

# Meanings of career success for students and psychology professionals

## *Significados de sucesso na carreira para estudantes e profissionais de Psicologia*

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### Abstract

There are several definitions of career success. The objective was to analyze the meaning of career success for students and Psychology professionals. Participants were 656 Brazilians from all regions, who answered an online survey containing a sociodemographic questionnaire and a word association task to define career success. The results were submitted to the Descending Hierarchical Classification, through IRAMUTEQ software. Analysis indicated six lexical classes, grouped into two thematic blocks. Students referred words associated to the theme "Realization of professional activities". Professionals, on the other hand, evoked more words related to the "Characteristics and Work Relations". As contributions, we highlight the presentation of how career success is understood by a specific group of professionals, and the need to consider, in career counseling processes, the contextual and life cycle influences on career success.

**Keywords:** Achievement; Occupational success; Psychologists; Vocational guidance.

### Resumo

*Várias são as definições de sucesso na carreira. Neste trabalho, objetivou-se a análise do significado de sucesso na carreira para estudantes e profissionais da Psicologia. Participaram do estudo 656 brasileiros de todas as regiões do país, os quais*

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responderam uma pesquisa online contendo um questionário sociodemográfico e uma tarefa de associação de palavras para definição de sucesso na carreira. Os resultados foram submetidos à Classificação Hierárquica Descendente, realizada pelo software IRAMUTEQ. Os resultados indicaram seis classes lexicais, agrupadas em dois blocos temáticos. Os estudantes referiram mais palavras relacionadas com o tema "Realização das atividades profissionais". Já os profissionais utilizaram mais palavras relacionadas a "Características e Relações de Trabalho". Como contribuições, destacam-se a apresentação de como o sucesso na carreira é entendido por um grupo específico de profissionais e a necessidade de se considerar, em um processo de aconselhamento de carreira, as influências contextuais e de ciclo de vida no sucesso na carreira.

**Palavras-chave:** Realização; Psicólogos; Sucesso profissional; Orientação vocacional.

Career success has been pointed out in the literature as vitally important for career development (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017; Giraud et al., 2019). It must be understood as a social and dynamic construct that evolves as the historical and cultural context changes (Smale et al., 2019). Therefore, it can take on a wide range of meanings, depending on the individual or subgroup in question (Dries et al., 2008; Freitas & Oliveira, 2017; Shockley et al., 2016).

Several definitions of career success have been proposed over the decades (Audibert et al., 2020). One of them posits that such phenomenon can be defined as the result of personal experience and the accumulation of real or perceived achievements in various areas of people's lives over time (Meade, 2000).

More recently, researchers conducted a study in order to understand how adult professionals from different countries and cultures view career success (Mayrhofer et al., 2016). The model they proposed is composed of seven relevant global meanings, grouped into four general areas: Social Relations (Work-Personal Life Balance; Positive Relations; and Positive Impact), Material Concerns (Financial Security; Financial Achievements), Learning (Development) and Development of One's Own Projects (Entrepreneurship).

As for Oliveira et al. (2019), they investigated the definition of career success in Brazil from the perspective of recent graduates. Objective success was described by this sample as getting a job in their field of education or earning good wages. On the other hand, subjective success was described as the construction of one's professional identity and career satisfaction. Thus, we may attest that apprehending the particular meaning of career success, in accordance with specific contexts, has been an ongoing trend in the literature. Along these lines, this study will address the meanings of career success specifically in the field of Psychology.

Currently, Brazil has 380,432 psychologists (Conselho Federal de Psicologia, 2020). A recent study aimed at outlining the profile of these professionals included a sample of 437 Brazilian psychologists (Anuniação et al., 2019). The results showed that the studied sample consisted of young people who worked in different areas in the domain of Psychology, had no other source of income and received an average monthly salary ranging from BRL 2,000.00 to BRL 3,000.00.

Another study sought to assess higher education studies in Psychology from the perspective of graduates at different stages of their careers (Mourão et al., 2019). Among other data, the study points to an increased demand for Psychology professionals in various areas, such as the Unified Health System, hospitals, the Judiciary system, traffic, sports, communications, Non-Governmental Organizations, in addition to traditional segments such as education and organizations. Paradoxically, the authors also point out a gap in higher education studies in Psychology in terms of preparing students to work in other contexts. On a complementary basis, the complaint expressed by graduates about the education received was striking; they claim that it is still very traditional, with an emphasis on a clinical approach.

