

# Goal instability, self-esteem, and vocational identity of high school Portuguese students (\*)

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Researchers in career psychology have produced a significant body of studies on the relationships between career variables, especially vocational interests, and personality dimensions (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996; Savickas, Briddick, & Watkins, 2002). A majority of the studies favor structural models of personality, like the «Big Five» model (McCrae & Costa, 1987), an option that can be explained by the fact that Holland's (1997) theory of vocational personality types has been the most used within the framework of the aforementioned research (e.g., Tokar & Swanson, 1995). It is important that studies seeking to articulate career variables and personality variables continue to be developed, such as those that apply other personality theories that can take into account specific aspects that are not analyzed in structural models.

In this context, the self-psychology theory of Heinz Kohut (1971, 1977, 1984) constitutes a particularly interesting alternative, as it has been referred to as a relevant conceptual framework for the understanding of human development and behavior (for a review see Baker & Baker, 1987; Kahn, 1985; Wolfe, 1989). Kohut developed a psychoanalytical theory of self that departs from the classic psychoanalytical approach. For this author, the self constitutes the center of the person's psychological universe, being the psychological structure responsible for the individual's adjustment and well-being. The process of maturation of the self has roots in infancy, during which the child uses the world around him/her, especially parental figures, as elements that allow him/her to anchor his/her sense of self and develop healthy narcissism. Kohut designates as self-objects the result of the relationships the child develops with others. Self-objects allow the child to develop and maintain self-cohesion and self-esteem, as well as provide feelings of security and emotional stability in his/her relationship with him/herself and with the world. The parents' response to the child's self-object needs is never perfect, since it is inevitable that occasional lapses occur. An optimal level of frustration allows the child to progressively incorporate the functions self-objects previously fulfilled through a process of internal

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psychological structuring, that Kohut designated transmuting internalization.

Maturation of the self occurs along three lines of development, which reflect the child's needs, and configure constituents or sectors of the self. The child's exhibitionistic and grandiose needs are satisfied when self-objects mirror the child's sense of grandiosity, thus strengthening his/her self-respect and self-worth. Idealizing needs are manifested through admiration and idealization of the parental figures, which will later be translated into an internal system of principles, values and goals. Finally, the altered ego or twinship needs are related with the search for a certain degree of likeness and closeness with other people.

When parents manifest chronic empathic failures in satisfying these needs, namely through attitudes of indifference, excessive criticism or hostility, a greater vulnerability of the self is verified and difficulties in the development of internal regulatory and emotional control mechanisms occur. According to Kohut, this is the main cause of failures in psychological adjustment and psychopathology.

The idealizing need of the self seems particularly useful in analyzing several aspects of psychological development and behavior. Individuals with healthy idealization should be able to develop a flexible but lasting set of ideals and goals in order to analyze alternatives and to make investments, maintaining a sense of direction and continuity, especially in periods of change and life transitions (Lapan & Patton, 1986). Other currents in psychology, such as the sociocognitive approach, have also stressed the importance of goals in the development and maintenance of individuals' well-being (Elliott & Sherwin, 1997; Oishi, 2000; Salmela-Aro, 2001).

Robbins and Patton (1985) created the Goal Instability Scale (GIS) in order to operationalize the assessment of a specific aspect of the idealizing line of development, based on the principle that a person who experiences difficulties in the maturation of this sector of the self may come to manifest «...a lack of goal-directness, a sense of depletion, or fear of committing oneself to longer term goals» (p. 223). Research with this scale has shown the existence of theoretically consistent associations between personal

adjustment indexes and goal instability. Individuals with low scores on the GIS, which reflects unhealthy idealization, reveal lower levels of self-esteem (Robbins & Patton, 1985; Smith & Robbins, 1988), personal competency (Scott & Robbins, 1985), goal commitment (Lese & Robbins, 1994), social satisfaction (Smith & Robbins, 1988) and self-efficacy (Multon, Heppner, & Lapan, 1995) and higher levels of depression (Smith & Robbins, 1988; Watson, McKinney, Hawkins, & Morris, 1988) and anxiety (Stark, Bentley, Lowther, & Shaw, 1991; Watson et al., 1988). Furthermore, goal instability is related to low school achievement, difficulties in adjustment to college (Lese & Robbins, 1994; Robbins, Lese, & Herrick, 1993; Robbins & Schwitzer, 1988) and a reduced adjustment among individuals with a physical disability (Elliott, Uswatt, Lewis, & Palmatier, 2000).

