

The Youth as the Clients of Career Guidance: Selected Studies of Polish Adolescents

This study attempts to find an answer to the question of how adolescents handle their educational and vocational career planning process in the context of cultural and economic transformations. It becomes particularly important to know how to knowingly shape one's own vocational biography in the market environment characterized by competitiveness and a high unemployment rate.

A diagnostic questionnaire method was applied in the research. A statistical analysis of the research results demonstrated three groups of young people that handle their career planning in diverse ways: one applying perspective strategies, one preferring strategies that focus on the present only and one group including people who gave up their planning of the future either following a conscious choice or due to practical helplessness.

Each group requires different forms of counselling and educational support in shaping their vocational biographies and has different requirements towards vocational counselling. The counselling activities, as demonstrated by the research results, require increasingly more psychological and educational skills, significantly exceeding a narrowly defined professional orientation.

Key words: *planning of educational and vocational future, adolescence, vocational development of individuals, vocational counselling.*

Introduction

In each nation, the youth are a peculiar category of the clients of career guidance activity, because of, among other factors, the unusual conditions of the development of people at that age (Erikson, 1950, 1968, 1989; Hurrelmann, 1994), who are crossing the various thresholds in the educational system and must fashion their own

paths of their future careers (cf. the stages of professional development after Super, e.g. Super, 1957, 1990; Osipow, 1973; Smart & Peterson, 1997). It is difficult to decide to what extent these processes are defined by mature decisions and choices, and to what extent, by accident or the impact of external influence. It cannot, however, be denied that adolescents must make a series of decisions concerning their choices of paths of subsequent education and their future professional activity. As Watts (1997a) observes, if we want career guidance to respond competently to the challenges produced by the political and economic transformations in Central and Eastern Europe, resulting in considerable disturbance of the previous style and standard of living and in enormous unemployment, then it is necessary to implement productive programmes of career guidance at schools and educational institutions. It is easier to prevent young people's hasty decisions concerning education and career than to repair their subsequent effects, which may include failure both in terms of the subjects' personal development and of the challenges of the market economy. The mechanisms of the making of decisions concerning education are so complex and affected by so many psychological and sociological factors (cf. e.g. the sociological theory of the making of decisions about education: Hodkinson, 1997) that it is impracticable to provide a universal definition of career guidance. Still, the main prerequisite to efficient prevention is a reliable diagnosis of the condition of the economy of the country in question (an aspect which is beyond the subject of the present considerations) and a psychosociological understanding of the circumstances in which the youth live within the reality of a specific point of time and space.

Education and career among the lifestyle preferences of the polish youth (based on sociological studies)

In order to define the desired form of career guidance in Poland and to identify the principal tasks of a career counsellor working with adolescents in this country, we must begin with a comprehensive diagnosis of this group of clients.

Accordingly, a passage in this paper will now describe the Polish adolescents who make decisions about education and career at the present time of intensive economic transformations following the political changes after 1989.

This general account of the lifestyle preferences of the contemporary young generation will be supplemented by the results of the author's own research focusing directly on career plans of the people completing their education at vocational and secondary schools. The collected data will be used as input for advice for career counsellors working with the youth who decide to continue their education and to enter the labour market in the immediate future.

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Education and career, which are essential components of a person's social life, provide young people with means of launching their adult professional activity. The procedure of passive self-placement within the range of the available educational and career offer, which a dozen years ago ensured stability and a long duration of employment, cannot be applied any more in the present social conditions. The contemporary youth enter the adult life in a much different market, economic and social situation, which requires competitiveness, mobility and professional flexibility (cf. Watts, 1996, 1997b).

Young people's attitude to education and career results from the social evolution which Poland has undergone during the long period of transformations.

In the 1970s, the youth based the aims of their lives primarily on such intersubjective values as a successful family life or a well-paid and interesting job providing a decent level of material existence. Knowledge and learning also ranked high in their capacity as autotelic values, but they were not top priorities (Cudowska, 1997).