Although it is possible to find studies on the profile of psychology professionals, such as the one described above, studies on career success focusing on this category are scarce (Otto et al., 2019; Sobiraj et al., 2016). While reviewing the literature for this work, national studies specifically related to career success focusing on psychology professionals have not been found. The results of an international study, on the

other hand, indicated that the feeling of social appreciation for such profession or the way occupational activities are performed was a more important indicator of career success for psychologists than earning money (Sobiraj et al., 2016).

In this sense, it seems important, when exploring career success as perceived by psychologists, to take into account intrinsic success, which reflects a subjective assessment of how satisfied people are with their professional development (Judge et al., 1995), as well as reconsider the importance of wages and hierarchical positions as indicators of career success when it comes to these professionals (Sobiraj et al., 2016). Taking these indications into account, and being aware of the wide array of interpretations about what career success is, the aim of this article was to analyze how career success is understood by Psychology students and professionals.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were 656 Brazilian nationals from all regions of the country, with the South (47.6% of students; 51.9% of professionals) and Southeast (26.6% of students; 35.4% of professionals) regions being the regions with the highest number of participants. In 3<sup>rd</sup> place, there is the Northeast region (12.8% of students; 6.7% of professionals), followed by the Center-West region (9.8% of students; 5.3% of professionals) and the North region (3.1% of students; 0.6% of professionals). Among the participants, 299 were psychologists graduated 10 years ago (at most), and 357 were undergraduate psychology students. The overall mean age was 28.7 years old ( $SD = 8.51$ ). Men were the minority (13.4%). Among the students, 18.4% were students who had recently started studying Psychology (1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> term) and 44.4% were students about to graduate (from the 8<sup>th</sup> term onwards). Among the professionals, 11.3% had graduated less than a year ago, 35.8% had graduated between one and four years ago, and 52.9% had graduated between five and ten years ago.

### Instruments

We used an online survey-type questionnaire, containing sociodemographic questions asked in order to characterize the sample, as well as the Career Success Task (CST). The CST was developed specifically for this study, based on models used in previous studies (Rick et al., 2017; Vieira, 2019). Participants were asked to answer the following question: "What characterizes a person who is successful in their career? Write below five words or expressions that come to mind when you hear that 'X is successful in their career'". Regarding the theoretical conception, the CST is based on Frequent Verbal Association (FVA).

The basic premise of the FVA is that the participants' spontaneous response to a stimulus allows access to their attitudes towards it. These attitudes are understood to have an affective dimension (related to feelings aroused and how individuals value the stimulus) and a cognitive dimension (related to beliefs associated with the stimulus). While the affective dimension is easily accessed through scales and tests (explicit assessments), the cognitive dimension is often difficult to access through an introspective exercise, and is subject to social desirability. Hence, FVA is understood as an implicit association task. In this task, a spontaneous verbalization (a single word or longer expressions) is considered a response to a stimulus. It is understood that this response expresses the (internal) mental state of a person in relation to an (external)

object. Therefore, the FVA presupposes that free associations with a stimulus word allow access to deeper value, cognitive and emotionally-anchored knowledge structures of an individual or group (Nienhuser, 2016).

## Procedures

This is an exploratory study with a qualitative approach. The research project was submitted to the Ethics Committee and was duly approved (protocol nº CAAE 81049417.8.0000.5336 – *Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul*). The collection of such survey-like data was carried out entirely on line on the Qualtrics platform. Participants completed the survey in about 20 minutes.

In order to access potential participants in the Psychology students sub-sample, after approval by the Ethics Committee, contact was made with the coordination offices of Psychology programs in all Brazilian states, selected based on convenience of access, in order to present the research project and obtain authorization to disclose the research proposal to students.

Upon acceptance by these coordination offices, students were invited to participate in the study through a brief presentation of the project, followed by an invitation sent via email with information about the research and the criteria for participation, in addition to a hyperlink redirecting them to the online questionnaire they had to answer.

Psychology professionals, in turn, were contacted through the researchers' contact lists as well as through social media, professional associations and communication and integration departments connecting graduated students, in the case of universities that provided this service, commonly called *alumni*. They received an invitation via email message, or messages were posted on social media containing a brief presentation of the project, with information about the criteria for participation, in addition to the hyperlink redirecting them to the online questionnaire.

