

Article

# Excellence in Professional Disciplines and Their Importance in Social and Educational Entrepreneurship

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**Abstract:** Knowledge of the potentialities and strengths of individuals is a premise of numerous studies today, even more so when we are in a historical moment characterized by dizzying changes that demand innovation and creativity from society to adapt to such challenges. The aim of this study is to identify and analyse the personal characteristics, together with the role of contextual mediators, of fifteen relevant Portuguese nationals recognised for their excellence. To this end, an interview generalizable to different professional contexts is used, seeking to explain the process of development and manifestation of excellence of the participants in their professional areas. Although the concept of excellence is complex, its approach is essential to favour, among other aspects, social and educational entrepreneurship. Therefore, knowing and understanding the personal and professional trajectories of these subjects may allow us to make an approximation to those distinctive characteristics of excellence, with a view to proposing a conceptual model for action in the social and educational fields. In this way, among the characteristics drawn, it is worth pointing out the necessary specialization in at least one professional area, its manifestation from an early age, the determining influence of the family, teachers or illustrious personalities, or the consideration that its incidence is not a gender issue.

**Keywords:** excellence; professional disciplines; personal and contextual variables; entrepreneurship; society



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## 1. Introduction

Excellence does not consist in achieving an extraordinary result at a given time, but in the work of each day where excellence must be shown. It is a daily task [1]; that is, it is not a specific objective or a goal to be achieved. Rather, it is a continuous process in search of perfection in everything that is carried out [2]. Excellence would be achieved when a person has a positive attitude towards a certain performance, perceives the social norms that support that behaviour, and believes that they have the control to carry out that action, elements all integrated into the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) [3].

In the professional field, excellence refers to a particularly high performance in one or more professional activities in a socially recognized context; we could say that it refers to 3% or 5% superior performance in each of these activities [4]. For other authors, such as [5], professional excellence is synonymous with professionalism, but not understood as a characteristic linked to commitment, but to competence and wisdom. In other words, professional excellence does not imply being committed to the task but refers to being an expert in the field. Sternberg [6], in his experience development model, states that professional excellence appears when there is acquisition and crystallization of a set of skills considered necessary for high performance in one or more performance areas. In addition, it is necessary to be aware that there are personal and contextual variables that are at the origin, manifestation, and evolution of professional excellence [4]. Next, a conceptual approach to these variables is developed.

First of all, personal variables can be divided into cognitive, motivational, and personality variables, highlighting the fact that their manifestation is not isolated within excellence [7]. In this way, excellence arises from the interdependent interaction of these variables, since together with the possession of superior abilities, it is important to manage them adequately and effectively in any context that demands it, so that the motivational and personality variables complement the necessary requirements for excellence.

When we talk about human excellence, the first idea that comes with it is that of exceptional performance associated with high cognitive abilities, that is, the presence of personal attributes of various kinds that result in the manifestation of one or more potentials of higher rank unlike those of the typical population, always bearing in mind the incidence of environmental factors [8]. Excellence becomes a multidimensional concept [9], whose identification of capabilities is key to making it visible [10–12], and favour adjusted socio-educational responses that favour a balanced development throughout the different stages of their life cycle [13,14].

In this sense, in these processes of acquisition and crystallization of skills, an essential aspect for their achievement is motivation [15]. Tauhed et al. [16] state that enthusiasm and commitment to the quality of professional achievements enables the attainment of excellence. This high motivation manifested by a given activity may explain perseverance and high involvement in deliberate practice [4], resulting in continuous improvement in their performance [17,18]. To this end, providing challenging and engaging learning and development opportunities is an essential source of motivation for individuals [19].

It is also important to mention the role of personality variables associated with excellence [20]. Among them, emotional intelligence plays a leading role, since excellence requires coping skills and resilience in the face of difficulties that may appear in performance and, above all, adequate management strategies and stress management in demanding situations of development and decision-making [21]. There are areas of manifestation of excellence that appear in close connection with the autonomy, independence, and non-conformity of individuals, characteristics that delimit the way of facing tasks and that constitute a particularly relevant aspect of excellence in some areas of production [4].

