Shaping an Identity as the Main Developmental Task of Youth in the Contemporary Socio-Cultural Reality

ABSTRACT
The self-creation of modern youth in the world of permanent change is closely related to the existing socio-cultural conditions and the psychosocial condition resulting from the experienced developmental stage. The changeability and relativity of the reality in which young people exist affects the process of searching for their “I”, which becomes more and more undefined, requiring constant updating, and changing. Therefore, it becomes necessary to undertake analyses of identity formation as the main developmental task of the youth period, with particular emphasis on the current socio-cultural reality, which is not insignificant for this process. The article presents the results of scientific research on the subjective aspect of the sense of identity of contemporary high school youth (out of the general population the author selected a population of 439 students of secondary schools, aged 15–19, located in the territory of the Wielkopolskie [Greater Poland] Voivodeship in Poland, random selection) measured by the TST (Twenty Statements Test). The presented results of research on the subjective aspect of the sense of identity of secondary school youth reveal an image of this age group as one that is still searching for its own identity core, and undergoing the process of implementation of developmental tasks belonging to the stage of adolescence. The analyses of the research results show the specificity of the process of shaping identity by young people in modern conditions. This issue is the main goal of the research presented in the article.

Keywords: education, youth, identity, secondary school, contemporary times.

1 Department of Educational Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland.
E-MAIL: pperet@amu.edu.pl ORCID: 0000-0002-9228-4009
IDENTITY OF YOUTH IN THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIO-CULTURAL REALITY

The permanent nature of social change is updating the problem of the dynamics of transformations of the nature of identity, which influences it (Kłoskowska, 1990), and implies the conceptualization of diverse, flexible, variable and open forms of individual and collective identity (Scholte, 2005). This issue shows the need for reflection on the conceptualization of the identity of young people. Undoubtedly, in a world undergoing permanent change, it is essential to seek answers to the question of the condition of the contemporary human beings, and an almost obsessively bothering problem of the contemporary times is “the issue of an individual’s identity, at the same time uprooted and emancipating itself from assignment to the existing existential communities” (Hałas, 2007). And yet there is no doubt as to the fact that “the obligation to live is […] identical with the obligation to become oneself, to develop one’s potential, individual characteristics” (Fromm, 1994). The existential situation of the individual who has been “unanchored” from the certainty that was associated with the crystallization of their identity in the conditions of modernity, forces them to shape their biography in accordance with the slogan “do-it-yourself, using elements such as norms, values, preferred lifestyle, religious beliefs or ideological beliefs, which are now ‘obtained’ from many sources” (Szlenadak, 2000).

Searching for an answer to the question of identity, one cannot ignore the reference to the basic theory of the social construction of reality, according to which “identity, as a key determinant of the subjective dimension of reality, is shaped, maintained and modified in the process of primary and secondary socialization, and remains in a dialectical relationship with the social world and its episodic nature” (see: Cudowska, 2004; Cybal-Michalska, 2006). The relational nature of the approach to identity emphasizes the impossibility of separating “individual development from changes that are taking place in the society, just as it is impossible to separate an identity crisis in an individual’s life from the simultaneous crises of historical development” (Kłoskowska, 1990).

Without the characterization of the period of adolescence as a developmental stage that is in many respects specific, it is almost impossible to analyze any issues concerning youth, both in the individual and in the social dimension. Therefore, the considerations presented below will relate to adolescence as a specific stage of human psychosocial development whose main developmental task is the shaping of identity.

Adolescence as a stage “between” childhood and adulthood is understood in two ways: as being torn between two stages of human development that are varied in terms of developmental tasks, and as being located on the crossroads between
the often contradictory internal factors of the individual, and hence their personality predispositions, and the external factors, i.e., the institutions and the social pressures (Oleniacz, 2005).