In the 1980s, as the social and economic crisis aggravated, the youth became increasingly escapist and ceased to value education, because of the incommensurability of people's acquired education with their actual financial status. Only a very few subjects of studies considered the possibility of university education (*Polska młodzież '87*, 1988). At the same time, young people continued to place a high value on a satisfactory job which provided financial security and stabilisation. In these matters, the prevailing preferred lifestyle was a defensive one, and the youth tended to reduce their aims to a minimum (Cudowska, 1997; Hejnicka-Bezwińska 1997). Material values, prestige and aggressive behaviour on the education and labour market were not appreciated in Poland during the period in question (Świda-Zięba, 1998), as the desirability of work and education was decreasing (Hejnicka-Bezwińska, 1997; Zandecki, 1999).

The situation became peculiar indeed in the early 1990s, at the beginning of the political and economic transformations, whose expected outcome was not clear to many people. If the youth denied the value of career at that time, it was only rarely. Young people considered an interesting job to be an externalisation of their identities, or an opportunity for self-improvement, fulfilling their aspirations and expressing their personalities. The youth believed that work constituted a means of implementing their personal plans, in which close emotional relations with others and the need to fulfil themselves in the workplace played a vital part. While the youth realised that unemployment had become a major issue, they were not unduly afraid of it. However, a certain paradoxical phenomenon emerged: the youth denounced success and rejected competitive behaviour (Świda-Zięba, 1998).

Thus, work had become a significant factor fashioning the social identity, but the paradigm of a purely competitive and ruthless career was not generally accepted.

In the early 1990s, education still ranked low among young people's priorities (Cudowska, 1997), although they began to revise their attitudes toward university education, whose importance as a factor determining people's opportunities in life was increasing. University education was also more generally associated with a better quality of living (Zandecki, 1999).

On the whole, education and career was becoming more and more important among young people's lifestyle preferences in the 1990s (Białecki, 1998; Szymański, 1998; Borowicz, 2000; Kwieciński, 2002). While its main attraction was the satisfaction with doing a certain type of work, the financial aspect was also appreciated (Sołdra-Gwiżdż, 1997). Thus, young people were turning proactive and attempted to control reality, and in particular to manage their career paths, but in interviews they also stated that they were afraid of unemployment, had difficulties with finding a job and could not afford education (Koseła [ed.], 1999). And yet, the reports of the surveys of the youth *Młodzież '90, '91, '92, '94, '96 & '98* conducted by the CBOS [*Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej*, the Centre for the Public Opinion Studies] are fairly optimistic, describing adolescents as graduates of secondary schools who want to continue their education and are confident of success in life. The subjects of these surveys increasingly aspired to education, and also more and more frequently declared that they intended to make professional careers for themselves. Their youthful belief in their ability to succeed is supported by a decrease in their fear of unemployment and confidence that they will easily manage to evolve from students into employees, which must be considered paradoxical in the present difficult situation on the labour market and the economic slump. A growing number of young people are not content with inferior schooling and want university education. They also trust that their good will alone will suffice to provide them with a relatively stable occupation, although the increasing unemployment among recent graduates does not warrant such optimism. Giermanowska (2001, p. 229) points out that by the late 1990s, two previously unknown strategies of work-related behaviour had emerged among the Polish youth. These are:

- the strategy of being successful, focusing on acquiring very advanced education, which will offer opportunities of prestigious employment, and ultimately of a fast, spectacular and financially rewarding professional career;
- the strategy of avoiding unemployment, consisting in a desperate search for any job or source of income whatsoever, in order to stay out of the extensive groups of the impoverished and apathetic members of society.

Obviously, each strategy is pursued by a very different group of young people: most of them (including those who have adopted the latter strategy) are aware of

the importance of education, but they have different opinions of their opportunities on the labour market, fashioned by their specific conditions and environments of living.

Adolescents' decisions concerning their future education and careers (selected results of the study)

How can one, in this context, define the young people who decide on their future education and careers? How do young people manage to plan this aspect of their future in the continuously changing Poland of today?

To answer this question, the author studied 357 people completing their education at secondary schools: technical colleges (*technikum*), technical secondary schools (*liceum zawodowe*), grammar schools (*liceum ogólnokształcące*) and basic vocational schools (*zasadnicza szkoła zawodowa*). Thus, the subjects covered by the questionnaires and personal interviews made up a large sample of eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds who were making decisions about whether to enter the labour market immediately or to acquire university education.

