Personal and Professional Development

Lecture Notes

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PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Lecture Notes
(Suport de curs)

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About the lecture notes

Guiding principles

These lecture notes are organized based on two guiding principles:

[1] Keep a close correspondence with the syllabus topics.

[2] Be as concise as possible while still providing the necessary basic information.

Even though these lecture notes were developed in close relationship with the syllabus topics and based on it, small differences might exist[1]. For instance, the numbering and the ordering of approaching the topics may be different. Furthermore, there may be topics included in the lecture notes that are not mentioned in the syllabus and vice versa.

The conciseness requirement implies that the student is provided with substantive and relevant information about a certain topic[2], but it remains the responsibility of the student to use this information as a starting point in building knowledge about that topic. The student should use the materials provided by the instructor in a corroborative, complementary, and conjunctive manner, and, at the same time, also try to use additional resources, independently identified by the student.

Learning, especially in and above undergraduate and graduate education, is predominantly a self-directed, self-managed, and self-determined process. It implies and requires studying from materials and sources provided by the educational institution as well as independently identifying and learning resources and using them to complete and expand the instructor-indicated materials.

When studying for any discipline, it is highly advisable not to rely exclusively on the lecture notes or any one single material/resource. Do combine all sources and resources indicated by the instructor and expand those sources and resources through individual research and study. The key to academic success is to want to study and be willing to do so, as well as to understand that knowledge is built, not transmitted.

Final notes

Notes about the terminology:

I always try to keep the terminology and the phrasing as simple as possible, as this facilitates understanding and demystifies abstract matters. However, sometimes it is necessary to use domain-specific jargon and/or to use terms in their original language (most often, in English). This happens

[1] There are several objective reasons for this. For instance, the lecture notes material must include themes and topics for both the lectures and the practical activities. Also, the field of knowledge is continuously evolving, which requires that the instructors adapt and update their instructional materials quite frequently.

[2] It should also be noted that the lecture notes are a textbook/manual neither in terms of comprehensiveness / thoroughness nor coverage. They are an enhanced and more substantive outline of the main course topics, with the overarching purpose of informing the student what the study topics are and how to approach them.

because many of these terms do not have an established counterpart in the Romanian language or if such a translation exists, sometimes it distorts the original meaning of the term.

Notes about other, complementary sources:

Almost all my courses have (1) a companion website and (2) an instructional platform[3]. Usually, the companion website and the lecture notes have a similar structure, but the website is updated continuously whereas the lecture notes can only be updated from time to time (most likely before the beginning of a new academic year or when such changes are required). In addition, almost all my courses are accompanied by a textbook written by me. While all the information required to complete the course is provided as lecture notes, course presentations, and additional materials distributed during the courses, the textbook is useful for those who want a more thorough approach and want to understand how to think about a certain discipline or domain, overall. Specific information about where to find and how to use (1) the companion website and (2) the learning platform is provided (a) on my didactic website (usually, albeit not always) and (b) during my lectures (usually, during the first lectures or a course).

Copyright notes:

All materials created by me are intended for unrestricted use by my students. However, this unrestricted use refers only to using the materials for learning and preparing for those of my courses in which the student is enrolled. Copying and/or distributing these materials, for or to anyone, in any form (printed, electronically, etc.), in part or in their entirety, without permission from the author, is forbidden[4].

[3] It can be something as simple as a Discord server, a Slack community, etc., or something more sophisticated (e.g., an MS Teams group, a Moodle LMS, etc., depending on (1) what the University's specific standing demands are, and (2) on the characteristics of the course and its academic subject).

[4] There are many objective reasons for these copyright restrictions; Some are related to discouraging and preventing academic dishonesty, but there can be others, like situations in which the sources invoked here must also be protected.

Conceptualizations of Personal and *Professional Development*

What others think "*personal development*" is.

A quick search of publicly available sources indicates that *personal development* refers to the **continuous process of improving and enhancing various aspects of an individual's life**, including their skills, knowledge, abilities, attitudes, and behaviors.

- "*Personal development* is a set of activities that a person uses to enhance and improve his or her body, mind, and spirit, with the goal of becoming a better person and achieving more out of life." (Brian Tracy (Author and Speaker)
- "*Personal development* is the process of creating a long-term plan to improve, refine and transform your capabilities, knowledge, and identity." (Mind Tools (Online Learning Platform))
- "*Personal development* refers to those activities that improve a person's talents, potential, consciousness, and quality of life." (Psychology Today (Magazine))
- "*Personal development* involves activities that help improve an individual's talents, potential, employability, and awareness." (Investopedia (Financial Education Website))
- "*Personal development* covers activities that improve awareness and identity, develop talents and potential, build human capital, and facilitate employability, enhance the quality of life, and contribute to the realization of dreams and aspirations." (Wikipedia (Online Encyclopedia))

The overarching theme and common thread are that *personal development* involves **intentional** efforts to grow and improve in various areas of one's life.

What others think "*professional development*" is.

Again, a quick search of publicly available sources reveals that *professional development* refers to the **ongoing process of improving and enhancing an individual's skills, knowledge, and abilities within their chosen profession or field of work**. It involves activities and strategies aimed at staying current with industry trends, expanding expertise, and increasing effectiveness in the workplace.

- "*Professional development* is the process of improving and increasing capabilities of staff through access to education and training opportunities in the workplace, through outside organizations, or through watching others perform the job." (American Society for Training and Development (now known as ATD, the Association for Talent Development)
- "*Professional development* refers to the acquisition of skills and knowledge both for *personal development* and for career advancement." (Investopedia (Financial Education Website)
- "*Professional development* refers to the acquisition of skills and knowledge both for *personal development* and for career advancement." (BusinessDictionary)
- "*Professional development* is the process of improving and increasing your capabilities and skills as a professional." (Chronus - Mentoring Software Provider)
- "*Professional development* is the process of improving skills, competencies, and knowledge through structured learning opportunities." (Association of American Educators)

These definitions emphasize the idea that *professional development* is not limited to formal education but encompasses a wide range of learning experiences, both formal and informal, that contribute to an individual's growth and advancement within their profession.

How "personal" and "professional" development are approached in this course.

First, I have no authority in the matter, other than whatever is given by my years of professional experience, as a psychologist and as a teacher.

In this case, why should my opinion matter, since I, myself, admit having no authoritative say on the subject?

The answer is quite simple; as the instructor for this course, I must account for my opinions and make them clear to my students from the very onset.

Second, I think (reasonably argued), that no one else truly does know what personal and/or *professional development* are.

Does that mean there is no such thing as "personal" or "professional" development? Certainly, no. I do think there are (concrete and effective ways for both); is just that no single individual holds the key, or, more technically accurate, a skeleton key to defining what they are.

Again, why do I believe this? I hope that my explanations, below, will provide a satisfactory answer to this, but the TLRD version is that both professional and personal development are individual paths, for which there is no single universal rule or set of procedures.

During my professional activity, both as a clinical psychologist and as a teacher, I have encountered many situations of individuals making their situation worse by trying to emulate other's actions and strategies[5].

Gullibly believing there is a single, 'magical' path or route, makes one more of a cult adept rather than a critical thinker, in charge of one's own life. Even more worrisome, it can create quite a few risks to one's wellbeing.

So, in brief, this is what I think of personal and *professional development*, based on my life and work experience and training.

- They cannot be separated, unless artificially and, say, for didactic/illustrative purposes. Personal and *professional development*[6] always intertwines and are rather various facets of the same individual endeavor.
- Almost everyone attempts to better themselves as human being, in their personal and professional lives. [7]
- There are various, empirically validated strategies to develop one's skills and even to better one's whole personality, but they should be pursued with great care and, most often, under the guidance of an expert and responsible counselor who can serve as an authentic mentor[8].

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[5] By this point, the reader already knows or at least got a strong vibe that I am not the biggest fan of self-help books. Just because someone successful says something, it does not make it true or valid for everyone else. Their success might be the result of luck or can be a marketing strategy (i.e., a term used sometimes to justify lies) or, eventually might just be working for them.

[6] Except, perhaps, if one lives completely separated from civilization and outside any human society, but even then, one must do some sort of proactive effort to ensure one's survival; thus, it can be argued that even in such cases, there is some sort of professional development going on.

[7] Even individuals that may be considered outliers, from a psychological perspective, have their own conceptualization of what they want to be and pursue their own path to that, as distorted and/or socially undesirable their understanding might be.

[8] I am not alone in supporting this assertion; see, for instance, Johns, H. (2012). *Personal Development in Counsellor Training*. SAGE Publications. https://books.google.ro/books?id=Id2SUF24JWkC.

That being said, in the beginning, I nevertheless stated that there is no single way of approaching or even conceptualizing personal and/or *professional development*; why then even attempt to develop a course for it?

The answer to this last question is, because *personal* and *professional development* is real and worth pursuing, only if one understands that the path is different from person to person and that what works for one person does not necessarily benefit another[9].

The second main caveat I need to make refers to the validity of the so-called precepts or tenets or golden rules or whatever else serves as 'magic' recipes for success according to some.

It is no coincidence that the volume of scientific research is abysmally small whereas there are disproportionately many more books on the topic.

Do note that scientific research is reported in journal articles, whereas books can be based on articles, but most often are merely their authors' perspectives on certain topics, without necessarily having the proper scientific evidence to back them up.

Personal development, and even professional development, is extremely difficult to do methodically, systematically, rigorously, and hence, scientifically.

A construct like one's personal or professional development is something that requires longitudinal research, i.e., follow-up over time, and that is extremely costly and prone to methodological omissions.

Moreover, it requires very precise modeling, conceptualization, and operationalization of its main constructs, *development* included, which is again very difficult to do.

Also, related to the hugely diverse approaches and conceptualizations of "personal" development, there are countless writings for which the term "pseudoscience" is simply too forgiving[10].

As such, I strived to include here either topics for which I could find supporting scientific evidence, or I could at least support from direct work experience and practice.

The reason for the clarifications and warnings presented above, as well as the rationale for this material's topics and how I approached them, might be clearer now.

Similarities and differences between "personal" and "professional" development

What are the similarities and differences between "*personal development*" and "*professional development*"?

"*Personal development*" and "*professional development*" share some similarities but also have distinct differences based on their focus and objectives.

Similarities:

- **Growth-Oriented:** Both *personal development* and *professional development* are centered around growth and improvement. They involve intentional efforts to enhance skills, knowledge, and abilities.

[9] Quite to the contrary, what worked for one individual could, potentially, be quite detrimental to another.

[10] For those willing to disregard the importance of scientific evidence, I can provide one example here; see, for instance, Hayertz, M. (2018). *Tarot for beginners: A holistic guide to using the tarot for personal growth & self-development* (1st ed). Althea Press.

- **Continuous Process:** Both concepts are ongoing processes that require consistent effort and a commitment to learning and improvement over time.
- **Self-Initiated:** Individuals are primarily responsible for driving their *personal development* and *professional development* journeys. They set goals, identify areas for improvement, and take proactive steps to achieve growth.
- **Enhanced Performance:** Both personal and *professional development* aim to enhance an individual's performance, whether it's in personal relationships, wellbeing, or in a professional context.
- **Goal setting:** Both involve setting goals to guide the development process. These goals can be short-term or long-term and act as benchmarks for progress.

