



Academic youth in the borderland – in the process of designing their future

Abstract: The contemporary socio-economic reality generates the need to create a life project that determines the direction of implementing important goals as well as of developing new competences. This inspires the individual to look for ways of thinking and behaving which can serve as protection against various risk factors. This applies to the factors which enhance socio-professional ambivalence, the difficulty of taking advantage of life opportunities and performing new social roles.

The study introduces the subject of designing the future by academic youth. It is a group that, at the stage of entering adulthood, takes up the challenge of adequate learning about their own needs and confronting them with the value system, in order to realistically determine their capabilities, both at the emotional and behavioral level. Then they will be ready for their internal and external exploration. In early adulthood, developing a plan for life turns out to be both an important protective factor and a manifestation of proactivity. In this context, creating a plan for life can also mean taking care of oneself and one's self-development.

Keywords: academic youth, young adults, life project, psychological time, borderland

Introduction

Contemporary education should support the formation of many new skills necessary in the process of adaptation of a young person to changes in social life. In practice, it turns out to be an area that requires not only additional investment, but above all, adaptation to social needs. In changing socio-cultural and economic conditions, these needs – on the one hand – are ex-

pressed in increasing access to education for young people and young adults with a lower status of origin and family habitus (from socially and mentally poorer backgrounds)¹. On the other hand, these needs make sense in the tendency of the educational system to keep up with social, cultural and economic changes (Suchodolska, 2014). One can indicate, among other things, a clear need to use the doctrine of critical and creative education to teach the acceptance of democratic social principles and their introduction into individual areas of education (Lewowicki, 2011). This is particularly important due to the ongoing changes in the labor market, requiring transformations in the planning of lives and careers by young adults – as one of the elements of general human professional development (Cybal-Michalska, 2015, 2013). In practice, the effect of growing deficits can be increasingly observed in the area of using education to search for individuality and human creativity. This then becomes a means of prolonging the stage of adolescence and the (pre) professional status of young people. In this sense, it also serves to prolong the period of a development moratorium, without adequate reference to the goal of constructing a life plan. Then young people focus more on what is “here and now” and stay in it for a long time, delaying their start into adulthood and taking responsibility. It seems that this phenomenon today has a new social face and socializing significance. In view of the above, an important task of environments supporting young adults is to show the strength of the humanistic dimension of education, and especially actions aimed at change, creativity and proactivity of young people (Bańka, 2005). This manifests itself, among other things, in the need to strive for education and search for a good job in the future. It can be said that the quality of education becomes a factor of change and that it sets the direction of human development and self-creation. In addition, it can be pointed out that only an education open to individual paths of personal development, new experiences and explorations can contribute to better adaptation of young people in changing living conditions.

The perception of education as a space for creating one’s own future and giving it a direction finds its place in the expert literature (Cybal-Michalska, 2015, 2013; Melosik, 2009; Szczurek-Boruta, 2007). The educational context of the projected future turns out to be particularly important in the context

¹ Wozniak (2006) points out that the Polish educational system differentiates the probability of achieving success through uneven availability of young people from different backgrounds to education of the same quality.

of young people entering adulthood² and new social roles. Early adulthood, also known as “emerging/becoming adulthood” (Arnett, 2004, 2000), is understood as a psychological and social time, revealing new possibilities for experimentation in roles (social and pro-professional ones).

Psychological time in life of young adults

Early adulthood is an important criterion in the timeline. In the expert literature, it is referred to as the socio-psychological time of young adults. It is the time of the greatest variety of experiences over the course of life. Most of the processes that are observed in this phase of development are non-normative, determined by the individual pace of change. This period of “becoming adulthood” is well described by such distinctive features as: instability (lack of stability), self-concentration (self-interest), feeling of being in between (“suspension”), feeling of having many possibilities and exploring (searching for) an identity. They result in taking on roles consistent with their needs and resources, less often than with social expectations.

Treating university education as a space for shaping the life project of young adults, one notices what place it occupies in their lives (Suchodolska, 2021, 2017). It turns out not only to be the task of and the key to raising their socio-professional status, but it also serves to raise the level of their quality of life. This quality is changed not only by recognizing the measurable benefits of having a higher education, but – in particular – by being more aware of one’s needs resulting from individual experience³ and learning about one’s own capabilities. As research results indicate, having a good education allows you to adapt more comfortably to the requirements and changing conditions of life, to cope better with difficulties and to search for information more effectively (Czapiński, 1995). A person with a higher educational status also more easily accepts both material and psychological difficulties of adaptation in unusual and difficult conditions, also in the changing labor market. In the perspective of extending human life, education seen and defined by

² In the study, I am interested in the second phase of this period, characterized by relatively good stability of entering the world of other adults. Then young adults begin to fulfil themselves in various social roles, which also serve the search for (pro)professional identity. L. Miś (2000) describes this in more detail.