In the career development domain, several studies have revealed that high-goal instability individuals are less involved in activities of career exploration (Blustein, 1989), reveal lower levels of career decision making self-efficacy (Blustein, 1989), are more career undecided (Chartrand, Robbins, Morrill, & Boggs, 1990; Multon et al., 1995; Robbins & Patton, 1985) and are usually less satisfied with their career choices (Robinson & Cooper, 1988).

As a whole, the results of these studies confer the goal instability construct a significant relevance for psychological research and intervention in the field of career psychology. If a certain level of maturation in the idealizing line is necessary for the development of a set of values and goals, then it can be expected that, in cases where this maturation process does not occur adequately, greater difficulties may arise in dealing with the tasks related to the development of a vocational identity.

At the same time, it should be noted that, over the last few decades, the job market has suffered profound transformations. For individuals faced with a social and work life which is undergoing significant changes at a much greater rate than before, including increased unpredictability in career trajectories and employment opportunities (Collin & Watts, 1996; Kraus, 1998; Peavy, 1997; Roberts, 1997; Sennett, 2001), the process of developing one's vocational identity is now a much more challenging task than ever before.

Thus, in this context, life transitions associated with internal and external sources of stress, especially those involving issues related with career (e.g., school-job transition), are particularly appropriate for analyzing the role of maturation of the self in the development of vocational identity.

The present study analyzed the influence of goal instability and self-esteem in the vocational identity of adolescents in secondary school. Specifically, we tested the hypothesis that higher levels of goal instability and lower levels of self-esteem are associated with lower levels of vocational identity. Apart from goal instability, self-esteem was included in this study because a diminished sense of self-worth has been associated with a reduced maturation of the self (Robbins & Patton, 1985; Robbins & Tucker, 1986; Smith & Robbins, 1988).

The second objective of this study consists of analyzing possible gender and age effects in the relationship between the aforementioned variables. Career development in women presents specificities and barriers that have been the object of many studies (Luzo & MacGregor, 2001). Simultaneously, as stated by Osipow and Fitzgerald (1996), «...the relationships between personality and occupational choice and membership appear to be moderated by gender, a factor that has been generally overlooked in discussions of this type» (p. 60). Thus, in the framework of this study, the inclusion of gender as a variable of analysis is justified. Age was included as a variable because it can be expected that maturation of the self, as a developmental process, is associated with age change.

## 1. METHOD

### 1.1. Participants

The participants consisted of 375 secondary school Portuguese students (10th to 12th grades). The students were recruited from classes chosen in a non-random way in 4 urban schools (3 public schools and one private). Their ages ranged between 15 and 21, with a mean age of 16.9 years ( $SD = 1.3$  years). There were 186 female students (49.6%) and 189 male students (50.4%).

### 1.2. Procedure and instruments

Administration of the instruments took place in school after the participants were informed that the general purpose of the research was to study several aspects of adolescent development. The voluntary nature of participation was stressed and the confidentiality of the data guaranteed. The measures were arranged in random order to control for order effects.

*Measurement of goal instability.* Goal instability was assessed with the Goal Instability Scale (GIS; Robbins & Patton, 1985), a 10-item self-report instrument with a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly agree* to 6 = *strongly disagree*) that measures «...a general instability or absence of orienting goals» (p. 226). Higher scores indicate a greater level of goal directedness. A confirmatory factor analysis with a sample of college students suggested that this scale assesses one unitary factor (Robbins, Payne, & Chartrand, 1990). The internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of the scale has ranged from .81 to .87 (Blustein & Palladino, 1991; Multon et al., 1995; Robbins & Patton, 1985; Smith & Robbins, 1988; Stark et al., 1991) and the test-retest reliability (two-week interval) was .76 (Robbins & Patton, 1985).