Differences:

Criteria	**Personal Development**	**Professional Development**
Focus	Focuses on improving various aspects of an individual's life, including emotional wellbeing, relationships, self-awareness, and overall quality of life.	Focuses on enhancing skills and knowledge related to one's chosen profession or career. It's geared toward improving job performance and advancing within a specific field.
Scope	Encompasses a wide range of areas, including personal growth, emotional intelligence, physical health, mindset, and life satisfaction.	Primarily concentrates on skills and knowledge directly related to one's profession, industry trends, and job responsibilities.
Context	Applies to all areas of an individual's life, including personal relationships, hobbies, interests, and wellbeing.	Primarily pertains to an individual's career and work-related skills.
Outcome	Outcomes include increased self-awareness, emotional intelligence, improved relationships, and a greater sense of purpose and fulfillment.	Outcomes involve improved job performance, increased employability, career advancement, and a deeper understanding of industry trends.
Measurement	Progress in *personal development* is often measured subjectively, focusing on how an individual feels and the impact on their overall wellbeing.	Progress is often more objectively measurable, such as through performance evaluations, certifications, promotions, or increased responsibilities at work.

In essence, *personal development* and *professional development* complement each other in a holistic growth journey. While *personal development* focuses on enhancing overall wellbeing and life satisfaction, *professional development* is geared toward career growth and expertise within a specific field. Both aspects contribute to an individual's overall growth and success.

Virtues[11]

Source:

Virtues as special universal qualities

Since ancient times and forms of social organization, people have appreciated what is generically denoted as "good" and have disavowed what the community designates as "evil." People themselves are classified as good or bad, as to be appreciated or, conversely, criticized. What *constitutes good and what constitutes* evil, respectively *what we mean by* good or bad people, is the subject of an extremely complex discussion and largely enters the purview of philosophy, sociology, ethics, as well as that of psychology. Moreover, an accurate detailing and referencing of what is right or wrong is far beyond the scope and possibility of this material.

One of the human aspects valued by all human cultures and societies, throughout history and up to the present day, is known/generically designated as *virtues*. In common sense, virtue exceeds quality in terms of desirability and social appreciation. Quality is a trait of an individual that gives them a cognitive or behavioral advantage over others. Unlike a mere quality, a virtue also has the characteristic of incorporating social desirability. Virtue does not exist outside the social and cultural context, which gives it meaning, justification, direction, and measure.

Throughout history, all cultures and religions have promoted various virtues as the ultimate goal of the development of man, of the individual, as part of the community. Virtues such as *courage, justice, humanity, moderation, wisdom, and transcendence*, are found over time in traditions such as Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Athenianism, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Of course, sometimes they are only implicitly introduced into the value system of that tradition, as in the case of moderation, which is explicitly mentioned in all major currents except Confucianism, but these six basic virtues have remained unchanged over time to this day (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). In turn, virtues are associated with a series of related qualities or strengths, which can be regarded as dimensions of that virtue. Table 1, below, presents their virtues and related characteristics (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Table 1:

Classification of the 6 virtues and 24 character qualities (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)

Virtue	**Related (characteristic) quality**
1. Wisdom and knowledge	• Creativity • Curiosity • Openness to knowledge[12] • Passion for learning • Power of perspective (overview)
2. Courage	• Authenticity • Bravura • Perseverance • Vivacity

[11] This section is an excerpt from Stanciu (2014) .

[12] Open-minded, in English, in original.

3. Mankind	• Kindness • Love • Social intelligence
4. Justice	• Fairness • Leadership • Teamwork
5. Moderation	• Forgiveness • Modesty • Caution • Self-tuning
6. Transcendence	• Appreciation for beauty and excellence • Gratitude • Hope • Humour • Spirituality

Virtue	**Description (in the examples are the associated qualities that are specific to that virtue)**
Courage	Emotional strength that involves applying the will to accomplish goals even in the face of internal or external adversity; For example: bravery, perseverance, honesty in crisis situations
Justice	The civic strength underlying a healthy social life; For example: fairness, fairness, leadership, civic spirit, collaborative effort (teamwork)
Humanism	Interpersonal strength that involves caring (keeping in mind) others and being friendly with others; For example, affection, kindness
Moderation	The strength to avoid excesses; For example: forgiveness, modesty, prudence, self-control
Wisdom	Intellectual endowment involving the acquisition and use of knowledge; For example: curiosity, reasoning, vision
Transcendence	The quality of glimpsing the existence of a reality (universe) larger than oneself and whose meaning is broader than one's own perspective; For example: spirituality, gratitude, hope

Features of virtues

The characteristics which the abovementioned virtues must satisfy to be considered representative are (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005):

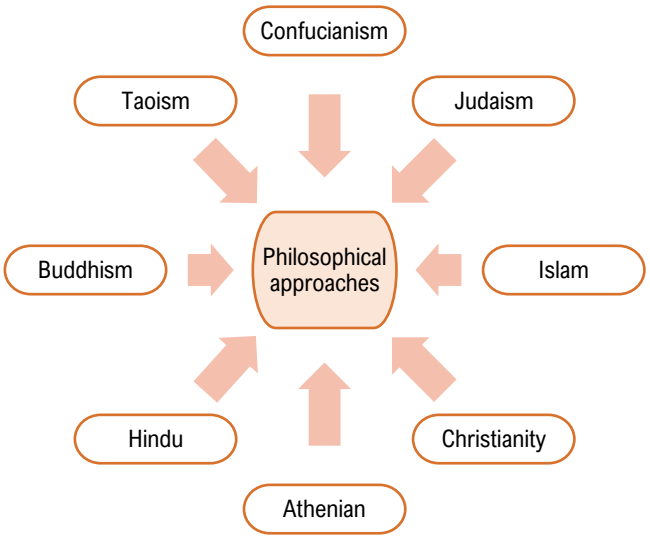
- They are ubiquitous (to be recognized in all major traditions, cultures, spiritual currents or religions);
- They are conducive for fulfillment[13] (contribute to personal fulfilment, satisfaction and happiness in the broad sense);
- They are morally valued (to have value in and of themselves and not as an instrument that serves a purpose);
- They are not detrimental to others (their existence helps and does not harm other people affected by them, produce admiration and not jealousy);
- They have undesirable antonyms (these are terms designating opposite attributes in meaning and undesirable, e.g., courage versus cowardice);
- They are characteristic[14] (virtue is a stable and general individual appearance);
- They are measurable (virtue can be assessed through research in terms of interindividual differences between people);
- They are distinctive (virtue is not redundant, neither empirically nor conceptually, with other character traits or qualities);
- They are paragonic (virtue is obvious and powerful and relevant embedded in the personality of individuals who possess it);
- They are prodigious (virtue is demonstrated early by some young people or adults who possess it);
- They are selectively present (virtue is lacking in some people);
- They are "institutionalized[15]" (in terms of social valorization; virtue is deliberately targeted or targeted by social practices and customs that value it and seek to develop it).

Therefore, these distinctive aspects that we call virtues, which all major societies, civilizations and spiritual and religious currents have promoted and maintained throughout history, are not mere personality characteristics, and are not merely contextual attributes, encountered conjecturally, in the ontology of the person, but are complex attributes, with multiple origins, whose development and expression take time, education, suitable environment and, last but not least, awareness of their importance for the ultimate goal of the person.

Philosophical perspectives

The selected virtues are found in all major philosophical currents and in all major religions of the world, respectively, all major philosophical currents promote a certain set of stable traits that characterize human thinking and behavior and that are universally / globally appreciated.

[13] Fulfilling, in English, in original.
[14] Live-like, in English, in original.
[15] Institutions, in English, in original.



Wisdom

We often refer to people's intellectual qualities by terms such as *smart, smart,* or even *pragmatic, resourceful,* etc. One of the most valued attributes of a person is *Wisdom*. An alternative view of human qualities is to consider them not just sets or sets of specific properties (traits, etc.), but as a named ensemble *wisdom*, or knowledge of pragmatic principles of life and the ability to put this knowledge into practice through global personal (life) strategies of selection, optimization and compensation (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2000).

Features of wisdom

Wisdom is generally understood as the state that characterizes the convergence of means and ends aimed at achieving the highest good, both for the person and for others (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). In a much more condensed formulation, wisdom is "knowing priorities and depths." (Kekes, 1983, p. 279). This perspective led to the development of the Berlin model (or paradigm) of wisdom, initiated by Baltes and his colleagues (1990; 2000), according to which wisdom is life expertise, characterised by seven essential criteria (Baltes & Smith, 1990; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000):

1. Wisdom is concerned with difficult and important aspects of life and the strategies by which we manage our lives and their meaning;
2. Wisdom includes knowledge about the limits of knowledge and the uncertainties of life (the world);
3. Wisdom is a higher level of knowledge, reasoning and counseling;
4. Wisdom is knowledge whose breadth, depth, value, and balance are truly extraordinary;
5. Wisdom involves the perfect synergy of mind and character, respectively, a masterful orchestration of knowledge and virtues;
6. Wisdom is knowledge used for one's own good and that of others;
7. Wisdom, although difficult to obtain and estimate, is easily recognized by its manifestations.

Meta-criteria of wisdom

There are five criteria specific to this volume of wisdom knowledge, the last three of which are meta-criteria, or composite criteria, namely:

1. The person has a rich body (volume) of *factual* (declarative) knowledge;

2. The person has *procedural knowledge* of pragmatic principles of life (i.e., knows how to act);
3. The person is characterized by their recognition of the existence of an *ontological contextualism*. More specifically, he understands where he is in his life, age and socio-professional position, and manifests a set of appropriate physical and cognitive behaviors. Ontological contextualism includes knowledge about many themes and contexts of life (e.g., family, profession, society, morals, etc.), their interrelations, cultural variations, and temporal perspectives.
4. The person understands *the relativism* of life values and priorities. More specifically, identifying, recognizing and tolerating the variability of other people, as well as their cultural and social values.
5. *The recognition and management of uncertainty* constitute the fifth and final characteristic criterion of wisdom. It is based on the understanding that the processing of information by humans is fundamentally impacted by objective constraints, such as lack of information or culturally specific cognitive values and procedures, by the limits of the reasoning used, etc.

Understanding and feeling of understanding

We have seen, then, that wisdom is crucially linked to understanding, to the construction of meanings, to the richness of meanings of perceived reality, and the correctness of this understanding. However, understanding and knowing how things are organized and their meaning is not always purely rational. We have all felt at times a "feeling" of understanding, a feeling that we know, and understand, how things are, even if at the level of cognitive, rational analysis, there was no additional data or processing. Thus, the meaning of the surrounding world and its events is built synergistically and intrinsically, including emotional, and imaginative contributions, related to our expectations and values, and not just a portrayal, a reflection, more or less complete of perceived reality (Heintzelman & King, 2014).

