decision-making, and learning from mistakes to achieve objectives.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that although empirical studies recognize the importance of romantic attachment and self-regulation in emerging adults' future expectations (e.g., Blalock et al., 2015; Orehek et al., 2017), none study yet sought to analyze a possible moderating role of self-regulation, considering its dimensions. During emerging adulthood, individuals actively establish expectations regarding their future (Levpušček et al., 2017; Shane & Heckausen, 2019). Abilities such as goal-setting, decision-making, and learning from mistakes are relevant and unique in successfully developing actions and plans to achieve the desired life goals (Baumeister et al., 2018). Those self-regulation abilities may also be protective in experiencing dependent, avoidant, and ambivalent romantic relationships. For instance, goal-setting, decision-making, and learning from mistakes can reduce the strength of connections between insecure romantic relationships and pessimistic future expectations (Blalock et al., 2015; Orehek et al., 2017). This hypothesis stems from the idea that goal-setting, decision-making, and learning from mistakes can empower individuals to adapt and overcome life's constraints and demands, not depend on the help of a romantic partner. This hypothesis is partly supported by previous evidence. For instance, Blalock et al. (2015) found that individuals with higher self-regulation capacities (assessed through a dimensional approach) were less likely to exhibit depressive symptoms, even in the presence of separation anxiety. Meanwhile, Orehek et al. (2017) investigated the association between attachment security, goal-setting, and future planning. Their findings indicate that individuals with higher attachment security are more likely to engage in future planning behaviors, such as setting goals and making decisions to achieve them. Based on the conclusions of both studies, we hypothesize that goal-setting, decision-making, and learning from mistakes may act as protective factors, mitigating the negative association between less secure romantic relationships and pessimistic expectations about the future.

Furthermore, sex and age have been suggested as important correlates of close relationships, self-regulation capacity, and future expectations. More specifically, there is evidence that men and women perceive their romantic relationships differently, have different decision-making and goal-setting capacities, and have different perspectives on the future (e.g., Bjuggren & Elert, 2019; Nolen-Hoeksema & Aldao, 2011; Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2014). There is also evidence that young people view their relationships differently and show different aspirations for the future depending on their age, i.e., younger and older emerging adults tend to value different aspects of their relationships and aspirations (e.g., Dutra-Thomé et al., 2019; Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2014). Based on this evidence, we consider a fully specified understanding of the associations between romantic attachment and self-regulation, and future expectations of emerging adults cannot be achieved without considering the role of these two individual variables.

The Current Study

In the current study, we explore the associations between romantic attachment and the future expectations of emerging adults. We also investigate the moderating role of goal-setting, decision-making, and learning from mistakes in the association between romantic attachment and future expectations. Both models controlled for emerging adults' sex assigned at birth and age. Based on the literature, we hypothesize that trustful romantic relationships would be positively associated with optimism and hope for the future. In contrast, we anticipate that dependent, avoidant, and ambivalent romantic relationships will correlate with pessimism about the future. We also anticipated that greater abilities in goal-setting, decision-making, and learning from mistakes might play a protective role in the associations between dependent, avoidant, and ambivalent romantic attachment and pessimistic future expectations. Further, we hypothesized that different levels of goal-setting, decision-making, and learning from mistakes may increase or reduce the magnitude of the association between romantic attachment and future expectations (Blalock et al., 2015; Orehek et al., 2017).

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 571 emerging adults (76.2% were female and 23.8% were male) aged between 18 and 30 (M = 23.31; SD = 3.35). Most of the participants were Portuguese (99.3%). Regarding education, some participants had ninth grade certification (1.2%). Most participants had a college degree (53.8%), many had a high school degree (44.5%), and some indicated that have a postgraduate degree (0.5%). Participants were students (49.7%) or full-time workers (37.5%), and some had a student-worker status (7.2%) or were

unemployed (5.1%). Most emerging adults reported living with both parents (55.9%) or with a romantic partner (17.9%), some were living alone (8.9 %), and some reported living only with the mother (12.8%), the father (1.8%), or with other people (0.2%).

Measures

Participants completed a sociodemographic questionnaire with items on sex assigned at birth (female or male), age, nationality, education, occupation, and household.

We used the Romantic Attachment Questionnaire (RAQ, Matos et al., 2001) to analyze the quality of the relationship with the romantic partner. The RAQ is a self-report questionnaire consisting of 25 items distributed across four dimensions: Trust (6 items), Dependence (6 items), Avoidance (6 items) and Ambivalence (7 items). The Trust dimension refers to the perception of the love partner's responsiveness to meet the individual's support and comfort needs (e.g., *I know I can count on my girlfriend (boyfriend) whenever I need her(him)*). The Dependency dimension refers to the need to look for closeness to the romantic partner and the manifestation of separation anxiety or fear of loss (e.g., *I can only face new situations if he/she is with me*). The Avoidance dimension expresses the primacy that the individual attributes to himself and his abilities and the secondary role of the romantic partner (e.g., *Sometimes I think her(him) is fundamental in my life, sometimes I don't*). The Ambivalence dimension refers to insecurity towards the romantic partner, as well as irritability and doubt towards the same (e.g., *I always have the feeling that our relationship is going to end*). The answers, on a Likert-type scale, range from (1) "I totally disagree" to (6) "I totally agree". In the present study, all dimensions revealed adequate reliability: Trust (α = .91), Dependence (α = .81), Avoidance (α = .81), and Ambivalence (α = .84). The instrument also showed an acceptable fit to the data ($x^2_{(265)}$ = 814.56, p < .001, $x^2_{/df}$ = 3.07, CFI = .92, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .06). Some authors report associations between RAQ and other scales (e.g., Ávila et al., 2011), namely with the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR). The results show moderate to strong correlations, which support the convergent validity of the RAQ score. ECR anxiety correlated significantly with RAQ dependence (r = .61, p < .001), ECR avoidance correlated positively with RAQ avoidance (r = .31, p < .001) and negatively correlated with RAQ trust (r = .71, p < .001).

