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COIMBRA

Vinicius Coscioni

A COMPREHENSIVE THEORY OF LIFE  
PROJECTS

VOLUME 1

Tese no âmbito do Doutoramento em Psicologia, Especialidade em Aconselhamento, em regime de cotutela com o Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia do Instituto de Psicologia da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, orientada pela Professora Doutora Maria Paula Barbas de Albuquerque Paixão e pelo Professor Doutor Marco Antônio Pereira Teixeira e apresentada à Faculdade de Psicologia e Ciências da Educação da Universidade de Coimbra.

Maio de 2021

TESE

Faculdade de Psicologia e Ciências da Educação  
Universidade de Coimbra

Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia  
Instituto de Psicologia  
Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

# **A comprehensive theory of life projects**

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Esta tese é dedicada à minha querida mãe,  
Diléta Brunoro Coscioni.

\*\*\*

This thesis is dedicated to my lovely mother,  
Diléta Brunoro Coscioni.





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“L’avenir a plusieurs noms : pour les faibles, il se nomme l’inaccessible. Pour les peureux, il se nomme l’inconnu. Pour les courageux, il se nomme opportunité.”

\*\*\*

“O futuro tem muitos nomes: Para os fracos é o inalcançável. Para os temerosos, o desconhecido. Para os valentes é a oportunidade.”

\*\*\*

“The future has many names: For the weak, it means the unattainable. For the fearful, it means the unknown. For the courageous, it means opportunity.”

Victor Hugo





## **Abstract**

The term life project (LP) has been used in scientific literature, though frequently without a clear definition. This terminological inaccuracy has been leading the field to conflicting conclusions. This thesis is a compendium of seven articles comprising four parts that, altogether, aim to introduce a new comprehensive theory of LPs.

The first part comprises two non-systematic reviews and one systematic review that discuss the existing literature on the theme. The first article presents the main theories, constructs, and instruments of future time perspective (FTP). The term LP is introduced as an FTP variable entailing a specific type of anticipation. The review fills in a gap in the Brazilian literature, in which the term LP has been frequently used as a synonym of expectations, aspirations, and other terms. The second article presents 15 theoretical approaches to LP. The review discusses similarities and controversies across them and acknowledges that they refer to different aspects of LPs or even distinct constructs. The third article identifies the theoretical contributions on LP across 93 articles. A thematic analysis coded all excerpts providing theoretical contributions on LP, from which six theoretical dimensions were created. Another thematic analysis with the LP's explicit definitions generated four categories that describe defining features. The associations between the included articles' theoretical features were investigated by networking analyses that identified three main theoretical trends.

The second part includes a theoretical study that integrates the theoretical approaches, dimensions, and defining features acknowledged in the first part. Thus, it signals the initial proposal of a comprehensive theory of life projects. The article starts by providing a definition of the general notion of project as “a process comprising the formation, enactment, and maintenance of intentional structures and actions”. This definition mitigates the conflict between two theoretical traditions that conceived project either as a process prior to action or a set of actions aiming at the same goal. Subsequently, LP is defined as “an ongoing evolving project that encompasses a long-term, meaningful, and prospective narrative capable of driving decisions and efforts in daily life”. This definition embraces diverse components extracted from distinct theories, which precisely denotes its comprehensive nature. The article also provides a framework associating LPs with other phenomena, such as consciousness, narratives, purpose, personal projects, life themes, career, and FTP.

The third part encompasses two empirical articles that provide empirical evidence of the created theory. Firstly, a qualitative study carried out via interviews is reported. Participants were 26 Brazilian citizens, aged between 15 and 59 years, who were aware of plans for the next years of their lives. The interviews content was assessed according to a thematic analysis that

allowed for the outline of a theoretical model associating several LP's personal and contextual antecedents. The second empirical article reports the creation of a psychometric scale for the assessment of LPs – the Life Project Scale (LPS). The article comprises eight studies encompassing over four thousand participants from five countries. Altogether, the eight studies identified different sources of validity and reliability evidence by means of consultation with experts, focus groups, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, invariance measurement models, relations to other measures, three types of reliability coefficients, and test-retest correlations.

The fourth part contains a theoretical study in which the practical relevance of the theory is discussed. Practical limitations of the use of more restricted LP definitions are firstly discussed. The comprehensive theory of life projects is, then, introduced as a possible set of guiding assumptions for professional practices, particularly in the context of basic education.

The seven articles introduce the four main components of a theory: (1) definition of terms; (2) a domain; (3) a set of statements; and (4) predictions. Firstly, it contributes with new definitions of project and LP. Secondly, it presents evidence that the theory may be applied in different circumstances and settings. Thirdly, it states the relationships between different types of phenomena and variables. Lastly, it presents a body of knowledge that allows for predictions regarding how people construct and implement their LPs. Therefore, the thesis may be conceived as the introduction of a new comprehensive theory of LPs.

**Key-words:** life projects, theory, narrative identity, personality, literature review, qualitative methods, psychometrics.

## Resumo

O termo projeto de vida (PV) tem sido usado na literatura científica, embora frequentemente sem uma definição clara. Esta imprecisão terminológica tem gerado conclusões conflitantes na área. Esta tese é um compêndio de sete artigos compostos por quatro partes que, em conjunto, visam apresentar uma nova teoria compreensiva dos PVs.