Along with personal variables, contextual variables are also essential, highlighting the importance of family and school, mainly as keys to an individual's excellence, especially in their early days [22]. Taking these contexts into account, it is essential to avoid the existence of socio-cultural stereotypes that could affect social success in the manifestation of professional excellence [23]. Thus, on the one hand, family education is characterized by the balance between freedom and order, demand and affection, together with the presence of incentives, guidance, and support. In addition, parents reinforce intrinsic motivation, value talent and human values, and support their children's learning with reading materials and equipment, experiments, and science games. In relation to the school, the teaching staff stands out for their instruction focused on incentives and personalized orientations, characterized by the passion shown when teaching and for putting into action individualized and differentiated teaching practices. Thus, in the talent development model proposed by Gagné [24], excellence arises from the active participation of the individual in certain areas of learning, showing their full potential and seeking to deepen the essence and content of the proposed activities.

These personal and contextual variables are key to the individual's entrepreneurship, a term closely connected to excellence [25]. The concept of entrepreneurship is a somewhat diffuse concept in which there is no unanimous consensus on its definition [26]. The various conceptions of entrepreneurship that have been developed over time have shaped this concept with a multiple dimension that transcends merely economic borders to be present and consolidated in other facets of people's activity, for example, in the social and educational fields. In this way, aspects related to entrepreneurship can be developed in any environment, such as the search for opportunities, the assumption of risks in complex contexts, creativity, and leadership [27].

In this sense, entrepreneurship has an intimate connection with professional excellence, since most of the characteristics linked to entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship are essential to achieve professional excellence, beyond contextual aspects or personality traits that in one way or another, also influence entrepreneurship [28]. Thus, aspects such as creativity and the ability to solve problems through innovation, motivation, and perseverance [29], decision-making [30], and especially leadership [2,27,31], are, among others, key elements of entrepreneurship that lead to professional excellence.

Generally, entrepreneurship is usually associated with the achievement of an economic benefit that has a direct impact on the entrepreneur, but there is also a social enterprise that seeks a direct benefit in society. This social entrepreneurship is an increasingly relevant instrument for addressing various social problems [32], whose momentum has increased significantly since the recent global pandemic [33].

Activities closely linked to social entrepreneurship are community work, volunteer actions and public organizations, but they also involve private companies that, although they have or may have their own benefits, focus on achieving a benefit that reaches society itself, thus seeking to improve the quality of life while maintaining a balance between economic profitability and social needs [34]. For various authors [35–38], social entrepreneurship consists of promoting social changes to solve problems or needs in the social sphere through innovation and taking advantage of opportunities. Although there are subtle differences between the two types of entrepreneurs, social and commercial [39], since they have to preserve the social impact and maintain the economic viability of the project [40], it is evident that both fields share and require training in the same skills and competencies [41,42].

Therefore, there is no doubt that excellence is a multidimensional phenomenon due to its diverse nature and due to the variety of interdependent factors that can have an impact. This article takes a closer look at the clarification of these possible factors in the geographical context of Portugal. The aim is to take a look at the differentiating characteristics of people who have achieved professional excellence in various disciplines with a view to establishing common characteristics and patterns of manifestation.

## 2. Materials and Method

The methodology used in this research has been qualitative based on a continuous process of analysis and interpretation of information derived from the comparison of the conceptual approach of the literature review with the contributions of the participants, in order to know and understand how trajectories of excellence are characterized through direct testimonies of excellent people.

### 2.1. Participants

The participants were adult individuals who show professional excellence in their field of activity widely recognized by the Portuguese scientific community. The type of sampling used was intentional non-probabilistic. The heterogeneity of selected profiles has made it possible to enrich the work carried out, seeking from this diversity common and specific aspects on the path to excellence in these areas. Therefore, through the instrument used, relevant people from fields such as the arts, literature, sports, scientific research, medicine, business, and various sectors of social life have been interviewed, which we group under “citizenship”. The search for a similar number of people for each field of activity has not been a premise of this study since, as we will observe later in some cases, professional activity goes beyond a specific field and, in addition, singularities appear in excellence resulting from the “unique and dynamic combination of contextual influences and the personal characteristics of each individual” [9] (p. 279). The characterization of the sample was as follows (Table 1):

**Table 1.** Characterization of the participating sample.

Variables	Characteristics
Gender	Male: 8 or 53.34%
Professional Area *	Arts (2 or 13.34%): FPR per OR Citizenship (4 or 26.67%): AM, DA, FVD of the JTF Sport (2 or 13.34%): RF and ND Business (2 or 13.34%): MLPFC and RN Research and Science (3 or 20%): AP, MA, and SS Literature (2 or 13.34%): AC y AV

Source: authors. \* For each area, the initials of the participants are indicated.

