

## The role of life goals in successful aging

*El papel de las metas vitales en el envejecimiento  
satisfactorio*

*O papel dos objetivos de vida no envelhecimento bem-  
sucedido*

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*"If you want to live a happy life, tie it to a goal not to people or objects."  
(Albert Einstein)*

**ABSTRACT:** Personal goals are conscious mental representations of states that a person wants to achieve, maintain or prevent in future time. Goals are important in all stages of life, and precisely in old age, providing meaning to our evolutionary path, and guidance to a desired future. The aim of this article is to explain the concept of life goals, their importance in people's lives and their evolution over time. We will analyze the main theories about the changes and self-regulatory mechanisms of goals. Finally, we will introduce the empirical results of a research conducted in Mar del Plata, Argentina, where the content and direction of life goals in different age groups were explored. The results indicate that both young adults and older people have different occupational and interpersonal goals. While in both groups many goals are focused on achieving something new, seniors outperform the other group in the proportion of goals focused on maintenance, which coincides with different theories. This data can guide future community actions with this age group.

**Keywords:** Goals; Old age; Youth; Self-regulation.

**RESUMEN:** *Las metas personales son representaciones mentales conscientes sobre estados que una persona quiere alcanzar, mantener o evitar en el tiempo futuro. Las metas son importantes en todas las etapas de la vida, y puntualmente en la vejez adquieren mayor relevancia porque otorgan un sentido a nuestra trayectoria evolutiva, nos orientan a un futuro deseado. El objetivo de este artículo es aproximarnos al concepto de meta vital, cuál es su importancia en la vida de las personas y que sucede con ellas con el paso del tiempo. Se analizarán las principales teorías sobre los cambios y los mecanismos de autorregulación de las metas. Finalmente se expondrán los resultados empíricos de una investigación realizada en la ciudad de Mar del Plata, donde se exploraron el contenido y orientación de las metas vitales en diferentes grupos de edad. Los resultados indican que tanto los adultos jóvenes como los mayores tienen metas ocupacionales e interpersonales variadas. Si bien en ambos grupos la mayor cantidad de metas está centrada en el logro de la novedad, los mayores superan al otro grupo en la proporción de metas centradas en el mantenimiento, lo que coincide con las propuestas teóricas. Estos datos pueden orientar futuras intervenciones comunitarias con estos grupos etarios.*

**Palabras clave:** *Metas; Vejez; Juventud; Autorregulación.*

**RESUMO:** *Objetivos pessoais são representações mentais conscientes de estados que uma pessoa deseja alcançar, manter ou evitar no futuro. Metas são importantes em todas as fases da vida e, precisamente na velhice, proporcionando significado para o nosso caminho evolutivo, e orientação para um futuro desejado. O objetivo deste artigo é explicar o conceito de objetivos de vida, a sua importância na vida das pessoas e sua evolução ao longo do tempo. Vamos analisar as principais teorias sobre as mudanças e os mecanismos de autorregulação de objetivos. Finalmente, vamos apresentar os resultados empíricos de uma pesquisa realizada em Mar del Plata, Argentina, em que o conteúdo e a direção de objetivos de vida, em diferentes faixas etárias, foram exploradas. Os resultados indicam que ambos os adultos, jovens e pessoas mais velhas, têm objetivos profissionais e interpessoais diferentes. Embora em ambos os grupos muitos objetivos estejam concentrados em alcançar algo novo, idosos superam o outro grupo na proporção de metas voltadas para a manutenção, o que coincide com teorias diferentes. Estes dados podem orientar futuras ações comunitárias com este grupo etário.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Objetivos; Velhice; Juventude; Auto-Regulação.*

## Introduction

Within the lifespan development paradigm, Ebner and Freund (2007) see successful aging as a lifetime constant process in which resources for adapting to change are developed, maximizing gains and minimizing losses. It focuses on understanding the mechanisms and circumstances that facilitate a satisfactory development over time. Therefore, the link between skills and personal needs and characteristics of the environment are analyzed. This type of aging would be the result of the ability to select challenging and attainable life goals, that is to say, that are appropriate to current or acquirable resources.

