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Young Adults in the Process of Academic Education and Shaping Their Life Project

ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to look at university education as an important developmental task and an element of young adults' life project. Both the expert literature and the results of empirical research make it possible to treat higher education as an important element of entering adulthood and undertaking mature social and professional roles. Fulfilling those roles enables the young to collect life experience and to crystallize their mature life project. That project comprises many tasks the fulfilment of which allows young people to become adults and to build a mature identity. Becoming an adult occurs very individually, with the use of one's own experience, resources, and competences. Therefore, the final developmental task can be viewed as the pursuit of adulthood and as undertaking mature obligations. In the case of young adults studying at university, that task involves the fulfilment of many social and (pro-)professional roles. Moreover, university students are provided with the possibility of verifying their current choices and investments in their own future before undertaking permanent obligations. In this context, it seems worth to raise questions of how students perceive this psychological period, how they find their place and what importance education has in their life project.

Keywords:

young adults, developmental tasks, university education, psychological period, life project.

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INTRODUCTION

The focus on considering university education as a space for fulfilling developmental tasks and shaping life projects of young adults seems justified for several reasons. Firstly, young adults during university studies are at the stage of both searching for their own path of social and professional development and undertaking their duties for the future that will result in a new personal status (expressed in the acquired education). Secondly, the time of university studies is an important stage in shaping a mature identity through making increasingly more conscious and autonomous choices and taking responsibility for them. What is more, it is the time of investing in one's identity and of integrating its different parts in order to experience oneself in the most coherent way, touching upon various dimensions of independence. Therefore, it might be worth to consider the space of higher education in the context of students' search for the way which will direct them towards a positive change and broadly understood pro-activeness (Bańka, 2005). Education understood in such a way, as providing the young with the opportunities for designing their future and building an integrated identity, may indicate the developmental direction that enhances self-creation. In this context, a person's development consists in an increase in activity, in stimulation of creative abilities, as well as in giving their social activities (also in the educational space) a creative character. This will result in a person's development and receiving certain benefits. An argument for linking education with the care for raising one's social status is the fact that only the education open to new paths of personal development, new experiences and social explorations may foster better adaptation of young adults to the changing conditions of the socio-economic life. This is not an easy task, especially in the times of permanent change, expressed in the life reality that is not distinct enough to be verified. Thus, viewing education as a space which opens to new ways of perceiving one's own future gains many new references and insights in the fields of social life. In this perspective, it is also possible to seek many theoretical and methodological connotations and to ask questions about the nature of the relationships between education and a young person and their chance for further development. Those relationships seem particularly significant (and might even comprise some revealing contents) when the target group subjected to such examination are young adults. In the developmental perspective, the time called early adulthood is a precious period that reveals new possibilities of exploring the world. Frequently, only at that stage in life can one develop a wide range of experiencing self-effectiveness in thinking and acting. This is a period of relatively stable joining the world of adults (Miś, 2000). It is a specific time as regards

the mental and social aspect, the time when growingly more responsible experimenting in mature social and pro-professional roles starts (or already takes place), which often leads to specifying the socio-professional identity. Moreover, in this period, the young search for some ideas for the confrontation of their dreams with the adult life reality, as well as the ideas related to attributing a unique character to their own life (which in the future may be manifested by their success, career, or a high social rank). What is important at this stage then is what way a young adult is moving (and will keep moving), whom they will meet on this way, and how they view themselves in the new social roles determined by being a university student. This seems of particular significance in the context of the occurring transition of final year students from education to the potential work market. Sometimes, this transition takes place still at the symbolic level, but in some cases it gets a real dimension. Anyhow, this issue makes it possible to see the relationship between learning and the socio-professional development from a wide perspective. It can be stated here that the contemporary sociocultural reality is not only changeable but that it is even becoming more and more intertextual (Melosik, 2017).