In this study, we used the Portuguese version of the GIS adapted by Santos (manuscript in preparation), with a sample of secondary school students. A confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the GIS assesses one single factor. The internal consistency value (Cronbach's alpha) was .81 and the test-retest reliability (two-week interval) was .95. High scores in the GIS were associated with psychological adjustment and career certainty. Furthermore, students who wanted to apply to college after graduation from secondary school revealed lower levels of goal instability than the group of students that were not sure of their decision.

*Measurement of vocational identity.* Vocational identity was assessed with the Vocational Identity Scale (VIS; Holland, Daiger, & Power, 1980). The VIS is an 18-item scale, with a true-false answer, which measures «...the possession of a clear and stable picture of one's goals, interests, personality, and talents» (Holland et al., 1980, p. 1). High scores indicate a clear sense of identity. The internal consistency (KR20) of the

scale's scores ranged from .86 to .89 (Holland et al., 1980) and the test-retest reliability, for intervals not greater than three months, was .75 (Holland, Johnston, & Asama, 1993). Evidence supporting the validity of VIS can be found in Holland et al. (1993), Leong and Morris (1989) and Lucas, Gysbers, Bluescher and Heppner (1988).

In this study, we used the Portuguese version of the VIS, adapted by Santos (2000), with a sample of secondary school students. Santos reported an internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of .78. He also observed that VIS scores were negatively correlated with personal-emotional and information dimensions of career indecision and positively correlated with scores of measures of self-esteem and career certainty.

*Measurement of self-esteem.* For the assessment of self-esteem we used the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965). Rosenberg defined self-esteem «...as a positive or negative attitude toward a particular object, namely the self» (p. 30). The RSES is a 10-item test, 5 positively oriented and 5 negatively, answered in a 4-point Likert-type scale ( $1 = strongly disagree$  to  $4 = strongly agree$ ). The negatively oriented items are reversed scored so that higher scores indicate higher levels of self-esteem. The RSES is the most frequently used scale in the assessment of global self-esteem (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991; Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999). The internal consistency results (Cronbach's alpha) of RSES's scores are higher than .80 (Fleming & Courtney, 1984; Gray-Little, Williams, & Hancock, 1997; Hagborg, 1996) and Fleming and Courtney (1984) indicated a test-retest reliability (two-week interval) of .82. Apart from the initial work developed by Rosenberg, construct validity of this scale has been evidenced by significant correlations with other instruments of assessment of self-esteem (Francis & Wilcox, 1995; Hagborg, 1996; McCurdy & Kelly, 1997) and with a set of dimensions and psychological variables, like depression (Fleming & Courtney, 1984), anxiety (Fleming & Courtney, 1984) and satisfaction with life (Diener & Diener, 1995).

In this study, we used the Portuguese version of the RSES adapted by Santos and Maia (1999, manuscript in preparation), with a sample of secondary school students. A confirmatory factor

analysis indicated that the RSES assesses one single factor. The internal consistency value (Cronbach's alpha) was .84 and the test-retest reliability (two-week interval) was .90. High scores in the RSES were associated with satisfaction with life and psychological adjustment.

## 2. RESULTS

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of scores on each instrument. In order to analyze possible differences between genders in the variables under study we used a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). All results were statistically non-significant: GIS,  $F(1, 365) = 2.22, p = .14$ , RSES,  $F(1, 367) = 3.07, p = .08$ , VIS,  $F(1, 364) = 3.35, p = .07$ .

Table 2 presents the correlation matrix. All measures were significantly correlated in the expected directions with goal instability. Higher scores in the GIS, indicating lower levels of goal instability, were positively correlated with higher scores on self-esteem, vocational identity, and age.

To analyze the influence of goal instability, self-esteem, age and gender in the manifestation of vocational identity, we used hierarchical multiple regression with vocational identity as a dependent variable and gender, age, self-esteem and goal instability as independent variables. The overall model was statistically significant,  $F(4, 350) = 40.52, p = .0001$ . The block of gender and age, which was entered first, was significantly predictive of vocational identity scores and accounted for 2.3% of the criterion variable. Only age was a statistically significant predictor. Next, the block of GIS and RSES scores was entered and was also significantly predictive of vocational identity scores, accounting for 29.4% of the variance of the dependent variable. The overall model accounted for 32% of the variance. An analysis of the standardized beta weights indicates that the three variables have a positive linear relationship with vocational identity and that goal instability was the strongest predictor (see Table 3).