Qualities

More recent research (Wortman & Wood, 2011):

Item	both_samples_M
courteous/polite	81.3
kindkind-hearted/caring	79.45
Cooperatives	79.3
Trustful	79.2
Moral	78.5
truthful/honest	78.4
supportive/encouraging	77.1
intelligent/smart	76.2
Intellectual	76

well-liked/likeable	75.3
happy/joyful	74
warm	73.4
Practical/level-headed/sensible	73.25
affectionate/passionate	72.8
funny/amusing	72.2
Humble/thankful/grateful	71.5
energetic/active	71
Imaginative	70.8
skilled/talented	70.3
Talkatives	69.1
self-assured/confident/self-assured	66.6
complex/deep	66.4
organized/efficient	65.1
calm/relaxed	65.05
thorough	65
outgoing/extraverted	63.4
extraordinary/exceptional	62.6
creative/artistic	62.25
bold/assertive	61.7
Influential/prominent/well-known	60.4
bravebrave/fearless	60.25

systematic	58.9
Experimenting	58.8
Neat	58.4
traditional/conventional	55.7
Dominant/controlling/dominant	48.15
Moody	48
anxioustense/nervous	46.7
temperamental	45.4
Shy/bashful/shy	43.75
weird/strange	42.1
Simple	41.8
Irritable/short-tempered/impatient	40.9
Odd	39.6
Jealous	39.2
insecure/unsure	38.4
Disorganized/messy/sloppy	37.05
Forceful	36.4
suspicious	36
ashamed/guilt-prone	35.2
conceited/egotistical	29.4
careless	29.3
manipulative	29.2

Uncreative	29.1
unsystematic	29
inefficient	28.3
Harsh	27.5
narrow-minded/closed-minded	27.3
annoying/aggravating	27
abnormal	26.6
sad/unhappy	26.4
untalkative	25
insulting/offensive	24.4
unsympathetic/unfriendly	23.05
devious	22.4
unimaginative	22.3
Angry/Hostile	20.9
Destroytful	18.8
cold	18.2
unreliable/undependable	16.55
unintellectual	16.5
unstable/disturbed	16.3
Unintelligent/dumb/stupid	15.6
Abusive/cruel/abusive	9.15

Another research (Anderson, 1968):

The order* in which people value qualities are: 1) sincerity, 2) honesty, 3) understanding, 4) loyalty, 5) authenticity, 6) being trustworthy, 7) intelligence, 8) being able to rely on someone, 9) being open-minded, 10) being attentive (caring), etc.

* cf. Anderson's research (1968), the most desirable qualities are:

1. Sincere	11. Wise	21. Happy
2. Honest	12. Considerate	22. Clean
3. Understanding	13. Good-Natured	23. Interesting
4. Loyal	14. Reliable	24. Unselfish
5. Truthful	15. Mature	25. Good-Humored
6. Trustworthy	16. Warm	26. Honorable
7. Intelligent	17. Earnest	27. Humorous
8. Dependable	18. Kind	28. Responsible
9. Open-Minded	19. Friendly	29. Cheerful
10. Thoughtful	20. Kind-Hearted	30. Trustful

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Wellbeing[16]

A first requirement necessary for our approach to building a useful and meaningful perspective of what personal and professional development means and what is relevant to know is to relate the objective of development to an ultimate goal. In our case, we considered that the ultimate goal of personal and professional development is to achieve higher levels of wellbeing.

Another necessary requirement to explore relevant topics of personal and professional development is to choose an appropriate conceptualization. As mentioned above, in the context and for the purpose of this book, we consider personal and professional development to be related to the acquisition of knowledge and cognitive and metacognitive skills necessary for personal and professional development and optimization.

Wellbeing can be regarded as a personal state of wellbeing that is reflected in three main dimensions or aspects: 1) satisfaction with life, 2) level of positive emotions or feelings, and 3) level of negative emotions or feelings (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002). It is easy to see from the first reading that a high level of wellbeing corresponds to high levels of emotions or positive feelings and, at the same time, to low levels of emotions or negative feelings.

Wellbeing and mood

We saw above that emotions, both positive and negative, are a fundamental component of perceived subjective wellbeing. But what exactly is the usefulness of positive emotions? If negative emotions have the role of protecting us, warning us, and increasing our motivation to avoid dangers or dangerous situations, what role can positive emotions have?

Positive emotions bring with them a series of beneficial effects, including, concretely: increasing the thinking-action register that a person is capable of at a certain moment; dissolving and combating persistent negative emotions; and providing resources for mental tenacity. In general, positive emotions not only accompany but actually contribute to the mental and physical health of the person (Fredrickson, 2001).

Mood and social contexts

We have all experienced social events as a result of which we felt either satisfied, fulfilled, satisfied, or, on the contrary, dissatisfied, disappointed, etc. What is it about these social interactions that we had that is responsible for their success? For the most part, emotions, positive or negative, that we feel in our social interactions are associated with the degree to which we feel accepted and understood by our partners in social interaction or relationships (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Research shows that the extent to which the self, the individuality of the person, is reflected in social contexts influences the measure of satisfaction, and even happiness, felt in these contexts. It is possible that some cultural differences felt in social contexts originate to the extent that the focus is on different aspects of the self. Moreover, the extent to which we perceive ourselves correctly is closely related to the extent to which an experience of social interaction will be positive or not (Oishi, Koo, & Akimoto, 2008).

Since above we have seen that we are happier the more accepted we are and the more we feel included in a certain social context, we might think that, at least in terms of social contexts, our happiness or wellbeing depends on being surrounded by friends, or, moreover, close friends. This assumption is natural and intuitive because it imagines that close friends are the ones who understand us best. However, research shows that relationships, and social interactions, with little-known people also play a significant

[16] This section is an excerpt from Stanciu (2014)

role in how we feel in these contexts. More specifically, on the one hand, a very or too small number of interactions is associated with negative emotionality, and consequently, a thoughtful increase in the frequency of social interactions can lift our morale. On the other hand, it's not just interactions with close people—i.e., friends, family—that help us emotionally, but also those with lesser-known or unknown people (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014).

This aspect, somewhat counterintuitive, may have, at first glance, two explanations. On the one hand, it is not mandatory to be understood and accepted only by close people, respectively by those we call friends. On the other hand, interactions and relationships with lesser-known people can be beneficial in aspects that contribute to increasing the satisfaction we feel, such as self-esteem, curiosity, etc. In the presence of strangers or lesser-known people, barriers, inhibitions and behavioral habits that we have developed and present to those closest to us often disappear, against whom the stake of the behaviors we manifest is higher.

The role of social context in how we feel is truly significant. It turns out, however, that social factors produce effects beyond the transient emotional state and also influence how happy or unhappy we feel. In adolescents, for example, personal factors strongly correlate with their perception of health, but social factors (related to school, entourage, and relationships with these environments) are those that strongly correlate with adolescents' perception of the level of happiness adolescents report (Gaspar de Matos, Simoes, Batista-Foguet, & Cottraux, 2010).

Research shows that positive mood is associated with social, expansive motivations to approach, while negative mood is associated with egocentric, avoidance motivations. Concretely, the mood we have at a certain moment can influence our mood and openness to relate or not to others (Cunningham, 1988).

However, the relationship between emotional disposition and social relationships is much more complex than simply being open to interactions with others when we feel good and avoiding others when we feel bad. Many people are not sufficiently aware of the importance of their social life on their own physical and mental health, respectively, on their wellbeing. Research conducted on people in the Western Hemisphere shows that most people consider relationships with close ones to be the source of their happiness (Berscheid & Reis, 1998).

Mood and self-regulation

We have all experienced events in life when we wish that reality would be different, to be as we would have wanted. Moreover, people sometimes tend to deny reality, formulate their own judgments that suit their goals, and entertain those judgments, even if they are not correct. For example, when people are sad, they often turn to judgments that are favorable to them, even if they are not correct or factually supported. It turns out, however, that this distortion of the logic with which we evaluate the surrounding reality is not necessarily the attribute of weak people and is not just a simple lie, but it serves a more important regulating purpose, namely, it helps us self-regulate our emotional mood. Thus, the use of subservient, distorted judgments for our benefit functions as a homeostatic mechanism that allows the individual to return to his normal emotional/affective state (Roese & Olson, 2007).

Emotional support and cultural context

In life, we often encounter situations where we either need or can benefit from help from others. We expect some to be more supportive and understanding, and others to be cooler and less willing to get involved. In turn, the support we can receive can be more concrete, focused on the problem we are facing, or more generally and rather emotionally, directed towards our person. While it is obvious that the support we receive depends to a large extent on the concrete abilities and capacities of others to help us, does this support still depend on other aspects, such as the cultural background of the person from whom we expect help? Research shows that it does. For example, Americans of European descent, compared to

Americans of Japanese descent, tend to provide emotional support rather than problem-focused support, while the latter are equally concerned with providing both emotional and problem-focused support. However, social support seems to have different motivations from culture to culture. In the example above, Americans of European descent were motivated to provide support by the degree of closeness to those helped and feelings of self-esteem, while in Americans of Japanese origin, the reasons were associated only with the degree of closeness to those helped (Chen, Kim, Mojaverian, & Morling, 2012).

Wellbeing and action

Regrets that arise from not acting (inactional regrets) last longer than regrets that arise from what we did (actional regrets) and are associated with a stronger sense of loss than actionable regrets. Overall, regrets about love are more commonly reported than other forms of regret but are more common in women than men (Morrison & Roese, 2011).

Both when it comes to regrets and when we recall ordinary memories, our imagination often produces alternate, "what if" scenarios. This specific, "could have" thinking is called counterfactual thinking because it lies outside the facts, the evidence of reality. However, as with the little lies we construct for ourselves about ourselves and the surrounding reality (see, the section on self-image), counterfactual thinking is not only an erroneous product and an inability to reason correctly but seems to have, like self-serving judgments, a regulating and performance-enhancing role (Epstude & Roese, 2008).

Wellbeing and attitude to conflict

Our interactions with others are not always easy and free from adversity, neither in family and close circles nor at work. Whether or not we enter into conflicts with others largely depends on the purpose and nature of our interaction with them. For example, negotiations aimed at satisfying a personal or organizational interest produce more competitiveness than those aimed at finding a solution, compromise, collaborative decision-making, or those that take place spontaneously in social contexts. This might seem understandable and even common sense. However, this is particularly relevant in understanding why meetings that declaratively promote competitive goals end in conflicts more often than those that declare collaborative goals. In addition, the more collaborative the attitude with which people enter into social interactions, including professional and economic interests, the greater the likelihood that economic outcomes or consequences will be (Halevy & Phillips, 2015).

Wellbeing and life in a couple

Very often people enter into couple relationships. Of course, it is possible to have throughout life, especially in youth, a series of fleeting and transient relationships with other people, to which we feel sexually attracted or in terms of the emotional pleasure felt in interaction with the other. But we accept, somewhat naturally and as part of life, that we will meet a special "other" or "other", with whom we will form a couple. When this happens, our lives are significantly influenced by the commitments we make, more or less consciously, to each other.

That a couple's life or a stable and deep relationship brings with it significant influences on personal life is no surprise to anyone. But how do the couple relationships reflect on our wellbeing? Research shows us that people who live in successful couple relationships are happier than those who have bad relationships with partners. Moreover, married people generally appear to be happier than unmarried people, regardless of whether the latter are single by choice or divorce or widowhood (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). The vice versa is true, too. Between loneliness, on the one hand, and unhappiness, mental, emotional and even physical disorders, there is a significant and well-documented association of research (Berscheid & Reis, 1998).

We often hear that the best thing that can happen to you in life is children. However, if we consider all the challenges that arise with having a child in a family, starting with learning to be a parent and ending with material and security issues, the previous statement can be viewed with some circumspection. Of course, evaluatively and cognitively, in relation to the noble and ultimate goals of a person and a family, to consider parenthood as the most valuable life experience is understandable. If we add to this the biological conditioning that pushes us towards procreation, then we understand why many of us say that having a child is the best thing that can happen to you.