A primeira parte é composta por duas revisões não sistemáticas e uma revisão sistemática que discutem a literatura existente sobre o tema. O primeiro artigo apresenta as principais teorias, construtos e instrumentos da perspectiva temporal futura (PTF). O termo PV é introduzido como uma variável da PTF que descreve um tipo específico de antecipação. A revisão preenche uma lacuna da literatura brasileira, na qual o termo PV tem sido frequentemente utilizado como sinônimo de expectativas, aspirações e outros termos. O segundo artigo apresenta 15 abordagens teóricas acerca dos PVs. A revisão discute semelhanças e controvérsias entre elas e reconhece que elas se referem a diferentes aspectos dos PVs ou mesmo a construtos distintos. O terceiro artigo identifica as contribuições teóricas sobre PV em 93 artigos. Uma análise temática codificou todos os trechos com contribuições teóricas sobre PV e, então, criou seis dimensões teóricas. Outra análise temática com as definições explícitas de PV gerou quatro categorias descrevendo características definidoras. As associações entre as características teóricas dos artigos incluídos foram investigadas por meio de análises de redes que identificaram três tendências teóricas principais.

A segunda parte inclui um estudo teórico que integra as abordagens teóricas, dimensões e características definidoras reconhecidas na primeira parte. Assim, sinaliza-se a proposta inicial de uma teoria compreensiva dos projetos de vida. O artigo inicia fornecendo uma definição da noção geral de projeto como “um processo constituído pela formação, execução e manutenção de estruturas e ações intencionais”. Essa definição atenua o conflito entre duas tradições teóricas que concebiam o projeto como um processo anterior à ação ou como um conjunto de ações com um mesmo objetivo. Posteriormente, PV é definido como “um projeto em evolução contínua que forma uma narrativa de longo prazo, significativa e prospectiva, capaz de incitar decisões e esforços na vida cotidiana”. Essa definição abrange componentes diversos extraídos de teorias distintas, o que precisamente denota o seu caráter compreensivo. O artigo também fornece uma estrutura teórica associando PVs a outros fenômenos, tais como consciência, narrativas, propósito, projetos pessoais, temas de vida, carreira e PTF.

A terceira parte compreende dois artigos empíricos que fornecem evidências empíricas da teoria criada. Primeiramente, é relatado um estudo qualitativo realizado por meio de entrevistas. Participaram 26 brasileiros, com idades entre 15 e 59 anos, que estavam cientes de

planos para os próximos anos das suas vidas. O conteúdo das entrevistas foi avaliado a partir de uma análise temática que permitiu construir um modelo teórico associando vários antecedentes pessoais e contextuais dos PVs. O segundo artigo empírico relata a criação de uma escala psicométrica para a avaliação de PVs – a Escala de Projeto de Vida (EPV). O artigo compreende oito estudos envolvendo mais de quatro mil participantes de cinco países. Ao todo, os oito estudos identificaram diferentes fontes de evidências de validade e fidedignidade por meio de consulta a especialistas, grupos focais, análises fatoriais exploratórias e confirmatórias, modelos de invariância da medida, relações com outras medidas, três tipos de coeficientes de confiabilidade e correlações teste-reteste.

A quarta parte contém um estudo teórico em que a relevância prática da teoria é discutida. Inicialmente, são discutidas as limitações práticas do uso de definições de PV mais restritas. A teoria compreensiva dos projetos de vida é, então, apresentada como um possível conjunto de pressupostos norteadores das práticas profissionais, em particular no contexto da educação básica.

Os sete artigos apresentam os quatro componentes principais de uma teoria: (1) definição de termos; (2) domínio; (3) conjunto de declarações; e (4) previsões. Primeiro, contribui com novas definições de projeto e PV. Segundo, apresenta evidências de que a teoria pode ser aplicada em diferentes circunstâncias e ambientes. Terceiro, afirma as relações entre diferentes tipos de fenômenos e variáveis. Por fim, apresenta um corpo de conhecimento que permite previsões sobre como as pessoas constroem e implementam os seus PVs. Portanto, a tese pode ser concebida como a introdução de uma nova teoria compreensiva dos PVs.

**Palavras-chave:** projetos de vida, teoria, identidade narrativa, personalidade, revisão de literatura, métodos qualitativos, psicometria.

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### List of abbreviations and symbols

$\alpha$	Cronbach's alfa or level of significance
$\Delta\chi^2$	difference between two $\chi^2$ values
$\Delta CFI$	difference between two CFI values
$\Delta df$	difference between two df values
$\Delta RMSEA$	difference between two RMSEA values
$\chi^2$	qui-square statistic
$\Omega$	McDonald's omega
78-99	articles published from 1978 to 1999
00-09	articles published from 2000 to 2009
10-19	articles published from 2010 to 2019
Act	active nature
AERA	American Educational Research Association
AI	Aspiration Index
AIC	Akaike Information Criterion
Anth	anthopological approaches
AS	Authenticity Scale
BI	biographic-identity dimension
BIC	Bayes Information Criterion
BID	biographic-identity dimension
BNCC	Base Nacional Curricular Comum
BR	Brazil/Brazilian
C	configural invariance
CAF	Common part Accounted For
CAPES	Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior
CFA	confirmatory factor analysis/confirmatory factor analyses
CFI	Comparative Fit Index
CH	China/Chinese
CI	confidence intervals
CONANDA	Conselho Nacional dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente
Corr	correlation
Covid-19	coronavirus disease 2019

