The meanings of higher education, work, and transition from higher education to work

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In times of uncertainty and growing job insecurity, this study aims to understand how higher education students build meanings regarding higher education, work, the transition from education to work, and how they are interrelated. Based on a sample of 986 students in the Portuguese higher education system, we intend to understand the relationships and mediations of the dimensions of the meanings of higher education with those of the transition from higher education to work and of the meanings of work. Professional Affirmation mediates the relationship between Personal Development and Personal and Social Dimension of Work. The results show that 61% of the dependent variable values for the personal and social dimension of work are explained by the proposed model. An analysis of the results provides a few pointers for counselling, which will be discussed.

Key words: Meanings, Transition, Higher education, Work.

Introduction

Vocational psychology in its classical view (Parsons, 1909) is based on the idea of matching personal variables (e.g., skills, interests, and personality) and specific job requirements. This positivist conception of vocational psychology and development assumes a certain degree of stability regarding personal and professional traits whose objective vocational counselling intends to align. This model has long been called into question, due to a series of profound social, economic, and cultural changes. These changes have gradually occurred as Western societies moved from the industrial age of the twentieth century to the information age of the twenty-first (Savickas, 1995).

Similarly, the concept of "self", like the concept of "career", has evolved significantly over time (Guichard, 2009; Pouyaud, Bangali, Cohen-Scalic, Robinet, & Guichard, 2016). Initially conceived as a set of traits that could be assessed scientifically, the "psychometric self", to use the term coined by Vance Peavy (1997), was perfectly suited to mass production process. However, profound changes in contemporary societies, which several authors have labelled differently – postmodern society (Lash 1990; Lyotard, 1979), risk society (Beck 1992), society of individuals (Elias 2001), individualized and liquid society (Bauman, 2000, 2001), late modernity (Giddens, 1990, 1991), or hypermodern society (Lipovetsky & Charles, 2005) – have severely undermined the sense of identity of many individuals, to the extent that the social referents on which this

process of identity construction was grounded began to lose their agglutinating power. Moreover, the possibilities of constructing meanings for human experience (that sustain a viable narrative) have become increasingly more complex because the great religious, ideological, scientific, and national narratives are definitely in crisis (Gonçalves & Coimbra, 2000; Lyotard, 1979).

The increasing cultural diversity of today's economically developed societies, marked by migration flows from various geographic, ethnic, social, and religious backgrounds, has further reinforced the multiplicity of models and lifestyles of human existence. The *self* began, therefore, to lose its structural characteristics of reference, to become a reflexive dimension (Giddens, 1999). The construction of meanings has come to be conceived of as the crucial dimension of human knowledge, without which it is not possible to ensure a sense of identity (Bruner, 1997; Carlsen, 1988). It is, therefore, not surprising that the subjective dimension of vocational development, that is, the personal perspective of individuals regarding their career path that the constructivist vocational theories privilege, has drawn growing interest (e.g., Cardoso, Silva, Gonçalves, & Duarte, 2014; Guichard, 2009; Savickas, 2005, 2013; Savickas et al., 2009). For Savickas (2005), the individual's subjective career emerges from an active process of making meaning, rather than from discovering pre-existing facts. The individual and the idiosyncratic perspective of vocational development, which emphasizes the events experienced and the way the individual builds him/herself in the course of various life events, enriches and complements the objective dimension of positivist inspiration that traditionally vocational psychology has adopted (Collin & Watts, 1996). It is in this context that the meanings given to higher education, to the transition from higher education to work, and to work itself become important topics of theoretical and empirical research.

Meaning of education

Literature on the meanings students ascribe to higher education tends to be scarce and little research has focused on the matter (Henderson-King & Smith, 2006). In the literature review we conducted, some studies were identified in this area by Henderson-King and her collaborators (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011; Henderson-King & Smith, 2006; Krypel & Henderson-King, 2010). This research served to build an assessment instrument, as well as formulate a relationship between this construct and other variables, such as stress or coping styles. The marks of uncertainty and unpredictability prevail in postmodern Western societies, restricting the training and work pathways of individuals (Azevedo, 1999; Marris, 1996), as well as giving rise to obstacles university students have to face. Contrary to a relatively recent past, young people can no longer find jobs and, when they do, their contractual basis is often fluid, fragile, and precarious (e.g., Azevedo, 1999; Gonçalves, 2008; Standing, 2014). Moreover, young people have to deal with the challenge of an ever-changing world and the references they could use to build coherent meanings and narratives for their life experiences seem to be fading away.