According to the concept presented by E.H. Erikson, the period of adolescence is the time of resolution of the identity crisis (identity vs. identity dispersion) known as “individual identity vs role diffusion”. This is a particularly important stage of development due to the fact that “in the social jungle of human existence, there is no sense of being alive without a sense of ego identity. To understand this is to better understand the problem of adolescents, and especially the problem of those young people who cannot simply be nice boys and girls, but are desperately seeking a sense of belonging, for example, in cliques and gangs or various mass groups” (Witkowski, 1989). The resolution of the identity crisis is the first step towards developing a concept of one’s own self which is a lifelong task. “The crisis during adolescence – which is a breakthrough moment – is caused by the conflict between the newly emerging physiological and mental abilities and the social requirements; between the need and the anti-need; between an individual’s own aspirations and the limitations imposed by the society” (Szczurek-Boruta, 2007).

The answer to the question “Who am I?”, and therefore the integration of identity, requires time that is defined by the term ‘moratorium’, and is recognized as a deferment or a postponement embedded in the course of life, the objective of which is to make a choice as to one’s own orientations, values and ideas that shape the identity of young people. It is a time for making choices, taking up and carrying out various tasks and comprehensive searches: for authority, for life paths, social roles, a place in the social reality.

The basic virtue during adolescence is dedication, which is confronted with peer pressure. A positively resolved crisis during adolescence results in being faithful to oneself. In turn, the threat that could be revealed at this stage of ego development is the dispersion of identity. This danger may result from “strong, prior doubt in one’s sexual and ethnic identity and may lead to criminal and psychotic incidents” (Erikson, 2004). The feature that distinguishes this stage of development from the others is that it ends the phase of an individual’s ego formation and that we then see the “verification of all identifications and experiences from previous stages of life and their integration into a new qualitative whole, which, described as a mature identity, would allow a person to pursue self-determination” (Szczurek-Boruta, 2007).

2 The classical concept of identity in the view of E. Erikson constitutes the theoretical basis of the research due to its universal character showing the essence of the identity dilemmas of young people. It is also worth emphasizing that this concept is the basis for analyzes of identity in terms of J. Marcia and M. Berzonsky.
“The integration of the fragments constituting potential components of an individual’s identity into one coherent system does not occur without conflict, it has its determinants in the discontinuity and even the contradiction of experiences accumulated in the area of physical changes, cognitive progress and various social expectations, conflicting identifications or mechanisms associated with the defense against an idolatrous attitude towards significant people” (Szczurek-Boruta, 2007).

The psychosocial characteristics of adolescence show the specificity and the immanent dissimilarity of this stage of human development from other periods of life, which is exemplified by the importance of implementation of the developmental tasks of the period of adolescence, and in particular, the crystallization of identity. The awareness of the specifics of the psychosocial functioning of adolescents, which requires special support from the socializing institutions, implies the need to undertake research explorations, in which the subject of analysis is the contemporary secondary school youth.

The considerations regarding the psychosocial characteristics of the period of adolescence show the specificity of this stage of life, which is a breakthrough moment in the individual’s development, both in the area of intrapsychic as well as interpersonal processes. The successful implementation of the developmental tasks during adolescence is an important criterion for the acquisition of competences required to fulfill the role of an adult, which is assigned for the rest of one’s life. Due to the presence of specific psychosocial processes in the period of adolescence, the knowledge concerning the developmental changes taking place at this stage of life should be the basic reference system for any considerations about the situation of young people in the contemporary times.

METHOD, SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE

Considering the importance of undertaking an analysis of the identity condition of contemporary youth living in the present socio-cultural reality, research project is carried out, one of the objectives of which was to recognize the subjective aspect of the sense of identity of adolescents.

The research procedure was a questionnaire containing open-ended questions. The subjective aspect of the sense of identity was examined using the question “Who am I?”. The responses to that question allowed for determining the degree of awareness of one’s own self in the studied youth group. The construction of the question allowed for quantitative and qualitative content analysis, as the Twenty
Statements Test\(^3\) was used, in which respondents indicate a maximum of twenty terms to characterize one’s own person, according to the order of subsequent associations. The justification for using this test results from the fact that it allows for both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

The quantitative context (the number of provided terms) indicates the degree of self-reflection, which is significant for the presentation of the subjective aspect of the sense of identity of young people. The qualitative context (analysis of the content of provided terms) allows for the interpretation of one’s own self, it shows the identification of the examined person and the degree of formation of their own identity.