YOUNG ADULTS VERSUS SOCIAL TIME

Early adulthood², as a time period dedicated to shaping an adult structure of life (Przetacznik-Gierowska & Tyszkowa, 2000), is the time for building one's own place and sociocultural niche. This is not an entirely peaceful and carefree time as adolescence used to be. On the contrary, it is full of mental tension and of frequent undertaking risky decisions related to fulfilling the need for satisfaction from the achieved success (that provide energy and willingness to act). These tensions co-occur with a person's experienced burden and the accumulated duties in major areas of life. In this developmental period, these areas affect increasingly bigger circles and mobilize a person to activities in all possible dimensions. On the one hand, these are activities generated by the age-relevant need for taking care of keeping the "Ego" position in social groups (with simultaneous care for preserving one's own autonomous status without infringing the group's status). On the other hand, these are activities aimed at balancing the activity in new social roles due to the partner or marital commitment and the undertaken professional work. Additionally, the activities are often undertaken both for oneself and for

² The stage of early adulthood usually comprises the period between the age 19/20 and 35 years. As D. Levinson indicates, this is the time mostly focused on creating a mature structure of life.

other people (through the fact of mental belonging and a sense of spiritual unity with them). Finally, it seems important to take into account the activities aimed at fulfilling one's current needs and those that address the future. What is worth mentioning here is that life at this stage brings about many hardships and objective restrictions in fulfilling the daily roles, associated with limited financial or health resources, or indirectly related to further education or the undertaken job. It is quite frequent that a young person is not ready for such restrictions and has no efficient tools to handle them. Therefore, young people should shape their new social skills and learn how to use them in relationships with the environments with which they might undertake collaboration or receive support. For that reason, it is an important developmental goal (or even a task) to invest properly in one's own future, using the environment's resources, both in the personal dimension and in the dimension of building the broadly understood economic security. In this respect, a lot may be offered by the family, a particular local community and an appropriately tailored educational offer. By shaping a specified range of skills, that educational offer prepares young adults for taking responsibility for themselves and their life. It seems useful to locate (pro-)professional education in this context – including (or rather mostly) university education. Its aim should be shaping the need for building life resources by a young person – both the current “here and now” resources and responsible development of the new ones which will be used in the future.

THE POSITION OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN THE LIFE OF YOUNG ADULTS

While viewing young adults' education through the category of developmental tasks, it is worth to emphasize that it is related to the social and psychological time in which the young function. In this period, students pursue their main objectives, associated both with their needs and with social expectations. Currently, most of the developmental tasks have lost their normativity and socially attributed punctuality. This causes that their fulfilment becomes the issue of psychosocial readiness for individual choices. Moreover, other important indicators of the readiness to fulfil a task are the level of competences which the individual has acquired earlier and the aforementioned resources (developed so far and still being developed by that person).

Undertaking the discussion on the rank and place of university education in the life of young adults enables one to ask many questions which originate from the

belief that investing in one's own education is an important developmental task for students. At this stage of life, the task is fulfilled alongside other tasks which focus on building social relationships and bonds, as well as love-based partnerships, the aiming at gradual independence from parents (and family), and undertaking social and economic activity. What may confirm a high rank still attributed to education is the belief that education not only results in a higher social status, but also enables to a large extent its further conscious planning. This is the reason why it is often stated that investing in education is the key to raising young people's social and professional status (Melosik, 2009). What is more, owing to the consciousness of one's own resources and new possibilities, education becomes a pass to raising one's quality of life (Czapiński, 1995). This quality undergoes frequent changes both due to new benefits resulting from higher education and due to one's increased awareness of the needs and chances for using them. As A. Brzezińska claims, during the whole life, a human being experiences many changes and transformations (also within the body, physicality, mentality, and spirituality). However, in each consecutive developmental period, different social expectations are directed to individuals, to which they are sensitive and which they follow, often regardless of the costs (Brzezińska, 2003).