Meaning of work

In postmodern societies, working is much more than a means of subsistence, as it has implicit dimensions in terms of social relations, survival, and accomplishment (Blustein, 2006). Work may fulfil basic needs such as food and shelter, but it is also related to acquiring psychological, social, and economic power (Blustein, 2006; Blustein, Kenna, Gill, & DeVoy, 2008). Work is at the root of social ties, not only as the main means for socialisation, but also as the substrate that sustains social links on a daily basis (Méda, 1995). According to the literature, work has been the object of social, economic, political, and legal studies, but there is a lack of reflection on the meaning and significance of work for people (an exception is MOW, 1987). Rosso, Dekas and

Wrzesniewski (2010) organised a review of the existing literature based on two main distinctions: the first is related to meaning, such as in MOW (1987), and the second is meaningfulness. According to the authors, meaningfulness is concerned with the psychological mechanisms involved in the identification or production of meanings of work, in which emotional and singular aspects are more present. Meaning, though, places greater emphasis on socially shared cognitions and interpretations about work, whereas meaningfulness focuses on understanding the act of giving meaning to work, that is, on the mechanisms that give it the quality of being meaningful. Cartwright and Holmes (2006) studied the meaning of work by trying to respond to the challenge of regaining employee engagement and reducing cynicism in the workplace. According to the authors, we have plunged into the age of anxiety and growth in employee cynicism, and individuals have become increasingly disenchanted and disillusioned with work, as well as fatigued by the constant demand to change and to be flexible in response to organizational needs. As Arnoux-Nicolas, Sovet, Lhotellier and Bernaud (2017) have mentioned, the meaning of work is an emerging concept in career counselling practices in postmodern societies.

Meaning of the transition from higher education to work

Entering the labour market is the main goal of the transition from adolescence to adulthood, for both genders, in industrial and post-industrial societies (Young et al., 2011). Indeed, transition from the educational system to work has been a relevant topic of study in recent years (e.g., Schlossberg, 2011; Young et al., 2011), and the high and persistent rates of unemployment since the 1980s has been the main reason for such attention on the part of researchers. A considerable number of young people remain unemployed in the period immediately following their leaving the educational system and even those who do find employment in that period do so under vulnerable conditions (Van der Velden & Wolbers, 2003). In these circumstances, life conditions also change dramatically, forcing individuals (and especially young people) to adopt new forms of negotiation and of relating to their transitions and life events (Nota, Soresi, Ferrari, & Ginevra, 2014; Wyn & White, 2000). There is a diversity of research lines dedicated to the transition to work, which has highlighted a sense of fragmentation, incoherence, and individualisation. The pluralist nature of transitions among young people has become more evident and accentuated (e.g., Azevedo, 1999; Müller & Gangl, 2003; Wyn & White, 2000). There is today a greater diversity of life paths in younger generations, particularly with regard to concluding their educational and academic pathway, starting to plan a family or entering parenthood (e.g., Guerreiro & Abrantes, 2007; Wyn, 2004; Young et al., 2011). As a consequence of these social and economic aspects, young people remain under the "semi-dependency" of their parents for longer stretches of time (Nilsen, Guerreiro, & Brannen, 2002), creating a period of options, freedom, and experimentation between adolescence and fully entering adulthood (Cavalli, 1995; Du Bois, 1995; Galland, 1995; Guerreiro & Abrantes, 2007). Based on the principles of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, Arnett (2000, 2001, 2004) and Côté (2006) suggest a developmental period they call "emerging adulthood" applied to individuals who, although no longer adolescents, do have not yet developed the necessary characteristics to be socially considered as adults. From the psychological perspective, the context which serves as the substrate for their development should not be ignored. It is marked by the disappearance of some of the major guiding lines of the past (Giddens, 1990; Lyotard, 1979), which provided structure to building more normalised life paths, without which young people find it difficult to face the social world (Coimbra, 2005; Coimbra & Menezes, 2009). Consequently, these emerging adults are increasingly driven to individualising their lives, in general, and their identity, in particular, by taking the initiative to build and develop professional and social relationships, obtaining educational and academic qualifications, having access to professional experience and planning their future (Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005).