We used the Short Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SSRQ, Carey et al., 2004; Portuguese version García del Castillo and Dias, 2009) to assess emerging adults' capacities to plan, guide, and monitor behavior adjustability regarding changing circumstances. The SSRQ is composed of 16 items distributed across three dimensions: Goal-Setting (7 items), Decision-Making (5 items), and Learning from Mistakes (4 items). The Goal-Setting dimension refers to the abilities concerning

planning and goal-setting (e.g., *I usually keep track of my progress toward my goals*). In turn, the decision-making dimension assesses one's ability to engage in decision-making processes (e.g., *I put off making decisions*). Finally, the learning from mistakes dimension refers to self-reflective behavior in the face of challenges (e.g., *I didn't notice the effects of my actions until it is too late*). The answers are presented on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) "Strongly disagree" to (5) "Strongly agree". In the present study, all dimensions revealed adequate reliability: Goal-Setting (α = .83), Decision-Making (α = .80), and Learning from Mistakes (α = .74). The instrument also showed an acceptable fit to the data ($x^2_{(99)}$ = 264.63, p < .001, $x^2_{/df}$ = 2.67, CFI = .95, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .05).

We used the Visions About Future questionnaire (VAF; Ginevra et al., 2016; adapted for Portuguese by Nunes et al., 2018) to analyze emerging adults' future expectations. The VAF is a self-report questionnaire consisting of 19 items distributed over three subscales: Optimism (6 items), Pessimism (6 items) and Hope (7 items). Optimism refers to the generalized belief in positive future events (e.g., *I am usually full of enthusiasm and optimism about my future*). The Pessimism dimension refers to the generalized belief in negative events in posterity (e.g., *I won't be able to do what I really think is important*). Hope represents the individual's motivation towards achieving their future goals, manifesting an affective component (e.g., *I feel that I will do very well in the future*). The answers, presented on a Likert-type scale, ranging from (1) "This does not describe me at all" to (5) "This describes me perfectly". All dimensions revealed adequate reliability: Optimism (α = .91), Pessimism (α = .73), and Hope (α = .91). The instrument also showed an acceptable fit to the data ($x^2_{(128)}$ = 585.21, p < .001, $x^2_{/df}$ = 4.57, CFI = .93, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .08).

Procedure

The authors' institutional ethics committee approved this study (Ref[a] 2018/07-1b). Data were collected using an online platform (LimeSurvey 3.15®) between August and November 2018. We implemented the current study in different contexts. We posted invitations to participatsadfasasdsade and disseminate the survey on our personal Facebook pages without using paid advertisements. We also contacted 43 universities or higher education institutions and 15 companies requesting the dissemination of the current study to their students or employees. The institutions' involvement in the current study was limited to dissemination. Companies contacted by the research team were from different sectors to ensure variability and with younger employees, given the target population of the current study. Participants completed the informed consent form. The first page of the online questionnaire contained an informed consent form with general information about the

survey, namely its objectives, target population, and guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants did not receive any reward for participation. Participants took an average of 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire, which was presented in Portuguese. The order in which the questionnaires were presented to the participants was randomized to avoid bias in responses due to fatigue. The response rate was 84.7%. In total, 692 participants accessed our questionnaire; 4 stated in the informed consent that they were not interested in participating in the study; 102 did not complete the questionnaire, giving up halfway through.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 26.0. We determine sample size according to Kline's (2015) recommendations for structural equation modeling (SEM): 5 or 10 participants per parameter are needed to find a reasonable effect. For the models tested in this study, a minimum of 300 participants would be required to obtain reasonable effect sizes. Participants only had access to the following questionnaire once they had fully completed the first; therefore, there were no missing values. Univariate outliers were identified using Z-scores < −3 or > 3, and multivariate outliers were identified by calculating the Mahalanobis distance scores (Marôco, 2018). All analyses were performed without outliers (N = 15). The results were analyzed and interpreted based on significance (p) values of .01 and .05. We performed confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to test the adjustment of measures to our data. CFA was tested using several fit indices: Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). The criteria used for adequate adjustment were CFI and TLI ≥ .90 and RMSEA < .10 (Kline, 2015). Next, we address the research questions through structural equation modeling using manifest variables. First, we tested a model considering the associations (model 1) among independent and moderation variables with dependent variables. Second, we tested a moderation model, including variables reflecting the interactions between independent and moderating variables that were significant in the initial mode1. In addition to standardizing the moderator variables (M = 0; SD = 1) to facilitate model interpretation, we performed no linear data transformation.