D	developmental dimension
DC	dialectical-contextual dimension
DCD	dialectical-contextual dimension
DCNEM	Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais para o Ensino Médio
DD	developmental dimension
Devel	developmental approaches
<i>d</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
<i>df</i>	degrees of freedom
Dial	dialectic nature
EFA	exploratory factor analysis/exploratory factor analyses
EPV	Escala de Projeto de Vida
EPVA	Escala de Projeto de Vida para Adolescentes
ERIC	Education Resources Information Center
Exist	existential-phenomenological approaches
FPCE	Faculdade de Psicologia e Ciência da Educação
FTP	future time perspective
FTPQ	Future Time Perspective Questionnaire
FTPS	Future Time Perspective Scale
H	historical dimension
HD	historical dimension
Id	identification
Int	Intentional nature
Inv	involvement
IPT	Inventário de Perspectiva Temporal
<i>k</i>	Kappa coefficient
<i>KMO</i>	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure
LILACS	Literatura Latino-Americana e do Caribe em Ciências da Saúde
LP	life project
LPQ	Life Project Questionnaire
LPRS	Life Project Reflexivity Scale
LPS	Life Project Scale
<i>M</i>	mean
M	metric invariance



M1	Model 1
M2	Model 2
M3	Model 3
M4	Model 4
M5	Model 5
MAP	Maximum A-Posteriori
max	maximum
Mean	meaningful nature
MIM	Motivational Induction Method
min	minimum
MLQ	Meaning in Life Questionnaire
MLQ-P	Meaning in Life Questionnaire – presence of meaning subscale
MLQ-S	Meaning in Life Questionnaire – search for meaning subscale
MLR	Maximum Likelihood Robust
MRFA	Minimum Rank Factor Analyses
MTurk	Mechanical Turk
<i>n</i>	sample size
OF	orientação futura
OTF	orientação temporal futura
<i>p</i>	level of probability
PePSIC	Periódicos Eletrônicos em Psicologia
PIA	plano individual de atendimento
PLCQ	Prospective Life Course Questionnaire
PMod	postmodern approaches
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
PsyS	psychosocial approaches
PT	perspectiva temporal or Portugal/Portuguese
PTF	perspectiva temporal futura
PV	projeto de vida
QPV	Questionário de Projeto de Vida
<i>r</i>	correlation's effect size statistic
RMSEA	Root Mean Square Error Approximation
S	scalar invariance

SciELO	Scientific Electronic Library Online
<i>SD</i>	standard deviation
SINASE	Sistema Nacional de Atendimento Socioeducativo
SL	Slovenia/Slovenian
SPhe	Social-phenomenological approaches
SRMR	Standardized Root Mean Residual
<i>st</i>	scree test
TE	teleological-existential dimension
TED	teleological-existential dimension
TGNC	transgender and gender non-conforming people
TLI	Tucker-Lewis Index
UC	Universidade de Coimbra
UFRGS	Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States of America/American
USA	United States of America/American
VS	volitional-strategic dimension
VSD	volitional-strategic dimension
y.o.	years old
<i>Z</i>	Z statistic
ZTPI	Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory

### **Presentation**

Since I was very young, I have been the kind of person who wonders about the future and strives for my dreams. It is not a surprise that my Ph.D. thesis reflects this aspect of my personality. After several years of hardworking study, I feel honored to introduce a new theory, which I humbly featured as “a comprehensive theory of life projects”. As we will see, the term ‘life project’ refers to people’s intended future. As for the adjective ‘comprehensive’, it mostly emphasizes the integrative nature of this newborn theory. That is, since its first steps, the comprehensive theory of life projects represents an effort to integrate several theoretical approaches and fields of knowledge. Therefore, the theory provides a complex body of knowledge on a complex psychological construct.

This thesis is part of a larger research project entitled “Future time orientation and life project: A theoretical and transcultural approach from a psychosocial perspective”. As its own title suggests, this project entails an additional psychological construct – i.e., future time orientation. In this thesis, the focus is on life projects. More precisely, the theoretical framework to the notion of life project is created, which will ground the subsequent steps of the research project.



# **General introduction**



## Introduction

The term ‘life project’ (LP) has been used in the scientific literature with very different meanings. Despite the differences between them, there is a consensus regarding its future-oriented nature. That is, an LP somehow describes what one intends or wishes to do in the future. As a concept designating people’s intended future, LP gains especial attention in the current historical time, which is characterized by uncertainty and instability regarding the future (Leccardi, 2014). For instance, Giddens (1991) entailed that life planning is an important means of organizing life experiences, which may allow for the construction of a sense of unity, coherence, and purpose in life (a sense that he called ‘ontological security’). That is, being aware of the next steps to take in the future may help people orient their lives in the present.