Based on the literature review, there is a lack of instruments to assess this emerging social phenomenon of the meaning of the transition from higher education to work. The Scale of the Meanings of Transition from Higher Education to Work used in this study was developed using an online platform to collect the representations of the transition to work from higher education students based on four words they selected (Monteiro et al., 2015). The words collected were initially grouped according to semantic closeness. The groups of words, as well as the words listed in each group, were presented to five experts with PhDs in psychology, in order to obtain independent feedback on the groupings. Based on this feedback, some groups that were considered semantically close were merged. Ninety-eight items were built bearing in mind the literature review and the groups created and the most used words in each one. This procedure to develop an instrument has been used in several studies on the development of instruments in Portugal, with highly satisfactory outcomes (Gonçalves, 2008). The option for this procedure is based on the fact that it serves to include updated information on the meanings students give to their transition from higher education to work, thus adding to the existing research. This aspect is important given the rapid changes in society (e.g., Bauman, 2000, 2001; Beck, 1992, 2000; Giddens, 1990, 1991; Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2008; Marris, 1996; Rifkin, 1995) and the probability of increased difficulty in the construction, variability, and amplitude of the psychological meanings (e.g., Bruner 1997; Carlsen 1988; Giddens, 1991; Lyotard, 1979) attributed to the transition from higher education to work. By also basing the items built on the collected words, we intend to be more sensitive to the new and different postmodern ways of constructing meanings.

Using this version of the scale, a pilot study was conducted and an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was performed. As a result, an instrument was obtained with 22 items distributed in four factors. Using this last version of the scale, another study was conducted and a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed (Monteiro, Santos, & Gonçalves, 2015). As a result, an instrument was obtained with 20 items distributed in four factors: Professional Achievement (6 items), Uncertainty (6 items), Unemployment (4 items), and Professional Responsibility (4 items).

Purpose of the study

Given the scarcity of research that relates the development of these meanings in higher education students, this study intends to test an explanatory model for the development of the meanings attributed to higher education, to the transition from higher education to work, and to work. It is assumed that the meanings students ascribe to higher education, built over time, but influenced by the experience of the present, affect and shape the meanings given to both the anticipated experience of the transition from higher education to the labour market and the meanings ascribed to working. Believing that experience and temporal elements plays an important role here, we consider that the meanings of the transition from higher education to work can play a mediating role in the relationship between the meanings of higher education and the meanings of work. This assumption is based on the importance of college environments as places of development for these kinds of meaning because individuals are motivated to make sense of the information and context around them (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). Wray-Lake, Syvertsen, Briddell, Osgood and Flanagan (2011), for example, in their study with high school seniors and drawing on a social constructivist approach, contend that individuals assign importance to various aspects of work based on their developmental and economic contexts and their own social locations. Thus, the meanings of the transition from higher education to work, because they are in an intermediate position between the lived experience of higher education and the future experience of work, can

function as a mediating factor in the relation between meanings given to higher education and the meanings given to work.

Method

Participants

986 students participated in the study, with a mean age of 20.60 years (SD=2.15), from undergraduate and master's degrees at public and private universities and polytechnic institutes in Portugal. The female gender is in majority, representing 79.7% of the sample. 74.5% of the students were attending undergraduate courses. In terms of field of study, 47.7% were attending courses in the area of Health, Earth Sciences, and Life Sciences, 22.1% degrees in the area of the Exact Sciences, Engineering, and Technologies, and 30.2% in the area of the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences. 81.7% of the students were from a public institution and 18.3% were from a private institution, while 64.1% were from a university and 35.9% were from a polytechnic.

Higher education student associations and groups were contacted (by telephone and e-mail) requesting collaboration in collecting the data. We requested that an e-mail be forwarded asking students to collaborate in the research and a link was provided to the online questionnaire. Students who stated having more than 6 months of working experience were excluded from the sample, because it was considered that they may already have built meanings about the transition from higher education to work and that their work experience could bias the results. The respondent students participated in this study voluntarily and without any form of compensation.

