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**How do Portuguese youth feel during the school to work transition process?**

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Individuals construct careers embedded in environments that affect them (Vondracek, Lerner & Schulenberg, 1986). At the same time, and based on their daily experiences, people are always making assumptions and generalizations about themselves and the (work) world, which end up influencing their personal ability to make (career) commitments – *i.e.*, for establishing emotional compromises with certain dimensions of reality (Bandura, 1989, 1997; Bartholomew, 1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Campos & Coimbra, 1991; Krumboltz, 1994; Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994, 1996). These days, people are confronted with a rather unpredictable world of work, requiring them the need to adapt to continuously changing circumstances and, simultaneously, to deal with (career, work) trajectories marked by growing inconstancies, fluctuations, discontinuities and reversibilities (Arnold, 1997; Arnold & Jackson, 1997; Guiddens, 1990; Pais, 2001; Tedesco, 2001; Wynn & Dwyer, 1999, 2000). This is particularly true for those experiencing the school-to-work transition. Many adolescents and young adults' career paths end up resembling *yo-yo swings* (Pais, 2001), always moving back and forth. Obviously, not everyone will be able to deal with such ambiguity and uncertainty in a positive, constructive manner. Some people, due to a higher difficulty in dealing with the risks associated to the establishment of career commitments in such a context, probably, will start showing a somewhat reduced ability to make (important) choices, anticipating mainly their negative consequences — *i.e.*, they'll show a general sense of fear of commitment, being the fear of success/failure it's most salient features (Leong & Chervinko, 1996; Serling & Betz, 1990). Others, due to the key role that, in Westerns societies, work plays in the way in which people construct meaning and

interpret their lives, might find it hard to consider them as meaningful, exhibiting a rather negative life regard – *i.e.*, some sense of vagueness/emptiness. In other words, they possibly will experience some difficulties (a) in envisioning a significant existential framework in which to believe and feel positively committed to, and (b) in perceiving themselves as having fulfilled or being in the process of fulfilling such life aims or priorities. Clearly, the opposite is also a likely. Individuals whose trajectories are marked by rewarding (work, school) experiences tend to show positive expectations about their future and, most probably, will experience their lives as meaningful and worth living, being able to not only name and recognize a significant set of (life, career) goals but, most of all, to perceive such targets as being within their field of accessibility (Debats, 1999), thus showing a positive life regard or a sense of clarity/achievement.

### **Study aim**

It is the aim of this study to contribute to the characterisation and understanding of the ways in which Portuguese youth are negotiating the school to work transition process, by exploring the ways in which psychological dimensions attached to career concerns (specifically, exploration and establishment), work commitment, self and world representations (more precisely, action and future orientation representations) allow predicting their life regard (*i.e.*, sense of vagueness/emptiness and of clarity/achievement) and fear or commitment (*i.e.*, their fear of success or of failure).

### **Hypotheses**

A moderate significant relationship is expected between the psychological dimensions considered by the study, as well as by participants' age and gender groups and:

(a) people's negative sense of life regard – *i.e.*, sense of vagueness/emptiness. More precisely, it is expected that clarity/achievement, exploration, work commitment, fear of commitment components, age (younger participants), gender (male participants), and negative self and world representations (in terms of action and future orientation) appear as its predictors;

(b) people's positive sense of life regard – *i.e.*, their sense of clarity/achievement. More precisely, it is expected that vagueness/emptiness, establishment, work commitment,

fear of commitment components, age (older participants), gender (female participants), and positive self and world representations (in terms of action and future orientation) appear as its predictors.

(c) on people's fear of failure. More precisely, it is expected that exploration, work commitment, life regard components, age (younger participants), gender (male participants), and negative self and world representations (in terms of action and future orientation) appear as its predictors.

(d) on people's fear of success. More precisely, it is expected that exploration, work commitment, life regard components, age (younger participants), gender (male participants), and negative self and world representations (in terms of action and future orientation) appear as its predictors.

## **Instruments**

### *Adult Career Concerns Inventory - II*

The Adult Career Concerns Inventory – Form II (Super, Thompson, Lindman, Jordaan, & Myers, 1986) is a version of the ACCI that usually works well with young people. This particular form of the instrument contains 60 items, focusing the first 30 s on the *exploration* tasks of Super's (1984) model of career development and the next 30 on the *establishment* tasks. Participants answer using a five point *Likert* scale, ranging from *no concern* (1) to *great concern* (5). An exploratory factor analysis with *Varimax* rotation on its items was conducted and 2 factors extracted accounting for 42.9% of the total variance ( $\alpha = 0.97$ ). The scale's components are *establishment (ESTAB)* — variance = 36.1% ( $\alpha = 0.95$ ), and *exploration (EXPL)* — variance = 6.75% ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ). Items 29 to 60 load on the first component and items 1 to 28 load on the second. Item 27 was eliminated, since it loaded almost equally on both components.