³ Suchańska and Worach (2013) describe the contextuality of the above mentioned issues in a broad perspective in the research on the formation of a sense of identity.

J. Czapiński is worthy of notice – it is seen as a remedy for most of the negative effects of rapid social change (Czapiński, 1995, p. 299). In addition, what seems important – in the context of lifelong education – is an increase in life competences. They play a protective role in confronting dynamic social changes leading to a new quality of life in the surrounding world. In such a world, universal values as well as clear signposts become weaker – the lack of authorities can be observed. In the process of building life competences, an important task for young people to perform is therefore not only to become aware of their resources, but above all, to care for them and their further development. The means by which this is done should be, among other things, education. However, this requires an increase in awareness of one's own resources and life competences.

Planning the future as a developmental task

A life project is one of the time-oriented action programmes. In this temporal perspective, it becomes an important life goal for a young person. This is especially important at the stage of becoming an adult. Then the young person feels the need to be active in various areas of life, the common denominator of which is building their own effectiveness and life success. In addition, it can be expected that the main goal of youth is to develop such a plan for life which will make it possible to follow socio-economic changes in the world of competition and consumerist behavior. Life plans are therefore visible as important, overarching goals and a natural developmental tendency.

Nowadays, it is very important to create one's own plan (project) of action which determines the developmental direction of life-important goals and areas of competence. An economically uncertain reality strongly inspires (or even forces) the individual to look for ways of thinking and behaving that can provide protection against various risk factors. This risk may generate socio-professional ambivalence, difficulty in taking advantage of life opportunities and limitations in fulfilling important social roles (also as a result of mass culture impact). In early adulthood, where it is important to take on new social and professional roles, developing a plan for one's own life turns out to be both a manifestation of proactivity and an important protective factor. Resourcefulness in this area teaches one to take care of oneself and one's development. At the stage of entering adulthood, it also obliges one to understand the world and one's own future in terms of extensive cognitive representations (Kuźnik, 2008, p. 627). This results in obtaining a real

picture of personal needs and the possibility of satisfying them, both on an emotional and behavioral level. This also means readiness for internal and external exploration.

In the perspective of analyses concerning students, it seems interesting to look at the life project as a type of thinking and acting in the area of subjective dimension (Suchodolska, 2017). According to such an understanding and perspective, the individual reacts vividly to external and internal conditions, opening themselves to what life brings. This is how young people react, changing their expectations and plans for life under the influence of external factors. They are associated with new experiences and possibilities. This situation quite adequately characterizes young adults at the stage of transition from the level of planning life events to their potential implementation.

Building a project of one's own life by young adults – transitional status – duality of being in the borderland

The stage characterizing the transition from planning to the implementation of life goals is a special moment for several reasons. First of all, it affects the understanding of the status of activity at the stage of entering mature social and pro-professional roles. Secondly, it symbolically makes one familiar with the perspective of the “duality of being” (Witkowski, 2013, p. 160) in students' everyday situations. This overlap of two realities has adequate social references. One of them is expressed in the borderline and moratorium-like suspension between youthfulness and adulthood, between education and the labor market (between semi-autonomy and entering mature roles, exploring them and making commitments and life choices). The other is visible in the status related to life and education in the conditions of the sociocultural borderland. This situation means that students function simultaneously in the social, economic and cultural dimensions. They define their ability to live in the borderland, understood as the ability to be “in between” or “on the threshold”. This perspective of Bakhtin's understanding of the borderland is shown by Witkowski (Witkowski, 2000). At this point, one can refer to the understanding of the borderland presented in the approach of Michal Bakhtin, which the author describes as functioning measured by the ability to “be on the border”. Awareness of the existence of the border poses some questions to be answered – where and why is it is worth being? In this perspective, the ways of human functioning in culture and social environment become an important issue. Being as being together (co-being) or coopera-

tion and participation allow for a deeper involvement in relationships. This sentence quite clearly reflects – on the one hand – the situation of contemporary young adults, on the other hand – the ambivalence and contexts present, among other things, in intercultural education, which has been developing vividly for years in cultural borderlands (also in the Polish-Czech border of Cieszyn Silesia).