Results

Moderating Effect of Self-Regulation in the Association Between romantic Attachment and Future Expectations

First, we tested a model considering all direct links among variables. The model showed an acceptable fit ($x^2_{(1)}$ = 3.32,
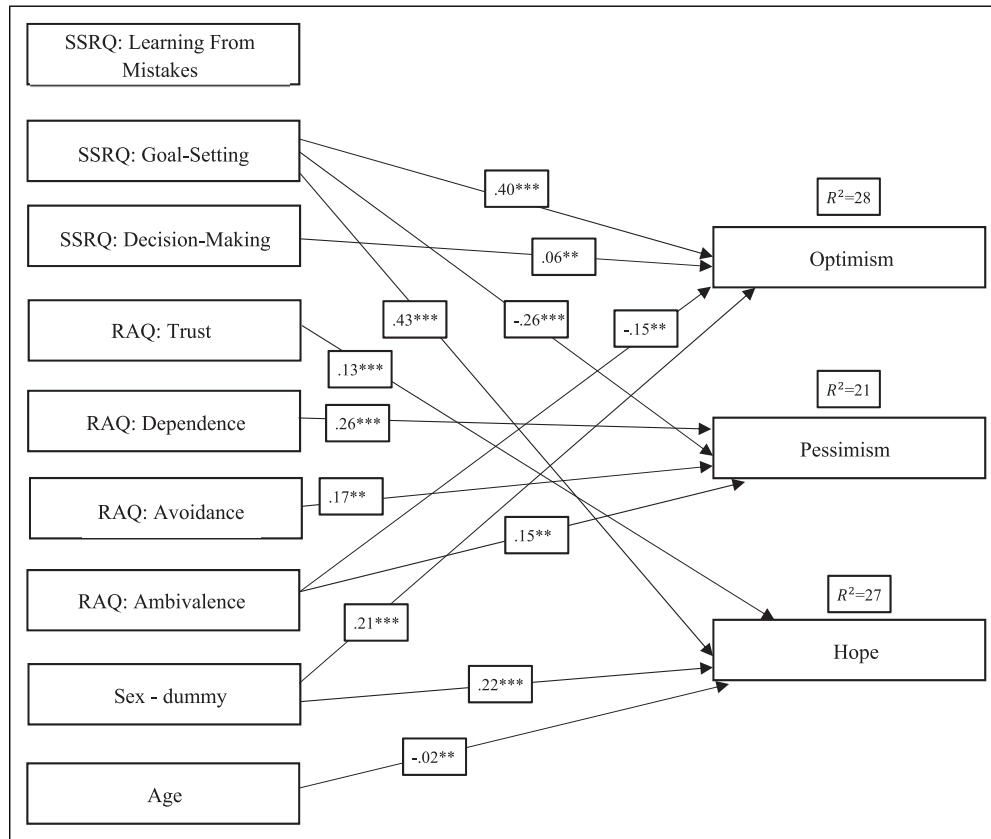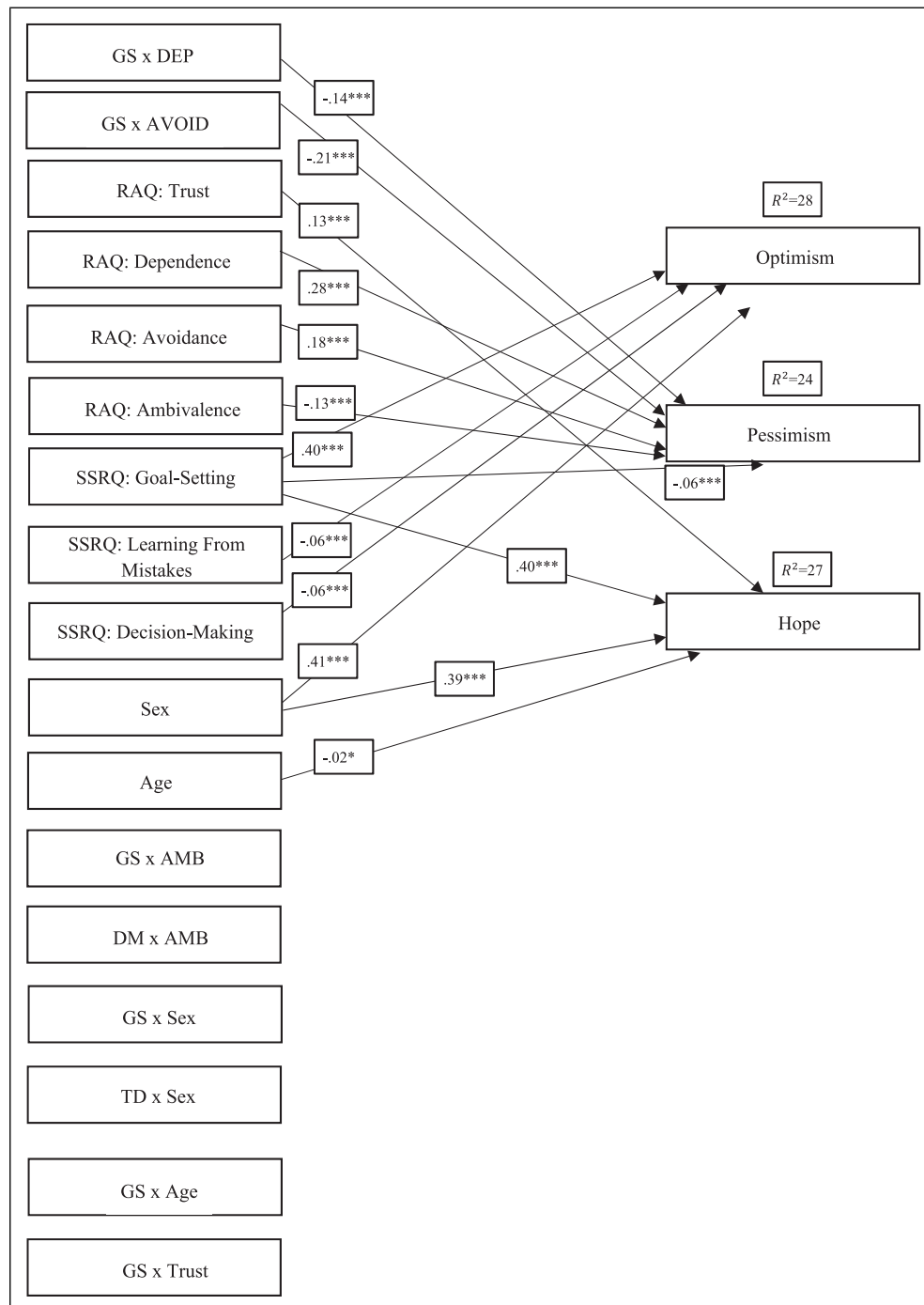
Figure 1. Representative model of the associations between romantic attachment, self-regulation and future expectations of emerging adults. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Note. RAQ- Romantic Attachment Questionnaire; SSRQ- Short Self-Regulation Questionnaire.