When accessing the site, potential participants in both groups viewed the informed consent form, attesting their voluntary and anonymous participation. Only those who expressed their consent to participate could answer the questionnaire.

The corpus generated from the CST was initially inspected and prepared by the researchers dedicated to this study (e.g. word correction, hyphenation elimination, among others). Subsequently, it was submitted to the Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC), a task that was carried out with the aid of qualitative data analysis software IRAMUTEQ. It consists of a computerized tool for text analysis that seeks to apprehend the structure and organization of discourse, based on vocabulary similarity (Andrade et al., 2016). Hence, it informs the relationships between the lexical components most frequently stated by the subject. IRAMUTEQ is not a data analysis method, but a tool to process such data. Therefore, it does not complete this analysis, as interpretation is an essential step, which is conducted by the researcher.

The DHC performed in this study was supported by the Brazilian Portuguese dictionary of words and expressions "lexique.pt" (Camargo & Justo, 2013). From this dictionary, the vocabulary of the corpus was automatically identified and quantified in relation to its frequency in the text, following three steps: 1) the preparation and coding of the initial text, which involved grouping the words by stem and suffixes of structure (e.g. calm, calmness); 2) the descending hierarchical classification, performed by data processing, and 3) the interpretation of classes (Souza et al., 2018). This analysis aims to obtain classes of text segments that have similar vocabulary to each other, as well as different vocabulary from the segments of other classes. Class is understood as a set of words that appear close together, being analogous to a dimension within factor analysis procedures, forming a specific segment. With the DHC, IRAMUTEQ organizes the words in a dendrogram, which represents the quantity and lexical composition of classes from a grouping of terms,

the absolute frequency of which is also obtained, and demonstrates the link between the words, which are associated with each other (Souza et al., 2018). Classes are formed according to the relationship of the various Initial Context Units (ICU) processed and that present homogeneous words. For the classification and correlation of the classes, the ICU are grouped according to the occurrences of words with regard to their roots, originating the Elementary Context Units (ECU).

## Results

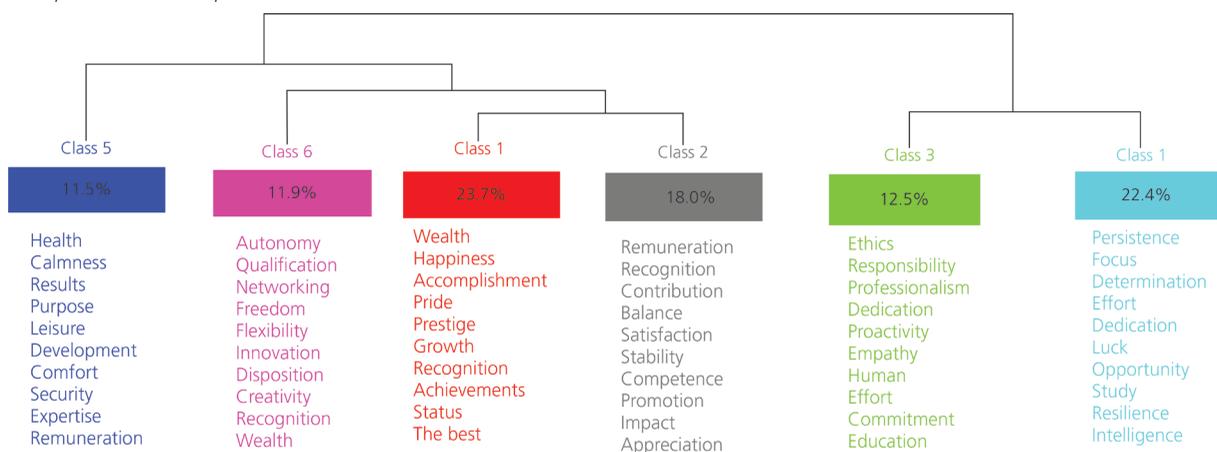
Taking into account the words and how they are inserted in different text segments, the ICU was formed by the free evocations carried out by 357 university students and 299 Psychology professionals through the “career success” stimulus. The ICU was then fragmented in the analysis into ECU, the most basic units of meaning, consisting of word clusters.

