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## **Experiencing Life at a Young Age – Identity Problems and the Strategies for Coping with Them, as Perceived by Academic Youth**

*We don't see things as they are, we see things as we are"*  
(Anais Nin)

### **Abstract**

This paper deals with the way young people experience an identity crisis, which is analyzed in terms of the self-creation problems that academic youth are confronted with. It is also an attempt to outline strategies for coping with a crisis, including adolescent rebellion, considered to be a peculiar form of dealing with the problems related to self-creation.

An identity crisis has been analyzed in the aspect of fundamental “ego” states (identity forms), classified in the article into two general categories: an integrated, pro-developmental identity, and a disintegrated, anti-developmental one. In the study the author also examines the potential consequences of identity disturbances, and the mechanisms governing the process of creating an individual identity.

Analysis of rebellion, the experience which young people go through, aims at investigating its two fundamental forms (inner vs. outer rebellion), and the main underlying sources (altruistic vs. egocentric rebellion).

The examination of strategies for coping with problems, presented in the article, includes: constructive activity, active and passive escape, and seeking social support.

**Key words:** *youth (young age), young people (youth), development, identity, identity crisis, rebellion, coping strategies.*

## **Introduction**

The tasks which an individual is faced with throughout the entire life are unbelievably tricky and complicated. They require awareness, maturity and support for solving the natural existential problems. This should encourage deep reflection on the socializing influences which a young generation is exposed to, and on the directions for its socialization. We also have to take into consideration the fact that nowadays shaping an individual's identity is based on the principles which are different from the ones characteristic of a traditional society. In the past, the process of creating a stable and consistent identity was clearly defined – it used to be commonly known what kind of person one *should* or what kind of person one *must not be*. Nowadays identity is created according to the principle of freedom of choice from a broad range of culturally available conceptions of self, none of which is dominant, and each of which can be chosen in the process of self-creation. It is undoubtedly a factor which hinders making the final decision, and at the same time underlies developmental disturbances.

A sense of identity plays an exceptional role in an individual's functioning in the social world, as well as affects the person's development. It is the sphere which enables making self-assessment, judging other people, as well as providing explanations and interpretations of the social world surrounding the individual (Mielicka 2000). During the period of adolescence, the crystallizing ego (self) of an individual serves certain functions, which include verifying former identifications and life experiences, and then integrating them into a new whole – a mature identity. It allows individuals to self-determine themselves, as well as to select freely and adopt the values which they consider to be positive, and to “dissociate themselves from” the ones which they regard as negative. It conditions both preserving a sense of self-esteem, and gaining social acceptance (Oleszkowicz 1995).

A definite form which identity takes is affected by interactions and experiences related to them. Hence, two kinds of mechanisms responsible for the process can be distinguished: non-reflective identification with other people, and a reflective perception of the differences between them. Gaining identity is, therefore, inherently interlinked with the process of socialization, in which an individual's initial subjective convictions become gradually objectivized and finally generalized. Accordingly, the identity creation process is determined by a number of various factors, which start to operate only in the sphere of interactions within fundamental social groups.

The adolescent identity crisis needs to be resolved to allow further effective development of an individual. Originally, the process of self-creation involves copying, and subsequently it transforms into adopting rationally selected identification patterns. Psychosocial functioning of a human being, and active creation of one's own self and everyday life are determined by a triad of factors which include: reconstruction of one's own past, which allows providing a conscious definition, explanation and understanding of "the here-and-now" functioning; construction of a vision for one's own future, which is conditioned by self-determination in the context of the past and present, and which motivates action and planning; and finally self-perception (self-awareness, self-determination, a sense of self-esteem, self-affirmation), which supports the construction of a vision for the future.