In this theoretical-practical perspective, all life experiences and levels of resourcefulness constitute a special type of the individual's property – on the one hand, they make and develop a new quality, but on the other – this takes place under strong pressure of the social environment. This confirms the impact of the diversity and multi-sidedness of the modern world on a human being, for whom it is really very hard to distinguish the dichotomous processes of sociocultural transformation. Their presence in the context of globalization is discussed by A. Cybal-Michalska (2012). What seems particularly important in this maddening mixture of issues is the prospective temporal orientation of a young person, focused on significant life events, thoroughly planned and with the estimation of possible side-effects (Cybal-Michalska, 2012). Everything that a human experiences takes place in many dimensions and involves both dimensions of social existence – the outer and the personal one. Everything that occurs in both of them is not free from the influence of the changing modern times, which not only promote the cult of perfection, but are also affected by omnipresent acceleration of social changes. As J. Szczepkowski (2016) indicates, this acceleration can be seen in various fields and ranges. In order not to yield to its superficial charm, it is worth to face one's own self and judge the place and time in which one is currently situated. This consideration concerns especially young people who are aware of their aims and expectations so that they could learn how to realistically evaluate their place and

activity space in confrontation with their experiences, their world of values and life plans (regardless of the character of sociocultural changes and their temporary fluctuations). In the context of the above indicated multi-sidedness and ambivalence of the social world, the construction of a life project and its modification by young adults becomes an important task to fulfil.

DESIGNING ONE'S OWN LIFE AS A DEVELOPMENTAL TASK IN EARLY ADULTHOOD

At the stage of early adulthood, a human feels the need of activation in various fields of life. Those are usually the areas directed to achieving efficiency and individually understood success in life. What should be a superior aim of a contemporary young person is the elaboration and implementation of a strategic plan for life which will enable keeping up with socioeconomic changes in the rather unstable and changing world. In such a world, everything is unobvious and changeable, which necessitates undertaking responsibility in some new fields of life without previous preparation. Bauman's liquid reality is a term which – despite the passing time – does not lose its topicality. In fact, it gains new social insights – in the situation of unstable work market, devaluation of diplomas and qualifications, and other phenomena and processes.

The construction of a life project, which is one of the programmes aimed at the future, becomes an important goal of the young generation. This reflects in a particularly distinct way the (pro)professional status of young adults at the stage of their university education. Thus, designing one's life is considered in categories that are superior to the indicated life goals. Creating a plan for life at this developmental stage is a priority activity, manifested also in the responsible treatment of oneself and one's own future. Undertaking responsibility for one's life does not mean resignation from dreams – rather a conscious choice of such forms of self-fulfilment which one can handle, which are feasible. In a way, they are estimated and they specify the cognitive and behavioural access to their implementation, which later turns into satisfaction. The cognitive access occurs through making choices, the behavioural one comprises the activity compliant with the declared values – most frequently also with individual paths of personal development (Ziółkowska, 2008). Those two ways become particularly important in the process of constructing a mature life project at the stage of entering adulthood. In every form of the activity aimed at choosing their own life path, the young mostly make use of their list of major values, often rooted in the process of education

and identity shaping at earlier stages of life. Even though life projects, mainly created in early and middle adulthood, constitute a cognitive space, a realistic life project takes a form of activity programmes which require consistent implementation (or are already being implemented). Therefore, it seems beneficial for a young person to undertake social and professional roles the usefulness of which can be continuously verified. The relativized reality necessitates the search for such ways of thinking and acting that enable one to find a place in various spaces, bringing closer the fulfilment of life chances and opportunities to pursue self-effectiveness. This is a valuable source of acquiring experience in the field of prospective self-development. For this reason, the basis for one's optimal functioning in the society consists of: the need of permanent self-creation, creativity and innovative thinking, the need of problem solving, overcoming life barriers and noticing satisfaction or even self-fulfilment in this. What becomes the superior and priority goal of human development in the modern world is simultaneous acceptance of the changeability of the world (Cybal-Michalska, 2009). Without it, it is not possible to fulfil new social roles in a conflict-free way – especially those roles which the individual considers as significant.