Thus, 3,280 free words were surveyed, which then generated 655 different ways to describe career success. It is worth pointing out that all participants mentioned 5 words. From the DHC analytical process, two distinct thematic blocks were found, which encompassed six lexical classes. One may observe a greater proximity between Classes 3 and 4, which, in turn, distance themselves from neighboring classes 1, 2, 5 and 6. It is also possible to observe the prevalence of most ECU, which account for 65.1% of the units in the corpus, in the second subgroup.

Thematic block 1 grouped individual characteristics that are important for achieving career success. In this sense, it was agreed to call Class 3 “Professional Conduct”, and the words “Ethics”, “Responsibility” and “Professionalism” appear as the main ones. In turn, Class 4, named “Realization of professional activities”, the terms “Persistence”, “Focus” and “Determination” appear.

Thematic block 2 was characterized by presenting elements indicating that career success was achieved. Class 1, called “Financial and Personal Satisfaction”, had the following main terms: “Wealth”, “Happiness” and “Accomplishment”. In Class 2, called “Financial and Personal Recognition”, the main expressions were “Remuneration”, “Recognition” and “Contribution”. In Class 5, called “Results”, the words “Health”, “Calmness” and “Results” stood out. Lastly, Class 6, called “Work Relations and Characteristics”, the main ideas expressed were “Autonomy”, “Qualification” and “Networking”. Figure 1 presents the description of the most representative elements of each class.

**Figure 1**  
Description of the most representative elements of each class



When considering a comparison between students and professionals, it is possible to observe a greater identification of the group of students with Class 4, "Performance of professional activities", and of professionals with Class 6, "Work Relations and Characteristics". As pointed out, the groups of students and professionals refer to different thematic blocks. When answering the question "what characterizes a person who is successful in their career?", the group of students, who theoretically have not yet entered the labor market as Psychology professionals, referred to individual characteristics that are deemed important for the execution of their work and achieving success. As for the professionals, there is a prevalence of answers about what are the main characteristics of the work carried out and how relationships are presented when career success has been achieved.

Based on the foregoing, it is understood that, for Psychology students and professionals, the meaning of having a successful career is associated with being ethical, responsible and professional; performing your activities with a persistent, focused and determined attitude, in addition to feeling happy and fulfilled in your career; achieving material wealth and being recognized, financially, through appropriate and fair remuneration and, by significant others, for their expertise. It is also possible to see that finding a balance between work and non-work activities, health and calmness, are parameters of success, in alignment with proactive career dynamics, as shown by the following evocations: networking, autonomy and accomplishment.

## Discussion

Given that the aim of this study was to analyze how career success is understood by Psychology students and professionals, the results found will be discussed based on the models of career success presented in the literature in recent decades and gathered by Audibert et al. (2020). However, it is clear that no model presented in the national or international literature so far has been able to include all the terms evoked by the participants in this study.

It was observed that, in Thematic Block 1, Class 3 concentrates aspects related to professional conduct, which have been already pointed out as constituent elements of certain success models reported in the literature. The "Values" universe, for instance, reveals how much people perceive that they respect their values while developing their career, working ethically and with pride (Costa, 2013). In turn, Class 4 brings together aspects related to ways of performing professional activities, which are present in the "Good performance" universe (Lee et al., 2006). By linking the personal and organizational spheres, this universe is defined by the ability to maintain high quality work, have a strong sense of responsibility and discipline at work, focus, concentration, work intensely and prioritize activities in order to fulfill them.

Regarding Thematic Block 2, Class 1 includes aspects related to Financial ("Wealth") and Personal Satisfaction ("Happiness" and "Accomplishment"). With regard to the financial aspect, the "Material Concerns, Financial Achievements" universe refers to the financial achievements observed when people earn more money, achieve wealth, and receive more benefits and incentives. It also refers to promotions and gaining social status (Mayrhofer et al., 2016). Along those lines, the "Status/Wealth" universe (Parker & Chusmir, 1992) is translated into the search for money and financial security, without indebtedness.