Regardless of the agreement on its future-oriented nature, divergences concerning a precise definition of LP have been leading the field into conflicting conclusions. For example, a systematic review of the literature (Coscioni, Rosa et al., *under review*) analyzed 24 Brazilian research studies that characterized the LPs of juvenile offenders under the care of the State. The review identified two distinct ways of conceiving LP, which thus directed the studies into different conclusions. A first set of studies considered LP as a composite of goals concerning the future. With this definition in mind, researchers concluded that participants had LPs associated with work, education, and family life domains. In turn, a second set of studies underlined that goals could only ascend to the category of LPs if associated with a plan of actions driving next steps to be taken. These studies concluded that most participants were not aware of LPs but only of wishes that, in most of the cases, were only distant dreams.

The aforementioned systematic review is just one example of how the inaccurate use of the term LP may lead into conflicting conclusions. In fact, we may refer to works conceiving LP either as a plan of actions (Leccardi, 2014), an intention (Catão, 2001), a direction or mode of actions (D’Angelo, 1999a), a connectedness with one’s surroundings (Bertelsen, 1996), areas of investment of time and energy (Ruth et al., 1996), a set of goals (Gobbo et al., 2019), an envisaged existence (Riard, 1994), a purpose (Silva & Salazar, 2009), an evaluative perspective (Velázquez, 2016), etc. These differences across definitions certainly impact how LPs are assessed, analyzed, and interpreted, which consequently influence the studies’ conclusions. That is, the absent consensus concerning an LP definition might be leading the theoretical approaches to investigate different aspects of future life, yet all referred to as LP.

The current state-of-the-art shares resemblance with the inaccuracy concerning the idea of career development at the beginning of this century. Conflicting conclusions in the field led Savickas (2001) to propose a comprehensive theory integrating the assumptions of different

theoretical perspectives. Grounded on McAdams' personality framework, he identified that the different concepts in the field associated with distinct levels of analysis of career development. Thus, Savickas (2001) provided sort of a metatheory that reduced controversies and allowed for the comprehension of career development from different perspectives (or levels of analysis).

This thesis aims to introduce a comprehensive theory of LPs. In the first versions of its project, the thesis aimed at the construction of a new psychometric scale for the assessment of LPs. The project also committed to a systematic review of the literature and a qualitative study with interviews, with both studies aiming to ground the scale content generation. As the project advanced, we started to develop an extensive theoretical effort to integrate different theoretical approaches. Thus, we realized that the thesis was actually assuming a broader purpose. Rather than solely constructing a new scale, we were creating a new theory. The purpose of constructing a new scale was kept, though it became one of the thesis' specific goals. Consequently, the systematic review of the literature and the qualitative study played a more substantial role in the thesis. Rather than simply providing content validity evidence for a constructing scale, they grounded the development of a comprehensive theory of LPs.

By assuming the purpose of introducing a new theory, the thesis' theoretical component had its importance enhanced. Priorly, theoretical articles were planned in order to ground the scale construction. Currently, the theoretical studies occupy a greater role since they represent the construction of the theory introduced in this thesis. The empirical studies, in turn, attend to the purpose of providing empirical evidence for the theory created.

This thesis is a compendium of seven articles, five of which are theoretical studies. The compendium may be didactically divided into four parts. The first part comprises three reviews that describe the current state-of-the-art in the field. The second part contains only one theoretical article that signals the initial proposal of the theory. The third part embraces two empirical articles that provide empirical evidence for the theory. The fourth and last part includes a single theoretical study that discusses the practical relevance of the created theory.

The first article is entitled "*Perspectiva temporal futura: Teorias, construtos e instrumentos*" [Future time perspective: Theories, constructs, and instruments]. It represents our primary effort to integrate different theoretical perspectives in the field, particularly on the concept of future time perspective. The article aims to present "the main theories, constructs, and instruments used in international literature on future temporal perspective". The adjective 'international' emphasizes one of its specific purposes (or better, its justification), which is to overcome a gap in the national (i.e., Brazilian) scientific literature. This is the reason why the



article is written in Portuguese rather than English. The gap which we meant to overcome refers to the fact that, in Brazil, terms such as life project, future time perspective, future expectations, aspirations, etc. have been commonly used as synonyms. Therefore, we provided an extensive review of the literature that introduced and contrasted these terms as well as presented their most popular assessment methods. The review conceived future time perspective as a broader psychological construct referring either to personal characteristics or anticipations of future. In this regard, LP is considered as a future time perspective variable describing specific types of anticipations. Besides introducing the notion of LP as a future time perspective variable, the review also presented important theoretical approaches that grounded the subsequent articles as well as the creation of the comprehensive theory of LPs.

The second article is named “Theoretical approaches to life projects in psychology and related fields”. It comprises a review of the literature that, as its title indicates, “examined a set of theoretical approaches to the notion of LP in psychology and related fields”. In total, 15 theoretical approaches from psychology, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and education were introduced. The review represents the first steps toward a comprehensive theory of LP, yet it mostly presents the already existing theoretical approaches in the field. The 15 selected approaches were extracted from the systematic review of the literature subsequently reported.