**2.2. Instrument**

To analyse the professional excellence of the participants, a structured interview already available was used as a methodology for collecting information [43]. This instrument integrates the recording of personal and contextual variables, training itineraries and professional trajectories, and opportunities for the exercise of autonomy and the support of significant agents. The complete interview template is as follows (Table 2):

**Table 2.** Structure of the instrument.

Topics	Questions	Information
Legitimacy of the interview	Do you give your informed consent to it?	Objectives of the study and reinforcement of the importance of collaboration, guarantee of confidentiality of data and request for relevant permission
Introduction	How did you start working in your professional field? When? At what age? What led you to start working in this area?	Beginning of the general approach
Formation	Throughout your training, how did your interests develop? What difficulties or barriers did you encounter on your way? What did they mean to you? How did you treat them? Throughout your training, what moment stood out to you the most? What did this moment mean to you? What happened? Did that moment have any impact? In what sense? Did it cause any kind of change? What stages did you have to go through to reach your current level?	Exploration of significant experiences throughout their training: opportunities to develop interests, barriers and difficulties and highlights and critical incidents
Current performance	Speaking a little more specifically about your current activity, can you describe a typical workweek? How many hours do you work per day? How do you manage your time? Do you have routines? Which one/which ones? How does it work? What strategies (“or sacrifices”) do you use to make the most of your time? What other activities (professional and leisure) do you do? How much time do you spend per week? How does it contribute to your professional activity?	Knowledge of the particularities associated with the main activity today, particularly regarding aspects related to deliberate practice, self-regulation strategies, organization and time management

Table 2. Cont.

Topics	Questions	Information
Involvement in a task-practice-process	<p>How do you prepare for your professional activity?            What is important to ensure your performance is effective? Can you describe a situation? What kind of goals do you have? Process? The result?            How do you react when your goals aren't achieved?            Can you give an example of a situation?            Can you give an example of a situation where the objectives were clearly defined and achieved?            What gets you involved? What's important to stay on task? What's distracting you? What do you do to deal with distractions?            Thinking about some situations that cause you stress, anxiety, or pressure, can you describe a few? Does anxiety have a negative or positive impact on performance? Can you describe a specific situation?            How do you deal with these situations? What strategies do you use? What is the role of enjoyment/fun in the way you develop your work?            How do you deal with challenges or situations that present a certain degree of risk and/or unpredictability?            Can you identify your best and worst moment or performance? In terms of your best performance, why does this moment stand out? What allowed this to be your best performance? And the worst? What happened? What impact did both have on the development of your work? Some authors argue that luck also influences the path to excellence, what do you think?            What are your current goals? And for the future?</p>	<p>Exploration of the specificities associated with problem-solving and the process of performing a task/activity: concentration, distraction, anxiety and stress, pleasure/enjoyment, and goals</p>
Personal characteristics	<p>What do you consider to be the keys to your success?            Acknowledging that you stand out from your peers in the same area, what characteristics differentiate you?            Are the qualities that develop your work (goal setting, perfectionism, self-regulation...) also present in other contexts of your life? How do they manifest themselves?            Have you ever been given a "nickname"? Or a "brand image"?</p>	<p>Search for singularities in terms of psychological characteristics: personality, perfectionism, curiosity, autonomy, and independence</p>
Reference figures	<p>Which people have had a significant impact on your life (positive or negative)? Can you explain why they had that impact? What characteristics do you identify in these people that marked you?</p>	<p>Identification of significant people who have contributed to the development of excellence, mainly influence and characteristics of these people</p>
Interpersonal relations	<p>Where did you find your group of friends? Do they share the same interests, or do they have other characteristics? How do you combine social relationships with professional activity?            In your personal career, you will surely have encountered situations of "pressure" from parents, relatives, teachers, or friends. Can you describe a situation?            How do you manage these "perceived pressures"? What role do they play (or played) in your trajectory?</p>	<p>Exploration of particularities related to social support network, social and family sacrifices, and "pressure" from peers and family members</p>
Relationship in the scientific/artistic community	<p>How do you feel about your scientific/artistic community? Do you feel encouragement, gratitude..., or, on the contrary, some barriers? What is the value of your productions in this community?</p>	<p>Analysis of the social value of the work carried out within the respective professional community: types of assessments, competence, and cooperation</p>