### **Identity problems and strategies for coping with a crisis – theoretical and methodological assumptions of the research conducted by the author**

Academic students, among whom the research was carried out, have already gained their fundamental self-identity, and are able to determine their own identity status. Therefore, the natural consequence of the crisis they experience might be different states of this identity, classified into two categories: integrated, pro-developmental identity, and disintegrated, anti-development identity. An integrated identity is related to resolving an identity crisis, that is to say, the ability to make a realistic appraisal of one's self, of one's own limitations, skills and capabilities; the ability to design one's own axionormative system, which governs behaviour patterns; inner coherence and order; and integration with the surrounding world, not accompanied by the feeling of self-depreciation or opposition against the social surroundings. Whereas disintegrated identity may take several forms, which differ both in terms of manifestation, and their underlying mechanisms (Erikson, 2000, 2004; Mamzer 2003; Marcia 1966, 1967; Wysocka 2005). They include:

- 1). *Negative identity* – characterized by the feeling of having many negative features ("I'm not OK."), which in the critical situation may end up in projection of the negative features onto others ("You're not OK.").
- 2). *Opposition identity* – related to adopting the values which have been rejected within a given culture ("You aren't OK."). The reason behind this may be a retaliatory motivation, considered to be the consequence of the person's

strenuous attempts to take control of one's own unfavourable situation arising due to the reversible social stigmatization and rejection.

- 3). *Ineffective, inhibited identity* ("I'm not OK.") – indolent, inflexible, fixed; triggering regressive behaviour; causing disappearance of self-control and autonomy, which hinders self-fulfillment (impoverished and neurotic personality) and turns the process of self-creation into imitation of an external authority.
- 4). *Identity diffusion* – characterized by confusion and lack of integrity of the fulfilled roles, and the inability to unify them; lack of continuity and a sense of personal sameness; and the impossibility to answer the question "Who am I?" and "Where am I heading for?"; which restricts the person's ability to make independent choices and decisions ("*diffused ego*").
- 5). *Mirror, reflection identity* – characterized by non-reflective acceptance of the conception of self imposed by the social environment, and created based on significant people's opinions, and not accompanied by individual reflection. The answer to the questions "Who am I?" and "Where am I heading for?" is a mirror reflection of the sense of identity determined by society and culture ("*conformist ego*").
- 6). *Postponed, ambivalent, unstable, insufficiently specified identity*, which stems from the ability to see a number of self-creation possibilities, yet not paired with the ability to select one of them. Characterized by a range of various, and very often contradictory, conceptions of self, which chop and change ("*indolent ego*").

When facing crisis situations, young people have to find some way to cope with them. It frequently takes the form of rebellion, which becomes an inherent characteristic of youth (adolescence).

The attempt at displaying the category of rebellion, presented in this paper, has been limited to the analysis of its pro-developmental vs. destructive (anti-developmental) nature, taking into account some characteristics of the phenomenon. Adolescent rebellion is a form of expressing opposition against, and refusing further approval for the existing situations and the status quo which a particular young person subjectively considers to be limiting and threatening, and inconsistent with the individual's idealistic expectations or conceptions. The rebellion takes place at two levels: the inner sphere of experiences and evaluation; and the outer one, related to behaviour. Though, it is worth stressing that the two aspects of rebellion may (though do not have to) coexist. There may be various functions of rebellion (Oleszkowicz, 1996, 2006) from ego dominance, through ego defence, to

inventive self-creation. There is also a variety of mechanisms underlying rebellion, from perceiving limitations and hazards to subjectivity, to observing the divergence between the postulated ideal world and reality. Anna Oleszkowicz distinguishes two forms of rebellion – outer (open, straightforward and explicitly manifested); and inner (hidden, muffled); as well as two kinds of rebellion – altruistic (aimed at protecting other people's interests), and egocentric (directed towards accomplishing one's own objectives).

Generally adopted coping strategies may have an anti-developmental or creative character, and are generally classified into two categories: resignation (withdrawal) strategies; and offensive strategies, which have their subsystems – a positive and a negative one (Ostrowska, 1998).