The sample of the primary and secondary schools covered by the study was selected by means of the quota method. This is a variety of statistical sampling which ensures preassigned ratios within the sample (Mayntz, Holm, Huebner, 1985; Brzeziński, 1996). For the purpose of the present study, the preassigned criteria included a variety of educational environments (from small towns to big cities, and in the latter, a broad sample of schools with traditionally various standards of the provided education); the diversity of curricula was taken into account in the case of grammar schools; in technical and vocational schools, both secondary and basic, the criteria of selection included the peculiar nature of their specialist educational offer, targeted predominantly either at males or at females. The interviewees in the schools were selected on a random basis. The study was conducted mainly in the territory of the province of Great Poland, which is a region in the west of Poland with a well-developed economy; a few towns immediately neighbouring with this province in the west and the north were also covered by the study. Thus, the sample was selected based on predefined quantitative criteria, and the breakdown of its population was not representative, which, unfortunately, does not warrant the use of the results of the study as a general description of the population of adolescents. This, however, was not the purpose of the study, which was intended as a mere investigation of the specific phenomenon of young people's processes of decision-making concerning their future education and careers. The collected data were submitted to various statistical procedures; the following dis-

cussionis based mainly on a cluster analysis (Brzeziński, 1996), a method of classification according to a combination of several criteria, which in homogeneous groups of subjects who have yielded data on a number of topics, identifies a pre-defined number of the clusters of subjects who are the most similar to one another and the most different from the members of the other clusters.

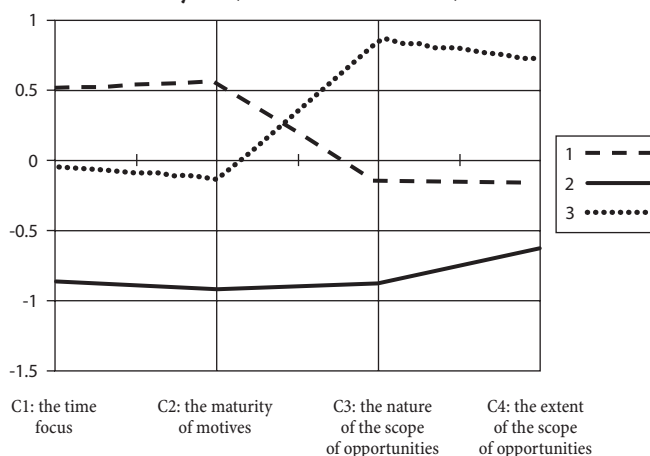
The study used the author's questionnaire examining young people's plans for their future, and the subjects' free written statements which revealed the motives of their choices of education and career, identified their values and aims, and indicated the skills and experience which the subjects expect to be beneficial in their future. As the latter information was combined with the synthetic data of the questionnaire, it was possible to classify the wh-questions in more detail, and to gain more grounds for the estimates and scales of selected quantitative variables.

In order to assess the subjects' plans concerning their future education and/or professional activity, a combination of several criteria was applied, selected on the basis of the entire corpus of the subjects' statements and on the classification of each subject using scales which measured the investigated phenomena.

The criteria of assessment were (Piorunek, 2004):

1. The subjects' time focus, as a measure of the range of their thinking about the future and decisions about education and career; these were divided into: a focus on the present: the subjects make plans only for the period immediately after their having crossed the imminent educational threshold, or only for the present stage of their lives; a focus on a period of several years: the subjects make long-term plans at least for selected aspects of their lives after the decision of continuing their education or beginning work; a focus on an extensive period: the subjects make comprehensive plans for the entire paths of their education, providing for numerous components of their future careers.
2. The quality of the declared reasons for and assessments of the subjects' decisions concerning education and career ("the maturity of motives"). The applied criteria were: the time range of planning, the specificity of reasons, the application of individual reasons for action or of more complex systems of reasons, and the adoption of external standards of assessment or the use of the subjects' own references. The entire corpus of the subjects' declared reasons for decisions was subsequently quantified using a four-level scale on which the lowest level was an actual lack of a motive of the decision, and the highest level, a mature and comprehensive motive based on the subject's values and aims in life and supported by an understanding of oneself and of the social reality.
3. The nature of the scope for the considered opportunities of education and career, revealing whether in the course of their previous education the sub-