$p = .068$, $x^2_{/df} = 3.32$, CFI = .99, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .06), explaining 28% of optimism, 21% of pessimism, and 27% of, with this acceptable fit, we decided to trim the non-significant paths, with very low magnitude (close to zero). The trimmed model did not show a significantly worse adjustment to the data than the original model, ($\Delta x^2_{(15)} = 20.81$, $p = .143$). As such, we decided to retain this more parsimonious model which also revealed an acceptable fit ($\chi^2_{(16)} = 24.13$, $p = .068$, $x^2_{/df} = 3.32$, CFI = .97, TLI = .99, RMSEA = .06) (Figure 1). The results suggest a positive association between dependent ($\beta = .26, p = .001$), avoidant ($\beta = .17, p = .001$), and ambivalent ($\beta = .15, p = .013$) romantic relationships and pessimism about the future. We also found a positive association between trustful romantic relationships and hope about the future ($\beta = .13, p = .001$) and a negative association between ambivalent romantic relationships and optimism about the future ($\beta = -.15, p = .001$). Further, we verified a positive association between goal-setting and optimism ($\beta = .40\ p = .001$) and hope about the future ($\beta = .43, p = .001$), as well as a negative association between goal-setting and pessimism ($\beta = -.26, p = .001$). Moreover, we found a positive association between decision-making and optimism ($\beta = .06, p = .036$).

Further, we tested a moderation model, adding eight manifest variables to the previous model. The variables added represented the interactions between goal-setting and each of the four dimensions of romantic attachment, sex, and age of emerging adults, as well as the interactions between decision-making and ambivalence and sex. The model showed an acceptable fit ($x^2_{(30)} = 33.45$, $p = .303$, $x^2_{/df} = 1.12$, CFI = .99, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .01). Nevertheless, we trimmed the paths non-significative close to zero. This final model did not show a significantly worse adjustment to the data ($\Delta x^2_{(7)} = 5.93$, $p = .547$); as such, we retained it ($x^2_{(37)} = 38.57, p = .364, x^2_{/df} = 1.12$, CFI = .99, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .02) (Figure 2). Findings show goal-setting moderates the association between dependent and avoidant romantic relationships and pessimism.

The results indicate that individuals who reveal high dependence on their partners and high goal-setting capacity show less pessimism than emerging adults who show high dependence on their partners but have low goal-setting capacity. The capacity to set goals moderates the negative association between dependent romantic relationships and pessimism about the future (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Moderator role of self-regulation in the association between romantic attachment and future expectations of emerging adults. *$p <$ .05; **$p <$ .01; ***$p <$ .001.
Note. RAQ- Romantic Attachment Questionnaire; SSRQ- Short Self-Regulation Questionnaire; GS- Goal-Setting; DEP- Dependence; AVOID- Avoidance.

Our results also suggest that emerging adults with higher avoidant romantic relationships show more pessimism when they have low goal-setting than those with high goal-setting. This finding seems to show that people's ability to set goals moderates the negative association between avoidant romantic relationships and pessimism about the future (Figure 4).