But beyond speculative and declarative considerations, what do we really know about the changes produced by the appearance of a child? How do they affect the quality of life of people and couples? Research shows that, in terms of quality of life, there are no significant differences for Americans between people with children and those without, but there are slight differences in terms of amplifying the hedonic (pleasure) of life, both negative and positive, for those who have children (Deaton & Stone, 2014; Gaspar de Matos et al., 2010). Again, however, we are dealing with a two-way relationship with mutual influences. Not only parents are influenced by the appearance of a child in the couple, but also the life and development of the latter is strongly influenced by the existing relationship between family members. Family relationships characterized by conflicts, misunderstandings, and marked discrepancies leave a significant mark on the mental and physical wellbeing of the child throughout his life, both in childhood and later in his adult life (Amato & Keith, 1991).

Wellbeing and money

As we saw above, wellbeing can be conceptualized as a combination of two main aspects or dimensions, an emotional one and a cognitive-evaluative one: emotional wellbeing and satisfaction with life. Many people believe that a rich life will simultaneously be a happy life. However, research shows that high incomes can ensure high levels of life satisfaction but not high levels of happiness, while conversely, low income is associated with both low life satisfaction ratings and low emotional wellbeing (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010).

Wellbeing and egocentrism

Overpaying attention to one's own thoughts or emotions is associated with depressive emotionality (Ingram & Smith, 1984; Smith, Ingram, & Roth, 1985). People who are always focused on their own mood and thinking, overly preoccupied with how they feel, tend to be significantly more vulnerable to their emotions, especially negative ones, and this seems to be found more among women than men (Flory, Räikkönen, Matthews, & Owens, 2000).

Wellbeing and the crisis of middle age

The phrase "midlife crisis" is well known and accepted in the collective mind as designating a period of instability, indecision, and insecurity that usually occurs in middle adulthood and, more or less argument, is generally attributed to men. Incidentally or not, the level of perceived wellbeing appears to have a U-shaped curve, with the concavity at the bottom, in which the beginning and end periods of life are characterized by maximum perceived wellbeing, while the minimum is reached in the middle period of life. Research shows, however, that, interestingly, this U-curve of perceived wellbeing is not unique to humans, but also to great primates (Weiss, King, Inoue-Murayama, Matsuzawa, & Oswald, 2012). These findings raise the question of whether the midlife crisis has not only psychogenic but also physiological, evolutionarily developed causes in the course of phylogenesis.

Wellbeing and communication

Wellbeing and communication in social contexts

Often in life, we also have to communicate less pleasant events or things to others. Research shows that there is a difference in how quickly people send negative messages as opposed to when they send positive messages, in the sense of delaying the transmission of negative messages. Why are we doing this? To what extent is the delay in politeness, respectively, explained by the extra attention we pay to sensitive messages in social contexts? Moreover, is there a difference in the way we plan to send a negative message, compared to a positive one, in the sense that we spend more time formulating, writing, and finding the right words, at the right time? It seems that politeness explains more situations of procrastination of negative messages than specific planning of the latter, but both are valid explanations for this procrastination (Dibble et al., 2015).

Wellbeing and couple communication

The couple relationship involves finding out intimate aspects of the partner's life. Sometimes people are more willing to give their partner such information, other times, feelings of embarrassment or fear about its impact hinder the communication of this information. However, research suggests that honesty with your partner is generally the best policy. For example, research involving heterosexual couples in which one partner had previously been gay or lesbian showed that the earlier the disclosure occurred during the relationship, the greater the chances of a successful relationship and the closer the partners were (MacInnis & Hodson, 2014).

Wellbeing and communication in work-related contexts

The readiness to communicate with others is one of the social characteristics of man. We not only communicate dictated by a clear and immediate interest or purpose, or related to a specific problem, but we also communicate with the purpose of relating, making ourselves known or knowing others better, freeing ourselves from worries or boasting about our successes. Psychological research suggests that, in general, communicating positive emotions at work has positive consequences for the individual, while communicating negative emotions has negative outcomes. We might be tempted to think, perhaps, that people tend to talk more about positive things. It turns out, however, that we are less motivated to communicate our positive emotional feelings to our co-workers than our negative ones (Hadley, 2014).

Wellbeing and old age

Old age and the paradox of perceived subjective wellbeing

We might expect that as people age, their happiness, or more accurately, their wellbeing, will decline with age. It's an intuitive expectation for some of us, and research shows that it's actually more difficult to maintain a high level of subjective wellbeing with age (Baltes & Baltes, 1993). However, both personal experiences and research data contradict this impression that older people are less happy than younger people. In reality, somewhat paradoxically, subjective wellbeing can remain at high levels despite some age-related physical and cognitive declines (Kunzmann, Little, & Smith, 2000; Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998).

Moreover, studies generally show that older people experience (perceive) similar or even higher levels of subjective wellbeing than young people under similar living conditions, with the maintenance that vulnerability to the effect of adversity is greater for older people than for younger ones (Jivraj, Nazroo, Vanhoutte, & Chandola, 2014).

Old age and social, economic and cultural differences

This "paradox" of maintaining perceived levels of subjective wellbeing even at earlier ages appears to be influenced by a number of factors, including age, level of involvement in social activities, and even standard of living. For example, maintaining high levels of subjective wellbeing is relatively well proven for the early stages of old age and less documented for more advanced ones (Schilling, 2006). With age, the person is cumulatively exposed to an increasing volume of adversities (problems) of life, which, unhappily, take their toll, negatively influencing the mental state of the person (A. Shrira, 2012).

Old age and socio-economic differences

On the other hand, adversity in daily living (measured, for example, by economic indicators such as gross national product per capita) is felt more strongly by older people than by young people. In addition, subjective wellbeing at earlier ages appears to be lower in poorer countries (e.g., developing) than in economically developed countries, where the "paradoxical" phenomenon of maintaining subjective wellbeing even in old age has been observed and massively researched (Swift et al., 2014). In Europe, there are major differences between populations in different European countries in terms of mild (or 'successful' as it is also called), differences in which age, gender and socio-economic level play a very important role and, not surprisingly, these differences are spread from low subjective wellbeing in economically challenged European countries to high levels of subjective wellbeing in European countries with good living standards and conditions (Hank, 2011). Living standards and conditions are not only positively associated with perceived subjective wellbeing, but also with the mental health of older populations (Ploubidis & Grundy, 2009)and the substantial influence of socioeconomic status is felt not only in Europe's elderly populations, but also in the elderly in the United States (Robert et al., 2009). Moreover, socioeconomic status not only influences changes in physical health and emotional functioning, but also the interaction between them (Schollgen, Huxhold, & Schmiedek, 2012).

Old age and gender membership

Another aspect where common, common-sense thinking differentiates is that of the sexes. Some believe that women endure old age better than men in terms of wellbeing, while others have opposing views. The arguments made are either that women are more emotionally sensitive, or that they face diseases and adversities (e.g., widowhood) of old age, while others argue that women are more equipped in terms of social relationships and social support resources than men. Research results show that women experience old age more problematically than men in terms of subjective wellbeing (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2001). In addition, the life expectancy of people with high socio-economic status is higher, especially for men (Melzer, McWilliams, Brayne, Johnson, & Bond, 2000).

Old age and the adversities of marital life

However, some arguments raised above, such as the lack of support of the partner in the case of widowhood, negatively affect the subjective wellbeing felt, but both men and women are affected. For example, in the case of vision deficits, often found in the elderly, the discomfort induced by these deficits is felt more strongly by people in poorly functioning marriages (or life partnerships) than by people in successful marriages, and in which the support of the partner is significantly better (Bookwala, 2011).

Old age and social activities and support

Last but not least, one of the things that helps people maintain high levels of positive emotionality is their involvement in social activities that have the potential to provide them with emotional, cognitive, etc. rewards. Research findings show that high levels of life satisfaction and positive emotionality are positively correlated with high levels of positive social interactions and exchanges, and high levels of social support from the social environment (i.e., friends, family, relatives, neighbors) (Pilkington, Windsor, & Crisp, 2012).

Old age and social activities with friends and strangers

Not only that, but joint activities with friends seem to be, at least sometimes, more beneficial than joint activities with family, especially in old age. For example, engaging in shared activities with friends and family is associated with increased levels of positive emotionality in middle-aged people, but does not correlate with increased levels of subjective (perceived) wellbeing. By comparison, in old age, engaging in shared activities with friends but not family is also associated with increased levels of perceived subjective wellbeing (Huxhold, Miche, & Schüz, 2014).

Old age and level of intellectual readiness

Is there a difference in how educated and less educated people benefit from interactions with family and loved ones as they age? At least in terms of interacting with grandchildren and teenagers, it seems so. Older people with lower levels of intellectual readiness appear to be more vulnerable in terms of wellbeing than those with higher levels of intellectual readiness (Mahne & Huxhold, 2014). But the benefits of education, and more specifically lifelong learning concerns, go beyond interactions with teens and grandchildren. People with better education tend to live longer and in better health and can expect increased satisfaction in later life (Majer, Nusselder, Mackenbach, & Kunst, 2011). Anecdotally, or popularly, we sometimes hear that "being a grandparent (or parent) is a job." Schematically and without explanation, popular wisdom has largely captured the conclusions of the research presented above.

Old age and voluntary activities

"Do good and good will return to you tenfold" is a teaching we learn from some religions or spiritual currents, from many self-help books, but also from the life experiences of those around us. We saw above that social interactions can have a positive effect on perceived subjective wellbeing, regardless of age, and that, at least for seniors, interactions with people outside the family seem to play a more important role than interactions with family. But one of the consequences of old age is reduced opportunities for social interactions. Some of the constant lifelong concerns, such as attending organised forms of training or employment, disappear for most older people. However, other possibilities for social interactions, such as volunteering, remain and even expand. In terms of perceived subjective wellbeing, especially positive emotionality, both young and middle-aged people, as well as older adults, benefit from volunteering (Pavlova & Silbereisen, 2012).

Old age and re-learning of skills and behaviors

Even in old age, people have the opportunity to acquire new knowledge and skills. Including the recovery of motor skills and the return to healthy behavioral habits (e.g., movement and exercise), the elderly are able to improve significantly in a relatively short time, on the order of weeks (Sarkisian, Prohaska, Davis, & Weiner, 2007). Physical activities performed appropriately, e.g., according to doctors' recommendations, produce positive effects on the elderly regardless of demographic characteristics or health status (Netz et al., 2012). In terms of cognitive functionality, people who actively and voluntarily engage in activities to maintain cognitive functioning experience lower cognitive declines with age (Gilhooly et al., 2007).

Old age and expectations

Some of us conceptualize old age as that stage in life that begins when we focus or look more at what we have left behind than at what awaits us in the future. Indeed, with age, the expectations we have of life and ourselves begin to change. If in our youth our expectations of improvement or strongly correlated inversely with expectations of being worse, with age, this connection begins to decrease in intensity. In addition, the negative expectations of the elderly are more related to the estimates they make about their cognitive, social, etc. functionality than those of young people (Amit Shrira et al., 2011).