Instruments

Data on sociodemographic variables were collected from an *electronic* questionnaire built for the purposes of this study. *The Meanings of Higher Education Scale (MHES)* was employed to evaluate the meanings of higher education. The MHES is the Portuguese version (Monteiro & Gonçalves, 2015) of the Meaning Of Education questionnaire (MOE) by Henderson-King and Smith (2006), and is composed of 72 items distributed over 10 subscales: Interpersonal and Social – a way to enhance one's social life, including the opportunity to develop friendships and become involved in extracurricular activities (e.g., "A good way of meeting people and making new friends"); Learning – learning to think critically; being exposed to new ideas and to cultural diversity (e.g., "Exposes you to different ideas"); Source of Stress – a source of stress in one's life (e.g., "Creates anxiety and a sense of pressure"); Escape – chance to escape the responsibilities of adulthood or stressful situations at home/family (e.g., "Putting off the responsibilities of adulthood"); Independence – opportunity to mature, increase independence and prove they are an adult (e.g., "A chance to gain independence"); Self – opportunities to know and understand themselves better, discover passions, and grow as individuals (e.g., "A chance to identify your values and beliefs"); World – learn skills which serve to make a difference in the world (e.g., "Helps people to make the world a better place"); Career – education as a way to prepare for a career and to enhance future earnings and chances of promotion (e.g., "Prepares you for a future career"); Next Step – the natural step to take after high school, the obvious thing to do (e.g., "The normal thing to do after high school"); and Economic – opportunity to access better jobs and better wages (e.g., "Increased chance of promotions and rises in career"). Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the various subscales ranged from .84 to .94. A 6-point Likert-type scale was used (1=strongly disagree, 6=strongly agree).

The *Scale of the Meanings of Transition from Higher Education to Work (SMTHEW)* was used to evaluate the meanings of the transition from higher education to work. The SMTHEW (Monteiro, Santos, & Gonçalves, 2015) is composed of 20 items, distributed over four subscales: Uncertainty – fear and anxiety provoked by the inability to predict the future in the transition from education to work (e.g., "I have so many doubts when I think about the transition to work"); Professional Responsibility – responsibility for tasks related to work, the challenge of rising to the occasion and succeeding (e.g., "Working means that some tasks will be depend on me"); Unemployment – expectations of encountering difficulties in the transition to work and finding a job (e.g., "Ending my degree means I will spend a long time looking for a job"); and Professional Achievement – satisfaction with the opportunity to put into practice the knowledge acquired in higher education (e.g., "I would be very proud to enter the world of work after graduating"). Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the various subscales ranged from .75 to .93. A 6-point Likert-type scale was used (1=strongly disagree, 6=strongly agree).

The *Meanings Assigned to Work Scale – Abridged Version (MATWS-A)*, developed by Sobral (2008) based on the previous measure (Gonçalves & Coimbra, 2004), was used to evaluate the meanings given to work. The MATWS-A is composed of 35 items, distributed over four subscales: Personal Fulfilment at Work – work as a source of personal satisfaction is related to aspects such as learning, personal growth, competence, motivation, and accomplishment (e.g., "The possibility to use my skills and competence"); Positive Emotional Dimension of Work – how work provides satisfying personal and social opportunities (e.g., "The opportunity to build a more solidary and just society"); Economic Dimension of Work – how work ensures the basic needs of personal and family quality of life as well as social recognition, translated into aspects such as income, subsistence, and financial stability (e.g., "The guarantee of a good salary"); and Negative Emotional Dimension of Work – the impact of the strain of work, in personal and family terms, as a source of concern, stress, monotony, and fatigue (e.g., "An exhausting and tiring activity"). Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the various subscales ranged from .83 to .90. A 6-point Likert-type scale was used (1=strongly disagree, 6=strongly agree).

Procedures

Given the contingencies of using three scales that, together, aggregate 127 items (72 from the MHES, 20 from the SMTHEW, and 35 from the MATWS-A), and 18 subscales (10 from the MHES, 4 from the SMTHEW, and 4 from the MATWS-A), there was a need to simplify the explanatory model through second-order factors. These second-order factors were obtained by performing an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) on each instrument, using the means of the items comprising the subscales. That is, the second-order factors were based on an analysis of the correlations between the first-order factors. The EFA was thus performed, with varimax orthogonal rotation, following the Principal Component Analysis method and applying a factor loading criterion of >.50 for each set of first-order factors of the three instruments used in the study.

A second-order Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was not performed given the study's exploratory nature, and because we considered the weak theoretical consistency this method is afforded in the literature for each of the dimensions studied. We followed instead Carroll's (1993) criterion regarding whether to use EFA or CFA, which determines that CFA should be applied when the hypotheses to be tested are strongly supported by a psychological theory or previous empirical analyses.