THE POSITION OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN A LIFE PROJECT OF YOUNG ADULTS

While searching for theoretical references to a life project, it can be indicated that in the expert literature its meaning is associated with the terms which specify personal aspirations and aforementioned life tasks (Mađry, 2010). In the case of young adults, the latter can be analogously referred to developmental tasks, the fulfilment of which is desired or even indispensable. Obviously, it depends on the current needs and the evaluation of possibilities. Thus, the plan that is being shaped is most frequently a response to the individual's needs, developmental tasks, goals and aspirations. It is getting mature alongside the constructed attitude to one's own life and it helps to develop the willingness to undertake action. In this sense, such a plan becomes an obligation on the threshold of adulthood and mature duties. A life project understood in such a way is obviously dealt with in the case of the age group of young adults.

Contemporary young adults turn out to be people who – on the one hand – reach maturity “on the way”, quickly adapting to changes in various spaces among many tasks and forms of activity, but on the other hand – control their life and implement changes up-to-date. They have no fear and serious doubt that the

world's liquidity and sudden changeability of the reality will impair this implementation. This phenomenon – discussed, i.a., by Z. Bauman (2001) as “settling in on the way” – is a clear distinctive feature of the modern young generation.

In this light, an important question can be raised about the place of academic education in young adult's life project – in the case of the group of university students. The question can be also treated as crucial in the context of some analyses comprising the space of their self-fulfilment.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH

The issues presented in this study pertaining to the evaluation of the rank and role of academic education in a life project of young adults constitute a reference to the research results obtained within the author's individual project on university students' feeling of quality of life. The project research was conducted among students of the three largest universities in Silesia³ and comprised people aged 23–25, who were the final year students. The obtained results of empirical studies make it possible to indicate the factors that construct students' feeling of quality of life at the stage of entering their adulthood. The research was of a diagnostic character. The sampling was purposeful (Suchodolska, 2018) and, due to methodological requirements, was determined by the nature of the research and the group's characteristics. In the procedure of selecting the research group, the layers of the sample were intentionally specified. It comprised the final year students of particular disciplines of the academic knowledge. The examined group fulfilled the criterion of typological representativeness and the applied methods of eliciting empirical data were of quantitative character. The empirical material was processed with the use of two statistical tests dealing with diversification in groups: variance analysis test (AVOVA) and Student's t-test. ANOVA served to specify

3 The research was conducted in the University of Silesia, the Medical University of Silesia, and the University of Economics in Katowice. Altogether, the studies comprised 1400 students from all faculties at these universities. The research was conducted within an individual project pertaining to the feeling of the quality of life – and it comprised people aged 23–35. The sampling was compliant with the sample size, with the consideration for the statistical error $p \leq 0.05$, used in social sciences. The sample size fulfilled the methodological requirements, which means that the groups were representative for the studied courses (taking into consideration the statistical error $p \leq 0.05$), and the collected empirical data constitute a base for seeking answers to research questions and for formulating generalizations at the level of selected Silesian universities in regard to students of final years.

the level of statistical significance of the differences between particular means in comparative groups of students.

In this study, the focus is on showing research results which pertain to students' self-experiencing and experiencing their own education in the context of building a project of their own life. From this point of view, the presented reflections concerning the research constitute an attempt to indicate an answer to the raised questions about students' self-satisfaction and satisfaction with their own life (self-evaluation in personal categories), as well as their satisfaction with the chosen profile and course of studies and the perception of their own education as an element of a life project.