Positive (reflective) resignation is aimed at protecting the accomplishment of a certain objective, which is connected with the necessity of choosing some higher values over others, but does not cause a loss of belief in one's own values and abilities. Negative (emotional) resignation is linked to the loss of self-trust and the belief in one's own abilities, the potential consequence of which is a tendency towards self-destruction (addictions, suicides).

A positive offensive strategy is characterized by activity aimed at self-protection and protecting others. Whereas its negative form is a peculiar kind of interaction, which is either exploitative (manipulation) or directly destructive (violence, displaced aggression) in character.

In order to determine the strategies for coping with problems which are most popular with academic youth, the author has devised a Scale of Abilities to Cope with Crisis Situations. It allowed to identify four fundamental coping strategies:

- a). *constructive activity* (objective: problem solving) – self-reflection, self-improvement, developing interests and passions, physical activity (8 items, a 9 – to 32-point scale);
- b). *direct escape, passivity, minimizing problems* (defensive mechanisms, withdrawal, emotional distancing) – passivity, seeking refuge in fun and company of other people, losing oneself in dreams, relieving stress by means of intoxicants, suicide thoughts (12 items, a 12 – to 48-point scale);
- c). *indirect, active escape, seeking substitute solutions* (defensive mechanisms, substituting, intellectual distancing), conducting activities in favour of other people, seeking refuge in religion and ideology, non-reflective conformism (6 items, a 6 – to 24-point scale);
- d). *social support* (turning directly to others for help – friends, parents, teachers, other adult authority figures) (5 items, a 5 – to 20-point scale).

## **Identity problems and strategies for coping with a crisis – a few empirical exemplifications**

The survey research was conducted at the beginning of 2007, among academic youth (Silesian Polytechnic, Silesian University, the Higher School of Pedagogy of the Society of Public Knowledge in Warsaw, Faculty of Social Science and Pedagogy in Katowice) aged 20–25 (N=173), with the use of an auditorium questionnaire.

The youth were sufficiently diverse in terms of sex, the place of living, parents' education. In respect of age, the survey participants were selected through random sampling, whereas the choice of an institution of higher education was intentional.

The survey analysis includes identity problems, the nature of rebellion, and the strategies for coping with an identity crisis, adopted by academic youth.

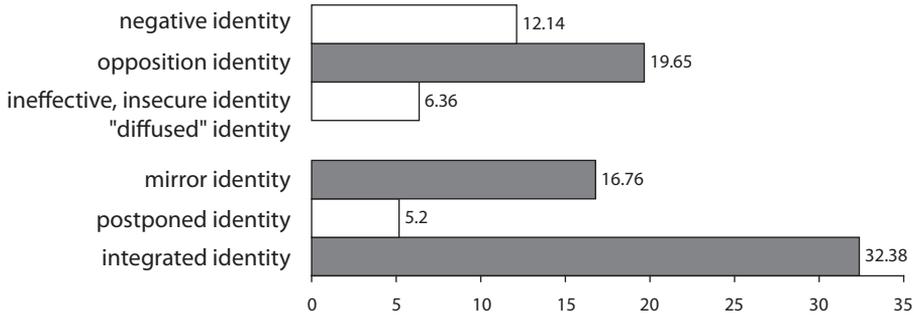
### **1. Problems with identity – forms, underlying mechanisms and developmental consequences**

An analysis of the identity problems which the young encounter was conducted at two levels. The aim of the initial stage of the examination was to determine the identity forms prevailing among the respondents (negative, opposition, ineffective, internally incoherent, mirror, postponed, internally and externally coherent) (Tab. 1, Fig. 1); and the next stage was an attempt to determine the general identity categories (pro-developmental, integrated vs. anti-developmental, disintegrated; internally disintegrated vs. disintegrated with the world; self-reflective vs. non-reflective) (Tab. 2, Fig. 2).