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Araujo et al. [43] (pp. 278–279).

The common structure of this interview has made it possible to ensure information related to the detection and maturation of skills and talents, indicators of excellence and specific illustrative experiences throughout the training cycle and professional practice, social and ethical sense of their activity, opportunities, and social equality of resources of excellence in today's society and future perspectives.

### 2.3. Procedure and DATA Analysis

After making contact with the participants to request their collaboration and once they gave their informed consent to participate in it, the interviews were carried out, the most appropriate option due to the determination of the purposes of the study, the existence of multiple variables and dimensions that could be integrated into the research, and the lack of evaluation instruments and research adjusted to the characteristics of these individuals [9]. Despite being a structured interview model focused on a case study, participants were asked to expand their answers in order to gather as much information as possible. The participants gave their consent to publicize all the information collected, so it was not necessary to sign any anonymity and confidentiality agreements.

For the analysis of the data, percentages have been indicated after delimiting frequencies in order to analyse the main characteristics of professional excellence. Therefore, a qualitative, categorical, and, mainly, inductive content analysis was carried out. The delimited categories are divided into personal (cognitive, motivational and personality) and contextual, differentiating between main and secondary characteristics.

## 3. Results

The results are presented taking as a reference the topics established for the development of the interviews: introduction, training, current performance, involvement in a task-practice-process, personal characteristics, reference figures, interpersonal relationships, and relationship in the scientific/artistic community.

All the interviewees stated that in professional excellence it is essential to specialize in at least one specific area, a performance that is closely associated with experience. This, together with a series of personal and contextual characteristics that are outlined below, is considered essential to achieve professional recognition.

Almost all of the interviewees (86.6%) started at an early age, except for the MLPFC and AM (13.3%), who started as adults. The interviewees FPR, OR, RN, AP, and VA (33.3%) started in the infant stage; the participants JTF, FR, SS, and AC, (26.7%) started in the primary stage; the interviewees DA, FVD, ND and MA (26.7%) started in the secondary stage.

The interviewees AM, JTF, FR, ND, RN, AP, MA, DA, FVD, MLPFC, and SS (73.3%) do not talk about the need to share their productions, as they do not consider it relevant. On the other hand, the participants FPR, OR, AC, and AV (26.7%) talk about sharing as inevitable, stating that "without sharing, creation is similar to building a ship and never leaving the port" (AC).

Most of the interviewees—AM, JTF, FR, ND, RN, AP, MA, FPR, OR, AC and AV (73.3%)—do not highlight a moment/circumstance/person that led them to join or approach the area where they have achieved excellence; MLPFC and SS (12.3%) speak of the importance of their family; DA (6.7%), speaks of the perception of the adventure and that each stage and each test were experiences that tested his physical and intellectual abilities, encouraging him more and more to continue; FVD (6.7%) speaks of the ideal of justice, the altruistic reasons, and the commitment to achieve justice that "no longer motivate the new generations". They all talk about how they have been helped on their path by their family (parents, spouse, grandparents, aunts and uncles, or another relative such as a cousin), a teacher or professor, or illustrious personality; as the interviewee MA says, referring to Isaac Newton, "if I have seen further, it is because they have carried me on the shoulders of giants".