The EFA performed on the MHES dimensions yielded a distribution in two second-order factors. The first, called Personal and Social Development, aggregates seven factors (Learning, Self-awareness, Openness to the World, Preparation for Work/Career, Interpersonal and Social,

Independence, and Economic). The second, called Social Aspirations, aggregates three factors (Escape, Source of Stress, and Next Step). For the SMTHEW, the four factors used in the EFA yielded a distribution in two second-order factors. The first, called Insecurity, joining two factors (Uncertainty and Unemployment), and the second, called Professional Affirmation, with two factors (Professional Achievement and Professional Responsibility). As for the MATWS-A, a distribution in two second-order factors resulted from the four factors used in the EFA. The first, called Personal and Social Dimension of Work, aggregated three factors (Positive Dimension of Work, Economic Dimension of Work, and Personal Fulfilment at Work). The second only includes the Negative Dimension of Work, so the name was maintained (Table 1).

Table 1

Second-order factors and corresponding values of Cronbach's alpha coefficients

| | Subscales | EFA – 2nd order | |
		No. factors	Cronbach's α
MHES	Personal and social development	7	.89
	Social aspirations	3	.65
SMTHEW	Insecurity	2	.71
	Professional affirmation	2	.74
MATWS-A	Personal and social dimension of work	3	.80
	Negative dimension of work	1	.84[1]

Note. [1]This value of Cronbach's alpha refers to the study of Sobral (2008), since in this study, when identifying the second-order factors, the negative dimension of work is not associated to any other factor.

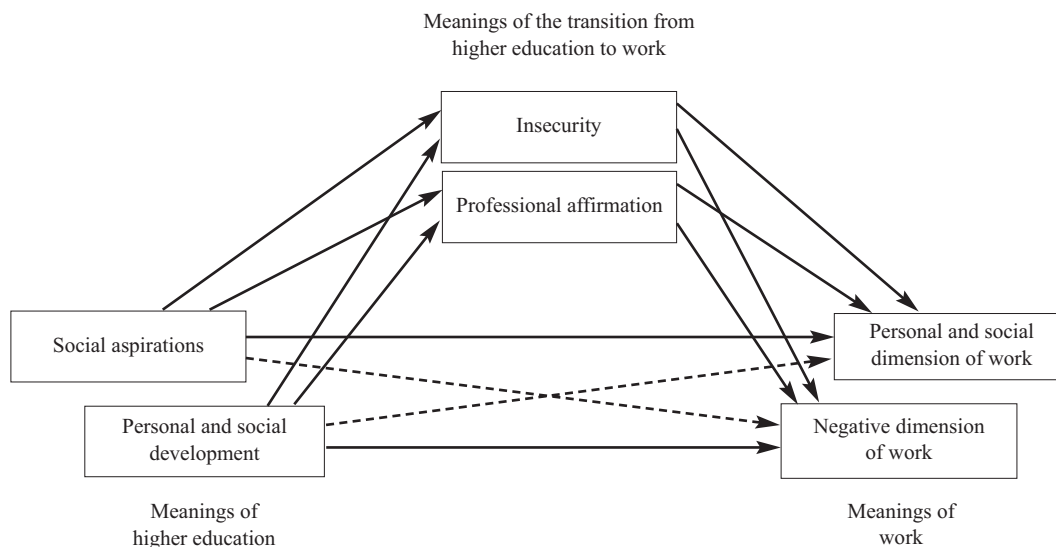The model considered for testing is represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Explanatory model of the relationships and mediation relationships between the second-order factors of the MHES and the second-order factors of the MATWS-A by the second-order factors of the SMTHEW

We assume the variables that comprise the meanings of the transition from higher education to work operate as mediators between the variables that compose the meanings of higher education (independent variable) and the variables of the meanings of work (dependent variable). The procedures to analyse the mediation were conducted on the basis of bootstrap sampling, as recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2004). The bootstrap method has been validated in the literature and is preferable to other methods to evaluate possible mediation between variables (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). It estimates indirect effects through one or more mediator variables with bias corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). The analysis includes estimates of the direct, indirect, and total effects. In this study, the direct path resulted from the effect of the meanings of higher education on the meanings of work, independent of their effect on the meanings of the transition from higher education to work. The indirect effect was the path that linked the meanings of higher education to the meanings of work via the meanings of the transition from higher education to work. The total effect of the meanings of higher education on the meanings of work was the sum of the direct and indirect effects. These analyses were performed using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013), a computational procedure for SPSS. A thousand bootstrap resamples were used to generate confidence intervals of 95%, with bias correction of the indirect effect. In accordance with Preacher and Hayes (2004), mediation is proved when the indirect effect is significant and the confidence intervals do not contain zero (that is, indicating that the indirect effect is significantly different from zero). All these tests were paired and considered statistically significant ($p<.05$).