Life goals enable us to understand these adaptation processes, while referring to personal goals that organize and motivate behavior and life development (Freund, & Ebner, 2007). Having goals helps us to give direction and meaning to our life. Goal setting is not final, but part of a dynamic process that changes over time depending on different factors. Goals are important throughout the lifespan, but particularly in old age due to the changes in personal resources and social representations. The aim of this article is to explain the concept of life goal, its importance in people's lives and what happens to the goals over time. Subsequently, we will analyze the goals' self-regulatory mechanisms and their explanatory theories. Finally, we will present the results of an empirical study conducted in Mar del Plata, Argentina, where the contents and direction of life goals in seniors and young people will be explored.

## Life goals

In general, the concept of goal is used to talk about the objectives to be achieved in life; these can be concrete, such as obtaining a university degree or getting a job. However, they may also be associated with more abstract goals, like being happy or being a good person. According to Brunstein, Schultheiss, and Maier (1999), personal goals are conceived as cognitive future-oriented representation of what individuals are striving for, want to keep or avoid in the future (Zea Herrera, 2012). In concrete terms they refer to representations of a future state which can be positive (hopes and aspirations) or negative (fears or concerns).

The importance of goals lies on the fact that they give direction and orientation to behavior, which enables goal achieving or avoidance. They also provide the context for a positive or negative evaluation of our present state; thus, if the distance between the present state and the desired goals is too wide, it is likely to adversely affect our well-being. The same applies in the case where the distance between our current state and desired states are too short (Villar, Triado, & Osuna, 2003).

Goals are doubly linked to both a personal level and a cultural level. With regard to personal development, the subject himself is the one who selects them, plans and sets in processes to achieve them. In addition, at a personal level, it refers to how a person defines his future, what he wants or where he would not like it to be. Regarding its cultural aspect, the goals are pointing toward an important evolutionary goal from a social and cultural point of view. In this sense, Freund, and Riediger (2006) state that the goals, while being future-oriented representations, are influenced by social expectations, reflecting on a set of rules that determine the possibilities and means that the context provides to each "social age " in order to achieve certain milestones. Through social sanctions - approvals or disapprovals -, selection and maintenance of personal goals is influenced by social expectations (Zea Herrera, 2012). This level includes beliefs about the times when it is appropriate or even possible to reach certain states, or hold certain goals. Villar (2005) holds that among the cultural restrictions that affect our evolutionary path, we may find the guidelines that each culture builds, which specify how a regulatory life cycle should be, indicating what we should have and how we should be. Thus, individuals belonging to the same culture share certain schemes on how the evolutionary development should be and the goals to be achieved. These goals would include different evolutionary domains (family, work, education etc.).

As regards future goal and objective building in different life stages, it is important to mention that these appear as early as in childhood, without posing a motivating value. From adolescence on, the building of an identity implies a series of future-oriented commitments, which implies the selection and participation in a series of more elaborate and specific life goals. When reaching adulthood, these objectives become vital future plans and expectations (Zea Herrera, 2012). In general, in adult life these goals are associated with a productive life – studying, getting a job, raising a family - with all that this implies concerning health, education, parenting, among other things.

In adulthood, there is also the need to coordinate these goals in different life environments; for example, coordinating goals in the family context with work goals. This task sometimes involves a prioritization of certain goals over others or negotiation with other people involved. Younger individuals tend to set very high and difficult-to-achieve goals, which can generate feelings of frustration. On the other hand, as the individual gets older, he/she learns to consider more realistic and easier-to-achieve goals, since the youthful high aspirations become a threat to happiness. Therefore, in the elderly the discrepancy between expectations and achievement is smaller (Zamarrón, 2006). This may be due to a personal change in priorities or a reformulation of the objectives which occurs in old age, where what is more relevant is to maintain and avoid losing what has been achieved by making an effort to adapt rather than to gain or grow (Villar, Traido, Resano, & Osuna, 2003). Thus, young people see the future as a time domain where progress can be made over the present, while older adults see it as a domain in which, they may maintain their positive conditions providing there are no difficulties. Cross, and Markus (1991, in: Villar, 2005), compared the future desires and fears in different age groups and found how older people - more than younger ones - emphasize the achievement and development of present roles and activities, rather than achieving new roles or activities.