The third article reports “A systematic review of the literature on the notion of life project”. The review systematically analyzed the theoretical contributions on LP across 93 articles indexed in databases of psychology and related fields. In addition to identifying the 15 theoretical approaches described in the previous article, the review comprises two thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first thematic analysis coded the included articles’ excerpts providing theoretical contributions to the notion of LP. By grouping them according to semantic similarities, six categories were generated. The categories entail general theoretical dimensions describing different LP’s properties, features and correlates. The second thematic analysis focused particularly on the LP’s explicit definitions and acknowledged four main defining features. The associations between theoretical approaches, dimensions, and defining features were assessed by networking analyses that identified trends in the field. The review not only charted the theoretical contribution on LP but also discussed similarities and controversies across the diverse theoretical perspectives. Thus, it was one of the main backgrounds for the proposition of the comprehensive theory introduced in this thesis.

Moving to the thesis’ second part, the fourth article, “Toward a comprehensive theory of life projects”, is a theoretical study that integrates the theoretical approaches, dimensions, and defining features identified in the previous systematic review. This integrative theoretical

study represents the creation of the comprehensive theory of LPs. Beside the systematic review, the study considered additional references, such as the narrative identity theory (McAdams, 2008a), the relational theory of dynamic behaviors (Nuttin, 1984/1980), and the action control theory (Kuhl, 1984). The article starts with the introduction of a new and broader conception of the general notion of project. Subsequently, the notion of LP is discussed as a long-term project with specific features. A broader comprehension of the term is provided in order to integrate different theoretical perspectives in the field. The next two articles are, therefore, empirical studies attempting to provide empirical evidence for the arising theory of LPs.

Moving to the thesis' third part, the fifth article is entitled "Life projects' personal and contextual antecedents". It constitutes the report of a qualitative study carried out via interviews with 26 Brazilian citizens, aged between 15 to 59 years, who were aware of plans for the next years of life. As its name suggests, the purpose of the article was to outline a theoretical model on LPs' personal and contextual antecedents. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the interviews' content was performed considering the theoretical dimensions identified in the systematic review previously conducted (third article). The analysis of participants' speeches allowed for the construction of a theoretical model associating different personal and contextual antecedents. The study also provided qualitative empirical evidence for the comprehensive theory of LPs since it denoted that participants' speeches approached the content of the theoretical dimensions previously created. It means to say that there is proximity between the theories' categories and participants' reports regarding their intended future.

The sixth article, "Life Project Scale: A new psychometric measure for the assessment of people's intended future", describes the creation of a psychometric instrument grounded on the comprehensive theory of LPs. It refers to eight studies involving over four thousand participants from five countries (Brazil, Portugal, the United States of America, China, and Slovenia). The eight studies comprise the pool of items generation, consultation with experts, focus groups, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, invariance measurement models, relations to other measures, computation of different reliability coefficients, and test-retest correlations. These results identified excellent validity and reliability evidence across samples, which indicates that the scale is ready for use in other research contexts. As the scale is an operationalization of the comprehensive theory of LPs, results asserting its good fit also enhance empirical evidence for the theory introduced in this thesis.

Moving to the thesis' fourth part, the seventh and last article is named "*Teoria compreensiva dos projetos de vida: Contributos para a Educação Básica*" [Comprehensive theory of life projects: Contributions for Basic Education]. It is a theoretical study adapted from

a conference at the online event “*Projeto de Vida e Educação Básica*” [Life projects and Basic Education], in May 2021, to which this thesis’ author was invited as one of the main speeches. This is the reason why the article is written in Portuguese. The purpose of the chapter was “to introduce the comprehensive theory of LPs as a possible set of guiding assumptions for professional practices in basic education”. It states potential uses of the theory in a professional context, which underlines its practical relevance.

As a compendium of articles, each chapter of this thesis comprises an independent article. That is, they were written in a certain way that allows each one to be read independently of the others. This also means that the chapters may be read in any order, yet we strongly recommend the order presented in this thesis. As the references used across articles share some common items, we opted for gathering all references in a single section at the end of the thesis. As a final observation, since each chapter was written as an independent article, the reiteration of ideas across chapters were inevitable. In addition, some of the articles’ introductions briefly describe the results of previous chapters (using citations *under review* or *in press* in the case of non-published articles). This mostly states the connections between the articles that, although independently written, are all theoretical and empirical reports of the same research.

Altogether, the seven articles introduce a comprehensive theory of LPs. The first part presents the theoretical background for the theory’s constructions. The second part embraces the theoretical study that first states its main assumptions. The third part provides empirical evidence that the theory is an effective background for the assessment, analysis and interpretation of people’s LPs. Lastly, the fourth part indicates the theory’s practical relevance in a specific professional context. Therefore, the thesis’ final product is a new comprehensive theory of LPs that may effectively ground future research and practice in the field. In addition to the theoretical contributions, the thesis provides a new interview semi-structured script and a new psychometric scale that are both ready for use in future research and practice contexts. Hence, the thesis also embodies methodological contributions.

## Goals

### General goal

This thesis aims to introduce a comprehensive theory of LPs.