Results

The results will now be discussed, ignoring analyses in which no mediating effect was found. A significant relationship was found between the Personal Development dimension and the Personal and Social Dimension of Work, with a direct effect of .52 of the former on the latter. There is also a significant relationship between Personal Development and Professional Affirmation, as well as between the latter and the Personal and Social Dimension of Work, with an indirect effect of .19. Thus, we can conclude that Professional Affirmation mediates the relationship between Personal Development and Personal and Social Dimension of Work. It should be noted that the analysis yielded a coefficient of determination (R^2) of .61, meaning that 61% of the values of the dependent variable Personal and Social Dimension of Work are explained by this model.

We found a significant relationship between the Social Aspirations dimension and the Personal and Social Dimension of Work, with a direct effect of .11 of the former over the latter. There is also a significant relationship between Social Aspirations and Professional Affirmation, as well as between Professional Affirmation and the Personal and Social Dimension of Work, yielding an indirect effect of .041. We can thus conclude that Professional Affirmation mediates the relationship between Personal Development and the Personal and Social Dimension of Work. A coefficient of determination of .43 means that 43% of the scores of the dependent variable Personal and Social Dimension of Work are explained by this model. There is a significant relationship between Social Aspirations and the Negative Dimension of Work, with a direct effect of .60. A significant relationship between Social Aspirations and the Negative Dimension of Work is verified, with an indirect effect of .091. A coefficient of determination of .39 means that 39% of the scores of the dependent variable is explained by this model. On the basis of the results found, the explanatory model is summarised in Figure 2.
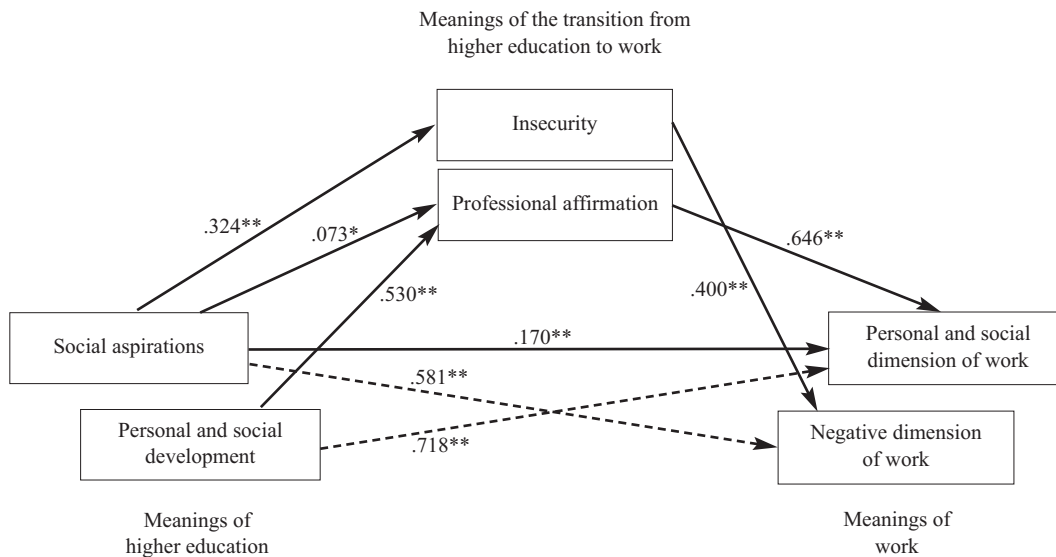
Meanings of the transition from higher education to work

Insecurity

Professional affirmation

.324**

.073*

.530**

.646**

.400**

Social aspirations

.170**

Personal and social dimension of work

.581**

Personal and social development

.718**

Negative dimension of work

Meanings of higher education

Meanings of work

Figure 2. Mediations by the SMTHEW's second-order factors of the relationships between the second-order factors of the MHES and the MATWS-A

Discussion

The mediating ability of the Professional Affirmation dimension is particularly noteworthy in explaining the relationship between Personal Development and the Positive Dimension of Work. This model with the mediation of Professional Affirmation is able to explain 61% of the relationship. Consequently, the meanings of higher education related to preparing for work, improving professional opportunities, becoming an adult, exploring, thinking critically, being exposed to new ideas, becoming more aware of oneself, and relating on a social level, are linked to the meanings of work regarding personal satisfaction, achievement, the way in which work provides satisfactory personal and social opportunities, as well as the needs of quality of life and social recognition. This relationship is reinforced by the meanings of the transition from higher education to work related to satisfaction with the opportunity to put into practice the knowledge acquired, responsibility for tasks required while working, and the challenge of rising to the occasion and succeeding.