In order to analyze possible differences between students high on vocational identity and those low on vocational identity, we created two groups using a mean split process. A one-

TABLE 1  
*Means and Standard Deviations of Measures of Goal Instability, Self-esteem and Vocational Identity*

Scale	Total sample		Male sample		Female sample	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Goal Instability Scale	43.72	8.85	43.04	8.72	44.41	8.96
Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale	31.44	4.64	31.86	4.44	31.02	4.81
Vocational Identity Scale	9.93	3.95	9.56	3.88	10.31	4.00

*Note.* The potential ranges for the several instruments are as follows: Goal Instability Scale (10-60); Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (10-40); Vocational Identity Scale (0-18)

TABLE 2  
*Pearson Correlation Coefficients of the Scores of the Scales*

	1	2	3	4
1. Goal Instability Scale				
2. Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale	.55**			
3. Vocational Identity Scale	.53**	.40**		
4. Age	.03	.07	.11*	

\*  $p < .05$       \*\*  $p < .01$

TABLE 3  
*Hierarchical Regression of Gender, Age, Goal Instability and Self-esteem Variables on Vocational Identity*

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Step 1					
Gender	.60	.35	.08	1.69	.092
Age	.29	.14	.09	2.10	.037
Step 2					
Goal instability	.18	.02	.41	7.54	.0001
Self-esteem	.17	.05	.20	3.75	.0001

*Note.* Adjusted  $R^2$  for Step 1 = .023; Adjusted  $R^2$  for Step 2 = .29.4

way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed to analyze possible differences between these groups; statistically significant differences were found in the scores of the RSES,  $F(1, 360) = 52.06, p = .0001$  and GIS,  $F(1, 358) = 95.99, p = .0001$ . Low vocational identity participants had lower self-esteem and higher goal instability. The two groups did not present statistical differences concerning age,  $F(1, 363) = 1.812, p = .179$ . We also assessed the effect size of these differences using Cohen's  $d$ . For self-esteem, the value was .71 and for goal instability it was .92. These values fall in the range of medium to large effect sizes according to Cohen's (1988) classification.

### 3. DISCUSSION

The results of the present research allowed us to verify that regression predicted a significant percentage of variance in vocational identity and that goal instability and self-esteem, conceptualized as indicators of the maturity of the self, contributed to the prediction of the dependent variable. Goal instability emerged as the most important predictor, confirming its relevance for research in the domain of career development and behavior (Blustein, 1989; Robbins & Patton, 1985; Robinson & Cooper, 1988). Age explained a small portion of the variance, a fact that could be interpreted as the result of the sample's small age range.

This study also revealed the importance of exploring in more detail the complementarity between career psychology theories and Kohut's theory (1971, 1977, 1984). Savickas (1997) proposed that the construct of career adaptability, defined as «...the readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by changes in work and working conditions» (p. 254), plays a central role in the life-span, life-space theory of career development (Super, 1957; Super, 1980; Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996). It seems reasonable to contend that it is highly unlikely that individuals with a debilitated self, without a firm sense of self-confidence and a set of developmentally appropriate goals and ambitions, come to succeed in the tasks and adjustments Savickas asso-

ciates with career adaptability. This relationship between career development and maturation of the self becomes even more relevant when we verify the growing number of transitions that current career paths imply (Chisholm & Hurrelmann; Collin & Watts, 1996; Kraus, 1998). At these points of transition, both normative (e.g., starting professional life) and non-normative (e.g., suffering an accident and having to deal with a career change), the level of maturation of the self constitutes an important variable in the adaptation process that is associated with changing situations. Thus, a sense of self-esteem and direction most certainly contributes to sustaining the development of career management skills (e.g., planning, exploration, decision, investment), which are fundamental for individuals to affirm themselves as competitive elements in an increasingly demanding job market.

