

## Revitalising career counseling for sustainable decent work and decent lives: From personality traits to life project reflexivity for well-being

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### Abstract

The context of contemporary work scenarios features constant change and innovation in the field of information and communication technologies, which result in frequent work transitions and job insecurity. Such circumstances are highly threatening to the well-being of workers. Moreover, the instability and precariousness of the labour market are aggravated by the current crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. Individuals are facing increased critical life and professional challenges and are being asked to take personal responsibility for the direction of their personal and work lives. In this complex context, career counseling needs to be revitalised in strength-based prevention perspectives. Life Project Reflexivity (LPR) addresses future professional and life plans and represents a critical construct for career counseling. The present study among Italian university students in transition to the labour market analysed the relationships between LPR and well-being while controlling for the 'Big Five' personality traits. The Big Five Questionnaire, the Life Project Reflexivity Scale and measures of both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being were administered to 278 university students of the University of Florence. LPR and its dimensions of authenticity, no acquiescence and clarity/projectuality explained the incremental variance beyond personality traits with respect to both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, with specific reference to meaning in life. Among the three dimensions of LPR, authenticity was the most promising in this study. These results offered new perspectives for career counseling by supporting a strength-based prevention process for constructing sustainable decent work and life.

**Keywords:** career counseling; decent lives; decent work; life project reflexivity; well-being.

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## Introduction

The labour market in the 21<sup>st</sup> century represents a complex, fluid scenario characterised by continuous changes due to constant innovations in the field of information and communication technologies. This fluidity generates frequent work transitions and job insecurity (Blustein et al., 2018; Maree, 2017), which could challenge workers' well-being (Maree, 2017; Maree & Di Fabio, 2018). The current crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic (Autin et al., 2020; Blustein et al., 2020a; Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2020; Gori et al., 2020) is further increasing the risks for instability and precariousness (Blustein, 2019, 2020; Blustein et al., 2019; Blustein et al., 2020b; Maree & Di Fabio, 2018). While in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, individuals developed their careers in largely unchanging organisations (Savickas, 2016; Savickas & Savickas, 2016), in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, career paths are increasingly unstable and individuals must face often progressively multiplying complex transitions (Savickas, 2011; Di Fabio & Maree, 2013; Maree & Di Fabio, 2015).

In this current scenario, individuals are typically considered responsible for personally constructing their professional and personal lives (Guichard, 2016). On this basis, a new call for a revitalisation of career counseling has emerged to help individuals redesigning their working lives and find decent, sustainable work (Di Fabio et al., 2016; Maree, 2021). A significant contribution to this process could be found in strength-based prevention perspectives (Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2021). This framework attaches great value to enhancing well-being, promoting and nurturing individual strengths as early as possible, and focusing on psychological resources that can be enhanced through specific training and intervention. These strength-based prevention perspectives underline the value also for career counseling to focus on research about variables that could be early enhanced as resources for individuals in constructing their future career path.

In this framework, Life Project Reflexivity (LPR; Di Fabio et al., 2018), with its focus on future professional and life planning, is both a promising construct in strength-based prevention perspectives (Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2021) and a critical construct for career counseling. The scale used to measure reflexivity (the Life Project Reflexivity Scale, LPRS; Di Fabio et al., 2018) has three dimensions: (1) authenticity, or awareness of work and personal projects based on one's most authentic personal values and meaning; (2) no acquiescence, or resistance to the inclination to passively agree to take 'other-directed' projects; and (3) clarity/projectuality about personal work-life projects, which includes implications for choices and work-life project decisions (Di Fabio et al., 2018).

The processes embedded in LPR can enhance career counseling intervention by supporting the construction of decent, sustainable work and life (Di Fabio, 2019; Di Fabio & Blustein, 2016; Di Fabio & Kenny, 2019; Duffy et al., 2017; Maree 2021). These processes favour focusing on the development of clear personal and professional steps that are deeply linked to the authentic self of the client dealing with the most authentic aspects of one's own Self and one's professional life as well as life's deepest purposes (Di Fabio, 2014b). LPR refers to 'people's capacity to reflect on and take the steps needed to tackle current and future work and life projects' (Di Fabio et al., 2018, p. 2). It represents a process through which individuals actively and continuously develop self-awareness, including balancing different aspects of their present, past and future (Di Fabio & Maree, 2016; Maree, 2013). This process permits people to construct personal projects that are clear, founded on the authentic self, and rich in meaning, allowing both for the advancement in personal and professional life and for the promotion of individual well-being (Di Fabio et al, 2018; Di Fabio & Kenny, 2016).