Qualitative analysis of terms that reveal the subjective aspect of the sense of identity of the surveyed youth by answering the question “Who am I?”, was made by categorizing the given terms, where reference to the notions of “I” takes place in the following dimensions: physical (age, sex, developmental stage, appearance); symbolic definition of the role (indicating the degree of kinship, social roles performed); individualistic (mental states, thoughts, feelings, interests, personality traits). The deliberations of J. Habermas were the inspiration to list these categories.

In the presented research project the following research problems were highlighted: the number and the quality of terms used by the young people to characterize their identity in response to the following question: “Who am I?” (division into categories: reference to the concepts of self with a physical character, reference to the concepts of self with the character of a symbolic definition of one’s role, reference to the concepts of self with an individualistic character).

In the scientific research the method of diagnostic survey was used. In order to collect the research material that would enable the resolution of the research problems, the questionnaire survey technique was applied. The selection of this research technique is due to the specifics of the studied fragment of social reality and the research objectives, which indicate the necessity of obtaining a large information material, which will be used for diagnostic purposes in the course of the analysis.

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\(^3\) The Twenty Statements Test (TST) is an instrument used to measure the concept of self. It was devised in 1954 by Manfred Kuhn & Thomas McPartland, with the aim of finding a standardized way to measure assumptions and self-attitudes. The test takes the form of a survey, with respondents asked to give up to twenty responses to the prompts, “Who am I?”, or “I am...”; it is not mandatory that respondents give twenty answers.

\(^4\) The identity of adolescents as a category tested using the TST test was the subject of research interests by: A. Cybal-Michalska (2006), R. Leppert (2010), B. Kanclerz (2015).
Due to the above indications, in the studies concerning secondary school youth, out of the general population the author selected a population of 439 students of secondary schools, aged 15–19, located in the territory of the Wielkopolskie [Greater Poland] Voivodeship in Poland, which constitutes the group of study participants. The selection of the research sample was purposive due to the intention of showing the socio-demographic diversity of the group of respondents. As a result, the author selected representations of students from 7 secondary schools of various type (high school, technical high school, vocational school) located in a large city (over 100,000 inhabitants) – Poznań, in a city (from 21,000 to 100,000 inhabitants) – Kościan, in a town (up to 20,000 inhabitants) – Opalenica, and in a village – Rokietnica, Pobiedziska Letnisko. The research used a random selection of the research sample, which constitutes some limitations of the research due to the failure to meet the criterion of research representativeness.

RESULTS – THE SUBJECTIVE ASPECT OF THE SENSE OF IDENTITY OF SECONDARY SCHOOL YOUTH

Considering the quantitative context of the terms used by the surveyed secondary school youth to characterize their own identity in response to the question “Who am I?”, the emerging picture is one of young people who are having difficulty with defining themselves, as the overall arithmetic mean of the number of provided terms was 6.14, while it was possible to indicate a maximum of 20 terms.

There is a difference between the number of indications depending on the sex of the respondents. The girls provided an average of 7.20 identification terms, while the boys indicated slightly fewer judgments about themselves (5.14).

A greater collection of ideas about one’s own person was also exhibited by youth from a large city (7.02), an average of 6.10 indications were given by young people from a city, slightly fewer indications were provided by respondents from a village (6.02), while the adolescents living in a town gave the lowest number of indications (5.41).

The sphere of self-determination of the studied youth was also differentiated based on the type of school attended by the young people. The highest number of terms was given by respondents who studied in a general education high school with a subject profile (6.67) and in a technical high school (6.53), while the students of basic vocational schools indicated the lowest number of categories (4.16).
Taking into account the education of the father, the highest number of terms concerning self-definition was given by respondents whose fathers graduated from a post-secondary school (7.00) and a vocational school (6.35), while the lowest number of answers was given by students whose fathers completed elementary school (5.29).