### *Work Commitment Scale (WORC)*

This is a 16 item scale that results from the combination of three other measures described in the literature, aiming the assessment of people's commitment to work, perceived as the degree of psychological (absolute) importance it has in a person's life, which together their general attitudes toward this life area might allow us to understand how much work oriented a person his – *i.e.*, the degree of personal commitment with

work and the significance work activities have in one's life. Responses are given in a five point *Likert* scale ranging from *totally disagree* (1) to *totally agree* (5) and participants' total scores range from a minimum of 35 (the least committed to work) to a maximum of 79 (the most committed to work). The Mean is of 58.2 (sd = 6.4). The scale's Cronbach alpha is 0.61.

#### *Future Orientation Questionnaire*

This questionnaire was adapted from a scale developed by Eric Thiebault (2001) based on Nurmi's (1989) work on adolescents orientation to the future. It is a 25 item questionnaire to be answered in a five point *Likert* scale ranging from *totally disagree* (1) to *totally agree* (5). An exploratory factor analysis with *Varimax* rotation on its items was conducted and 3 factors extracted accounting for 37.7% of the total variance ( $\alpha = 0.77$ ). The scale's components are *belief in personal future (BEPF)* — variance = 19.0% ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ), *adjustment to future events (ADFE)* — variance = 11.8% ( $\alpha = 0.67$ ), and *disbelief in personal future (DIPF)* — variance = 7.0% ( $\alpha = 0.65$ ).

#### *Action Orientation Questionnaire*

This is a 17 item scale that results from the combination of two other measures described in the literature, some subscales of the *World Assumptions Scale* (Janoff-Bulman, 1989) and the *Striving Index* (Nurius, 1994). It aims to assess a person's action orientation, based on their self and world representations. An exploratory factor analysis with *Varimax* rotation on its items was conducted and 2 factors extracted accounting for 36.5% of the total variance ( $\alpha = 0.63$ ). The scale's components are *belief in personal agency (BEPA)* — variance = 21.4% ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ), and *disbelief in personal agency (DIPA)* — variance = 6.75% ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ).

#### *Life regard Index - Index – Revised (LRI-R)*

The questionnaire originally developed by Battista and Almond (1973) and later on revised by Dominique Debats (1990) includes 28 statements. Two scales — framework (FR) and fulfilment (FU) — with 14 items each compose it, being seven of those items presented in a positive manner and the other seven negatively. It uses a five point *Likert* scale ranging from *totally disagree* (1) to *totally agree* (5). An exploratory factor

analysis with *Varimax* rotation on its items was conducted and 2 factors extracted accounting for 39.3% of the total variance ( $\alpha = 0.68$ ). The scale's components are *vagueness/emptiness (VAGE)* — variance = 29.2% ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ), and *clarity/achievement (CLARA)* — variance = 10.1% ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ). The scale's first component combines all the items with a negative formulation of each of its subscales (framework and fulfilment). The opposite happens with the other component, which comprises all the items with a positive formulation.

### *Fear of Commitment Scale*

40-item scale designed to assess one's reduced ability to make important decisions due to the anticipation of negative consequences that may result from such decisions or choices, being the fear of commitment construct a "relatively dispositional tendency" (Serling & Betz, 1990, p. 92). An exploratory factor analysis with *Varimax* rotation on its items was conducted and 2 factors extracted accounting for 31.8% of the total variance ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ). The scale's components are *fear of success* — variance = 24.9% ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ), and *fear of failure* — variance = 6.9% ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ). Item 9 was eliminated, since it loaded almost equally on both components and item 22 had to be reversed.

### **Sample**

All 602 sample participants, male and female, are presently employed, unemployed or seeking a first job. Their ages vary from 17 to 33 years, being its mean of 22.9. Concerning their education level, there are (a) those presenting an education level equal or inferior to Portuguese basic education, *i.e.*, grade nine, (b) those that have or are in the process of acquiring a secondary education diploma, *i.e.*, grade 12, and (c) those possessing a higher education degree. Most study participants were attending vocational training courses (mainly apprenticeships – 34.4%, even though other types of training courses were used), others were working in enterprises and some attended night school.