A triad of the main identity types has been reported in the survey. The prevailing one was an integrated identity, internally coherent and integrated with the external world, rationalized (32.38%); a less common one was an opposition identity, rebellious, in disagreement with the external world (19.65%); and finally a mirror identity, reflected, excessively and non-reflectively conformist (Fig. 1). This points to the fact that young people choose various adaptation strategies, predominantly rational ones (reflective conformism), and less frequently emotional (rebellion) or indifferent ones (non-reflective conformism, servility).

Two criteria have been taken into account while investigating the general categories of identity problems (Tab. 2, Fig. 2): developmental consequences of the particular "I states" (integrated, pro-developmental vs. disintegrated, anti-developmental); and the mechanisms which underlie the self-creation problems

**Fig. 1: Identity forms experienced nad reported by the surveyed academic youth (N=173)**



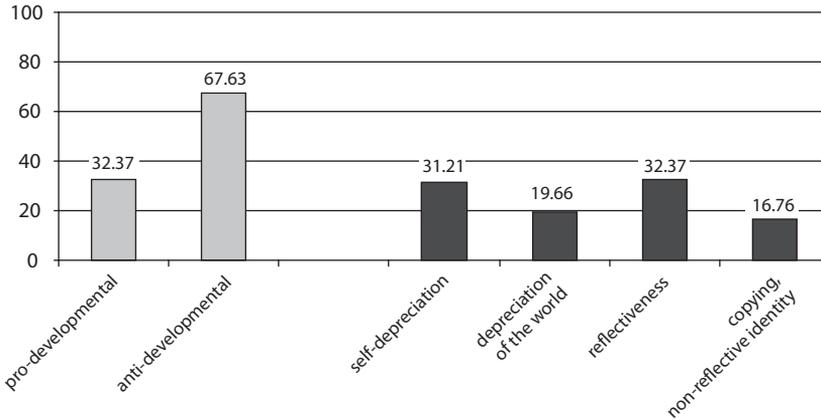
**Table 1: Identity forms experienced and reported by the surveyed academic youth (N=173)**

Forms of identity	n	%	Rank
Negative identity (“I’m not OK.”)	21	12.14	4
Opposition identity, rebellious (“You’re not OK.”)	34	19.65	2
Ineffective, insecure identity (“impoverishing, neurotic”)	11	6.36	6
“Diffused” identity (internally incoherent, diffusion)	13	7.51	5
Mirror identity (non-reflective, conformist “I”)	29	16.76	3
Postponed identity (indolent, passive, helpless “I”)	9	5.20	7
Integrated identity (internally and externally coherent)	56	32.38	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>-</b>

(internal vs. external disintegration, non-reflectivity) or support the process of self-creation (self-reflection, making conscious choices).

The analysis of potential developmental consequences (Fig. 2) indicates that various versions of anti-developmental identity (67.63%) dominate over a pro-developmental one, grounded on self-reflective self-creation (32.37%). However, the survey results reveal a range of various underlying mechanisms, the most prevailing of which is internal identity incoherence (self-negation – 31.21%). Negation of the surrounding reality (externalizing blame onto the environment), and non-reflective indifferentism (nothing can be done), constitute a consider-

**Fig. 2: Developmental consequences and the mechanisms underlying the process of identity creation, as perceived by academic youth (N=173)**



**Table 2: Developmental consequences and the mechanisms underlying the process of identity creation, as perceived by academic youth (N=173)**

Developmental consequences of identity problems	n	%
– pro-developmental “I states” (ego-identity status)	56	32.37
– anti-developmental “I states” (ego-identity status)	117	67.63
<b>Total</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Mechanisms underlying the process of identity creation	n	%
– self-depreciation ( <i>internally disintegrated identity</i> )	54	31.21
– depreciation of the world ( <i>identity disintegrated with the world</i> )	34	19.66
– reflectivity ( <i>self-reflective identity, consciously created</i> )	56	32.37
– copying ( <i>non-reflective, borrowed identity</i> )	29	16.76
<b>Total</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>100.00</b>

ably lower proportion of the data collected in the survey (31.21% and 19.66% respectively). This proves that young people place the blame for the crisis situation they experience onto themselves, which consequently might trigger off the process of defensive projection of the blame for the problems they encounter onto the surrounding environment, or lead to abandoning the attempts at genuine self-creation (borrowed identity).