### Specific goals

This thesis' specific goals are:

- (1) to present the main theories, constructs, and instruments on future temporal perspective;
- (2) to examine the main theoretical approaches to the notion of LP in psychology and related fields;
- (3) to identify the theoretical contributions to the notion of LP across articles indexed in databases of psychology and related fields;
- (4) to introduce the main theoretical assumptions of a comprehensive theory of LPs;
- (5) to outline a theoretical model on LPs' personal and contextual antecedents;
- (6) to create a psychometric scale to assess LPs and obtain validity and reliability evidence to the scale;
- (7) to introduce the comprehensive theory of LPs as a possible set of guiding assumptions for professional practice in basic education.

The specific goals refer each to one of the seven chapters that comprise this thesis, yet they may assume slightly different phrasings due to the independent nature of the articles.

## **General discussion and conclusions**



### **General discussion and conclusions**

This thesis is a compendium of articles that introduced a comprehensive theory of life projects (LPs). The compendium contains seven articles that may be didactically divided into four parts. The first part comprises three theoretical chapters in which an extensive review of the literature was carried out. In addition to charting the theoretical contributions in the field, these articles discussed similarities and controversies across several theoretical approaches. The second part is composed of a single theoretical study in which the main assumptions of the comprehensive theory of LPs were introduced. The third part entails the thesis' empirical component, which is composed of two chapters reporting a qualitative study and the creation of a psychometric scale for the assessment of LPs. Their results provide empirical evidence that the theory may effectively ground the assessment, analysis, and interpretation of LPs. Lastly, the fourth part, composed of one theoretical study, discussed the practical relevance of the theory, particularly in the context of basic education. Altogether, the seven articles represent the initial steps of an arising comprehensive theory of LPs.

The first three chapters cover two non-systematic and one systematic reviews of the literature. The non-systematic reviews introduced the main theoretical approaches to future time perspective (FTP) and LP, respectively. The inclusion of a review on FTP mostly aimed to fill in a gap of the Brazilian literature, in which terms such as LP, FTP, future expectations, and aspirations have been used as synonyms. The review contrasted these different terms and provided theoretical evidence that they refer to distinct aspects of people's psychological future. It also identified that FTP has been investigated through different theoretical approaches conceiving it either as a personal characteristic or an anticipation of the psychological future. In this regard, LP is introduced as an FTP variable referring to a specific type of anticipation. The term LP is presented in the review as a concept holding a similar meaning to the idea of personal project (Little, 1983), since both terms pertain to a sort of interrelation between goals, plans, and action. Yet, the terms are contrasted by considering the fact that LPs are also interwoven with identity processes. This difference is resumed in details in the fourth article. The review was also an important means to introduce influential authors subsequently introduced in order to ground the creation of the comprehensive theory of LPs, such as Joseph Nuttin (1980/1984) and Bryan Little (1983).

The second and third chapters reported results of the same theoretical study. The second chapter focused on the exam of 15 theoretical approaches on LP. These approaches were indicated in the systematic review reported in the third chapter, which identified the theoretical contributions on LP across 93 articles of psychology and related fields. Altogether, both studies

provided an extensive review on the existing literature on the theme. Their results suggested that the term LP has been used in different disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and education. Despite the differences between the disciplines and theoretical approaches, the systematic review identified six general theoretical dimensions (volitional-strategic, dialectic-contextual, biographic-identity, teleological-existential, historical, and developmental) and four defining features (intentional, active, meaningful, and dialectic nature) ascribing different meanings to the notion of LP.

In addition to charting different theoretical features across the included articles, the systematic review also investigated the associations between them. Three groups of nodes were identified in the networking analyses that were performed. The first group entailed the associations between intentions and actions. This group did not relate to any specific theoretical approach and, thus, action theories were introduced to underline the motivational and volitional nature of LPs. These theories subsequently grounded the LP framework provided in the fourth article. The second group of nodes emphasized the LP's meaningful nature, which was associated with the influence of existentialism. Lastly, the third group acknowledged the impact of context and life story on LPs' construction and implementation, which was connected with the influence of constructivism and social constructionism. Regardless of the theoretical diversity, the systematic review identified several controversies as well as a large number of articles not referring to any theoretical approach, nor any explicit definition. In some cases, the term LP was mostly used as a sort of jargon or as an imprecise scientific concept.

Moving to the thesis' second part, the fourth chapter represents an effort to integrate the different theoretical approaches, dimensions, and defining features identified in the previous part. Therefore, this integrative theoretical work signals the initial proposal of the comprehensive theory of LPs introduced in this thesis. The chapter first discussed the general notion of project as a process integrating decisions and actions. This conception was grounded on Sartrean notion of project as simultaneously a verb and a noun. As a verb, a project embodies actions in the light of future ends, which, in turn, represent the project's choices (the project as a noun). A theoretical model grounded on action theories (Kuhl, 1984; Nuttin 1984/1980) was, then, proposed in order to associate different motivational, volitional, cognitive, affective, and behavioral representations, states, and processes. Hence, project was defined as "a process comprising the formation, enactment, and maintenance of intentional structures and actions". This definition integrates the contributions of two conflicting traditions that considered project either as a process prior to action or a set of actions toward the same goal.