Discussion

The present study sought to investigate the associations between romantic attachment and future expectations of emerging adults and the moderating role of goal-setting, decision-making, and learning from mistakes in the
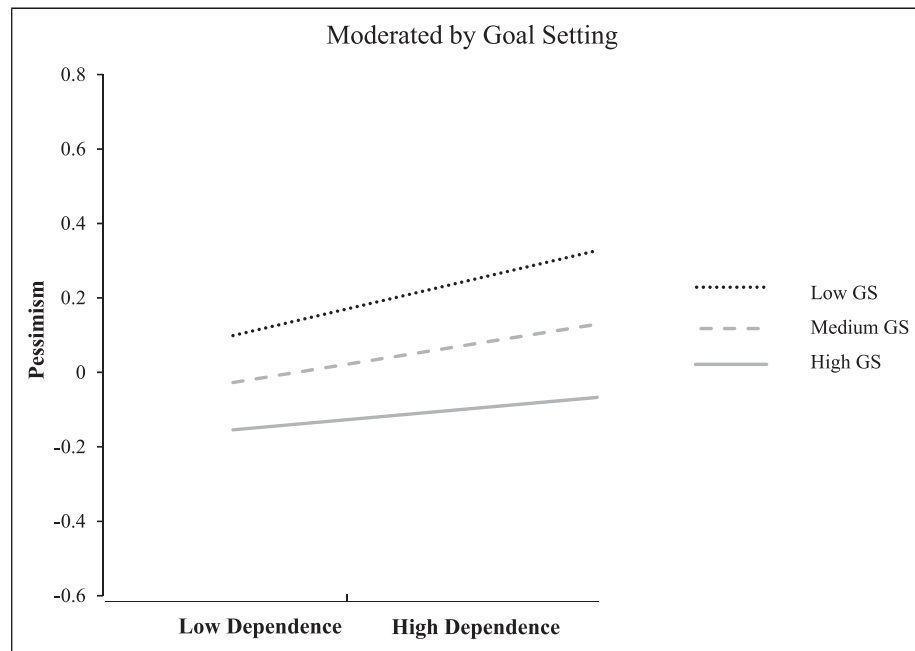
Figure 3. Moderator role of goal-setting in the association between dependence and pessimism about future of emerging adults. Note. GS – Goal-Setting.
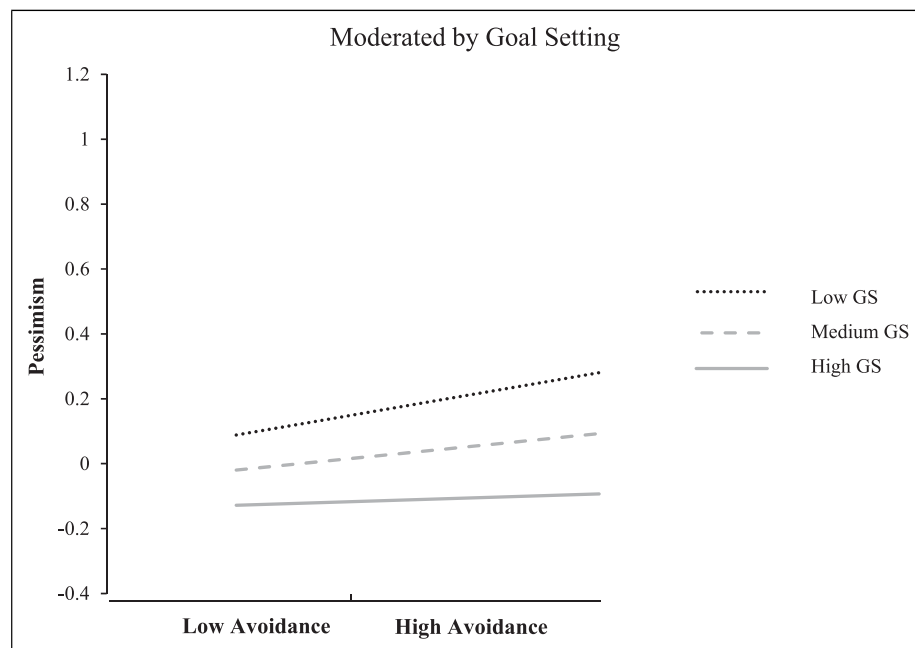
Figure 4. Moderator role of goal-setting in the association between avoidance and pessimism about future of emerging adults. Note. GS– Goal-Setting.

previous association. Firstly, our results show positive associations between dependent, avoidant, and ambivalent romantic relationships and pessimism about the future. These findings seem to suggest that emerging adults who reveal an excessive need for approval, closeness, and separation anxiety from their romantic partner and emerging adults experiencing

a more defensive relationship pattern of self-reliance tend to perceive the future pessimistically. These results are in line with attachment theory insofar as high levels of dependence, avoidance, and ambivalence towards the romantic partner may highlight lower levels of perceived security in attachment, which, in turn, can hinder the exploration of life possibilities

and foster pessimistic beliefs about oneself, others, and the future (Feeney & Collins, 2019; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019; Simpson & Rholes, 2017). Also, the current study findings suggest a negative association between ambivalent romantic relationships and optimism about the future. An ambivalent romantic relationship, characterized by instability, can foster insecurity or uncertainty about the future. Being unsure about one's feelings or questioning the partner's intentions and feelings can become a challenge or difficulty when planning the future together. Therefore, the plans and goals can be undermined by ambivalence, thus making it difficult to be optimistic about the future.

Although we expected a positive association between trustful romantic relationships and optimism and hope about the future, our results only show a significant association with hope. Some authors define hope as a cognitive and affective dimension that has a role in thoughts and behaviors directed to the future (Ginevra et al., 2016). More specifically, hope emerges from a system of beliefs about oneself and believing in one's abilities to achieve desired and self-determined goals, allowing the individual to be more active towards them (Rand, 2018). Trustful romantic relationships providing emotional support in the face of challenges can encourage and validate autonomy for achieving self-determined goals. A trusting romantic relationship can offer comfort and assurance against future uncertainties, thus fostering hope that the individual can face adversities with the help and support of the romantic peer (Coy et al., 2012). Further, the current study findings suggest that, in our sample, optimism is independent of trustful romantic relationships. Trustful romantic relationships can be associated with other relational figures (e.g., parents), being less evident in the optimism about the future. Nevertheless, these findings should be interpreted cautiously because we did not control for romantic relationship duration. Thus, the romantic partner can be considered a safe haven but not yet a secure base for young adults in our sample, as attachment functions are gradually transferred through shared interactions and experiences over time (Allen, 2008).