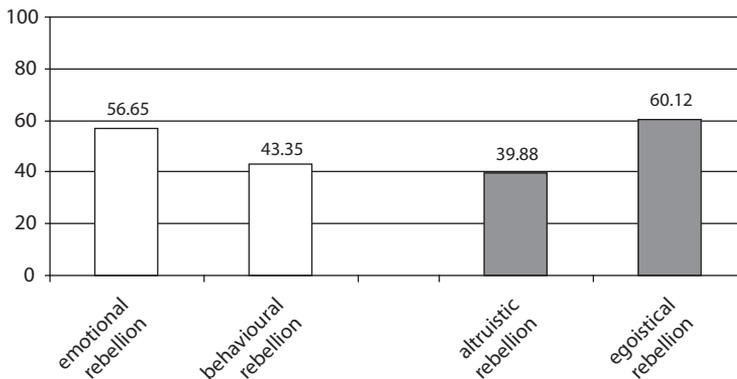
## 2. Rebellion as experienced by academic students – forms and kinds of rebellion

Rebellion against the reality created by adults, potentially arising from adolescent idealistic attitudes and beliefs, is an inherent psychosocial characteristic of young people. The study of the fundamental forms of rebellion (Tab. 3, Fig. 3), distinguished on the basis of the forms of manifestation (open, behavioural rebellion vs. emotional, hidden rebellion), as well as the underlying sources (idealistic altruism vs. rational egoism); reveals a rather interesting regularity, namely prevalence of hidden rebellion (56.65%) of the egoistic nature (60.12%).

**Table 3: Forms and underlying sources of rebellion experienced by academic youth (N=173)**

Forms of rebellion	n	%
Emotional (hidden) rebellion	98	56.65
Behavioural (open) rebellion	75	43.35
<b>Total</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Underlying sources of rebellion	n	%
Altruistic rebellion (idealism)	69	39.88
Egoistic rebellion (realism)	104	60.12
<b>Total</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>100.00</b>

**Fig. 3: Forms and underlying sources of rebellion experienced by academic youth (N=173)**



This result proves the existence of both instrumentalism and external control (hidden rebellion), as well as egocentrism (egotistic rebellion). According to the theory of positive disintegration (Dąbrowski 1975, 1979), which emphasizes two fundamental dimensions of the process of identity development: egocentrism vs. pro-social attitude (attitude towards others – “extended I”), external vs. internal control (autonomy and subjectivity of an individual), the development of the surveyed youth is characterized by immature personality (externally controlled, with a “limited I”).

### 3. Strategies for coping with an identity crisis, reported by the surveyed students

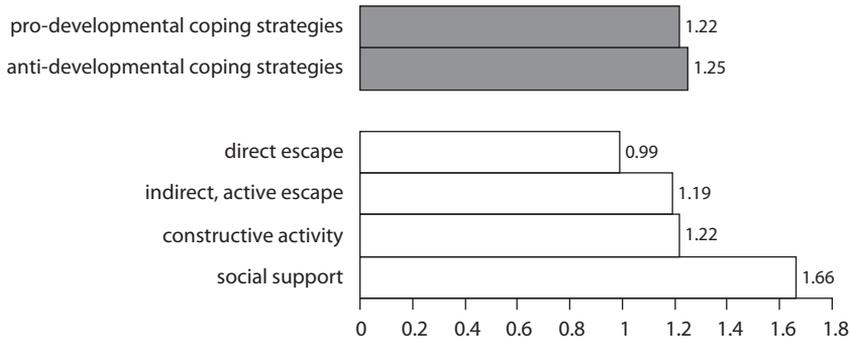
It appears that the coping strategies reported by the surveyed students partially correlate with the self-descriptions they provided, as well as the forms of rebellion (Tab. 4, Fig 4).