Next, LP was defined as “an ongoing evolving project that encompasses a long-term, meaningful, and prospective narrative capable of driving decisions and efforts in daily life”. This definition entails LP as, first and foremost, a project. The other components of the definition underline its particular features compared to other types of projects. Three additional properties may be extracted from the definition: (1) LPs are continuously in action and continuously changing accordingly to personal and contextual demands, resources, and limitations; (2) LPs are narrative components of the future life story; and (3) LPs influence the way one already lives in the present. The definition is directly and indirectly associated with the theoretical dimensions and defining features identified in the systematic review (third article), which denotes its comprehensive nature. More than simply defining the idea of LP, the chapter introduced a framework associating LP with consciousness, action, and narratives. It also entailed statements regarding the relationships with antecedents and other concepts in the field, such as purpose, personal project, life theme, possible self, career, and FTP.

Moving to the thesis' third part, the fifth chapter reported a qualitative study grounded on the comprehensive theory of LPs. The study was carried out via interviews with 26 Brazilian citizens, aged between 15 and 59 years, who were aware of future plans. By means of a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a theoretical model was outlined associating different LP's personal and contextual antecedents. The model refers to the field of possibilities as a sociocultural dimension comprising one's autobiographical past, access to resources and opportunities, historical-cultural context, and interpersonal relationships. The model also assumes that the field of possibilities impacts LPs directly or indirectly, with the mediation of developmental, volitional, and motivational features. The antecedents evoked by participants associated with the theoretical dimensions previously created (third article). Thus, the study provides empirical evidence that the theory embraces representative dimensions for the comprehension of LPs. Regardless of the model's theoretical relevance, it was mostly grounded on participants' speeches and still needs to be tested in future confirmatory studies. Lastly, in addition to provide a new theoretical model, the study contributed with the creation of a semi-structured interview script that may be used in future research contexts.

The second empirical chapter (the thesis' sixth chapter) reported the creation of a new psychometric scale for the assessment of LPs – the Life Project Scale (LPS). The chapter comprises eight studies with samples from five countries that, altogether, identify different sources of validity and reliability evidence. At the moment, the scale is ready to be used in Portuguese (European and Brazilian), English, Chinese, and Slovenian. In its final version, the LPS contains eight items assessing two factors with four items each. The first factor,

identification, measures awareness of one's intended future; while the second, involvement, assesses the enactment of plans and actions in favor of one's intended future. The two factors measure intentional structures and actions, respectively. Thus, the scale is conceptually in line with the definition of LP as a project (i.e., a process comprising the formation, enactment, and maintenance of intentional structures and actions). Since a psychometric scale is the test of a theory (Pasquali, 2009), the LPS' validity and reliability evidence also provide empirical evidence for the theory here introduced. Lastly, the transcultural nature of the study supports the theory's validity for other cultural contexts besides the ones in which it was firstly created.

Moving to the thesis' fourth part, the seventh and last chapter discusses the practical relevance of the comprehensive theory of LPs. It started by critically analyzing the use of the term LP in other contexts so as to argue that unclear LP definitions may lead into practical limitations. The main statements of the comprehensive theory of LPs were, then, introduced as a possible set of guiding assumptions for professional practices in basic education. Thus, the theoretical study started a discussion on how the theory and instruments introduced in previous parts may serve as basis for future professional practices in the field.

This compendium of articles may be conceived as the introduction of a new theory. Despite the differences across philosophical views, "generally, academics point to a theory as being made up of four components, (1) definitions of terms or variables, (2) a domain where the theory applies, (3) a set of relationships of variables, and (4) specific predictions" (Wacker, 1998, p. 363). Beginning with the first, the thesis contributes with a new definition of LP grounded on an extensive review of the literature. The new definition seeks to encompass different LP's features, acknowledged by distinct theoretical approaches. The thesis also provides a new definition for the general notion of projects as well as refers to definitions of other constructs in the field, such as purpose, career, personal project, etc. When adopting the definition of other concepts, differences with the notion of LP were stated, which corroborated the uniqueness of LP as a particular object of analysis.

A domain of a theory "is the exact setting or circumstances where the theory can be applied" (Wacker, 1998, p. 363). The acknowledgement of LP as a component of narrative identity positions the theory as referring to a large spectrum of settings and circumstances. Considering the well-accepted assumption that human beings are natural storytellers (McAdams, 2008b), what is defined as LP appears as a personal construct of human beings from different ages, cultures, and historical times. Particularly in terms of age, the theory stated that the genesis of LPs is conditioned to the development of psychosocial identity and the acquisition of hypothetical-deductive thinking. Thus, children and adolescents in early ages

apparently do not construct LPs, at least not accordingly to the features embraced by this theory's definition. In addition, the thesis' empirical studies included only participants aged between 15 and 60 years. Therefore, future empirical studies still need to identify the theory's applicability for people belonging to other age groups. In terms of culture, the transcultural nature of the sixth chapter indicates that the theory can be applied in different cultural contexts. Nevertheless, the unsolved question of whether LPs are products of modernity may limit the theory to the analysis of modern cultures only. Thus, it may not be valid for the analysis of isolated civilizations (such as indigenous tribes in Amazonia) or pre-modern societies.