Regarding the attributes of their personality that have contributed to their path, individuals FPR, OR, MLPFC, RN, AP, MA, SS, and AV (53.3%) speak of hard work and perseverance; FPR, FVD, MLPFC, RN, and MA (33.3%) speak of humility; AD and AP (13.3%) speak of exceeding their own limits; ND and MA (13.3%) speak of willingness to take risks in adverse situations; AM (6.7%) comments that you should never give up; FR (6.7%) points out that he wants to be better than his “rivals”; JTF (6.7%) says he does not stay silent and changes the things he cannot accept and that he “doesn’t mind getting his hands dirty so that the world stays clean”; the interviewee AC highlights that “talent is not born with us, it is the result of passion, will, discipline and determination, which would not be possible without pleasure”; the interviewee MA comments on a phrase by Winston Churchill that said that “the pessimist sees difficulties in every opportunity while the optimist sees an opportunity in every difficulty”.

The interviewees AM, DA, RN, and SS (26.7%) do not highlight that they have encountered significant obstacles on their way to excellence; FPR, FVD, JTF, MA, and VA (33.3%) indicate that no obstacle is overcome if it is not faced and that difficult challenges and paths with more obstacles develop us more and make us stronger and happier; MLPFC and AP (13.3%) tell us about instability; AC (6.7%) highlights that it is always difficult to start and did not know anyone; OR (6.7%) talks about their insecurities, doubts and existential crises; ND (6.7%) speaks of a certain personal inconstancy in the journey with ups and downs along the way; the subject FR (6.7%) talks about the injuries that he has always overcome because of what was his strongest point of all, his head, and that he did not give up on anything.

The participants DA, MLPFC, AP, MA, and AC (33.3%) explain that each opportunity that life offers you is unique and commitment makes the difference, since success can only be achieved by taking advantage of opportunities and not by being passive; AM and FVD (13.3%) do not make distinctive statements about the opportunities encountered in their trajectory; JTF and ND (13.3%) talk about the fact that we do not go alone and the importance of going with the best in our professional area and training in high-level environments with a very cohesive work group; the interviewee OR (6.7%) highlights that “living to succeed distracts us from the path and brings us pain”; FPR (6.7%) indicates that opportunities do not always appear when we need them most, but rather when we have to look for them; the interviewee FR (6.7%) points out that “if each of us can be the best of ourselves instead of the worst, the world will always end up being better too”; RN (6.7%) states that they are not satisfied with what they have already achieved because they have a clear idea that they could have done more; SS (6.7%) highlights that the episodes that marked him the most were the mistakes since mistakes are the best way to learn, 6.7%; AV (6.7%) talks about the importance of rewards and prizes; MA (6.7%) acknowledges that luck was also an important factor and reminds us that Thomas Jefferson stated that “the more I try the luckier I seem to be”, meaning that luck takes a lot of work.

The interviewees OR, AM, FVD, FR, and AP (33.3%) do not talk about their origins. On the other hand, individuals FPR, DA, ND, MLPFC, AC, RN, MA, SS, and AV (60%) recognize constant family support, which is the result of their origins and that it is essential to find harmony between family and professional spaces trying to define the appropriate priorities at all times. The interviewee JTF (6.7%) highlights that “without emotion and affection no one can grow”.

Subjects AM, FR, and ND (20%) do not talk about whether they would retrace the path they travelled and if this was due to vocation; FPR, OR, DA, JTF, MLPFC, RN, AP, AC, and AV (60%) recognize that they would follow the same path again; FVD, MA, and SS (20%) point out that “we cannot recreate the past in the light of present knowledge, since the mistakes made must be life lessons”. The interviewees OR, AM, DA, FVD, JTF, FR, ND, MLPFC, RN, MA, AC, and AV (80%) do not talk about whether the path followed was by vocation; FPR, AP, and SS (20%) recognize that the path followed initially was a vocation that ended up becoming a mission.

FPR, FVD, FR, ND, MLPFC, and AC (40%) do not speak about teaching and today's youth; on the other hand, the interviewees AM, DA, RN, AP, MA, SS, and AV (46.7%) have a positive vision of education and today's young people, saying that education is everything or almost everything and that if we all have access to it, the world will be more just and humane, since the world needs ethical and moral references. On the other hand, the interviewees OR and JTF (13.3%) have a negative view of education and young people today, highlighting that we find ourselves with an education system with few alternatives, with a traditional and somewhat retrograde vision, highlighting the insensitivity of young people to human rights problems, cultural ignorance, mediocrity with styles of opinion that tolerate violence in the most refined forms and a total disinterest in knowledge and learning, which leads to disharmony between people.