High levels of (optimistic) expectation in the elderly population are associated with better health and mental wellbeing, especially when people maintain a series of age-appropriate health behaviors, such as sports, exercise and physiotherapy, etc. (Kim, 2009). The vice versa is also true. Low expectations about the future of older people are associated can hinder active involvement in combating sedentary lifestyle (Sarkisian, Prohaska, Wong, Hirsch, & Mangione, 2005). Of course, it is somewhat intuitive, and it is a personal experience for each of us that a person's perspective on the world around us changes with age. Again, however, research shows that with age, people generally develop more favorable views of the world around them, i.e., the world is seen as more benevolent (Poulin & Cohen Silver, 2008).

However, even though substantial recoveries are possible, and above we have seen that optimism and positive expectations contribute to higher subjective wellbeing, it is important that expectations are realistic. Older people who construct realistic representations of the future (expectations) about themselves seem to be less influenced by the effects of physiological and functional declines and losses that come with aging (Cheng, Fung, & Chan, 2009).

Positive thinking and active involvement in decision-making are important factors that contribute to the control people feel about their environment. Also, the mental attitude and expectations of the person also contribute significantly to perceived controllability. For example, in the case of elderly people relocated to care homes, their adaptation to new living environments was significantly influenced by the factors mentioned above (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2013).

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Self-constructs

How well we know ourselves is a question that concerns each of us at some point. How good we are at calculations, how good athletes we are, how smart we are, what skills we have, etc., are examples of questions that we are often forced to find answers to. What emerges from these questions, the answer we give ourselves to them, contributes to the formation of what we do not call *self-image*. The concept or self-image is also known as "*self-construct*", "*self-identity*," or "*self-perspective*." From a behavioral perspective, in order to be able to establish a sense *of self-concept*, the individual must refer to the pattern of behaviors that is unique enough to characterize a person.

In a broad sense, the term *self* It refers to how a person thinks about himself. More specifically, the concept of *self* It is a collection of beliefs about one's own persona (Leflot, Onghena, & Colpin, 2010). Note that the self-image includes beliefs about academic performance (Mimi Bong & Richard E Clark, 1999; Byrne, 1984; Rosen, Glennie, Dalton, Lennon, & Bozick, 2010), gender/sex and gender identity (Hoffman, Hattie, & Borders, 2005), and breed (Aries et al., 1998).

The self-image is not static but rather is continuously developing over time. At the beginning of this search, in our youth especially, we are rather interested in the social aspects or with social interests of the self, while later, towards the second part of life, the search for the self acquires more and more spiritual charge. As a rule, we begin by reflecting on our social selves (*What am I?*), after which we continue with the exploration of the self in relation to ourselves (*Who am I?*), and then we move on to the final stage of searching for the spiritual self (*Why am I?*) (Irving & Williams, 2001).

Sometimes we think we know ourselves very well, sometimes we think we are strangers in our own bodies. In general, however, most people maintain the belief that they know themselves quite well. Research results show, however, that we are not very good, but rather mediocre evaluators of our own abilities, and that, in general, we evaluate ourselves better when it comes to simple skills than complex skills or precisely defined fields than to broader or more general fields (Zell & Krizan, 2014).

Another aspect to keep in mind, and to which he refers quite often throughout this material, is the tendency of people to focus on the negative aspects, either concerning others, themselves, or life in general. Very often, when people are asked to describe other people or the human nature, the portrait contains terms such as: greedy, competitive, jealous, ambitious, violent, aggressive, intelligent, etc., or variants of these attributes (Mandler, 1997). With the exception of the term "intelligent", which can be interpreted in both negative and positive connotations, depending on the purpose for which it is applied, the rest of the descriptors are rather negative.

The question that arises here is "are we really more 'bad' than 'good' or do we not know ourselves as well as we think and consequently describe ourselves somewhat distorted"? The answer is not that we do not have enough positive qualities and aspects, but that, for reasons that relate to education and sometimes to phenotype, we often show a predisposition to focus on the negative.

Academic self

The concept of the academic self is extremely important for anyone pursuing some form of education or instruction. It encompasses the person's personal beliefs about their academic abilities (Trautwein, Lüdtke, Marsh, & Nagy, 2009). This type of beliefs can appear as early as the age of 3-4 or 5 y.o. and is influenced by interaction with parents and educators (Tiedemann, 2000). By the age of 10-11, children assess or self-estimate their academic skills by comparing themselves with other peers (Freund & Kasten, 2012; Rubie-Davies, 2006). However, while self-estimation of cognitive abilities may prove to be most accurate in exact areas such as mathematics, it may prove to be less accurate when engaged in estimating the rapidity of reasoning (Freund & Kasten, 2012).

The importance of personal development and, implicitly, of the self and related constructs, is assumed directly and explicitly by educational institutions. The perception of importance is found not only at programmatic and declarative level, educational policies and curricular strategies, but also at implementation, i.e., didactic and counseling level. For example, in the U.S., school counselors constantly evaluate the importance of developing character principles and qualities such as effort, dedication, and perseverance, as the most important and urgent, and more relevant and important than school performance (Barna, 2011).

The academic self and perceived academic self-efficacy

Although *academic self* and *academic self-efficacy* are sometimes used as similar, they are both theoretically and empirically distinct (Rosen et al., 2010). While *Self-concept* is an overall assessment by the person of himself, *academic self-efficacy* is the cognitive estimation of their capabilities. Also, the concept of *academic self* is much more comprehensive than *academic self-efficacy*, and includes, for example, evaluative and affective components (M. Bong & R.E. Clark, 1999).

The Self and Cultural Aspects

Self-concept is not similar across cultures. Significant differences can be observed between how people belonging to different cultures perceive themselves. In Western culture, for example, great emphasis is placed on the independence and expression of one's individuality (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) whereas in Eastern cultures, the individual is seen more as part of a group leading to interdependent perspectives of the self (Swann Jr, Jetten, Gómez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012).

A suggestive Israeli study reveals differences within the same culture as well. The study contrasts small traders with members of the kibbutz group or collective community. Similar somewhat to West-East cultural differences, people who belonged to the kibbutz group exhibited more pronounced traits of interdependent self than those who belonged to the small merchant community. Also, when describing themselves, kibbutz members referred more to personal preferences and hobbies, compared to members of the small urban merchant community, who tended to refer to personal traits of self.

Self and gender differences

Men and women do not seem to differ from each other in the independence and interdependence of the self, they differ in the types of interdependence of the self. More specifically, men tend to belong to a larger group than women, who tend toward dyadic groups, or one-on-one relationships, most of which (Gabriel & Gardner, 1999). This trend starts early in childhood, when boys and girls begin to have different social interactions, in which girls prefer dyadic interactions while boys prefer larger group activities (Maccoby, 1990).

The Self and the Bias of Past Perspective

The bias of the past perspective[17] designates a type of "I knew it" attitude that we sometimes have, when, after the occurrence of events, we have the impression that we have judged the situation quite clearly and that we have appreciated quite well the chances that the result will be the one that occurred. In other words, looking back after an event occurs, we overestimate the predictive capacity we had before it occurred about the outcomes or effects of that event.

The construction of such bias includes elements such as cognitive inputs (information we select from the environment when analyzing a situation or event), metacognitive inputs (an over- or meta-analysis we make about our own cognitive-evaluative processes; in the case of past perspective bias, the

[17] *Hindsight bias*, in English in original

metacognitive aspect refers to the fact that the ease with which we understand an effect or consequence can be attributed to the fact that, Previously, I had already allocated it a high probability), and motivational inputs (e.g., the tendency to see the world in an organized, predictable manner with meaning and meaning) (Roese & Vohs, 2012).

Self-esteem and social contexts

Whether we experience successes or failures, whether we are in a happy position or in a less favorable position, we often tend to compare ourselves to others. Comparisons with others have been part of our daily lives since childhood, and adolescents are particularly susceptible to seeking comparisons with those around them and to pressure from social role models (Krayer, Ingledew, & Iphofen, 2008). But this comparison is by no means as balanced and objective as we would like to believe. For example, people with high self-esteem in successful positions tend to compare themselves to others in terms of their best or equal qualities, while those in less favorable positions tend to compare themselves to others in terms of their weaknesses (Wood, Giordano-Beech, & Ducharme, 1999).

Self-esteem also plays an important role to the extent that we engage in new social interactions. New social interactions are somewhat risky in the sense that, with no data from previous experiences, it is relatively difficult to predict whether they will be successful, beneficial relationships, or on the contrary, will bring costs or harm. From this point of view, people with high self-esteem are more motivated to engage in risky social interactions than those with lower self-esteem, while the latter are more motivated to engage in social interactions from which they forecast social benefits (Stinson, Cameron, & Robinson, 2014).

Social comparisons with others are extremely important analysis tools through which we obtain information about ourselves, information that we later use to build our self-image, to relate to others, to make decisions, etc. From the point of view of brain structures that activate in social comparisons, two brain structures in particular, the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and the insular cortex, are especially important (Moore, Merchant, Kahn, & Pfeifer, 2014), which are also involved in social preferences (Dawes et al., 2012).

The self and self-estimation of one's own ethics[18]

Most of us have heard the saying "The shirt is closer to the skin than the coat". By and large, it is natural to put our own interests ahead of the interests of others. However, when we self-assess our honesty or morals, we have a somewhat idyllic perception of our own moral probity. Usually, this self-perception is a good one, according to which we consider ourselves brave, willing to fight for what is right, willing to face adversity, including negative consequences, to defend justice, etc.

Moral courage is characterized by a willingness to act against violations of social norms despite the possibility of negative consequences for oneself. As I said above, we have a certain personal perception or conviction about how brave we are. However, often our convictions, declared or not, about intentions to help others or intervene in the presence of injustices are not fully confirmed by reality. More specifically, there is a significant difference in real commitment between declared courage and behavioral courage. Knowing the level of self-esteem, the degree of social anxiety, the moral commitment of the person, effective predictions can be made about the person's beliefs about his moral courage or intentions to act against injustices in a social context. Nevertheless, when it comes to concrete, manifest action of this

[18] Here, “ethics” is used more in the sense of having some sort of a set of moral principles.

moral courage, beneficiary *sensitivity*[19] remains the only personality trait that predicts concrete involvement in courageous actions (Baumert, Halmburger, & Schmitt, 2013).

The Self and the Confirmatory Bias

People build about themselves certain perceptions or self-images, which include a series of traits and attributes, such as qualities, defects, competences, etc. In general, we all tend to protect the image we have of ourselves. For example, when it comes to important or lasting personal traits, people tend to construct richer self-images, i.e. to associate more traits with themselves (self-image) than when it comes to negative aspects (Cheung, Wildschut, Sedikides, & Pinter, 2014).

But this tendency to focus on the positive aspects when things are going well and the negative aspects when things are going badly, is not only found when we are the only ones in the analysis, but also in social contexts, in interactions with others. Thus, we have the preference or tendency to seek to interact with people who are accommodating with us, respectively, who seem to perceive us in a positive light, regardless of whether our image is authentic, corresponds precisely to reality or not. For example, when people build the belief that a certain image of themselves is a successful one, they tend to retain more feedback from those around them who confirm this image than from those who refute it (Sanitioso & Wlodarski, 2004).

Self, self-esteem and active disengagement

Another way people protect their self-esteem is known as *Active decommitment*. Active disengagement refers to the process by which people dissociate their self-image from negative feedback obtained in a given situation. Of course, not all people resort to active disengagement with the same intensity and frequency, and there are interindividual differences here as in any other aspect of life. The role that this mechanism of active disengagement plays is to protect the individual from unwanted outcomes of negative feedback (Leitner, Hehman, Deegan, & Jones, 2014).