When dealing with the aspect of personal satisfaction, the literature is vast; in fact, on some occasions it ends up being confused with the definition of career success itself (Judge et al., 1995). However, Heslin (2005) claims that they are different constructs. Specifically regarding the term "Happiness", the "Satisfaction" universe (Dries et al., 2008) points to the aspect of career success in terms of performing work activities that bring happiness and personal satisfaction, both in family life and at work. The "Identity" universe, on the other hand, reveals how much the career makes sense to the person as an expression of their being, bringing them happiness (Costa, 2013). The term "Accomplishment" is also supported in the literature. Parker and

Chusmir (1992) differentiate between “Personal Accomplishment”, a form of intrinsic reward, and “Professional Accomplishment”, related to the trust of immediate managers. Accomplishment is also identified as a universe related to a professional’s competence and expertise. In this line, a “sense of personal accomplishment” refers to the assessment that one is extremely good at what one does at work (Sturges, 1999). In turn, the term “Intrinsic Accomplishment” relates to maximum use of potential and talent, continuous engagement in work challenges, high level of respect from colleagues, solving difficult problems and making contributions to an organization, enthusiasm and passion for work, accumulation of knowledge and skills in order to become an “expert”, having pleasure and feeling happy while working, achieving excellent performance along with group members and a good reputation in one’s field of activity (Zhou et al., 2013).

Class 2 gathers terms referring to Financial Recognition. The literature indicates that the presence of a financial aspect remains over time in Career Success Models (Audibert et al., 2020). The “Advancement” universe contemplates aspects of hierarchy or advancement in a status system, as well as any financial remuneration rewards (Derr, 1986). The “Career Achievements” universe (Turban & Dougherty, 1994) encompasses aspects of remuneration, benefits, bonuses and other forms of compensation, associated with the performance of professional activities. In turn, the “Salary” universe (Sutherland, 2017) brings the idea of an appropriate and fair remuneration proportional to the education and experience of the professional, not being exorbitant, but allowing for a comfortable lifestyle. Moreover, the “Remuneration” (Costa, 2013) and “Remuneration and Financial Independence” universes (Oliveira et al., 2019) emphasize an individual’s perception of the financial rewards obtained in their career. Finally, the “Material Concerns, Financial Security” universe refers to the ability that someone has to meet the basic needs so that they can live and also includes the ability to financially provide for their family or wider networks, and this ability must be present on a continuous basis for an extended, uninterrupted period of time, if possible for the remainder of their career (Mayrhofer et al., 2016).

The term “Recognition” can either be related to financial recognition for a good job done, or to recognition from one’s leaders and peers, inside and outside the organization. The “Recognition” universe (Dries et al., 2008) emphasizes the financial aspect, while making reference to the appreciation, by others, of how well an individual does his/her job. However, there are authors who address the “Recognition” (Shockley et al., 2016), “Appreciation/recognition” (Lee et al., 2006) and “Personal Recognition” (Sturges, 1999) universes as referring to acceptance, approval and appreciation, either formally or informally, by significant people, of one’s expertise and good performance in the activities performed.

It may be noticed that the idea of “Contribution” began to be a part of successful models around the 2000s (Audibert et al., 2020). In this sense, the “Having an impact/making a contribution” (Lee et al., 2006), “Real Contribution” (Dries et al., 2008), “Contribution” (Costa, 2013) and “Social Relations”, “Positive impact” (Mayrhofer et al., 2016) universes encompass aspects related to making a difference and having an impact on society, so that people may leave a legacy and be remembered for their achievements. In turn, the “Contribution to society” universe (Sutherland, 2017) is related to the change in communities produced through the result of research efforts and access to education.

Class 5 includes aspects related to balancing different spheres of life, while still achieving good professional results. In this sense, the “Work-Life Balance” universe (Mayrhofer et al., 2016) is about achieving a satisfactory balance between family life and work life, or work and non-work activities, as well as having time for interests that are not related or associated with work, and the search for physical and mental well-being. Furthermore, this universe suggests that career success is judged not only in terms of intrinsic factors associated with work, but also in terms of its impact on other areas of life.

Class 6 encompasses aspects related to work relationships and characteristics. The term “Autonomy” finds support in the literature in the “Freedom” universe (Derr, 1986; Sutherland, 2017), which refers to the

level of freedom, autonomy and flexibility for work performance. The term “Qualification” is supported in the literature as an integral part of career success according to the “Learning” (Mayrhofer et al., 2016) and “Challenge/Learning/Growth” (Lee et al., 2006) universes. These universes are related to an individual’s journey of professional growth and development, whether through formal or informal learning experiences. Lastly, the term “Networking” can be found within the “Social Relations, Positive Relations” universe (Mayrhofer et al., 2016). This universe takes into account the importance of relationships for achieving career success, being configured in a continuous search to build and maintain a network of relationships.