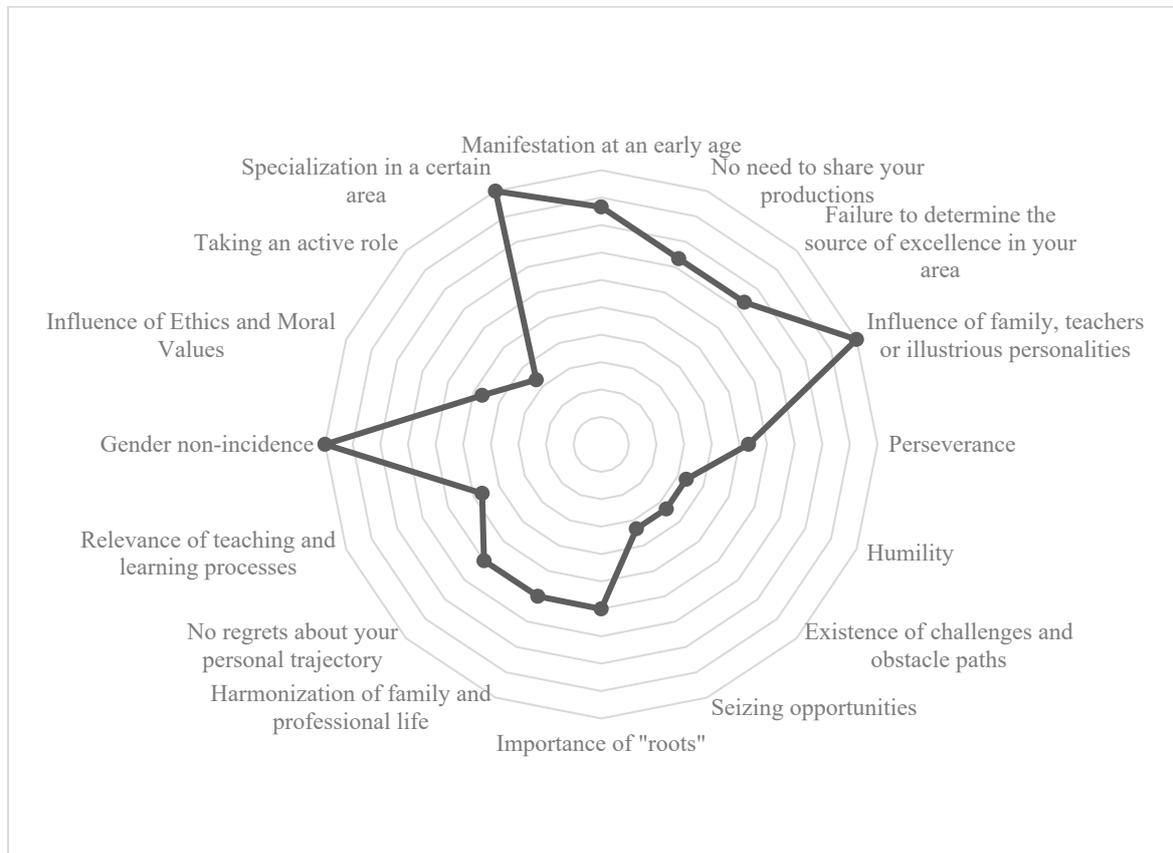
All participants pointed out that professional excellence is not a gender issue; 46.7% of the individuals, OR, DA, FVD, FR, MLPFC, AP, and AV, are women and believe that they constitute an unquestionable and indispensable balancing factor in the decision-making processes of the dynamics of modern societies, but that they have suffered centuries of oppression without the right to equal education that "they have had to run like crazy not to miss the train, but that the train doesn't stop and sometimes the skirts are still trapped" (OR); women can achieve successful and first-class careers albeit with more difficulties; the process of achievement can take longer; and that, therefore, there is still much to achieve, highlighting that there are no jobs for women and men but that there are suitable people in the right places, stressing "that there would only be gender equality the day an incompetent woman was appointed to a leadership position" (AV).