The auto-definitional dimension of the question posed in the study – “Who am I?” – requires the positioning of one’s own person within the network of social connections and a reflection on the essence of one’s own self. These tasks were best fulfilled by the youth from a large city. A large city constituting the center of activity of factors belonging to the global dimension of contemporary socio-cultural reality (the cult of success, career, immediacy, body, risk) influences the development of the youth’s identity. Young people from a large city, experiencing their everyday life in clearly defined living conditions that are in line with the rules of existence of the people of “liquid modernity”, relatively quickly internalize them in the system of their own self, which makes the task of self-determination easier.

The determination of the subjective dimension of one’s own identity through a higher number of indications in response to the question “Who am I?” also applies to students of general education high schools. A greater awareness of one’s own self among this group of young people in comparison to the other respondents may result from the specific aspirations of prospectively oriented high school students, who see themselves as active subjects shaping their own lives. This translates into increased awareness of the connections between the individual and the social environment, which leads to an analogous increase in the awareness of one’s own self.

The research results revealed that the examined youth most frequently defined their own self by referring to individualistic concepts (3.15), followed by references to the symbolic determination of one’s role (2.77), while the physical features were mentioned the least frequently (0.53).

Young people most frequently defined themselves by referring to terms describing their own personality traits (ambitious, obliging, helpful, sympathetic, sociable, honest) and their interests.

The traits relating to the symbolic definition of one’s role most frequently related to being a human and a student. The roles fulfilled in the family and in the local community were also indicated.

Among the physical features, in response to the question “Who am I?”, the surveyed youth frequently mentioned the category of being a teenager. This shows a sense of identification with the peer group. Responses concerning the external appearance of the surveyed participants were very rare.
The average number of indications given in response to the question “Who am I?” is significantly differentiated by the variable of sex. Girls more frequently indicate auto-definitional features referring to the physical category, as well as the symbolic determination of one’s role, and the individualistic category.

On the basis of the above data, it can be stated, that the examined youth perceive their own self through the prism of personality traits and the fulfilled social roles. The qualitative analysis of the auto-definitional terms provided by the surveyed students in response to the question “Who am I?” indicates a high level of self-reflection on one’s own person in the context of identity formation.

The above considerations indicate that the examined youth has some difficulty with the answer to the question “Who am I?”, which points to an ongoing process of obtaining knowledge about oneself and searching for one’s own self. The respondents who have clearly defined life goals have the most developed auto-definitional ability, which may be due to favorable psychosocial conditions. Sex is a variable that differentiates the number of indications provided by the surveyed students in response to the question “Who am I?” – girls provided significantly more auto-definitional terms than boys in every category (physical dimension, symbolic determination of one’s role, and individualistic dimension) as well as in the personal and family sphere.

While defining their own self, the respondents simultaneously emphasized the personality properties and the affiliation with groups, both those concerning the personal and the social sphere. The respondents emphasized the fulfilled social roles, which may point to a sense of responsibility for the entrusted duties associated with the fulfilled role as well as a sense of identification with the group that entrusted them.

Respondents’ answers to the question “Who am I?”, categorized, have recently been added to the types of domains of life that are constant data. Split answers were taken into account due to the location of the subject’s trait in a special area of activity. The personal, professional, family and civic areas were distinguished. The results of the research revealed that adolescents used to refer to the categories of the professional (0.68) and family (0.49) human sphere. The respondents gave significantly fewer answers referring to the personal sphere (average number of terms – 0.11) and the civic sphere (0.03).

The above considerations indicate that the surveyed youth has difficulty answering the question “Who am I?”, which proves the ongoing process of gaining knowledge about oneself, searching for one’s “I”. The respondents who have clearly defined life goals have the most developed skill of self-definition, which may be due to favorable psychosocial conditions. Gender is a variable differentiat-
The respondents, while defining their own “I”, emphasized the personality characteristics and belonging to groups, both those related to the personal and social sphere. The respondents emphasized their social roles, which may indicate a sense of responsibility for the duties entrusted to them, and a sense of identification with the group that entrusted them.

Qualitative analysis of the answer to the question “Who am I?” revealed important spheres of human functioning, where the gender difference is visible – girls show a high degree of commitment towards the family sphere, and boys towards the professional sphere.