From a strength-based prevention perspectives (Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2021), LPR presents a particularly promising resource because it is amenable through training differently from personality traits that are seen as essentially stable (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Furthermore, from a primary prevention perspective (Di Fabio et al., 2017; Hage et al., 2007; Kenny & Hage, 2019), early adoption of LPR could be essential to proactively implementing self-awareness processes for career and life construction, particularly to facilitate adaptive transitions.

At the same time, the distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being must be considered. Hedonic well-being includes both positive and negative affect as affective components (Watson et al., 1988), and the cognitive component of life satisfaction is defined as the global cognitive judgment of individuals in their lives (Diener et al., 1985). Eudaimonic well-being, on the other hand, is defined as optimal functioning

and self-realisation (Ryan & Deci, 2001), life meaning and purposefulness (Waterman et al., 2010), and flourishing in terms of a 'person's self-perceived functioning in important areas such as relationships, self-esteem, purpose and meaning, and optimism' (Diener et al., 2010, p. 247). In the literature only one study (Di Fabio et al., 2018) showed a positive association between LPR and life meaning. For this reason, it could be useful to undertake an in-depth study of the relationship of LPR with different aspects of well-being, introducing both hedonic well-being (Positive and negative affects and Life satisfaction) and eudaimonic well-being flourishing in addition to the already studied life meaning. In view of this framework, the present study among Italian university students in transition to the working context analysed the relationships between LPR and well-being while controlling for the 'Big Five' personality traits.

The hypotheses of the present study were the following:

H1. LPRS dimensions will contribute additional variance beyond the Big Five personality traits with respect to positive affect.

H2. LPRS dimensions will contribute additional variance beyond the Big Five personality trait with respect to negative affect.

H3. LPRS dimensions will contribute additional variance beyond the Big Five personality traits with respect to life satisfaction.

H4. LPRS dimensions will contribute additional variance beyond the Big Five personality traits with respect to meaning in life.

H5. LPRS dimensions will contribute additional variance beyond the Big Five personality traits with respect to flourishing.

## Methods

### *Participants*

Questionnaires were administered to 278 psychology students of the University of Florence during the final period of their academic path as they began their transition to the labour market. Participants' average age was 24.93 years ( $SD = 1.83$ ). In terms of gender, 41.96% were male and 58.04% were female. Students' participation in the study is voluntary.

### *Measures*

The Big Five Questionnaire (BFQ) includes 132 items (Likert scale: 1 = 'absolutely false' to 5 = 'absolutely true'). It facilitates the detection of five distinct personality traits: extraversion (example of item: "It's easy for me to talk to people I do not know"; Cronbach's alpha = 0.81); agreeableness (example of item: "I almost always know how to meet the needs of others"; Cronbach's alpha = 0.73); conscientiousness (example of item: "Before submitting an assignment, I spend a lot of time reviewing it"; Cronbach's alpha = 0.81); emotional stability (example of item: "Usually it does not happen to me to react exaggerated even to strong emotions"; Cronbach's alpha = 0.90); and openness (example of item: "Every novelty fascinates me"; Cronbach's alpha = 0.75) (Caprara et al., 1993).

The Life Project Reflexivity Scale (LPRS) includes 15 items (Likert scale: 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 = 'strongly agree') that facilitate detection of three dimensions: authenticity (example of item: "The projects for my future life are anchored by my most authentic values"; Cronbach's alpha = 0.86), no acquiescence (example of item: - reverse score - "The projects for my future life are more anchored by the values of the society in which I live than my most authentic values"; Cronbach's alpha = 0.83); and clarity/projectuality (example of item: "The projects for my future life are clearly defined"; Cronbach's alpha = 0.89) (Di Fabio et al., 2018).