The Self and Bias in Social Contexts

Another tendency we have regarding the qualities and defects we have is to consider that those who are part of our circles or groups to which we belong have fewer defects than those in other groups or circles. More specifically, we tend to consider the defects of those in our group as more explicable by *human nature* We are not part of the faults of those in other groups (Koval, Laham, Haslam, Bastian, & Whelan, 2012).

In the section dedicated to wellbeing, mood and social contexts, we talked about the role of social contexts and interactions on the wellbeing and mood of the individual. Again, when it comes to assessing social contexts, people tend not to make objective judgments. For example, we tend to underestimate the quality of life of others in most aspects of life and underestimate it in other aspects (Galesic, Olsson, & Rieskamp, 2012).

The self and the bias of the negative aspects

Even if most of our conscious actions are based on positive motivations, respectively, an effort for the better, even if we wish to live a beautiful life and describe it only in positive terms, we actually experience

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[19] *Beneficiary sensitivity,* in English in original, together with the sensitivity of the observer, the sensitivity of the victim and the sensitivity of the perpetrator, it is one of four types of perspectives that a person can feel when a social norm is violated from the point of view of justice or justice of the situation (Schmitt, Baumert, Gollwitzer, & Maes, 2010). It designates a person's predisposition to react with feelings of guilt and intentions to repair the situation when given an unfair advantage.

both pleasant and unpleasant events. We experience loss, suffering, conflicts and tragedies, events that we feel and interpret as negative, and that leave their mark on our lives.

Negative information is processed more thoroughly and deeply than positive information, with few exceptions, and this observation characterizes an extremely wide range of psychological phenomena that include how we interact with others and form more distant or closer social relationships, our emotional life, learning, development, social support, memory (what we remember), information processing (the way we think), perceptions we create, including about ourselves (self-image formation), etc. (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Wohs, 2001).

Research suggests that the origin of this phenomenon of preferential processing of negative events is an evolutionary one, with an adaptive role in phylogenesis, and that this predisposition may serve to protect us from negative events or happenings by being more prone to discriminate against negative stimuli in the environment and to process them more thoroughly (Baumeister et al., 2001). In addition, it seems that what makes negative stimuli more prevalent is that they are more capable of contagion than positive stimuli, respectively, that their level of association with other elements in our notional system is higher (Rozin & Royzman, 2001).

An example of a social situation where negative communication is more influential than positive communication is that of political messages. People tend to compensate for the lack of information about a person by making assumptions about that person's characteristics that are missing from the initial information package. For example, politicians often resort to transmitting, projecting, an image of competence, performance, or an image of a close, warm person, or, of course, both. When there is enough information for only one dimension, people tend to evaluate the other aspect of that politician in a more negative connotation. Moreover, when a politician resorts to a tactic of denigration, of presenting his political opponents in negative terms, the public perceives and evaluates him negatively. Somewhat counterintuitively, vice versa is not always valid (Koch & Obermaier, 2014).

Locus of Control

The term locus of control was introduced by Julian Rotter (Rotter, 1954) within his theory of social learning and further developed within this theory (Rotter, 1966). The locus of control can be considered a generalized expectation to consider the consequences as being under internal or, conversely, external control (Lefcourt, 1966). Specifically, the locus of control is an individual's belief as to the origin, source, or cause of the outcome of a particular action. Viewed in relation to the two opposite extremes of the locus of control, the cause of events (the attribution we make to determination) can be internal, i.e., to the individual, or external, i.e. to forces or factors external to the individual.

Another dimension of causality analysis includes consideration of the *stability* or *persistence over* time of the cause. For example, if an employee believes that the salary increase that they expect is decided by the analysis of the boss who is a demanding, meticulous, consistent, rigorous person, etc., we are dealing with a stable cause that does not change from day to day. If, on the other hand, the employee believes that the salary increase depends on the moodiness of the boss on that day, then the person's estimate of the causes of events is that they are fluctuating, circumstantial, unstable, temporary. We should note that, although the attributions we make to the stability of causes as well as to the internality of control are crucial in how we program and maintain our commitment to the pursuit of goals, they are not always and necessarily accurate. We can make errors of judgment in analyzing and evaluating the controllability and stability of cases.

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Judgments and decisions[20]

Common cognitive distortions

The motivations underlying our actions are greatly influenced by the evaluation processes we make about the nature of the situation, ourselves, the significance of the objectives or finalities of our actions, etc. All these evaluative processes involve reasoning and judgments, as well as making decisions about what we are going to do or what values of truth or untruth, respectively of certainty or uncertainty we associate with the situation.

Nevertheless, humans are not perfect information-processing machines. First, leaving aside the specifics of human information processing, in formulating a judgment we depend on the quality and quantity of information available to us. Then, multiple cognitive processing mechanisms are involved in making a judgment, cognitive procedures that may or may not be correct, interests in processing certain information more than others, etc. The tendency of people to think incorrectly, respectively to use incorrect cognitive procedures, is known as cognitive *bias*. For example, logical reasoning errors are a specific category of cognitive biases.

More specifically, a cognitive bias is a pattern or pattern of deviance in judgment, which can lead us to make wrong inferences about other people or certain situations (Haselton, Nettle, & Andrews, 2005). Like almost all complex phenomena, conceptualizing cognitive biases is a difficult and often controversial topic, especially in terms of classifying them or finding explanations for causative mechanisms (Gigerenzer, 1996).

The reasons why we are vulnerable to cognitive biases are multiple, complex, and often overlapping or competing. We can encounter cognitive biases when the heuristics (procedures for solving problems and finding meaning) used are lacking, respectively when we make logical leaps and preferentially use information (D. Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982), or when we're preoccupied with too many things at once (Simon, 1955), or when we are too emotional or subject to moral restrictions or imperatives (Pfister & Bohm, 2008), or, of course, when social pressure is very high (Wang, Simons, & Brédart, 2001).

In everyday life, we encounter countless situations of cognitive bias[21]. Some of the most important are: *Availability bias* (predisposition to consider an event as more representative as information about it is more available or the event is more special), *Overconfidence bias* (over-evaluation of the correctness of the judgments we make), *Hindsight bias* (predisposition to form beliefs at the present moment that we have correctly estimated the finality of an event before it takes place), *Self-serving bias* (predisposition to perceive ourselves in a favorable light, explained more fully, below, in relation to self-constructs), *Framing bias* or, simply, *Framing* (cognitive distortion associated with presenting a scenario of events, explained below in relation to its role in attributing causality), *Status quo bias*[22] (predisposition to consider the current state as preferable to other possible states), *Bias of anchoring and adjustment* (in which cognitive distortion is associated with the existence of irrelevant information from the environment, but which has the power to influence current estimates) (Trout, 2005).

Cognitive biases are particularly important for our daily functioning because they can result in a distorted perceptual construction of the surrounding reality, erroneous reasoning and wrong decisions (Baron, 1988; Daniel Kahneman & Tversky, 1974). In particular, the role of the individual is crucial in determining their behaviors and not just external factors or stimuli. More concretely, our social behavior is influenced by how we perceive the world around us (constructed reality) rather than by objective information that is

[20] This section is a translation of an excerpt from Stanciu (2014)
[21] See more here, Cognitive bias. (2023, September 21). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_bias
[22] Or, sometimes referred to as status *quo bias*.

transmitted to us (Greifeneder, Bless, Fiedler, & Strack, 2014). Therefore, a distorted construction of reality negatively influences the correctness of the way we relate to reality and, consequently, act in the real field. Moreover, biases are important both at the individual level, through the importance they have in influencing the autonomy and optimal functioning of the individual, and at the social level, through the costs they have on social wellbeing (Trout, 2005).

Evaluative judgments and self-determination

We often reflect in life on the causes that determined or decided the outcome of a particular course of events, especially when we ourselves took part, actionably[23], in those events. Mainly, people identify four major causes for the outcomes of events, causes most often in combination: a) ability (ability), b) effort, c) luck or chance, and d) difficulty of the task (Weiner, 1985, 1992, 2001).

For example, a student can attribute the good result he obtained (or hopes to get) in an exam to a) perceived self-efficacy, respectively to his own abilities and competences (i.e., that he is good at learning and does it easily), b) to the effort made (i.e., he worked or studied for a long time and constantly strived), c) chance (i.e., he was lucky and, possibly, others were unlucky), and/or, respectively, d) difficulty (i.e., that the exam was not difficult at all, but rather, the assessments he passed were simple and approachable). Similarly, if he failed a certain exam, he may think that a) he is not good enough in that subject, b) he did not learn enough, c) he was unlucky and was given exactly those subjects he did not learn, or d) it was too difficult an exam. In real life, attributions are less simplistic than they were expressed in the examples above. Rather, almost always the person will identify a combination of factors and/or make a hierarchy of the weight that any of the four types of factors had in the final outcome.

The extent to which people attribute the results of an event to chance, i.e., good luck or, conversely, bad luck, is strongly influenced by *Framing*, or how the scenario of events is presented to them. The more favorable an event is portrayed, the more that event is associated with luck. Moreover, the closer an unfortunate event is presented towards the end of a scenario, respectively, closer to the denouement, the more the end result is associated with bad luck (Hales & Johnson, 2014).

In addition to considering the four main types of causes described above, when attributing causes to a course of events we can add another level of analysis, namely that of the degree or extent to which the person considers that the outcome depended on it. This dimension or level of analysis refers to the place or *locus of control*[24]. This dimension, or level of analysis of causality or determinants of behavior, is sometimes referred to as internality or *controllability*. In this context, we understand by controllability the extent to which the person perceives that the determining factors of an event are under his control, or, conversely, are in an external area of control, under other influences, including chance or luck. For example, an employee may consider that the salary increase depends on how much effort he puts in and on his qualities (increased internality, internalized locus of control) or on factors beyond his control, such as the disposition of the employer or direct boss, etc.

The term locus of control was introduced by Julian Rotter (Rotter, 1954) within his theory of social learning and further developed within this theory (Rotter, 1966). The locus of control can be considered a generalized expectation to consider the consequences as being under internal or, conversely, external control (Lefcourt, 1966). Specifically, the locus of control is an individual's belief as to the origin, source,

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[23] Actively (directly involved), sometimes willingly and proactively.

[24] We keep in this work the name of *Locus of Control* Because it is already used as such in the specialized spoken and written language of Romanian psychology, on the one hand, and to distinguish it from the classical meaning that the term *place* could have it, as a reference to a physical location or location. From the perspective of his theory Rotter (1954), the locus of control is not physically internal or external to the individual, but merely designates by whom the root cause of the outcome holds, i.e., by the individual or external forces.

or cause of the outcome of a particular action. Viewed in relation to the two opposite extremes of the locus of control, the cause of events (the attribution we make to determination) can be internal, i.e., to the individual, or external, i.e. to forces or factors external to the individual.

Another dimension of causality analysis includes consideration of the *stability* or *persistence over* time of the cause. For example, if an employee believes that the salary increase that he expects is decided by the analysis of the boss, who is a demanding, meticulous, consistent, rigorous person, etc., we are dealing with a stable cause that does not change from day to day. If, on the other hand, the employee believes that the salary increase depends on the moodiness of the boss on that day, then the person's estimate of the causes of events is that they are fluctuating, circumstantial, unstable, and temporary. Of course, we must note that, although the attributions we make to the stability of causes as well as to the internality of control are crucial in how we program and maintain our commitment to the pursuit of goals, they are not always and necessarily correct. We can make errors of judgment in analyzing and evaluating the controllability and stability of cases.