University education as a developmental task and an element of the life project of young people

In the life project of students, not only values and plans for implementation in the future are present. In particular, there are forms of activity present in it, the implementation of which is already in progress. Experiencing youth at the stage of higher education is associated with many personal, sociocultural and educational components. The changes experienced by young adults in education are felt individually and affect their life situation. It is thanks to these experiences that young adults have the chance to create a mature life project. Not only does it take into account the personal sphere, but also the perspective of lifelong learning. The educational space prepares them for professional activity and makes them aware of the need to take care of themselves (also of their presence on the labor market in the near future). The examined students of the University of Silesia are at this stage of pro-professional development. The studied group consists of people at the age 23–25⁴ years, who are future educators. The group presented in the research are full-time students who participated in broader, multifaceted research on the sense of quality of life, conducted by the author of this study. The research in question included a group of 1400 students in several universities (including the University of Silesia). These are people recruited from the whole group of surveyed students of Pedagogy. The group of future teachers included in

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In the analyses, the results of research conducted with the use of diagnostic survey method were used, referring to the surveyed group of 80 people who study pedagogy at the Cieszyn faculty of the University of Silesia⁵. These circumstances allow the group to be treated as homogeneous, taking into account the way in which their individual, social and educational goals are achieved (Frankfort-Nachmiast and Nachmiast, 2001), as well as the nature of developmental tasks carried out at this stage of life (typical of students in early adulthood).

The obtained research results allow one to notice the linearity of students' thinking about their own future. It is expressed in their current experiences in different areas of life. Young adults are open to social exploration. They assess current events as typical, natural, related to age and the social time they experience. They provide an opportunity to build social relationships, improve skills and competences, as well as expand experience. In many areas of activity, youthful imaginations and expectations are confronted with what life brings in the perspective of current events "here and now". This sequential order of experiences with education and future work, confrontation with the realities of life and the experienced (pre)professional space make it easier for students to access the content of their life project. This also allows them to verify values, goals and previous life plans and try to answer the question "Who am I today and who do I want to be in the future?" This happens in a situation in which this confrontation is still of a temporary nature. What is currently happening in their lives turns out to be predictable, and in an emotional sense – neutrally beneficial (good) and even satisfying. In a sense, the status of the respondents can be defined in terms of a development moratorium. Although the moratorium is understood especially in the context of development during the period of adolescence, it can be assumed that this phenomenon is present today. Moreover, early adulthood implies its presence (and even its legitimacy or the natural aspect of its occurrence in

⁵ The group included in the research pursued education at the second-degree master's studies at the Faculty of Arts and Educational Science, in the following specialties: Integrated Early Childhood Education with Pedagogical Therapy, Integrated Early Childhood Education with Preschool Education and Care and Educational Work with Family Assistant.

modern culture). Parents often permit young people not to make professional commitments (and build autonomy), despite their being adults. All these processes are currently considered – on the one hand – the consequences of functioning in an individually understood norm and psychological time. On the other hand, as J.J. Arnett believes, they may be a manifestation of a new social universe of this period (Arnett, 2004).

Certainly, the criteria related to students' becoming adult seem to be individualized, depending on objective living conditions and the course of their socialization (mainly family socialization). In addition, as it turns out, they also depend on their individual ideas and subjective assessments of their own place and moment in life. Students pursuing university studies function in the educational space they have chosen. They declare that they want to co-create it, because they feel that they fit there well. An assessment of the rank that higher education has in their lives (and the choice of faculty) indicates that these choices are conscious and autonomous. The chosen field of study turns out – in the case of the majority of respondents (67%) – to be consistent with their previous plans. In the case of people who have chosen the faculty as an alternative (for various reasons) to another one, there is their visible acceptance of such a fact and a positive assessment of this situation. One can even get the impression that students willingly accept what life brings them in order to give it an individual direction and meaning. The explored roles are subject to minor modifications on an ongoing basis and provide a sense of satisfaction. In the life project, there are mainly short-term plans the implementation of which is already in progress. The emotional involvement of students in performing the developmental tasks (Suchodolska, 2018, 2017) is revealed in subjective assessments of their own place and moment in life.