The entire process of building meanings and the way in which they seem to occur are an important source of reflection for higher education institutions. Higher education institutions become protagonists in the promotion of these meanings, not only through solid technical preparation for work, but also through engagement in activities geared at enhancing growth and personal development, exploration and critical thought, exposure to new ideas, self-awareness, and social relations. Furthermore, the construction of positive meanings associated to work depends on the meanings associated to the transition from higher education to work, namely in terms of the opportunities to put into practice the knowledge acquired in higher education, the responsibility for tasks required while working, and the ability to rise to the occasion. In this regard, the gradual preparation of students for the transition from higher education to work is particularly relevant. Accordingly, due to the impact such a transition has on their lives, altering their roles, relations, and routines (Schlossberg, 2011), students should have in higher education

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the opportunity to anticipate the transition. This does not only refer to technical-scientific preparation, but, above all, developmental preparation, which may enable students to deal with the difficulties of a society where work is increasingly more scarce, unstable, or inaccessible (e.g., Bauman, 2000, 2001; Beck, 1992, 2000; Doogan, 2009; Méda, 1995; Rifkin, 1995, 2001; Standing, 2014).

This need to value the transition from higher education to work seems to be corroborated by the fact that Professional Affirmation is also a mediator between the Social Aspirations dimension and the Positive Dimension of Work, despite the more tenuous relationships and effects that were found. Thus, the meanings of higher education related to the natural step to take after high school, the obvious thing to do, source of stress, and opportunity to avoid the responsibilities of adulthood, are related to the meanings of work regarding personal satisfaction, achievement, the way in which work provides satisfactory personal and social opportunities, and fulfils the needs of quality of life and social recognition. In this way, although they may signify higher education as a source of stress and the path others expect them to follow, students build meanings related to work as something that can be positive and a source of satisfaction in their future. This relationship can be bolstered by the meanings of the transition from higher education to work related to satisfaction with the opportunity to put into practice knowledge acquired in higher education, responsibility for tasks required while working, and the challenge of rising to the occasion and succeeding. Consequently, the transition from higher education to work, which serves to build meanings from the perspective of the students' professional affirmation, underpins a more positive view of work.

If higher education institutions are unable to encourage a positive meaning for the transition from higher education to work, by providing training that underpins professional affirmation, they may, on the contrary, contribute to aggravating the relatively strong relationship between the Social Aspirations dimension and the Negative Dimension of Work. Thus, the meanings of higher education related to the natural step to take after high school, the obvious thing to do, source of stress, and opportunity to avoid the responsibilities of adulthood, are related to the meanings of work regarding the strain of work, in personal and family terms, as a source of concern, stress, monotony, and fatigue. However, this relationship can be further aggravated by fear, uncertainty, insecurity, anxiety, and the difficulty of finding a job, as well as in the subsequent transition. There is, hence, a need to intervene in the management of uncertainty, a feature of this phase of transition to work and adulthood (e.g., Oliveira, 2014).

Despite the limited role of the dimensions of the meanings of the transition from higher education as mediators between those of higher education and of work, attention should be drawn to the importance of building positive meanings for the transition from higher education to work. This then serves to bolster the relationship between the significance of higher education, as a context where personal development is fostered, and the Positive Dimension of Work, in terms of both professional and economic achievement. We should also highlight the importance of building positive meanings for the transition from higher education to work as an element that is able to shape more positive meanings of work, even though less positive meanings of education may exist beforehand, related to stress, strain, and delaying responsibilities.