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988; Italian version Terraciano et al., 2003) is composed of 20 adjectives: 10 indicating positive affect (PA) (examples: "enthusiastic, interested, determined"; Cronbach's alpha = 0.72) and 10 indicating negative affect (NA) (examples: "afraid, upset,

distressed”; Cronbach’s alpha = 0.83). Participants completing the PANAS are asked to indicate how they generally feel by choosing responses on a Likert scale (1 = ‘very slightly or not at all’ to 5 = ‘extremely’).

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985; Italian version Di Fabio & Gori, 2016) includes five items (Likert scale: 1 = ‘strongly disagree’ to 7 = ‘strongly agree’) and has a reliability coefficient of 0.85. Examples of items are: “In most ways my life is close to my ideal”, “So far I have gotten the important things I want in life”.

The Meaningful Life Measure (MLM; Morgan & Farsides, 2009; Italian version Di Fabio, 2014a) includes 23 items on a Likert scale (1 = ‘strongly disagree’ to 7 = ‘strongly agree’). The MLM distinguishes five dimensions: exciting life (sample item: “Life to me seems always exciting”; Cronbach’s alpha = 0.85), accomplished life (sample item: “I have been very successful in achieving certain things”; Cronbach’s alpha = 0.87), principled life (sample item: example of item “I have a personal value system that makes my life worthwhile”; Cronbach’s alpha = 0.86), purposeful life (sample item: “In my life I have very clear goals and aims”; Cronbach’s alpha = 0.85), and valued life (sample item: “My life is worthwhile”; sample item: example of item “My life is worthwhile”; Cronbach’s alpha = 0.84). Cronbach’s alpha for the total score of the MLM is 0.85 (Di Fabio, 2014a).

The Flourishing Scale (FS; Diener et al., 2010; Italian version Di Fabio, 2016) consists of eight items on a Likert scale (1 = ‘strongly disagree’ to 7 = ‘strongly agree’) and has a Cronbach’s alpha score of 0.88 (Di Fabio, 2016). Examples of items are: “My social relationships are supportive and rewarding”, “I lead a purposeful and meaningful life”, “I am engaged and interested in my daily activities”.

### Procedures

The instruments were collectively administered by specialised psychologists according to Italian law norms of privacy and informed consent as well as European Union legislation. The participants had the option to withdraw at any time from the study. The order of administration was counterbalanced to control the possible effects related to this order of presentation.

### Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, Pearson’s *r* correlations and hierarchical regressions were performed with the software programme SPSS Statistics version 27.

### Results

The correlations among the BFQ and LPRS and measures of both hedonic well-being (PANAS, SWLS) and eudaimonic well-being (MLM, FS) are reported in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Correlations among BFQ and LPRS and measures of both hedonic well-being (PANAS, SWLS) and eudaimonic well-being (MLM, FS).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. BFQ Extraversion	-												
2. BFQ Agreeableness	.25**	-											
3. BFQ Conscientiousness	.33**	.21**	-										
4. BFQ Emotional Stability	.22**	.25**	.27**	-									
5. BFQ Openness	.42**	.44**	.32**	.21**	-								
6. LPRS Authenticity	.31**	.45**	.32**	.05	.34**	-							
7. LPRS No Acquiescence	.02	.20**	.02	.28**	.07	.07	-						
8. LPRS Clarity/Projectuality	.10	.37**	.14	.22**	.25**	.59**	.23**	-					
9. PANAS Positive Affect	.45**	.19*	.43**	.14	.40**	.54**	.04	.46**	-				
10. PANAS Negative Affect	-.08	-.13	-.03	-.59**	-.10	-.31**	-.17*	-.23**	-.28**	-			
11. SWLS	.14	.47**	.22**	.40**	.33**	.56**	.27**	.47**	.27**	-.37**	-		
12. MLM	.25**	.56**	.32**	.33**	.36**	.71**	.24**	.47**	.50**	-.45**	.69**	-	
13. FS	.40**	.47**	.27**	.38**	.36**	.59**	.08	.49**	.59**	-.56**	.47**	.69**	-

Note: *N* = 278. \* < 0.05 \*\* < 0.01

BFQ = Big Five Questionnaire; LPRS = Life Project Reflexivity Scale; PANAS = Positive and Negative Affect Schedule; SWLS = Satisfaction with Life Scale; MLM = Meaningful Life Measure; FS = Flourishing Scale.