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Communication

Assertive communication

Fundamental aspects of assertiveness

Assertiveness is a characteristic of human behavior, and in particular human communication, that has been defined in opposition to aggressive, passive, and passive-aggressive (or aggressive passivity) behaviors.

In a massively abbreviated presentation, those who intend to deepen the subject and/or develop this competence (because, ultimately, in the professional field, *e.g.*, mass media and communication, politics, didactics/teaching, etc., it goes beyond mere skill and is regarded as a competence), should be aware that:

- Assertiveness is not an innate characteristic[25], but, on the contrary, it must be learned through purposeful training and proactive practice.
- Assertiveness can appear to be a sort of middle-ground between the passivity-aggression continuum[26], and in terms of quantifying the intensity of the two in individual behavior it is. However, it is a **self-assumed process of cognitive-behavioral restructuring**!
- A key aspect of effective assertive expression is overcoming egocentrism. Self-centeredness is a natural tendency to interpret the world according to our own beliefs and meanings, and to consider this to be the normal and natural way everyone else looks at the world.

  Note: In reality, each person has their own conceptualization and understanding of the world and surrounding reality, and between individuals, there is only an overlap of these perspectives.

  In turn, this overlap/congruence of perspectives is dependent on a multitude of individual and contextual factors, and is not always perfect, and often not even satisfactory.

  An essential role in distancing these interindividual perspectives is played by the goals, objectives, and interests of each individual.

  Therefore, interpreted in the key described above, interpersonal conflict is a function of the combination of differences in perspective (including, or especially, interests), and individual behavioral habits and personal sensitivities.

Definition and description

Below you have a couple of verbatim "dictionary" definitions:

- "Assertiveness is characterized by calm, confident, tactful, straightforward expressions of feelings and desires" (Donsbach, 2008, p. 1331).
- "*n*. an adaptive style of communication in which individuals express their feelings and needs directly, while maintaining respect for others. A lack of assertiveness may contribute to depression and anxiety, whereas maladaptive approaches to assertiveness may manifest as aggression." ("Assertiveness," 2022; VandenBos, 2015, p. 80)

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[25] Of course, neither are passivity and aggression, but they are conditioned earlier in life (during development), and therefore, being deeply and earlier ingrained, can appear as more "natural" or even "innate."
[26] This perspective is limited and partial.

Therefore**, assertiveness** is the quality of being able to communicate in a safe and self-confident manner, without being aggressive. This ability includes listening and negotiating, as well as expressing preferences or needs to other people, groups, or organizations.

Being assertive implies on the part of the person to have **a strong**[27] **self-esteem**, as well as a willingness to defend their rights and decisions[28].

Assertiveness is associated with the ability to negotiate and influence others, which is a useful skill in creating the premises for *leadership*.

Assertiveness contributes to better physical health because it reduces stress and allows people to make better choices. For example, assertive people are less likely to engage in dangerous behaviors, such as using drugs or drinking alcohol, or participating in risky sexual situations.

People who are able to present their beliefs using logic and evidence are less likely to succumb to peer pressure or use aggression to manipulate others.

Assertiveness can be developed by training components and/or related skills. Practising in a safe environment, protected from threats, helps to naturally express assertiveness.

Passive and aggressive behaviors

Fear of others is often the foundation of non-assertive behavior[29].

Fear causes passive people to give in so that they avoid situations in which they should express their disagreement.

In turn, aggressive people use bullying tactics to dominate those they fear.

Lack of assertiveness can lead to low self-esteem and a less satisfying life. A person who is not capable of assertive expression can be easily exploited and defeated by the assertive or aggressive behaviors of others.

For example, a passive person may accept a financial loss rather than having to confront an aggressive or domineering salesperson in an attempt to return a defective item they bought.

In a work situation, when another person unfairly claims the merits of a successful activity, a passive person can avoid mentioning that they are actually the author. Likewise, they can give up defending themselves when unfairly criticized by a superior.

All these failures to speak for themselves result in strengthening feelings of embarrassment and low self-esteem[30].

An aggressive person will not hesitate to say or do whatever it takes to achieve their goals, regardless of the rights or feelings of others.

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[27] "strong" is not the same as "high". A "strong" sense of self-esteem refers to having solid grounds, whereas "high" self-esteem only refers to a (justifiably or not) high regard of one's self.

[28] Note: it is debatable to what extent defending one's beliefs (which may have erroneous foundations and be prejudicial) is a characteristic of assertiveness; assertiveness can be considered to include defending beliefs as long as they are not detrimental to others. Here, at least one of the debatable issues is whether the person realizes this aspect of their beliefs.

[29] See also the relationship of assertiveness with aggressive behavior, or, more correctly, the possibility of confusion and some theories that consider assertiveness as a component of *symbolic aggression.*

[30] Note: to understand the mechanism of reinforcements it is advisable to review the *operant conditioning* taught at level 1

Aggressive people often use tension, insults, nicknames, sarcasm, etc. to frighten others into giving in to their demands, essentially asserting themselves by destroying others.

For example, criticizing or mocking a colleague for a mistake may be an attempt to cover/mask their own mistakes or possible contributions to the colleague's mistake (*e.g.* did not provide the necessary information in time, etc.).

Goal alignment

Often, those who try to be assertive (being aware of the significance of this attitude) and even experts (those who study this attitude and train others) mostly focus only on the way of expression (e.g., clear formulation of objectives/intentions, politeness of expression, depersonalization/non-personalization of dialogue and especially criticism, etc.) and do so at the expense of finding *common* ground.

Specifically, *goal alignment* is a fundamental and critical aspect of communication efficiency. However, alignment of interests produces positive effects only if it is [1] correctly understood and [2] correctly applied. More specifically, we sometimes misunderstand that goal alignment means finding common terminology and/or topic of discussion.

It is correct that *the terminology* (vocabulary and dialogue style) used must be chosen and adapted in such a way as to maximize (and ideally ensure) understanding of what is being discussed. However, simply finding a *common topic* of discussion **is not** enough to create *the commonplace/denominator* referred to above.

A commonplace*/denominator* means, besides an obvious topic/topic of discussion, and often imposed by the formal requirements of the discussion, identifying and bringing into the collaborative process of assertive dialogue such a topic/topic of *personal*[31] interest to the interlocutor (or *core/set* of such topics).

A discussion that has as commonplace*/denominator* only a topic imposed officially/formally or agreed form as a pretext/justification for dialogue is often 'sterile' and lacks interest for some interlocutors, which can lead to a disengagement (lack of motivation) in finding a solution/resolution acceptable to all parties.

Planning and contract

As mentioned above, communication is a 'social contract' and effective communication involves reaching a certain level of consensus/agreement[32].

If all you want is to "tick" a checkbox on the to-do list of transmitting a message, then you must also assume the shortcomings that come along with superficial, unplanned communication, which does not take into account the interests and cognitive and linguistic areas of the interlocutor.

At the beginning of this material, one of the highlights was "attitude (global) vs. technique/tactics". Now, this emphasis is easier to understand. Conceptualizing assertiveness as a 'simple' technique/tactic (no matter how well taught by trainers and learned by trainees) is far inferior to conceptualizing and assuming assertiveness as a *global, lasting, consistent attitude, resulting from an authentic cognitive-behavioral restructuring*.

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[31] See (analyze and discuss) here the implications of *empathy* (including active listening) for identifying a topic of personal interest, as well as the implications of wanting and striving for goal alignment.

[32] So, ask yourself to what extent you did that. Also, ask yourself to what extent you involved your collocutors. Did you treat them as authentic interlocutors, i.e., participants in the dialogue, or as a passive audience, whose only purpose was to receive your message?

Nuances of assertiveness

The above is an introductory perspective on assertiveness. As you can certainly tell, there are many other important aspects to know about assertiveness. For example, research shows that there are different types of assertiveness and/or dimensions (Lorr & More, 1980):

a) Directiveness
b) Social assertiveness
c) Defense of one's interests
d) Independence

Clarifications

Often, dictionary definitions of *assertiveness* can create the false impression that it's okay to be (a little) aggressive; such a misconception is not very easy to avoid, because (at least) some of what we consider to be assertiveness is also found in symbolic aggression[33].

> *as·ser·tive* (adjective): disposed to or characterized by bold or confident assertion. Synonyms: aggressive, dynamic, emphatic, energetic, forceful, resounding, strenuous, vehement, vigorous —more at EMPHATIC[34]
>
> *as·ser·tive·ness* (noun): the quality or state of being assertive. Synonyms: aggressiveness, emphasis, fierceness, intensity, vehemence—more at VEHEMENCE (*Dictionary by Merriam-Webster*, 2022)

Assertiveness vs aggression

It is important to note that assertiveness is 'naturally' linked to aggression (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009):

See below the explanation of verbatim from the Encyclopedia of Communication Theory (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009)

> "Symbolic Aggressive Communication
>
> The first distinction made in categorizing aggression is physical versus symbolic. Aggression can take both physical and symbolic forms. Physical aggression involves the aggressor's forceful use of his or her body (roughly handling or striking objects or others). Symbolic aggression involves the aggressor's forceful use of his or her communication (words, gestures, facial expressions, vocal tone, etc.). It is this latter set of behaviors with which aggressive communication is concerned. Symbolic aggression can be divided into two types: constructive and destructive. Aggressive communication is composed of not one, but sev- eral traits, including assertiveness, argumentative- ness, hostility, and verbal aggressiveness. Each of these traits interacts with environmental factors to produce message behavior.
>
> Constructive Aggressive Communication
>
> Assertiveness is considered a constructive trait because it involves verbal and nonverbal symbols to exert control, obtain justified rewards, and stand up for one's rights. Individuals who are assertive can use symbols aggressively but tend to do so in socially acceptable ways. One facet of assertiveness is argumentativeness, defined as a stable trait that predisposes individuals involved in a conflict to defend positions on controversial issues and to verbally attack the

[33] e.g., asserting/imposing interests openly and loudly
[34] Do not confuse 'emphatic' with 'empathic'

positions of others. Argumentativeness is considered a subset of assertiveness as all arguing is assertive communication, but not all assertiveness involves arguing."

Finally, it is almost impossible to discuss assertiveness "in isolation", as an eminently personal construct, because assertiveness is defined in relation to communication, and therefore in a social context.

> '*interpersonal assertiveness*, [is] the degree to which people speak out and stand up for their own interests when they are not perfectly aligned with others' (Ames et al., 2017, p. 1).

However, *assertiveness* **is different from** *aggression* in that it aims to align interests and does not deny the achievement of objectives by the interlocutor or the unilateral imposition of a point of view.

> "Assertiveness is a way of being engaged for (!) one's own interests and needs; aggressiveness is a form of mobilizing one's energies in order to fight against (!) others. To be sure, there are situations in which the differentiating line between the two can be very thin. But that cannot count as a reason to deny the difference" (Staemmler &; Staemmler, 2015, p. 218).

Assertiveness Training

Although some are naturally assertive[35], especially those who have expansive personalities and high self-esteem, it is a trait that can be learned by those who want to modify their passive or aggressive behavior.

During this assertive training process, the person concurrently develops a sense of self-confidence, independence, authority, and control of emotions.