Furthermore, we found positive associations between goal-setting, optimism, and hope and a negative association between goal-setting and pessimism. We also found a positive association between decision-making and optimism. Our results seem to indicate that emerging adults who actively set goals for themselves perceive the future in a more optimistic and hopeful way and have less pessimistic expectations. These findings highlight the importance of goal-setting during emerging adulthood (Carver & Scheier, 2013; Lenne & Mann, 2021), indicating that it can shape future orientation. Our results are in line with the empirical evidence; a greater ability to set goals and to actively make decisions towards the future seems to indicate a higher engagement of emerging adults in actively shaping their lives, which can promote greater levels of optimism, hope, and lower levels of pessimism (Beal et al., 2016; Fonseca et al., 2019; Shane & Heckausen, 2019).

Finally, we also found that goal-setting moderates the associations between dependent and avoidant romantic relationships and pessimism. Our results indicate that individuals with high dependence and avoidance on their partners and high goal-setting capacity had less pessimism about the future when compared to emerging adults with high dependence and avoidance but low goal-setting capacity. Our results seem to suggest that when emerging adults can set goals according to their personal values and desires, they tend to reveal a less negative perception of the future, regardless of their romantic relationships characterized by an excessive need for physical and emotional closeness (Feeney & Collins, 2019; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019). These results may, in part, be perceived through the lens of expectancy-value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). According to this theory, when individuals set specific goals, they control their behavior by defining what they aim to achieve. Setting goals allows individuals to prioritize tasks, assign relative value to different activities, and rely on the individual's expectation of success regarding those activities. In the context of future orientation, emerging adults who can set goals are more likely to dedicate time and effort to achieving them, which can serve as an 'escape' from relational difficulties with their romantic partner. In other words, by investing more time and effort in achieving their goals, young individuals may feel more capable of attaining them and perceive the future in a less pessimistic light, regardless of the quality of their romantic relationship. It is worth noting that out of the three dimensions of self-regulation analyzed in the current study, only goal setting moderated the associations between romantic relationships and future expectations. Therefore, our initial hypotheses were only partially confirmed. Upon reflecting on these results, several hypotheses come to mind. First, self-regulation is a complex process involving various dimensions, and each of these dimensions may assume a distinct and independent role in different contexts. For instance, in the current study, only goal-setting moderated the association between romantic attachment and future expectations. Goal-setting seems to be relevant for dealing with the demands of dependent and avoidant relationships. In contrast, decision-making and learning from mistakes are not directly relevant in this context. In other words, goal-setting may be more closely linked to maintaining an optimistic perspective in the face of interpersonal challenges. In contrast, the other dimensions of self-regulation may be more relevant in other life domains, such as professional careers. For instance, previous evidence suggests that individuals with self-regulated decision-making abilities are more likely to select appropriate courses and jobs and to experience satisfaction with their career decisions (e.g., Eun et al., 2013). Second, other factors not included in our models may be relevant to decision-making and learning from mistakes in the association between romantic relationships and future perspectives. It would be valuable if future studies investigate the role of other variables in this moderation dynamic, such as attachment to parents, sense of personal agency, or personality.

Despite our initial efforts to reflect on these results, further studies are needed to understand this issue better.

Although the relevance of these findings, the current study has some limitations that should be recognized. First, the cross-sectional nature of the present study and the use of self-report instruments both limit the interpretation of causality between the variables, making it necessary to carry out future studies addressing this limitation. We recognize that human beings are not passive recipients of the influences of their life contexts, i.e., it is also possible that their expectations about the future can shape their romantic relationships. Therefore, further research is needed on possible bidirectional influences between future expectations and romantic attachment. It also could be interesting to replicate the study, including other explanatory variables of future expectations in emerging adults in our models. For instance, in the current study, we did not consider the region where participants lived. Although Portugal is a small country, there are some differences between regions/districts in opportunities available to young people. Aspects such as access to employment and cultural opportunities can vary from region to region and are differentially associated with the future expectations of emerging adults (Commission European, 2022). It would be valuable if future studies sought to clarify whether the future expectations of emerging adults vary according to the different regions of Portugal. Answering this research question will provide a broader understanding of the contextual factors associated with the future expectations of emerging adults. Moreover, it is important to note that in the current study, we analyzed the sex assigned at birth, not gender identity. It could be interesting in future studies to articulate emerging adults' gender identity as their future expectations.

Despite the limitations, the present study represents an important contribution to the literature. Although preliminary, this study's results provide valuable clues to inform policy-makers' actions. On the one hand, our findings underscore the relevance of developing interventions that promote goal-setting skills to assist emerging adults in addressing the demands of dependent and avoidant romantic relationships and perceiving their future more positively. In other words, intervention programs focusing on goal-setting development can empower emerging adults to face the emotional and interpersonal challenges associated with dependent and avoidant relationships. By acquiring goal-setting skills, emerging adults can develop greater autonomy and the ability to plan their future more assertively, regardless of the challenging relational dynamics they may face. The current study´s findings also have implications for public health initiatives, particularly promoting mental health and well-being among emerging adults. By identifying the positive association between goal-setting and the future perspectives of emerging adults, public health policies can incorporate educational and intervention programs to enhance these skills among young individuals. These actions may include initiatives in schools, universities, and community centers that provide resources and support for developing goal-setting skills and guidance and counseling programs that help young individuals explore their goals and personal aspirations. By empowering emerging adults to set realistic and meaningful goals for themselves, these initiatives can play a crucial role in promoting a successful transition to adulthood. On the other hand, our findings emphasize the relevance of policy-makers continuing to invest in scientific research in this area so that a more robust body of evidence can be built on the explanatory factors behind emerging adults' future expectations.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

ORCID iDs

Filipa Nunes ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1315-3327
Catarina Pinheiro Mota ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1814-7425

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The raw data contained in this manuscript are not openly available due to privacy restrictions set forth by the institutional ethics board, but can be obtained from the corresponding author following the completion of a privacy and fair use agreement. No aspects of the study were pre-registered.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

References

Ainsworth, M. S. (1991). Attachments and other affectional bonds across the life cycle. In C. M. Parkes, J. Stevenson-Hinde, & P. Marris (Eds.), *Attachment across the life cycle* (pp. 33–52). Routledge.