Reported in Table 2 are the hierarchical regressions carried out with the different measures of both hedonic well-being (PANAS, SWLS) and eudaimonic well-being (MLM, FS) as dependent variables and as independent variables in the first step of the Big Five personality traits and the second step of the three-dimension LPRS (authenticity, no acquiescence, clarity/projectuality).

**Table 2.** Hierarchical regression. The contributions of personality traits (first step) and LPR (second step) to positive affect (PA), negative affect (NA), life satisfaction (SWLS), meaning in life (MLM) and flourishing (FS).

	PA	NA	SWLS	MLM	FS
	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
<i>Step 1</i>					
BFQ Extraversion	.38**	-.32**	.11*	.21**	.47**
BFQ Agreeableness	.05	-.06	.39**	.57**	.39**
BFQ Conscientiousness	.29**	-.01	.23**	.34**	.27**
BFQ Emotional Stability	.24**	-.71**	.34**	.27**	.43**
BFQ Openness	.04	-.11*	.05	.19*	.21**
<i>Step 2</i>					
LPRS Authenticity	.33**	-.42**	.31**	.49**	.30**
LPRS No Acquiescence	.06	-.04*	.09*	.11*	.07*
LPRS Clarity/Projectuality	.19*	-.23**	.21**	.03*	.11*
<i>R<sup>2</sup> step 1</i>	.33***	.40***	.33***	.44***	.46***
$\Delta R^2$ step 2	.16***	.06***	.14***	.22***	.13***
<i>R<sup>2</sup> total</i>	.49***	.46***	.47***	.66***	.59***

Note:  $N = 278$ . \*  $p < 0.05$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; BFQ = Big Five Questionnaire; LPRS = Life Project Reflexivity Scale; PANAS PA = PANAS Positive Affect; PANAS NA = PANAS Negative Affect; SWLS = Satisfaction with Life Scale; MLM = Meaning in Life Measure; FS = Flourishing Scale.

In the first step involving the PANAS PA, the Big Five personality traits explained the 33% of variance. In the second step, when the three LPRS dimensions were added, the model was significant and explained the 16% of additional variance (authenticity  $\beta = .33$ , no acquiescence  $\beta = .06$ , clarity/projectuality  $\beta = .19$ ). The total  $R^2$  was .49.

With respect to the PANAS NA, the Big Five personality traits explained the 40% of variance in the first step. In the second step, the three LPRS dimensions were added, making the model significant and explaining the 6% of additional variance (authenticity  $\beta = -.42$ ; no acquiescence  $\beta = -.04$ ; clarity/projectuality  $\beta = -.23$ ). The total  $R^2$  was .46.

Regarding life satisfaction (SWLS), the Big Five personality traits explained the 33% of variance in the first step. After the three LPRS dimensions were added in the second step, the model was significant and explained the 14% of additional variance (authenticity  $\beta = .31$ ; no acquiescence  $\beta = .09$ ; clarity/projectuality  $\beta = .21$ ). The total  $R^2$  was .47.

In relation to meaning in life, the Big Five personality traits explained the 44% of variance in the first step. When the three LPRS dimensions were added in the second step, the model was significant and explained the 22% of additional variance (authenticity  $\beta = .49$ ; no acquiescence  $\beta = .11$ ; clarity/projectuality  $\beta = .03$ ). The total  $R^2$  was .66.

With regard to flourishing, the Big Five personality traits explained the 46% of variance in the first step. After the three LPRS dimensions were added in the second step, the model was significant and explained the 13% of additional variance (authenticity  $\beta = .30$ ; no acquiescence  $\beta = .07$ ; clarity/projectuality  $\beta = .11$ ). The total  $R^2$  was .59.

## Discussion and Recommendations

The present study examined the relationships between LPR and both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being among university students transitioning toward the working context. The design of the study controlled for the Big Five personality traits. The results sustained the formulated hypotheses underlining contributions of LPR to the different aspects of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being beyond personality traits.

In relation to hedonic well-being, the first hypothesis was confirmed. After controlling for personality traits, a positive relationship emerged between LPR and PA, highlighting a significant association between reflexivity in professional and life plans and positive emotional activation (Watson et al., 1988). In addition, the second hypothesis was also confirmed. An inverse relationship emerged between LPR and negative emotional activation (Watson et al., 1988).