Students seem to be aware of their own needs. They declare satisfaction with life and with their current life status (81% of respondents). These are quite typical areas of personal satisfaction for this period of life. The highest rank is given to love relationships (90% – partner rather than marital), satisfying relationships with close people (76%), relationships with friends (84%), attractive forms of spending free time and self-fulfillment. In the area of education, the current stage of education corresponds to their personal preferences and choices (81% of respondents). This is extremely important when one tries to determine the dominant factors which indicate not only the place of values in the life project of students, but also their personal educational status. In addition, the above conclusions of the research also

correspond to results obtained in the research conducted among academic students by Janusz Ślusarski (Ślusarki, 2021, pp. 95–96). In the case of the group studied by this author, the highest preferred values are the ones related to self-directing and crossing one's own boundaries.

This psychological perspective of young adults being in the process of their studies allows us to see that they are in control of their own lives and their planning. In the context of education, which at this stage of life leads to gaining education and independence, they make choices according to their own belief and preferred values. Moreover, they judge these educational choices to be right. In addition, they declare that they intend to keep to these choices and – in the future – they want to improve themselves. Students plan to remain in the area of pedagogical work. It is very heartening to observe but it is not known whether these views will not change when they start practicing the profession. In the areas of assistance, requiring a special confrontation of one's own competences with the reality of life and the goals of education of children and young people, the firmness (constancy) of beliefs is extremely valuable. This creates opportunities to set priorities and give a personal shape to your professional future. A significant group of students also enjoy paid work. It allows you to gain at least partial financial independence and builds a sense of semi-autonomy in the emotional dimension. This is important in the context of striving for full autonomy of the individual. On the one hand, this aspect shows the value of gradual independence at the stage of ongoing education. On the other hand, this idea reflects the proactivity (and proactive needs) of young people. This particularly applies to people who do not have support in their environment in adapting to social conditions and the needs of the labour market. Therefore, they undertake proactive activities themselves, personally engaging in some area of (pre)professional development. The effect of this is (re)defining one's social role and the effectiveness of thinking oriented towards one's own development. In a sense, they "scan" the environment to get a good idea of its possibilities and to make use of them. What facilitates this search of young people is the support from the family, awareness of the risks, and readiness when a change occurs. The perception of this fact may currently have a new space of description, due to the difficulty in predicting conditions of getting independent in times of inflation and the tangible effects of the pandemic. It may be that the awareness of risk and uncertainty (as a feature of contemporary socio-economic reality) triggers self-educational strategies and activities in the examined group. The surveyed young adults collect various experiences in the area of supporting

the development of others, e.g. participating in volunteer actions at the level of the local environment. This applies to both children and older age groups. In the case of students, pedagogy is a space of activity that gives an opportunity to build empathic attitudes and verify their personality traits.

The effective involvement of young people makes it easier for them to find their place in many relationships and sociocultural roles. It is also likely to be conducive to solving problems and conflicts that may accompany early adulthood. Taking up activities in relationships, social roles, education and commitments related to the future, co-creates their mature identity and helps to build new competences. Transculturation of competences at the stage of transition from youthfulness to adulthood – from dependence to life independence (also pro-professional) – is a process oriented towards change. At this stage, knowledge, commitment and (pro)professional activity are needed. What is highly significant are – on the one hand – the changes in socialization processes, preparing young people for adulthood and responsibility for their own lives, and on the other – the diverse potential and readiness of young adults to explore. Explorations on the internal and external level are in a sense determined by the psychological mobility of the respondents. In the process of designing the future, both motivators and barriers of students' subjective activity are involved. The awareness of their impact also determines the individual pace of change, the direction the life project is heading for, and the achievement of success in important life spaces. The presence of personal motivators – as a source of perceived satisfaction – probably supports the process of setting a direction for everyday life in accordance with the expectations.