Allen, J. P. (2008). The attachment system in adolescence. In J. Cassidy, & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 419–435). The Guilford Press.

Ávila, M., Cabral, J., & Matos, P. M. (2011). Parental attachment and romantic relationships in emerging adults: The role of emotional regulation processes. *Family Science*, *2*(1), 13–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/19424620.2011.593342

Bandura, A. (1991). Social cognitive theory of self-regulation. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *50*(2), 248–287. https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90022-L

Baumeister, R. F., Tice, D. M., & Vohs, K. D. (2018). The strength model of self-regulation: Conclusions from the second decade of willpower research. *Perspectives on Psychological Science: A Journal of the Association for Psychological Science*, *13*(2), 141–145. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691617716946

Beal, S. J., Crockett, L. J., & Peugh, J. (2016). Adolescents' changing future expectations predict the timing of adult role transitions. *Developmental Psychology*, *52*(10), 1606–1618. https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000189

Bishop, S., & Gagne, C. (2018). Anxiety, depression and decision making: A computational perspective. *Annual Review of Neuroscience*, *41*(0), 371–388. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-neuro-080317-062007

Bjuggren, M., & Elert, N. (2019). *Gender differences in optimism*. Research Institute of Industrial Economics (IFN).

Blalock, D. V., Franzese, A. T., Machell, K. A., & Strauman, T. J. (2015). Attachment style and self-regulation: How our patterns in relationships reflect broader motivational styles. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *87*(0), 90–98. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.07.024

Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. Basic Books.

Carey, K. B., Neal, D. J., & Collins, S. E. (2004). A psychometric analysis of the self-regulation questionnaire. *Addictive Behaviors*, *29*(2), 253–260. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2003.08.001

Carver, C. S., & Scheier, M. F. (2013). Goals and emotion. In M. D. Robinson, E. R. Watkins, & E. Harmon-Jones (Eds.), *Guilford handbook of cognition and emotion* (pp. 176–194). Guilford Press.

Commission European, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture. (2022). *Education and training monitor 2022*. Publications Office. https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/84da4174-66f5-11ed-b14f-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

Conversano, C., Rotondo, A., Lensi, E., Della Vista, O., Arpone, F., & Reda, M. (2010). Optimism and its impact on mental and physical well-being. *Clinical Practice and Epidemiology in Mental Health: CP & EMH*, *6*(0), 25–29. https://doi.org/10.2174/1745017901006010025

Coy, A. E., Green, J. D., & Davis, J. L. (2012). With or without you: The impact of partner presence and attachment on exploration. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *48*(1), 411–415. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2011.08.008

Dutra-Thomé, L., Marques, L., Seidl-de-Moura, M., De Oliveira Ramos, D., & Koller, S. (2019). Autonomy development: Gender and age differences from adolescence to emerging adulthood. *Acta de Investigación Psicológica*, *9*(2), 14–25. https://doi.org/10.22201/fpsi.20074719e.2019.2.259

Eun, H., Sohn, Y. W., & Lee, S. (2013). The effect of self-regulated decision making on career path and major-related career choice satisfaction. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, *50*, 98–109. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1920.2013.00029.x

Feeney, B. C., & Collins, N. L. (2019). The importance of relational support for attachment and exploration needs. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *25*(0), 182–186. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.11.011

Fonseca, G., Silva, J. T., Paixão, M. P., Cunha, D., Crespo, C., & Relvas, A. P. (2019). Emerging adults thinking about their future: Development of the Portuguese version of the hopes and fears questionnaire. *Emerging Adulthood*, *7*(6), 444–450. https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696818778136

García Del Castillo, J. A., & Dias, P. C. (2009). Auto-regulação, resiliência e consumo de substâncias na adolescência: Contributos da adaptação do questionário reduzido de auto-regulação [Self-regulation, resilience and substance use in adolescence: adaption of the short self-regulation questionnaire]. *Psicologia, Saúde & Doenças*, *10*(2), 205–216. https://doi.org/10.15517/ap.v30i121.24657

Ginevra, M., Sgaramella, T., Ferrari, L., Nota, L., Santilli, S., & Soresi, S. (2016). Visions about future: A new scale assessing optimism, pessimism, and hope in adolescents. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, *17*(2), 187–210. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-016-9324-z

Hill, P., Jackson, J., Roberts, B., Lapsley, D., & Brandenberger, J. W. (2011). Change you can believe in: Changes in goal setting during emerging and young adulthood predict later adult well-being. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *2*(2), 123–131. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550610384510

Kline, R. B. (2015). *Principles and practice of structural equation modeling*. The Guilford Press.