The summary of the above considerations will be selected examples of the answer to the question “Who am I?” granted by the respondents:

- “student; man; boy; son; cousin; driver; discoverer; traveler; sailor, motorcyclist; bus passenger; store customer; family hope; beer connoisseur; tobacco connoisseur; smoker; automotive fan; handsome” (Ch/LO);
- “man; schoolgirl; your parents’ child; older sister; a young person; a person who wants to achieve something in life; shy; granddaughter; nice; positive person; trustworthy; a friendly; helpful; resourceful; independent; having her friends; tearful; peaceful; sensitive” (Dz/T);
- “loner; pessimist; helper; girl; independent man; the original man; free man; pupil; sister; daughter; citizen” (Dz/LO);
- “student; son; introvert; romantic; dreamer; optimist; egocentric; a person with a sober view of the world; a believer; independent person” (Ch/ZSZ);
- “student; daughter; sister; granddaughter; friend; cousin; niece; Polish girl” (Dz/LO)\(^5\).

The presented results of research on the subjective aspect of the sense of identity of secondary school youth reveal an image of this age group as one that is still searching for its own identity core, and undergoing the process of implementation of developmental tasks belonging to the stage of adolescence. The low number of responses to the question “Who am I?” as well as a particular emphasis on

\(^5\) The symbols in brackets next to the exemplification mean: Dz – girl, Ch – boy, LO – high school student, T – technical school student, ZSZ – student of the basic vocational school.
individualistic features could indicate that the secondary school youth is focused on the formation of the personal identity components, which is consistent with the development plan that they currently experience.

**SUMMARY**

Changes in the subjective aspects of individual self-determination (sense of identity) are dependent on the properties of the subject’s developmental phase and are determined by the quality of socio-cultural reality which is in the process of creation. In the cultural space that is constructed in the present times and that is dominated by individualistic tendencies, the core of the subject’s identity is their interpretation of their own history (autobiography). The cognitive practice of a subject conducting a permanent discourse, focused on capturing the “difference” in relation to others and in relation to one’s own self over time, is therefore aimed at “constructing trajectories of human destinies and life paths and allows them to evaluate their own trajectory in the context of the directions in which others are moving, and in the context of at least an approximate assessment of the intensity and pace of changes that others are undergoing” (Misztal, 2000).

The post-modern rhetoric determines the category of identity in the form of a given construct, which is exemplified by the considerations of Z. Bauman, who wrote: “I am discovering identity, because it is myself, the individual who is choosing and bearing the consequences of my own choices, that turns out to be the only permanent point of reference in the stream of views, challenges, chances, opportunities, temptations, threats and prescriptions for life, that are occurring out of nowhere and then disappearing into nothingness” (Bauman, 2007). The period of adolescence is a particularly intense time of discovering one’s own identity and determining its main core due to the quality of biopsychosocial changes occurring at that time, which determine one’s own self and the nature of the self–others relationship. However, it should be kept in mind that in post-modern socio-cultural conditions, the reconstruction of identity is carried out on a lifelong basis. As pointed out by E. Erikson, “the shaping of identity neither begins nor ends with adolescence; it is a lifelong process, of which the individual and the society are to a large extent unaware” (Witkowski, 1989). The discovery, or rather, the search for identity in the liquid modernity’s conditions of permanent change has become one of the main developmental tasks of the period of adolescence, which has been confirmed by the multiplicity of developmental concepts that emphasize the importance of identity formation at this stage of human development.
In a situation of perceptible organization of social life around the multiplicity and variety of alternatives (and this is a perception that is not only observed, but also experienced), the young people are presented with a task of determining what is their own relationship with this world. This is a certain kind of internal exploration and an element of seeking answers to a question that is complex and requires repeated reflection: Am I (and to what extent) the subject of prospective changes? The significance and dynamics of change implies changes in the identity aspects of social life in which young people are seeking themselves and defining themselves. For the young people participating in the shaky reality, who are undergoing a period of transition from youth to adulthood during the period of adolescence, finding the answer to the question “Who am I?” acquires special significance, but also turns out to be increasingly difficult in the “multiplicity of worlds”. This issue is not without significance for the diversity of functioning of research group in the socio-cultural reality, which constitutes a foundation for further scientific and research analyses on this topic.

References