Referring to the empirical material makes it possible to claim that many significant social processes take place in the field of young adults' education. These processes regulate young people's emotional attitude to their own life, their satisfaction with the studies they have chosen and their place in this important moment of studying at university. While analysing both the contents of developmental tasks and the character of the processes that accompany early adulthood, it can be noticed that over the recent several years (especially in East-Central Europe) not only the way of thinking about young adults has been changing but also the way in which they experience this period. The priority rank is attributed now to such developmental tasks as: building close relations and partner relationships and – later or even simultaneously – further education and designing the social and professional future. What seems important for young adults in the context of the earlier discussed psychological time are various investments. These are not long-term investments, but rather such that can bring expected effects soon and should bring benefits in the near future. This is due to the fact that – as it is observed – the young “live faster”, their reality is not so much divided into symbolic parts, but rather aggregated to a few basic motifs that can be specified as: personal development and relationships, education and work, leisure.

Those life goals are correlated with many forms of daily activity. At the level of personal development, this is investing in one's own resources, in relations and a partner relationship; at the level of education and work – investing in broadly understood independence, in learning how to be resilient and how to experiment with paid work. At the level of leisure – this is the experience of satisfaction from everyday matters, making use of free time and developing one's passions. As it can be observed, in the case of young adults, these goals might be (and often are) fulfilled as naturally integrated with one another in time. Studying at university – as a time indicating that social moment in life – allows them to combine the implementation of their goals. This enhances students' social self-awareness and

– which seems particularly important – increases their access to a real evaluation of their life and of the place of university education in it.

It can be said that fulfilling the developmental tasks of early adulthood is a *sine qua non* for the development of broadly understood autonomy and for constituting the independent status of being adult. This affects self-esteem and satisfaction with one's own life and successful further attempts to seek fields of satisfaction. Among the developmental tasks, the following take the highest ranks: love relationships (90% – rather partner than marital ones), satisfying relationships with close people (76%), relationships with friends (84%), and individual forms of spending leisure time and self-fulfilment. Yet, what becomes another important task at that stage is achieving an education. As the examined students indicate, they are satisfied with the course of their university education. The currently implemented stage of education is compliant with their predispositions and their choice. This is declared by 81% of the respondents. This confrontation with the empirical data seems particularly important due to the possibility of searching for some dominants which more thoroughly specify both the personal status of a student and the place of education in the life project of young adults.

The evaluation of the position of higher education in their life confirms that their choices are conscious and autonomous. The studied profile of education – in the majority of cases (67% of the respondents) – turns out to agree with their earlier plans. Among those who have chosen the current course as an alternative to the one they dreamed of, a lot of acceptance can be noticed. One can get an impression that students willingly accept what life brings. They give an individual direction and sense to this. The explored roles are subjected to up-to-date modifications, providing the respondents with the feeling of satisfaction (which agrees with their assessment).

As regards the group of young adults, the context of education (especially such which prepares for a professional career) turns out to be an important factor that generates the development of the adulthood status and the tasks related to it. As it can be noticed, students function in the educational space (and their choice of a course) which was their main selection criterion. This is a fully conscious choice, which rightly reflects their sense of place and good time in their life. Students function not only in the educational space which they have chosen but also in the one that they want to co-create, because they feel good in it. Undertaking the role of a student is associated with the need to take care of the nearest future. It cannot be excluded that for some students the time of academic education is a sort of developmental moratorium. However, this time does not only serve subsistence but also (and maybe mostly) the incubation of one's self-concept and the

consolidation of one's social position. It is crucial at that stage in life to survive the oppressive world of culture in which there are no guidelines for the future. These are important issues associated with real motives of undertaking academic education by part of the students. What is clearly seen in the respondents' declarations are the following: resoluteness, autonomy of choice, and consistency in the implementation of life plans and intentions. There might be other reasons for students' undertaking university education – yet, they are not an object of this study.