Kornblum, A., Unger, D., & Grote, G. (2021). How romantic relationships affect individual career goal attainment: A transactive goal dynamics perspective. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *125*(0), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2020.103523

Kumar, S. A., & Mattanah, J. F. (2016). Parental attachment, romantic competence, relationship satisfaction, and psychosocial adjustment in emerging adulthood. *Personal Relationships*, *23*(4), 801–817. https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12161

Kvitkovičová, L., Umemura, T., & Macek, P. (2017). Roles of attachment relationships in emerging adults' career decision-making process: A two-year longitudinal research design. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *101*(0), 119–132. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2017.05.006

Lenne, R. L., & Mann, T. (2021). Self-regulation. In L. M. Cohen (Ed.), *The Wiley encyclopedia of health psychology: Volume 2: The social bases of health behavior* (1st ed., pp. 623–630). Wiley.

Marôco, J. (2018). *Statistical analysis with SPSS statistics* (7th ed.). ReportNumber.

Matos, P. M., Barbosa, S., & Costa, M. E. (2001). Assessment of romantic attachment in adolescents and emerging adults: Development of an instrument and validation studies. *Revista Oficial de la Asociación Iberoamericana de Diagnóstico y Evaluación Psicológica*, *11*(1), 93–109.

Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2019). Attachment orientations and emotion regulation. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *25*(45), 6–10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.02.006

Mota, C. P., Carvalho, H., & Matos, P. M. (2022). Challenges and changes in family(ies) formation in Portugal since the transition to democracy. In M. Emirhafizovic, T. Heiman, M. Medgyesi, C. P. Mota, S. Tomanovic, & S. Vella (Eds.), *Family formation among youth in Europe: Coping with socio-economic disadvantages* (pp. 159–174). Library of Congress Cataloging-In-Publication Data.

Nolen-Hoeksema, S., & Aldao, A. (2011). Gender and age differences in emotion regulation strategies and their relationship to depressive symptoms. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *51*(6), 704–708. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2011.06.012

Nunes, F., Matos, P. M., Ferreira, T., & Mota, C. P. (2022). Romantic and parental attachment, psychosocial risk, and personal agency in emerging adulthood. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *39*(3), 549–569. https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075211042317

Nunes, F., Matos, P. M., & Mota, C. P. (2018). *Perspetivas sobre o futuro: Tradução e adaptação para a população portuguesa [Visions about future. Translation and adaptation into Portuguese]*. Unpublished manuscript. Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Porto.

Orehek, E., Vazeou-Nieuwenhuis, A., Quick, E., & Weaverling, C. (2017). Attachment and self-regulation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *43*(3), 365–380. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167216685292

Páez-Gallego, J., Gallardo-López, J., López-Noguero, F., & Rodrigo-Moriche, M. (2020). Analysis of the relationship between psychological well-being and decision making in adolescent students. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*(1195), 1195. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01195

Pichardo, M. C., Cano, F., Garzón-Umerenkova, A., de la Fuente, J., Peralta-Sánchez, F. J., & Amate-Romera, J. (2018). Self-regulation questionnaire (SRQ) in Spanish adolescents: Factor structure and rasch analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *9*(9), 1370. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01370

Levpušček, M. P,, Rauch, V., & Komidar, L. (2017). Individuation in relation to parents as a predictor of career goals and career optimism in emerging adults. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, *59*(2), 146–156. https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12421

Rand, K. L. (2018). Hope, self-efficacy, and optimism: Conceptual and empirical differences. In M. W. Gallagher, & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *The oxford handbook of hope*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199399314.001.0001

Shane, J., & Heckausen, J. (2019). For better or for worse: Emerging adults' opportunity beliefs and motivational self-regulation during career entry. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, *40*(2), 107–116. https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025415589389

Shrira, A., & Palgi, Y. (2014). Future expectations and functioning in later life. In A. C. Michalos (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of quality of life and well-being research*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_3876

Simpson, J. A., & Rholes, W. S. (2017). Adult attachment, stress, and romantic relationships. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *13*(0), 19–24. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.04.006

Wigfield, A., & Eccles, J. S. (2000). Expectancy–value theory of achievement motivation. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, *25*(1), 68–81. https://doi.org/10.1006/ceps.1999.1015

Zimmermann, P., & Iwanski, A. (2014). Emotion regulation from early adolescence to emerging adulthood and middle adulthood: Age differences, gender differences, and emotion-specific developmental variations. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, *38*(2), 182–194. https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025413515405

Author Biographies

Joana Reis is Researcher at the University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro – UTAD. Her major research interests include attachment, emerging adulthood, future expectations, self-efficacy, and self-regulation.

Filipa Nunes is an Researcher at the Centre for Psychology at University of Porto, Faculty of Psychology and Education Science. Her major research interests include sense of personal agency, future expectation, adolescence, emerging adulthood, family relations, attachment, school relations, peers, psychosocial adversity and suicidal ideation. Filipa does research in psychometrics, developmental psychology and clinical psychology.

Paula Mena Matos is an Professor at Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences at University of Porto and director of Centre for Psychology at University of Porto. Her major research interests include attachment, emotion regulation, family transitions, psychosocial adaptation (e.g., transition to adulthood, oncological situations, residential care, new communication technologies), and work-family balance. Paula Mena Matos also conducts research in the field of psychological intervention and psychotherapy.

Catarina Pinheiro Mota is an Professor at University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro – UTAD and member at Center for Psychology at University of Porto. Her major research interests include attachment on child, adolescence and young adulthood (individuation processes, resilience, well-being, self-esteem, social competencies, mental health, ...); Family configuration issues; residential care; clinical psychology and psychotherapeutic practical approaches (case studies).