Conclusion and limitations

The results suggest that higher education institutions could develop intervention strategies aimed at building adaptive meanings regarding higher education and, consequently, foster students' personal development and the construction of meanings related to the transition to work in terms of empowerment. These interventions should not overlook other education professionals involved

in student development (e.g., teaching staff, principals). Thus, action in context does not depend exclusively on personal skills and cognitive structures: the interaction of individuals with the psychosocial characteristics of their life contexts also determines and structures opportunities for action (Campos, Costa, & Menezes, 1993). As Campos, Costa and Menezes (1993) mention, the psychological dimension does not only have intrapsychic structures nor is the process of building meaning independent of the socio-historical context or the environment in which individuals live. Thus, interventions that take into account the transpersonal structures of students emerges here as a legitimate possibility. Education professionals can enhance the personal and social development of students, as well as empower them to be critical citizens in relation to the world, seeking their own space of personal and professional achievement. This context appears to highlight the importance of psychology services and professionals in higher education, catalysing agents for developing interventions that serve to (re)build their relationship with higher education and work. They can thus contribute to students' overall development (Monteiro & Gonçalves, 2011) and empower them to face the challenges of the transition from higher education to work.

The correlation between the meanings of Personal Development in higher education and the meanings of Professional Affirmation in the transition from higher education to work can provide important information about how institutions should be focused on questions related to preparation for this transition. Interventions that imply direct contact with professionals (e.g., interviews), with real work settings (e.g., visits to institutions and companies) and with the business world (e.g., internships and events with companies) can prove an asset, as they raise the challenge of thinking about the resources available or required to develop and implement realistic and satisfactory vocational projects. These interventions should be intentional experiences to come closer to the real world of work, in which the moments of action are alternated with moments of reflection that give students relational spaces where they can attach meanings to their real experiences. In this context, in which students intend to intervene in the transpersonal structures, studies based on deliberate psychological education (Mosher & Sprinthall, 1971) have shown efficacy of this type of intervention in the past and present (e.g., Schmidt, Davidson, & Adkins, 2013; Sprinthall & Scott, 1989). Pedagogical practices should be employed which stimulate a true community of participative learners in a process that is able to give answers to the challenges faced in a time when the university is no longer the traditional bastion of knowledge (Lea, 2005). For example, the following could be fostered: (i) create/develop support services with psychology professionals, available to help students overcome difficulties in the developmental process and the transition process susceptible to difficulties, and disappointments which may lead to hasty decisions and/or dropping out; (ii) develop extracurricular activities that can be meaningful experiences for students and bring them closer to real life and work situations; (iii) engage students in the daily life of their university, fostering their involvement and democratic participation in decision-making bodies; (iv) create specialized counselling services for teaching staff, providing them with strategies to promote student development.

This study has a number of limitations: (i) the use of a transversal design, which makes determining the causal direction impossible. Although difficult to implement, given the high level of complexity and manipulation of variables, a longitudinal study would establish temporal precedence, making the analysis richer and more able to explain in terms of maintaining and confirming the results over time; (ii) we acknowledge that the sample, despite the number of participants, is not representative of the student population in Portuguese higher education institutions. For example, the number of female participants tends to be higher than real numbers and the number of students in private institutions tends to be underrated; (iii) the study was conducted on the basis of data collection with quantitative methodologies. Research with qualitative data could complement the study, including, for example, focus groups, which could provide a more complete view of the way in which students build their meanings. In summary,

the correlations between Personal Development in higher education and the Personal and Social Dimension of Work, and between Social Aspirations and the Negative Dimension of Work, serve to alert to how the meanings built in higher education institutions regarding work are linked to the meanings students give to the higher education they are attending itself. It is thus urgent to alert students to this reality, in which higher education is more than a means to prepare for work. It is rather part of a process of personal growth through the development of their ability to think critically.

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Os significados da educação superior, do trabalho e da transição da educação superior para o trabalho

Num tempo de incerteza e precarização do trabalho, este estudo tenta compreender como os estudantes do ensino superior constroem significados sobre a educação superior, o trabalho, a transição da educação para o trabalho e como estes se relacionam entre si. Com uma amostra de 986 estudantes do Ensino Superior português visa-se compreender as relações e mediações das dimensões dos significados da educação superior com as dimensões dos significados da transição da educação superior para o trabalho e as dimensões dos significados do trabalho. A dimensão Afirmação Profissional é mediadora da relação entre o Desenvolvimento Pessoal e Social e a Dimensão Pessoal e Social do Trabalho. Com base na análise dos resultados algumas pistas de intervenção são apresentadas.

Palavras-chave: Significados, Transição, Educação superior, Trabalho.