The third component of a theory, a set of relationships of variables, is better described by Reynolds (2007/2016) as an interrelated set of statements (rather than solely variables). The difference between such terms consists in the fact that a statement may refer to non-measured phenomena and, thus, does not narrow the definition of theory to a quantitative approach. The theory introduced in this thesis posited different statements that are interrelated and, therefore, describe an extensive set of phenomena associated with LPs. Even the definitions of projects and LPs already assume complex relationships among diverse types of psychological phenomena (cognition, motivation, volition, emotion, and behavior) and objects from distinct ontological levels (states, representations, processes, dispositions, etc.). These relationships are evident when the theoretical model of projects is graphically represented in the fourth article. When LP is defined as a long-term project, the features differing it from other types of long-term projects may also be conceived as statements associating LPs with other concepts (narrative identity, consciousness, action, etc.). In the fifth chapter, the outlined model clearly associated LPs with several antecedents. Lastly, the LPS' factor structure represents an interrelation of identification and involvement's indicators, which allowed for the measurement of LPs.

These interrelated set of statements provide a theory that allows for specific predictions. For instance, the sixth chapter contained hypotheses predicting associations of LP with authenticity and meaning in life. The practical relevance of the theory, introduced in the seventh chapter, also entails potential predictions. While using the theory to ground professional practices, one may optimize actions by focusing on elements emphasized by the theory. When doing so, one is predicting the construction of LPs by the practices' participants. That is, one is generating theoretically grounded tools that might enhance the construction and implementation of people's LPs. As voiced by Lewin (1951), "there is nothing more practical than a good theory" (p. 169).

Wacker (1998) referred to eight virtues of a good theory: uniqueness, conservatism, fecundity, generalizability, abstraction, internal consistency, parsimony, and empirical riskiness. *Uniqueness* means that the theory is different from another. The created theory is grounded on several previous ones, yet it consists of more than the simple sum of assumptions. Its construction involved a creative integration of knowledge from different fields in order to generate new definitions and statements. It is precisely its integrative nature that qualifies it as a comprehensive theory. This feature associates with the second virtue, *conservatism*: “when a new theory is proposed, there is a good reason to believe all other theories are lacking in some virtue” (Wacker, 1998, p. 395). The created theory introduced a broader conception of LP able to comprehend the different features emphasized by previous theories. Thus, compared to each of the previous theories on LP separately, it covers a larger conceptual area. This states its greater *fecundity* over the others. It also consists in a theory with great *generalizability* potential since it has been created by research teams from different regions of the globe. Additionally, it is not restricted to adolescence, as a great deal of theories in the field. Its comprehensive nature and larger domain also posit its high-level of *abstraction*. This is particularly evident if we consider the fact that the theory entails a definition of project as a unit of analysis of consciousness and action, and as a heuristic system for the interpretation of narratives. Therefore, it constitutes a theory applied to different types of setting and circumstances.

The other three remaining virtues still require further theoretical and empirical work. When one says a theory has *internal consistency*, one states that “the theory has identified all relationships and gives adequate explanation” (Wacker, 1998, p. 365). The created theory was grounded on an extensive review of the literature that acknowledged different features and phenomena associated with LPs. Six theoretical dimensions were identified, which subsequently grounded the qualitative study reported in the fifth chapter. The outlined theoretical model of the fifth chapter represents, then, a more consistent set of relationships between statements. Currently, the theory integrates several logically and parsimoniously interrelated statements, which indeed reinforces its internal consistency and *parsimony*. However, future studies still need to better capture relationships between such phenomena, especially with those that received less attention in this thesis – such as LP’s consequents, affects, and unconscious processes.

*Empirical riskiness* virtue asserts that “refutation must be very possible if theory is to be considered a ‘good’ theory” (Wacker, 1998, p. 365). The creation of the theory included the development of two instruments (an interview script and a psychometric scale) that assess LPs accordingly to the theory’s assumptions. Thus, these instruments allow for the test of

statements theoretically proposed. For instance, by means of the interview script, the qualitative study identified correspondence between theoretical categories and participants' speeches. Nevertheless, the theoretical model's statements still need to be tested in confirmatory studies – using, for instance, the LPS. In fact, the LPS is a valuable instrument able to test hypotheses already presented as well as others that might be generated as new research studies are performed. In addition to the LPS, standardized codes may be created in order to quantify elements of participants' narratives when the LP interview script is used. This methodological approach is used by McAdams (2008b) to analyze data from the life story interview.

Finally, we may conclude that the comprehensive theory of LPs is a good theory able to ground future research studies and practices in the field. The seven articles that encompass this compendium represent its initial steps. As an arising systematic body of knowledge, the comprehensive theory of LPs associates with other theories in the field, such as the action theories (Kuhl, 1984; Nuttin, 1980/1984) and the narrative identity theory (McAdams, 2008a) that initially grounded its construction. Due to its integrative nature, complexity, and multiple determination, the theory integrates the postmodern paradigm, in which theoretical lenses such as social constructivism and life-design are also encompassed. Since the start, the comprehensive theory of LPs seeks an integrative perspective valuing knowledge from different fields. It does not commit to any specific previous theoretical approach but, rather, aims to provide a broader comprehension on the phenomena under investigation. Additional statements that may help future theoretical and empirical constructions are more than welcome. Indeed, even though there is still much to be theoretically and empirically researched, these initial steps constitute a sound start for a more comprehensive view on how people narrate and project their future lives.



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