### **Regulatory mechanisms of goals**

Goal setting is not a final, but a dynamic process. As we said, it is influenced by certain parameters around us and it changes over the life span; for example, in relation to the fulfillment or not of previous objectives, the availability of resources and materials or temporary means to achieve certain objectives, changes in the perception of control over certain objectives, among others (Zea Herrera, 2012).

The goals selection is based on the use of various self-regulatory mechanisms. There are three complementary theories which suggest the dynamic selection of life goals based on the changes over the life course, 1) Baltes' theory of selection, optimization and compensation (Baltes, & Baltes, 1990); 2) Coping theory by Brandstädter (Brandstädter, & Rothermund, 2002); and 3) Socio-emotional selectivity theory by Carstensen (Charles, & Carstensen, 2007).

The theory of selection, optimization and compensation studies the processes through which the use of available resources in the different areas of personal functioning is regulated. The mechanisms of selection, optimization and control become especially important in adulthood. They are put into operation when going through the process of change in personal resources. Selection refers to the choice and definition of personal goals, i.e. the specification of development trajectories. These changes may be related to personal choice or loss. Optimization is the focus of external and internal resources in order to maintain or enhance the functioning level in a specific domain, which is associated with expertise. Finally, compensation is a process that begins when there are losses; it aims to prevent or compensate for a decrease of a previous functioning level, and it is accomplished by allocating more resources to the function. By the synergistic operation of these three processes, people adapt to loss more easily and obtain psychological and physical gains against them (Baltes, & Baltes, 1990).

Secondly, Brandstadter's coping theory (Brandstätter, & Rothermund, 2002) describes two mechanisms that are triggered against the discrepancies between expectations and achievements. This psychologist identifies the existence of two types of responses: assimilation and accommodation. The first one implies the change of external situations and internal resources and it is put into play when the goal is attainable. Instead, accommodation is the modification of the goal when losses in the resources occur or when the goals are unattainable. This last coping type is more common in old age, due to the physical and social role losses, which are more frequent than in other stages of life.

Finally, Carstensen's theory (Charles, & Carstensen, 2007), offers an explanation to changing goals and motivations in a lifespan based on the perception of vital spare time. In youth, individuals do not perceive a time limit in their life, so they focus on goal achieving that will enable them long-term benefits. Unlike these, the elderly do perceive the end of their lifetime, so their motivational goals focus on the here and now, to get comfort and pleasure in the present time. Because of this reassessment of the goals, seniors prioritize sources of well-being linked to affective bonds and deliberately focus on the search for positive emotions. This results in generating high emotional levels of well-being and better regulation skills than in younger adults.

To summarize, it is important that all mechanisms presented here be based on the ability to assess personal resources available and the requirements of the situation. Stemming from this, all models agree that there are different possibilities for adaptation, according to the characteristics of the situation and the person, ranging from the redistribution of resources to the changing of personal goals. These perspectives highlight the active role of subjects in adapting to context, thus enabling successful aging.

### **Exploring the vital goals in Mar del Plata**

With the intention of looking at this subject more closely, different age groups - 50 elderly people (65-80 years old) and 50 young adults (20-35 years old) - participated in a limited research, which explored people's life goals in Mar del Plata, Argentina. We sought to include people with different socio-economic and educational levels. Those interviewed were asked to participate voluntarily and anonymously. We approached them in public institutions, recreation centers, educational institutions and public areas.