The survey results appear to show something of a paradox, related to the fact that the surveyed youth reported rebellion against the world of adults, but at the

**Table 4: Strategies for coping with a crisis, reported by academic youth (N=173)**

Reported coping strategy	n	%	Quotient H:L	Rank
<b>Social support</b>				
– low figures (L)	65	37.57	<b>1.66</b>	<b>1</b>
– high figures (H)	108	62.43		
<b>Total</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>100.0</b>	–	–
<b>Constructive activity</b>				
– low figures (L)	78	45.09	<b>1.22</b>	<b>2</b>
– high figures (H)	95	54.91		
<b>Total</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>100.0</b>	–	–
<b>Indirect, active escape</b>				
– low figures (L)	79	45.66	<b>1.19</b>	<b>3</b>
– high figures (H)	94	54.34		
<b>Total</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>100.0</b>	–	–
<b>Direct escape</b>				
– low figures (L)	87	50.29	<b>0.99</b>	<b>4</b>
– high figures (H)	86	49.71		
<b>Total</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>100.0</b>	–	–

**Fig. 4: Strategies for coping with a crisis, reported by academic youth (N=173)**



same time 62.43% of the respondents declared that they seek adults' support in coping with problems (quotient H:L=1.66). It provides indirect evidence that there is "hunger for authority", and describes the underlying mechanism of rebellion, which is rooted in the fact that adults fail to perform certain duties that are aimed at supporting self-creation of an individual.

The second common strategy adopted by young people is constructive, rational and conscious coping with inner crises (54.91%; quotient H:L=1.22), which points to considerable autonomy, independence as well as personal and social maturity of the respondents.

The survey results indicate that young people attach not much lesser importance to searching for some substitute ways of coping with problems, which undoubtedly springs from lack of other possibilities, and most commonly takes the form of intellectual-distancing (54.34%; quotient H:L=1.19), rather than emotional escape (49.71%; quotient H:L=0.99).

Summing up, the analysis of the coping strategies reported by the surveyed academic youth reveals slight prevalence of anti-developmental coping strategies, which do not allow development of an individual's potential (quotient H:L=1.25), over pro-developmental ones (quotient H:L=1.22). This proves inner chaos, ambivalence in decision-making, reactive behaviour, insufficient ability to control one's own life in a coherent, integrated and rational way, which simultaneously points at unsolved identity dilemmas.

## **Final thoughts**

An interdisciplinary perspective on the adaptation problems among the young generation, presented in this study, is characteristic of the social pedagogical approach, which focuses on the very individual who creates his or her own life on the basis of the person's conceptions of the world and life as well as under the influence of the social environment which conditions an individual's development. However, it should be assumed that even according to the classical conception of social pedagogy (a theory of social forces) the focal point in the reflection on human everyday life is a human being and his perspective on his own life. It results from the fact that it is a human being who creates his own existence, which has a reciprocal effect on an individual. Although the existence conditions prove to be considerably important to an individual's development, a human being, endowed with awareness, is able to make a reflective assessment and a final decision. It can be assumed that a young individual is potentially able to choose his or her own path of life, since the person gains a psychological status of an independent individual, which results from the fact that the individual creates his or her own identity ("me like me"), distinct or gradually distinguished from social identity, borrowed during childhood ("me like us"). This does not mean that the person loses it, but an individual modifies the social identity, imparting on it his or her own individual personal attributes, which originally stem from simple, non-reflective opposition against the concept of the world (and self) introduced by the adult generation (and culture), subsequently transforming as a rule into reflective opposition, linked with awareness of one's own individual objectives (transformation of rebellion). It means, however, that in the educational and socializing circumstances, which favour this phenomenon, a generation of educators should adopt an attitude of "democratic consent to independent mistake-making and self-creation".

*Translated by Iwona Mrozińska*

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