Furthermore, the use of Kohut's constructs, especially goal instability, can also contribute to improving career intervention practices with clients who present specific career needs. In fact, in recent years, several authors have defended the importance of developing diagnostic schemas for vocational problems, even though some proposals have already been developed in this sense (cf. Campbell & Cellini, 1981; Miller, 1993). The effectiveness of career counseling is not questioned (Fretz, 1981; Oliver & Spokane, 1988; Whiston, Sexton, & Lasoff, 1998), but very little is known about the relationship between the intervention process and specific client attributes (for an exception see Heppner & Hendricks, 1995). However, some research suggests goal instability may be a variable that moderates the effectiveness of career interventions. Robbins and Tucker (1986) verified that college students with high goal instability obtained more gains in interactional than in self-directed career workshop formats, whereas Kivlighan, Johnston, Hogan, and Mauer (1994) concluded that clients with a lower level of goal instability presented more significant gains in vocational identity after using a computerized career counseling guidance and information system. Both studies suggest that individuals high in goal instability who seek career counseling may benefit more from a personalized intervention, possibly one that is longer and more structured. This intervention should provide an emphatic therapeutic en-

vironment that allows the development of the self, increasing goal directedness and self-worth. Thus, a previous assessment of the maturation of the self, using the GIS, may be particularly valuable in analyzing the clients' specific characteristics and idealizing the most appropriate intervention for each case.

Career intervention conceptualized in this way blurs the distinction between career counseling and psychotherapy, a distinction a growing number of authors have come to question (Betz & Corning, 1993; Blocher, 2000; Lucas, 1993; Manuele, 1992; Peavy, 1997). According to Blustein and Spengler (1995), intervention should not be based on different counseling modalities (career counseling vs. personal counseling), but rather it should be determined by each client's specific characteristics. In other words, it makes little sense to differentiate psychological intervention domains unless by reference to the type of problems presented by clients or by the institutional context in which the intervention takes place, given that the models, strategies and techniques employed by counselors are basically the same (Campos, 1988).

Although the results of this study were consistent with its theoretical assumptions, some limitations must be considered. First, the instruments used were self-report scales and social desirability processes could have influenced the scores. Second, we cannot draw conclusions of a causal nature, as the relationships between variables were correlational.

Despite these limitations, the present research reveals the pertinence of Kohut's theory for the understanding and intervention in adolescent career development. A future path that may be followed consists in operationalizing other relevant constructs in this theory (see Lapan & Patton, 1986; Patton, Connor, & Scott, 1982) and more systematically analyzing their relationship with several indicators of career development and behavior. Similarly, an analysis of the effectiveness of the different types of career intervention (e.g., individual career counseling, group career counseling) according to the clients' specific characteristics, especially in relation to their level of maturation of the self, is an area that warrants further study.

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#### ABSTRACT

According to the self-psychology of Heinz Kohut, development of a healthy narcissism that is reflected in a secure sense of self, permits individuals to set and pursue meaningful life goals and maintain a sense of well-being, particularly in periods of transition and change. Based on this perspective, the primary purpose of this study was to assess the contribution of goal instability and self-esteem to the vocational identity of Portuguese high school students using a sample of 375 individuals. Additionally, the effect of gender and age on vocational identity was assessed. A regression equation accounted for 32% of the variance of the dependent variable with goal instability emerging as the strongest predictor. Implications for career theory and counseling are discussed.

*Key words:* Goal instability, self-esteem, vocational identity, adolescence.

## RESUMO

De acordo com a psicologia do self de Heinz Kohut o desenvolvimento de um narcisismo saudável, que se reflecte no sentimento de segurança do self, permite aos indivíduos determinar e prosseguir objectivos de vida e manter a auto-estima, particularmente em períodos de transição e mudança. Baseado nesta perspectiva, o principal objectivo deste estudo, que utilizou uma amostra com 375 estudantes que frequentavam o Ensino Secundário, consistiu em avaliar a contribuição

da instabilidade de objectivos e da auto-estima para a identidade vocacional de adolescentes. A influência do género e da idade foi igualmente considerada. A equação de regressão permitiu explicar 32% da variância da variável critério e a instabilidade de objectivos demonstrou ser a variável independente mais importante. São discutidas implicações para a teoria e consulta vocacionais.

*Palavras-chave:* Instabilidade de objectivos, auto-estima, identidade vocacional, adolescência.