We explored qualitatively and quantitatively personal or interpersonal goals and projects that people want to achieve or maintain in their life, applying Ebner's instrument (Ebner, Freund, & Baltes, 2006). An average of 5.31 goals per participant was obtained with a minimum of 2 goals and a maximum of 7 goals informed. From the described goals, the following emerging categories were created to group them according to thematic affinity: social – to maintain and incorporate friends and partner affective bonds-; family –to maintain and build a family-; and work – personal and professional development -; leisure - entertainment and volunteering work-; health - health care and maintenance -; and possessions -acquisition of movable and immovable property-. From the selected goals, young people reported high frequency in work (111), family (69) and social (42) goals. Moreover, goals related to leisure (35), property (20) and health (2) were the least named. As for the goals selected by the elderly, issues including the family (69) and leisure (68) are those, which, depending on the frequency found, had greater importance for them. Work aspects (44) and social (33) followed them, leaving possessions (20) and health (13) as the last goals.

Regarding the comparison between both age groups, descriptively, we can see that young people have a strong preference for the work goals in their choices; while older adults have similar preferences in both leisure and family goals. Similarities in the low frequency were found in the mentioning of property and health goals; likewise, on the importance of social and family goals. At the same time, older adults scored higher in the leisure goals whereas young adults considered labor goals as more important.

Regarding goal-orientation reported, seniors had higher rates in maintenance-oriented goals than young adults (seniors: 117; young people: 48), and the latter, in turn, scored higher on achieving innovative project goals (seniors: 131; young people: 235). However, as it was seen, older people reported higher rates in novelty-oriented goals than in maintenance goals. In turn, we explored if these goals were individual or shared. We found that seniors experienced high frequency in projects of this second type (social: 134; individual: 113), while young people reported higher frequency on individual projects (social: 126; individual: 154).

The aforementioned findings agree with the background about the content and goal-orientation changes described. Older people prefer social goals focused on the maintenance as well as achievements goals. The favorite goals are related to personal life aspects, such as family relationships and the use of leisure time. Meanwhile, young people prefer individual goals aimed at achieving novelty and focused on the workplace. Based on the theoretical predictions it is interesting to note that both young and older people mentioned goals related to social representations and defined vital tasks and resources in their life stages, so we could infer that adaptation levels are high. These data contribute to challenge the prevailing stereotypes of older people in society, where older adults are shown as rigid people, without motivating and challenging projects.

## Conclusion

Throughout this article, we have tried to address the concept of life goal, show its importance in the lifespan and especially in the aging process, as not only does it allow for building toward the future but it is also the existential meaning of human life.



Aging is a process, which requires adaptation to change, which is going to make it possible to experience satisfaction and to help them face the regular losses in aging. Within these changes, the adjustments in the life goals are a central process. Research findings show that young and older adults report life goals, whose content is associated with socially constructed guidelines. However, we found differences in each group with respect to goal-orientation. While both young and old people report higher frequency in novelty goals, the older group outnumbers the other in their focus on maintenance. From this, we may infer that respondents apply regulatory mechanisms of revised goals, as the selection of achievable goals. They also develop strategies that enable them to maintain the achieved goals, particularly those aimed at leisure or family. They even reorganize towards achieving new goals, but with limited resources, which becomes a powerful coping mechanism. These courses of action for achieving certain development goals could be considered as gains in this process. Older adults who are passing through this vital stage today, they not only live with the normative patterns that somehow were established for them, but also challenge them by selecting achievement-oriented goals. Today we are building new models of aging in which seniors can develop themselves according to their individuality without following the old static ideals. The presence and variability of life goals is a valuable resource to have positive aging, since they provide an active life engagement developing a prospective process with a new meaning to each aging individual. These data suggest the creation of a new community environment for inclusion of the elderly, from social entrepreneurship or volunteering work. Given the importance of the social goals for the elderly, it is conceivable that this type of insertion is associated with what Villar (2012) called generative aging, where older people overcome old stereotypes about old age as a time of low productivity, and they perceive themselves as powerful and effective social subjects.

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