Likewise, the third hypothesis was confirmed. A positive relationship emerged between LPR and life satisfaction after controlling for the Big Five personality traits. The results showed that higher levels of LPR are associated with higher levels of a positive global evaluation of one's own life (Diener et al., 1985).

In terms of eudaimonic well-being, the fourth hypothesis was confirmed, underlining a positive association between LPR and meaning in life beyond personality traits, emphasising that greater LPR is linked to the recognition and awareness of authentic and meaningful aims (Morgan & Farsides, 2009). The fifth hypothesis was similarly confirmed. The results suggested that higher LPR is associated with a higher perception of social and psychological prosperity 'in relationships, self-esteem, purpose, and optimism' (Diener et al., 2010, p. 143).

Further reflection can be offered regarding the contribution of LPR to different types of well-being as well as the different contributions of the three dimensions of LPR. In this study, the contribution of LPR was higher for eudaimonic well-being and, in particular, for meaning in life. Reflexivity regarding one's own life and projects permits individuals to acquire greater awareness of the deep meaning of their lives that can anchor their future projects (Di Fabio et al., 2018).

On the other hand, in relation to the different contributions of the three dimensions of LPR to different aspects of well-being, in this study, authenticity proved the most promising. This dimension includes awareness of the authentic self and meaning as fundamental anchors on which to construct future career and life paths (Di Fabio et al., 2018). This integration of authentic self-awareness and meaning constitutes the basis of self-attunement (Di Fabio, 2014b), or considering both one's objective and subjective authentic talents and values with awareness as a basis for future projects rich with personal meaning. These processes of reflexivity seem to promote different aspects of well-being, particularly the aspect relative to meaning in life. Overall, the results of the present study highlight the associations between LPR and both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, showing evidence that LPR (especially the dimension of authenticity) offers a contribution to well-being (in particular, to eudaimonic well-being as meaning in life).

Notwithstanding the results of the present study, there are limitations related to examining the relationships between LPR and different aspects of well-being in students of the University of Florence who are not representative of the Italian university context as a whole. In future studies, the associations between LPR and both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being could be analysed in students from other Italian universities from north, central and the south of Italy. Such associations could also be examined with other groups of students, such as high school students, and also with other groups, such as workers in transition periods. Likewise, future research could investigate the relationships of LPR with, for example, employability, career decision-making self-efficacy, and hope as positive career outcomes. This research could empirically verify the contribution of LPR in different career outcomes, and this is promising since LPR could be enhanced during the career counseling processes. Moreover, the current research approach could suggest the value of an evidence-based approach to career counseling.

If the findings of this research are used as a baseline for other studies, promising perspectives for practice could be opened to enable individuals to acquire resources needed to face the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century more positively. Indeed, the investigation of the antecedents of individuals' well-being and mental health finds more and more relevance and attention in the scientific literature. This is true not only in the clinical field (e.g., Cacioppo et al., 2019; Craparo et al., 2018; Pellerone et al., 2017), but also in the world of work and organizational psychology in the perspective of healthy organizations (Di Fabio, 2017; Di Fabio, Cheung, & Peiró, 2020; Di Fabio & Peiró, 2018), which emphasizes and applies to workers the concept of health understood not only as absence of disease or infirmity, but also as “*a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being*” (WHO, 1985). Given this framework, reflexivity relative to life projects is a crucial help for individuals when constructing well-being, identifying meaning in their personal narratives, individuating authentic aspects of the self, and designing personal and professional paths full of meaning in the current unstable and tumultuous work environment (Maree & Di Fabio, 2018). Personality traits are considered fundamentally constant (Costa & McCrae, 1992), whereas LPR is amenable to training and career counseling interventions, helping it emerge as a particularly promising variable in strength-based prevention perspectives (Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2021) along the lifespan and also in a primary prevention framework (Di Fabio et al., 2017; Hage et al., 2007; Kenny & Hage, 2009). From these perspectives, this study introduces new opportunities for career counseling and promoting strength-based prevention processes and resources for constructing sustainable decent work and life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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