**Table 1.** Subjects' general distribution

Subjects		N = 602	
Mean age		22.9	sd = 4.9
		(minimum 17 and maximum 33)	
Median		21.0	
Gender	Female	39.2 %	(236)
	Male	60.8 %	(366)
Civil status	Single	79.2 %	(477)
	Lives together	4.2%	(25)
	Married	15.6 %	(94)
	Separated	0.2%	(1)
	Divorced	0.8 %	(5)
Education level	9th grade or less	30.6 %	(184)
	Secondary education	50.0 %	(301)
	Higher education	19.4 %	(117)
Employment status	Employed	38.7 %	(233)
	Seeking a 1 <sup>st</sup> job	38.2%	(230)
	Unemployed	23,1 %	(139)

## Results

A series of stepwise multiple regression were performed. The aim was to determine which subset of independents variables accounted the most to predict Portuguese adolescents and young adults feeling of vagueness/emptiness, clarity/achievement, fear of failure and fear of success.

**Table 2.** Stepwise multiple regression for both components of the LRI-R and of the FOCS.

Variables	<i>r</i>	$\beta$	$sr^2$ (unique)	<i>t</i>
<i>vagueness/emptiness</i>				
fear of failure	0.63	0.36	0.39	12.21**
disbelief in personal agency	0.62	0.31	0.13	9.69**
clarity/achievement	-0.48	-0.22	0.09	-5.94**
disbelief in personal future	0.42	0.14	0.01	4.73**
belief in personal action	-0.40	-0.11	0.03	-3.06**
work commitment	-0.06	-0.06	0.003	-2.28*

R<sup>2</sup>= 0.63

F (6, 595) = 167,37**				Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = 0.62
				R= 0.79
<i>clarity/achievement</i>				
belief in personal future	0.64	0.45	0.40	13.29**
vagueness/emptiness	-0.48	-0.33	0.08	-10.66**
adjustment to future events	0.30	0.15	0.02	4.61**
work commitment	0.30	0.07	0.004	2.14*
				R <sup>2</sup> = 0.51
F (4, 597) = 155.44**				Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = 0.51
				R= 0.71
<i>fear of failure</i>				
disbelief in personal agency	0.50	0.35	0.25	8.73**
adjustment to future events	0.26	0.22	0.03	5.72**
belief in personal future	-0.17	-0.14	0.04	-3.13**
exploration	-0.18	0.11	0.01	3.28**
disbelief in personal future	0.36	0.10	0.01	2.58**
clarity/achievement	-0.22	-0.12	0.01	-2.72**
age	-0.24	-0.07	0.01	-2.09*
				R <sup>2</sup> = 0.35
F (7, 594) = 46,25**				Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = 0.35
				R= 0.59
<i>fear of success</i>				
disbelief in personal agency	0.62	0.45	0.38	12.59**
disbelief in personal future	0.49	0.25	0.05	7.02**
clarity/achievement	-0.25	-0.09	0.01	-2.83**
age	-0.31	-0.10	0.01	-3.20**
adjustment to future events	0.04	-0.08	0.01	-2.45*
gender	0.18	0.07	0.01	2.24*
				R <sup>2</sup> = 0.47
F (6,595) = 86.78**				Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = 0.46
				R= 0.68

\*\*p<0.01 and \*p<0.05

## Conclusions

As expected, we found a moderate significant relationship between the dimensions under analysis – vagueness/emptiness, clarity/achievement, fear of failure and fear of

success, and their specific subset of predictors (all variables presenting with a  $r > 0.7$  weren't included in the regression equation). However, not all of the hypothesised variables appear as predictors for the life regard dimensions. Most likely, the rather generic character of this measure helps to understand these findings. In fact, up till now, the absence of a framework or of a feeling of fulfilment, and consequently a lower life regard, has only been observed in clinical samples (Debats, 1996, 1998, 2000). On the other hand, specificities concerning sample characteristics may also account it, since we must not overlook the fact that almost all of our participants (approximately, 70% of the sample) attend vocational training courses (either apprenticeships or other modalities targeting unemployed populations). For many, this might function as a buffer for the development of a rather negative view of themselves and the world around, since, at least partially, it may help them answer personal usefulness and social affiliation needs usually attached to the performance of work roles. That also possibly explains why establishment career concerns do not appear as a predictor for any of the studied dimensions. Perhaps while attending such courses people consider their lives to be in a kind of a "standby", making it hard for them to perceive a relationship between such dimensions and the commitment to the purposeful achievement of career goals.