The results support the recommendation made by Heslin (2005), who talks about finding out what individuals want and value in their careers. Thus, it is understood that one of the theoretical contributions of this study is to present, from an emic perspective, how career success is understood by a specific group of professionals within a Brazilian context in the late 2010s. On a large scale, it can be stated that the meanings of career success for Psychology students and professionals are included in the career success model proposed by Mayrhofer et al. (2016). However, the absence, in this model, of universes related to satisfaction and professional conduct is striking, as these aspects are already present in previous studies (Costa, 2013; Dries et al., 2008; Greenhaus et al., 1990; Judge et al., 1995; Lee et al., 2006), and have been identified in this study.

It is important to observe that the financial factor is an indicator of career success, both for Psychology students and professionals. This aspect is noteworthy, as it was present in two of the six lexical classes generated from the corpus, without it being possible to establish a distinction between the group of students and the group of professionals. On the one hand, models of career success are almost unanimous in taking financial gain as an elementary universe (Costa, 2013; Derr, 1986; Dries et al., 2008; Mayrhofer et al., 2016; Parker & Chusmir, 1992; Turban & Dougherty, 1994; Sutherland, 2017). It is also known that the financial factor is a fundamental aspect for the career of psychology professionals, although there are few studies that present in great detail the financial profile of Brazilian psychologists (Anunciação et al., 2019). In contrast, it is known that greater weight can be attributed to social recognition by clients and patients (Sobiraj et al., 2016). In view of the foregoing, when exploring career success for psychologists, it is recommended that the financial factor be taken into account with the same weight and importance as other universes of a subjective order, such as satisfaction, professional conduct, learning, balance, entrepreneurship and social relations.

Regarding the group of students, the emphasis observed was on aspects related to the way of performing activities in order to achieve success, arising from individual characteristics, that is, in a persistent, focuses and determined way. In turn, psychology professionals emphasized work relationships and characteristics as indicators that career success was achieved. It is worth noting that the search for qualification meets the recommendations of the *Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais* (National Curriculum Guidelines) (Ministério da Educação, 2011), and reflects the perception of professional psychologists on the need to continue studies as a way to mitigate the lack of preparation with which recent graduates face after graduation, especially those who intend to work in less traditional areas of psychology (Cury et al., 2018; Mourão et al., 2019).

One of the limitations of this study concerns the composition of the sample, which was predominantly female (86.6%). Because of this, it was not possible to analyze possible gender differences regarding the meaning of career success with this sample. The instructions provided in the CST may also have been configured as a limitation. Although the inductive term “Career Success” refers to professional activities, it is possible that, when participants were asked to answer the question, they did not necessarily take into account the area of Psychology or even their own reality and personal characteristics when answering this question. Thus, it is suggested that future studies be carried out on the meaning of career success for Psychology students and professionals, with an emphasis on verifying the existence (or not) of sociodemographic, gender and regional differences, for instance, with explicit instructions during the CST indicating that the participants must give answers according to their personal context, including their professional activities.

## Conclusion

We believe that the main objective of the study was achieved, as it questioned the ability of existing models to explain the phenomenon of career success. The use of FVA allowed access to the more profound, cognitive and emotionally anchored knowledge structures of participants. The results obtained clearly show the need to take into account aspects related to satisfaction and professional conduct when addressing the topic of career success for Psychology professionals and students. Moreover, it is important to take into account financial success as an unquestionable indicator of career success in this field. As practical contributions to career counseling, it is necessary to understand that career success is characterized by changes that are consistent with the stage of development of a professional's or student's life, and even with the experienced context. Such understanding allows individuals to have greater clarity and security in knowing that success will be achieved from a structural and individual construct that involves being aware of their skills and values, as well as their reflections and insights into what they have experienced. This construct provides individuals with more useful tools so that they can perform imaginative exercises about possible futures as well as develop action plans that allow them to achieve such futures.

## Contribution

All authors made substantial contributions to the conception and design of this study, as well as to the analysis, interpretation of data, review and approval of the final version submitted to the journal.

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