Assertiveness training has several steps; We start here by highlighting the differences between aggressive, passive, and assertive behaviors.

The client (the one in training) identifies[36] the people, feelings, fears (anxieties), as well as goals (personal and others) related to each situation[37].

Subsequently, the trainer (e.g., therapist) helps the client develop a plan for approaching these situations in an assertive manner, including in this plan what needs to be said, how to behave (down to gestures and attitude), how to make compromises without letting themselves be manipulated.

Group role play[38] gives the client the opportunity to train in a safe environment, protected from threats.

Endnotes (highlights)

- Assertiveness is *not* a tactic/technique, or even a strategy. Some behavior (including communication), and even a behavioral strategy, can be described as assertive.
  - An example of a negative effect that can occur as a result of misconceptualizing assertiveness as a tactic/technique, instead of a global attitude at the personality level, is the use of humor (and even irony). Using humor often de-escalates the situation, and can even be a personality characteristic, but it has nothing to do with assertiveness, and if not

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[35] Disclaimer: see previous footnote on the "innate" aspect, or rather, the correct use of the term "innate" vs. "natural"; See (analyze and discuss) also (from the perspective of) aggression (e.g., assertiveness as a component of symbolic aggression and clarifications in this regard).

[36] with the help of the trainer.

[37] It is advisable for these situations to be as concrete as possible, respectively, preferably examples of situations actually lived by the client.

[38] *role-playing* in English; it is a therapeutic and training technique in which participants play, possibly in turn, different roles.

done with enough delicacy, it can have negative effects on reaching consensus and establishing mutual respect, which is fundamental in goal alignment.
  - Other examples can be "depersonalization" and "downplaying." Depersonalization means avoiding/eliminating personal characteristics and downplaying refers to minimizing the stake/importance of the negotiated situation/challenge that is the subject of communication. Both are useful tactics / techniques for an effective negotiation (used appropriately) but promoted at the level of attitude / generic approach to communication, can easily create the impression of disregard and disrespect.
- Therefore, assertiveness is an overall characteristic of an individual's personality.
- Assertiveness is **not** innate, it requires conscious preoccupation (awareness and interest) and assertiveness training, and consistent, systematic, planaified implementation/application, i.e., *proactivity*.
- Assertiveness is based on understanding and promoting one's own values and interests simultaneously and in balance with the values and interests of others (goal alignment).
- Assertiveness involves:
  - understanding and accepting a workable compromise (which should not go up to/confused with/giving up).
  - promoting one's own interests despite the existence of competing / different / adverse interests (which must not reach the abuse of force or aggression).

Exercise/example of assertive communication

Step/step 1. Managing emotions

(control the emotional climate)

Start by estimating and adapting to the emotional experiences of the interlocutor (audience)

Course: What Does It Mean

- pacify/calm the interlocutor down, if possible
- initiate/ask for dialogue/discussion
- "sell" the opportunity for discussion

Step/step 2. Target specific issues in an empathetic manner

Listen carefully and respond empathetically, including asking questions on specific issues (and issues of interest to the intellectual)

course> what it means (e.g., speaking before being invited/stepped, you risk antagonizing the interlocutor from the beginning).

- Make sure the interlocutor knows that you listen with respect and interest
- Standard phrases:
  - I understand what's bothering you
  - Tell me what that means, exactly
  - Tell me what makes you think that

  - Help me understand what you're thinking/how to think about it
  - Can you tell me more/give me more details?

Step/Step 3. Reinforce your message

Rephrase (possibly rephrase) the problem to create a common semantic and linguistic area

- Be as objective and precise as possible and reserved in descriptions
- "Borrow" the interlocutor's vocabulary/words

Step/Step 4. Control communication channels

Extend control over channels by using non-verbal language, adapted to the verbal message

To avoid:

- Don't excuse yourself (avoid doing it), because that raises the subjective arousal and accentuates differences; If you have made an error, treat it as an error and openly offer to correct it.
- Don't be shy; Often shyness can be misinterpreted as avoidance, reluctance, indecision, or even concealment or lying.
- Don't be aggressive; No one likes to negotiate with an aggressive person because it is clear, from the beginning, that there will be losses/compromises; Even if you "win" the first round, you have an "enemy".

Step/Step 5. Incite change and "sell" it as an opportunity to win/goal alignment

Challenge/challenge the interlocutor outside their fixation zone, but not outside their comfort zone (!)

- Ask to look at the problem from other points of view/angles:
  - I understand what you say/how you think, but I would like to see if there are any other valid options also.
  - Have you thought about this possibility (your alternative)?

Step/Step 6. Create agreement/consensus

It's not always possible, especially when the "cards" are made before the "discussion" and the dialogue only happens because it has to take place.

- Review your expectations and evaluate earnings (There is no absolute law/rule that you must achieve all your goals: remember that all communication is a negotiation, and any negotiation is a transaction/exchange).
- Keep opportunities open for future dialogue and see dialogue as the first step toward consensus.

Other suggestions and points to remember

- provide enough relevant information

- just because you think you know what you want to say, it does not mean that your message contains the right information and is adapted to your collocutor

- stick to a clear outline and a structure of main points

- same as above, just because you think you have some points and a line of reasoning, it does not mean those are immediately apparent for your collocutor, or even that they exist in the first place

- provide a preamble

- provide prompting and refresher

- provide background

- provide a goal/aim for your intent to communicate

- why is it, in the first place, that you're opening up a communication

- is it a dialogue, are you making a point (monologue)

- be willing to explain your points

- and when you do, do not just repeat what you said; try to understand what was in your message that didn't get across and needs rephrasing or more evidence

- provide (factual) evidence and/or reasoning, not just opinions

- people may respect you and may be willing to listen to you, but that does not mean you are making a convincing case

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Persuasion and manipulation

Conceptualizations of Persuasion

Persuasion refers to ***the act of influencing or convincing someone to adopt a particular belief, attitude, opinion, or behavior through communication and reasoning***. It involves presenting arguments, information, and appeals in a compelling manner to sway the recipient's thoughts or actions. Here are a few definitions of persuasion:

- "the process by which a person's attitudes or behaviour are, without duress, influenced by communications from other people." (Britannica, 2023)
- "a symbolic process in which communicators try to convince other people to change their own attitudes or behaviors regarding an issue through the transmission of a message in an atmosphere of free choice. There are five components of the definition. [1] Persuasion Is a Symbolic Process. [2] Persuasion Involves an Attempt to Influence. [3] People Persuade Themselves. [4] Persuasion Involves the Transmission of a Message. [5] Persuasion Requires Free Choice." (Perloff, 2017)
- "Persuasion usually is concerned with changing the attitudes and consequently (under specific conditions) the behavior of people in a context of relative freedom" (Gardikiotis & Crano, 2015)

These definitions highlight the core concept of persuasion as ***a communicative process aimed at changing or reinforcing individuals' attitudes, beliefs, values, or behaviors, but without using dishonest means or violating the other person's rights***. Persuasion is a fundamental aspect of human communication and plays a significant role in various contexts, including advertising, public speaking, marketing, politics, and interpersonal interactions.

Conceptualizations of Manipulation

Manipulation refers to ***the practice of skillfully influencing or controlling others, often through deceptive or dishonest means, to achieve a specific outcome that may not be in the best interest of the person being manipulated.*** It involves exerting control over someone's thoughts, emotions, or actions for personal gain. Here are a few definitions of manipulation:

- "behavior designed to exploit, control, or otherwise influence others to one's advantage" (Association, n.d.).
- "controlling someone or something to your own advantage, often unfairly or dishonestly"(Dictionary, 2023)
- "Manipulation is directly influencing someone's beliefs, desires, or emotions such that she falls short of ideals for belief, desire, or emotion in ways typically not in her self-interest or likely not in her self-interest in the present context." (Coons & Weber, 2014)
- "Manipulation, the third person-environment mechanism, is defined by the tactics used intentionally to coerce, influence, change, invoke, and exploit the environment [...] (a) behavioral instigation, or tactics used to get another to do something, and (b) behavioral termination, or tactics used to get another to stop doing something." (Buss et al., 1987)
- "manipulation is hidden influence. Or more fully, manipulating someone means intentionally and covertly influencing their decision-making, by targeting and exploiting their decision-making vulnerabilities." (Susser et al., 2019)
- "[Manipulativity] is activity that aims "to achieve a desired goal (perverse or normal, symbolic or real) using deception, coercion and trickery, without regard for the interests or needs of those used in the process" (Bowers, 2003)
- "those efforts by which covert means are used to control or gain support from significant others. Typical ways include somatic complaints, provocative actions, or misleading messages, as well as self-destructive acts" (Gunderson & Links, 2008)

These definitions highlight manipulation as ***a process involving the deliberate use of tactics to control, influence, or deceive others for one's own benefit, often disregarding other's people rights***. Manipulation can occur in various contexts, including personal relationships, business interactions, and social dynamics, and it often involves exploiting psychological vulnerabilities or using subtle tactics to achieve a desired outcome.

Persuasion versus manipulations

Similarities Between Persuasion and Manipulation:

- **Influence:** Both persuasion and manipulation involve influencing others to adopt a certain belief, attitude, opinion, or behavior.
- **Communication:** Both persuasion and manipulation rely on communication to convey messages and influence others.
- **Outcome-Oriented:** Both aim to achieve a specific outcome, whether it's convincing someone to agree with a viewpoint (persuasion) or getting someone to act in a certain way (manipulation).
- **Psychological Factors:** Both consider psychological factors, such as emotions, cognitive biases, and social dynamics, to achieve their goals.
- **Techniques:** Both can use similar techniques, such as appealing to emotions, using social proof, and framing information in a certain way.

Differences Between Persuasion and Manipulation:

- Intent:
  - **Persuasion:** Generally has honest and transparent intentions, aiming to provide information and arguments to convince someone of a viewpoint.
  - **Manipulation:** Often involves deceitful or hidden intentions, seeking to control others for personal gain.
- Ethics:
  - **Persuasion:** Can be ethical and respectful, respecting the autonomy and wellbeing of the person being persuaded.
  - **Manipulation:** Often raises ethical concerns, as it may disregard the person's autonomy and wellbeing for the manipulator's benefit.
- Transparency:
  - **Persuasion:** Is often transparent, openly presenting arguments and information to help the other person make an informed decision.
  - **Manipulation:** May involve deception or withholding information to control the person's perception and decision-making.
- Consent:
  - **Persuasion:** Generally respects the person's right to make their own choice, even if they ultimately disagree.
  - **Manipulation:** May involve coercive tactics that limit the person's ability to make a free and informed choice.
- Long-Term Effects:
  - **Persuasion:** Often focuses on building relationships and trust, leading to more sustainable changes in attitudes or behaviors.
  - **Manipulation:** Can damage relationships and trust, potentially leading to short-term compliance but long-term resentment or resistance.
- Empowerment:
  - **Persuasion:** Can empower individuals by providing them with information and reasoning to make informed decisions.

- **Manipulation:** Can disempower individuals by taking advantage of their vulnerabilities or by using tactics that undermine their autonomy.

In summary, while both persuasion and manipulation involve influencing others, the key differences lie in intent, ethics, transparency, consent, and the long-term effects on relationships. Persuasion often involves respectful communication aimed at sharing information and fostering understanding, while manipulation may involve deceptive tactics to control others for personal gain, potentially at the expense of their wellbeing and autonomy.

Recommended readings

On persuasion

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