Individual ways of becoming an adult are not easy tasks nowadays, especially in the conditions that are changeable, socially and economically unstable. That is why it is important that young adults build their capital by investing in themselves. In this context, education seems to be not only an important individual resource and an element of the educational capital of this generational group, but also an element of their life project. Time and developmental tasks regulate the attitude of young people in the place where they are at the very moment. Young Poles belong to a group that appreciates the role of close people in their lives. Their presence often contributes to the hedonistic attitude of young people towards the world and their own place in it. The presence of close people allows one to feel joy and see the meaning of life, so the need for contact with them is important to be satisfied. Moreover, it is a prerequisite for good social adaptation in individual phases of

life, from childhood to late adulthood. In these periods of time, for various reasons and to varying degrees, an individual needs the presence of others. Experiencing acceptance and support is a kind of buffer which offers a sense of security in unpredictable situations. One such moment is the change of status from dependent (a trainee) to independent (after graduation), with all the consequences of this process. This change entails the risk of the aforementioned ambivalence, “being in between”, remaining “on the border” of one’s self-reliance. It is not just a matter of space and activity. It is also a matter of cross-border thinking – exploration in the cognitive sense. Therefore, it is important how young adults cope with the tasks of adulthood, what vision they have of the future and what determines this. What seems important in this context is the ability to plan the future, as well as compliance with the expectations and development of cognitive competences. These components allow one to better and more consciously take care of one’s needs and the development of behavioral skills.

The need of young people to gain new experiences, as well as to read the world individually, encounters new sources of ambivalence and generates new sources of development and learning (Lewowicki, 2011, p. 31). Maybe that is why young people are such a susceptible matter. The changes in life and its conditions accompanying contemporary communities provoke (and even force) the need to reformulate and permanently define the developmental tasks to be carried out by the community of young people. Among the factors that generate such a need, both socio-cultural and economic factors can be found, as well as individual ones. The latter are related to personal needs, the preferred form of activity, the formulation of goals and plans related to the future.

Conclusion

Young adults’ planning for the future develops adequately to the hierarchy of values which determine the way of thinking about themselves and their place in the world. Values also co-occur with the educational and socio-professional tasks they carry out. The project shows three important areas of self-fulfillment: personal life, education and taking up employment. Broadly understood lifelong education can be found useful in all of the above areas.

In the case of young adults graduating from university, it can be noted that planning for the future gains a dimension and a shape that is currently achievable. It is related to the closest achievable real goals and the strategy

of their personal development available to young adults. When planning to achieve important goals, they monitor their achievements and confront them with current situations and their assessment. It is important for them to confront the reality of life and education with the participation in the future. They strive to define their own priorities and the direction they want to give to their own adulthood. In the case of the studied group, a plan for life is not only a plan for what the future holds, but – in particular – a perspective that is currently being implemented. The way young adults think and act at the level of their initial life projects sets the direction in which they are going and the beliefs which they have. Monitoring everyday experiences, trying to assess the time and place in which they are currently located, enhance the development of their self-awareness. Long-term plans and their more precise construction seem to be a secondary issue. It seems that the temporal perspective is rather more limited to the present time.

Education leading to being academically educated and raising status to a more autonomous level (Melosik, 2009) is an important criterion for students to determine the design of their own lives. In the hierarchy of values, it has a high position – the second place – right after a successful relationship and satisfaction in relationships with people. According to the respondents, obtaining education opens up many paths, it allows independent life to start. It is also important when it opens mentally and generates an increase in awareness. In the era of the changing labor market, getting a specific educational profile is only “part of the success”. It happens that much more depends today on ingenuity, invention and human (pro)activity.

A clear focus on the present time is a result of everyday experiences in society, according to the principle that what happens “here and now” is worth enjoying. This is probably an increasingly frequently diagnosed feature of the modern generation, which mentally easily adapts to changes, implements them in life and functions well with them (Bauman, 2001). Symbolically, this may mean a special state of mind of the young generation, which certainly adapts more easily to change than the generation of their parents. The active need for self-fulfillment no longer requires so much attention and planning over a longer period of time. It is also probably not so strongly related to the place and physical attachment to space, as well as the attributes of the environment. It can be assumed that Bauman’s category of “fluidity” in modern society reflects the need to remain open and ready for activity in those spaces of life which are currently important to an individual. However, this does not mean that the young do not want to be attentive. Focusing on the present

allows one to control and plan a life. Such a tendency can be seen in various dimensions of young adults' functioning, also in the context of the described life plan. In this perspective, long-term planning does not apply. What counts is planning which can be modified on an ongoing basis. This does not take away the chance to experience satisfaction and well-being. An important skill is the readiness to experience change – to what life brings. One can get the impression that satisfaction with current events and a favorable assessment of time and place, as determinants of important moments in life, gives students a comfortable space to develop and continue working on the project of their own future. As the results of the research indicate, the process of education (and getting educated) of students seems to be one of such areas.

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