What seems worth emphasizing is that there are such forms of activity in students' life project that are associated with the values and plans which are to be implemented in the future. It is also worth noting that such future-oriented plans are not only present at that stage of life but are already partially being implemented. In students' life project, there are mostly short-term plans, in the implementation of which they are currently engaged. This emotional engagement is reflected in developmental tasks (Suchodolska, 2018) and subjective assessment of one's own place and moment in life. Obviously, the criteria associated with students' becoming adults seem individualized. What remains common to this group is the way students experience the present and the way they think about their future, which is manifested in their current experiences.

It can be indicated that the students' experienced sense of control over their own life and its design develops a belief in the rightness of their activities. In the context of academic learning, which at this stage of life leads to achieving education and independence, the young assess their educational choices. The confrontation of the reality of life and education with the prospective designing of the future is important for them as well. It has such significance surely due to the possibility to define priorities and chances for giving a personal orientation and shape to one's own adulthood. What students consider as important for the care about the future and the aiming at autonomy is the fact that a significant group of students have paid employment. This work allows them to achieve at least temporary financial independence. This is another aspect which shows the value of gradually becoming independent during education that is still taking place. The perception of this fact currently gets a new description space because of the unpredictable paid work periods in the pandemic times.

The present time events in the life of young adults are evaluated by them as not only beneficial but also satisfying. They make it possible to build social relations, to improve skills and competences, and to expand social explorations. The obtained research results let one notice that students are aware of their needs and are satisfied with life and what is now taking place in it. In my opinion, this is a cognitively important consideration.

INSTEAD OF RECAPITULATION

Treating university education in the category of developmental tasks, it is worth to emphasize that it is related to the social and psychological time in which students function. At this time, they fulfil their major goals associated with their own needs and social expectations. Although today most of the developmental tasks have lost their normativity and socially attributed punctuality, young people choose the path of their self-development in the way which is available to them and in compliance with individual planning. Acquiring education takes place along with an increase in psychosocial readiness to act, in skills and in social competences. An important indicator of the readiness to implement mature tasks which young adults face is the existence of personal resources that should be activated not only currently but also in the future.

To sum up, it can be claimed that investing in educational development and raising the status of belonging to the group of people with higher education becomes an important developmental task at the stage of entering adulthood. For students, the education leading to graduation and raising one's status to a more autonomous level (Melosik, 2009) is an important criterion which more thoroughly specifies the project for their own life. In the system of values, academic education has a high rank, just behind a successful relationship and satisfying relations with other people. According to the surveyed students, achieving an education enables them a life start.

Individual ways of entering the world of adults (and becoming an adult person) are not easy tasks today, especially in the unstable and changing socioeconomic conditions. Therefore, it is of crucial significance that young people should build their educational capital while fulfilling their developmental tasks associated with self-investments. From this standpoint, university education seems to be not only an important individual resource and an element of young adults' educational capital, but also an element of their life project.

The obtained research results make it possible to indicate that fulfilling student roles gives young adults possibilities to experience their own selves not only in relations with Others, but mostly in confrontation with themselves and their important developmental tasks. One of those tasks is education – as it prepares for further professional path, in compliance with the maxim that it is not only “the last step of the ladder to reaching the period of adulthood” (Suchodolska, 2017, p. 352), but also to the achieved education. In a more short-term perspective, education is treated by the respondents in the categories of self-fulfilment “here and now”, in line with the values they promote.

Effective commitment of the young to particular roles in this life period makes it easier to find their place in many relations and sociocultural roles. This facilitates solving problems and conflicts which may take place in early adulthood. The undertaking of activity in social relations and roles, in education and future-oriented obligations help the young to build a new identity and to make mature decisions. It can be expected that the consistency of self-evaluation in major categories of self-definition also helps to succeed in important life spaces by providing satisfaction and direction which agrees with the expectations. The satisfaction from the current life events and a favourable assessment of the time and place which determines important moments in life give students a comfortable space to continue working on their life project. As the obtained research outcomes indicate, the process of students' education and learning is one of such areas.

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