Nevertheless, results seem to point to the fact that a moderately significant portion of our experience of life as meaningful is being derived from our commitment to work and, most of all, from the kinds of generalizations and assumptions we make about ourselves and (work) world around. Something similar happens in what concerns participants' fear of failure/success. On the overall, this seems to indicate that the schema (about oneself and the world around) being constructed throughout the (continuous, dynamic and emotionally invested) interaction process, between an individual and its surrounding reality, play a nuclear role in the meaning-making process, particularly when it comes to personal self-efficacy representations and the pursue of outlined goals or priorities (Bandura, 1997; Mahoney, 1991; Neimeyer, 1987; Nurius, 1994). In fact, as our results show, when someone perceives mainly negative outcomes from his/her choices, it is likely that his/hers personal capacity to clearly define important (work, career) goals and to put them into practice becomes rather reduced. Moreover, it most likely will also lead him/her to the (unrealistic) anticipation of (primarily) negative consequences from his/her daily experiences, namely those associated with his/hers ability to (successfully) accomplish certain developmental



tasks, like the ones concerning the attainment and/or maintenance of a satisfying job or occupation, due either to personal features (like age or gender) or to context characteristics (like structural unemployment, persistent underemployment or scarcity and de-regulation of employment access and maintenance conditions).

The significance of affections in modelling judgement and choice, derived from their role in the development of chronic schema for the interpretation and organization of (work, life) events (Lerner & Keltner, 2000), and their repercussions in terms of individuals experience of life as meaningful as well as ways in which they deal with commitments must not be overlooked, especially when it comes to career interventions. A critical conscience about the opportunities available in addition to one's capacity to develop an attitude based on the exploration and planning of choices, prior to transition periods, come out as the two determining aspects of any well succeed career change (Savickas, 1999). It is the presence or absence of such an awareness that allows individuals to seize (or not) the "windows of opportunity" at their disposal (Heckausen & Tomasik, 2002) – *i.e.*, that allows them to render concrete a series of efforts, that facilitate or inhibit commitment to a number of vocational aims, having in mid the exercise of a certain amount of control over environmental results and over themselves. Since affects work as tacit/implicit clues that lead individuals to deal with problems and opportunities in a manner congruent with their idiosyncratic schema, while intervening, it might be important to help them (a) attach meaning to what is happening to them, (b) make concrete control efforts of the situation at hand, and (c) to overestimate their self (Taylor, 1983; Taylor *et al.*, 2000). According to the author the development of such beliefs – or positive illusions – ends up constituting a dynamic force that, more than impede adjustment, favours adaptation throughout change or transition processes. As it happens, these are also the dimensions underlying the future and action orientation components that best predict one's sense of clarity/achievement.

In sum, a person's subjective experience of his/her career trajectory plays a determining role in the ways in which he/she finishes up framing, connecting and attaching meaning to what was, is and will be lived in one's work life (Blustein *et al.*, 2004; Cochran, 1994; Collin & Young, 2000; Savickas, 2002). Individuals beliefs, attitudes, values, feelings and actions emerge as no more than the reflex of the kinds of meanings being constructed about oneself and the (work) world, most particularly

those concerning one's (in)ability to succeed or enjoy career success (Bandura, 1997; Bartholomew, 1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Krumboltz, 1994; Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994, 1996). Especially in a rapidly shifting world, as it ours today, it is important that people learn to adjust to the uncertainty and the paradoxes such changes impose them, namely in the work domain. This becomes even truer for all those going through the school-to-work transition process. Not only late adolescents and young adults are, themselves, experiencing a transition but also the nowadays process of access and transition to the labour market has become more diverse and complex than ever before (Rose, 1997). Thus, it comes as no surprise that the ability to construct some positive illusions, which help them deal with the uncertainties and ambiguities of the work world, appears as a rather protective means of (vocational) adjustment. In contrast, the development of personal theories marked by an (unrealistic) tendency to anticipate negative consequences from possible commitments finishes off shading the undergoing experience of life as something deeply fulfilling and one's goals as attainable, aspects inseparables from our personal ability to make commitments and deal with risks. Both these dimensions are pivotal for the construction of people's career paths. Otherwise, they might find themselves involved in less positive career movements, such as those associated to wandering, floundering or stagnating (Savickas, 1999).