AM (6.7%) does not have an opinion on the subject of ethics and excellence; OR, DA, FVD, JTF, ND, MA, and SS (46.7%) believe that ethics and moral values shape our path of personal development, being the challenges we face and the way in which we face them in our way of acting, those that define who we are; as Teresa of Calcutta said, "not all of us can do great things but we can do small things with a lot of love"; SS (6.7%) highlights that he would never use the word excellence as it is an "exaggeration".

Once a transcription of the most relevant information of the development of the interviews is made, it is necessary to draft an approach to the characterization of professional excellence, being aware that there are no "single paths" in its achievement and characterization [9], even among people with professional excellence in the same field [44]. Therefore, what main and secondary characteristics would professional excellence have, based on the interviews conducted? As main characteristics, those most endorsed by the interviewees have been selected, while secondary characteristics are those that have considered by a smaller number of them. In this way, the following Figure 1 would represent the main characteristics of professional excellence according to the considerations made by the interviewees:

On the other hand, the secondary characteristics of professional excellence would be: openness to experience; ideal of justice, altruism and social commitment; the instinct to push one's limits; risk-taking in the face of adverse situations; an attempt to never give up; competitiveness, to be better than others; nonconformity; passion and pleasure for what you do, will, discipline and determination; optimism; curiosity; sometimes a certain instability in the face of challenges; difficulties in the absence of referents in their field; manifestation of insecurities and existential crises; ups and downs and personal inconsistency; consideration of their potential as a reference point for their personal life; originality and flexibility in decision-making; relevance of training at high levels; the importance of highly cohesive working groups; pain at the feeling of living for success; the importance of the search for opportunities, which do not always come when they are most needed; the need to do our best at all times; life dissatisfaction and perfectionism; self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation; the importance of learning from mistakes as a key, as those made are taken as life lessons; influence of rewards and prizes achieved; incidence of a certain amount of "luck" generated by effort and work; the need to be close to loved ones; vocation-driven career path; management and planning of tasks and situations; pessimism

towards the moral and ethical performance of the new generations, mainly due to their lack of interest in knowledge and democratic coexistence and human rights; consideration of excellence as something unattainable.



**Figure 1.** Main characteristics of professional excellence. Source: authors’ own elaboration.

Finally, taking as a starting point the personal and contextual variables initially indicated, an approach to the characterization of a conceptual model of excellence taking into account these main and secondary characteristics and being aware that some of them could be integrated into several variables, could be the following (Table 3):

**Table 3.** Approach to a conceptual model of excellence.

Characteristics	Variables			Contextual
	Cognitive	Motivational	Cognitive	
Main	Manifestation at an early age. Failure to determine the origin of excellence in your area. Relevance of teaching and learning processes. Specialization in a certain area.	Perseverance. Seizing opportunities. Playing an active role. Existence of challenges and paths with obstacles.	Humility. No regrets about your trajectory. Influence of ethics and moral values.	No need to share projects. Influence of family, teachers, or illustrious personalities. Importance of origins. Harmonization of family and professional life. No gender incidence.

Table 3. Cont.

Characteristics	Variables			
	Personal		Contextual	
	Cognitive	Motivational		Cognitive
Secondary	Curiosity. Consideration of your potential as a reference for your personal life. Originality and flexibility in decision-making. Relevance of training at high levels. Importance of learning from mistakes. Career path guided by vocation. Management and planning of tasks and situations. Consideration of excellence as something unattainable.	Instinct to overcome one’s own limits. Assumption of risks in the face of adverse situations. An attempt to never give up. Ups and downs and personal inconsistency. Importance of looking for opportunities. Need to always give the best of ourselves. Self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation. Influence of rewards and prizes achieved. Incidence of a certain “luck” but given by effort and work.	Ideal of justice and altruism. Competitiveness. Nonconformity. Sometimes there is a certain instability in the face of challenges. Passion and pleasure for what you do, will, discipline and determination. Optimism. Manifestation of insecurities and existential crises. Life dissatisfaction and perfectionism. Pessimism towards the moral and ethical performance of the new generations.	Social commitment. Openness to experience. Difficulties in the absence of referents in their field. Importance of highly cohesive working groups. Pain at the feeling of living for success. Need to be close to loved ones.

Source: authors’ own elaboration.

#### 4. Discussion

Excellence presupposes having good cognitive abilities, skills, and knowledge, a fundamental aspect of social and educational entrepreneurship. With the analysis of the content of the interviews conducted with these excellent people in various fields, we have observed in their biographies, among other aspects, the importance of their perseverance and passion for learning and performing well [45]. In addition, it has become clear that in adult life, the contexts of achievement and work are decisive for achieving excellence, highlighting the need for environments guided by innovation, security in interpersonal relationships, incentives for productivity and openness to experience [46]. Therefore, the personal trajectory of each subject throughout their development is key to the manifestation of their potential [47,48].

These constituent elements of excellence appear to be closely related to entrepreneurship. In recent years, largely due to the influence of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), entrepreneurial education has come to encompass the field of social entrepreneurship [49], with the training objective of generating awareness, skills, and competencies increasingly committed to social problems [42,50], although there is still a certain lack in the field of research that specifies the different currents and trends of social entrepreneurship [51].

In this way, only in favourable social and institutional contexts would they allow personal resources to be translated into professional excellence. It has been observed that work situations that do not encourage people to realize their talents and skills, whether cognitive, emotional, or physical, generate more or less permanent feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction [52]. In the development of excellence, today’s institutions will need to be challenging and innovative organizations that create opportunities for professional growth and reward such personal investments. This will be the only way in which individuals will be able to mobilize to improve their skills and, therefore, seek professional excellence. In today’s globalized world, many countries struggle to avoid brain drain among their populations. Therefore, as indicated above, the generalization of opportunities and the establishment of productivity rewards are essential.

The eight men and seven women in these fifteen interviews speak from the example of their lives, which, through the uniqueness of their stories, allows us to find three patterns. The first pattern is the combination of pleasure and work through the freedom to think, create, investigate, serve, develop, and follow one's own trajectory; freedom guided by human rights is "the basis of everything" (FVD).

The second pattern is action; in these interviews, the importance of action, initiative, and audacity is observed. Acting is not only completed in movement, but is always creation, thought, reflection, writing, research, and introspection. In the words of RN: "You play and win, or you don't play and you lose! And I always made that bet. I played to win. I never played, losing. Not even in Africa. And when I lose, the loss is foretold. Sometimes, when you lose, you win".

The third pattern is present in the statement of MLPFC at the end of his biographical note: "My success is related to the generations that worked before me, to my family, to the team I have, to the region and, finally, to the consumers. The house lives for them". In different ways, the interviewees FR and ND also explain the importance of others, of collectives, of the support of peers and coaches. Nothing can be achieved alone. Sometimes, help comes from previous generations, such as from the teachers that MA tells us about. In other cases, it comes from our peers, as SS explains very well: "Error is the best way to learn and that is why the use of multidisciplinary teams for diagnosis and treatment is imposed, as well as the use of a second opinion whenever there is a doubt, no matter how small". It is with others that we make our lives.

In terms of the limitations of the analysis as carried out, it would be interesting to expand the participant sample to improve the characterization of professional excellence in each area, as well as expanding the professional disciplines analysed and taking a specific theoretical model as a reference for its foundation. These three proposals could mark a proposal for future research, with the aim of valuing, knowing, and supporting the existence, manifestation, and characterization of professional excellence, a field that has been observed to stand out for the complexity of its conceptualization and its uniqueness. In line with the latter, a pertinent line of research could be the design and construction of an instrument for the evaluation of professional excellence, a lack that exists in this field, as has been pointed out, which, after its administration, could lead to a replication of the results of this research.

In short, society and its different contexts must be aware that in order to promote excellence, it is essential to offer adequate contexts of education, training and professional practice that are favourable to its expression. In addition, entrepreneurship, intensive work, deliberate practice, having optimal experiences and interaction with significant others, the acquisition and implementation of diversified skills within a given area, the management of coping strategies and emotional regulation, and commitment to tasks are essential aspects [9]. The effort should be to promote individual talents, differentiating educational and professional trajectories, ensuring personal fulfilment and the development of society [53]. To this end, based on the personal accounts of several Portuguese individuals, this article has made an approach to characterize and socially share the circumstances that could best explain professional excellence.

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