Diagram 1. Average profiles of the three groups identified by the cluster analysis (standardised data)



[1, 0.5, 0, -0.5, -1, -1.5; C1: the time focus; C2: the maturity of motives; C3: the nature of the scope of opportunities; C4: the extent of the scope of opportunities]

The final centres of the clusters

The constituent variables of the profile	Cluster		
	1	2	3
the time focus	0.5047	-0.8694	-0.0622
the maturity of motives	0.5534	-0.9124	-0.1233
the nature of the scope of opportunities	-0.1561	-0.8734	0.8582
the extent of the scope of opportunities	-0.1602	-0.6309	0.7169

The instances of observation in the clusters

	Population	%
Cluster 1	158	44.0
Cluster 2	81	22.6
Cluster 3	118	32.9
Significant observations	357	99.5
No data	2	0.5

jects had taken into account a convergent (coherent) or divergent (incoherent) range of possibilities. A convergent range of educational and career possibilities is defined as one that covers a single general area of social-and-economic activity (e.g., the schools or professions that guide the subject to the general area of business, human relations or the humanities) or that may be described by another acceptable criterion declared by the subject. There may be a relationship between the subjects' limiting their scope of decision to a convergent range of possibilities and their having more specific career preferences.

4. The extent of the scope for the considered opportunities of education and career, corresponding to the number of the subjects' plans ("ideas to be implemented") for this aspect of their lives, and ranging from a total absence of plans to an abundance of possibilities. A high number of plans may, on the one hand, prove an involvement in the selection of the future professional roles and a continuing search for something suitable in the constantly evolving reality, and on the other hand, especially when the contemplated possibilities are substantially varied, a certain incompetence in the process of decision-making.

As we have already explained, the applied method was a cluster analysis, which breaks down the subjects into homogeneous groups characterised by the amount of all (in this case, four) the investigated characteristics: the time focus of their plans, the maturity of the motives of their decisions, and the nature and extent of the scope for the considered opportunities of education and career.

We now proceed to report on the measured characteristics of the studied sample of eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds.

A quick cluster analysis (cf. McQueen, 1967) established that those young people at the final stage of their adolescence and crossing an educational threshold were divided into three groups.

The largest group (44.0% of the subjects) consisted of teenagers whose plans covered periods of several years and featured more specific visions of their future professional paths or at least of some aspects of these, and whose decisions were based on a mature understanding of their own expectations, interests and abilities in the context of the particular current requirements of the labour market. They were determined to follow their intended paths of professional education and interested in one or a few specific possible jobs; occasionally one subject had a variety of motives and took into account several rather divergent possible careers.

A fairly numerous group of young people (32.9%) were interested only in their imminent educational threshold, making plans for the period of, at the most, their choice of a university and their studies at that institution. Their criteria of choice

included only a few aspects of their personal preferences and of the current market situation, and were typically based on very short-range motives of decisions (e.g. the proximity of the school, low entrance requirements, or many friends selecting the same educational path). These subjects tended to consider a fairly high number of career possibilities, which, however, fell into a rather convergent area; both the number and the convergence of the possibilities taken into account by an individual subject were above the average for the entire studied sample. Thus, this group may be described as consisting of people who often made numerous plans for entering on various, although related, possible careers and were aware of the importance of their future jobs and professions but entertained a number of complementary “visions” of their lives, and applied a short-term approach to their future, unable to make final decisions on their careers.

The remaining group, accounting for more than a fifth of the sample (22.6%), were those who ranked markedly below the average in all the investigated parameters because their time focus was on the present only and their decisions lacked a motive, often made at random. Those people either did not plan their future at all or took fortuitous professional opportunities. The philosophy of their lives might be summarised by the statement of one of the subjects: “something will turn up eventually”, which illustrates their preoccupation with the present experience and expresses either a conscious rebellion against the need for making a decision concerning the future as a facet of personal development (Hall, Lindzey, 1978) or an utter inability to make decisions and a fear of the future. Both the subjects’ sex and their parents’ education were statistically significant factors in this group of people unable to plan their careers: most of them were males, and the incidence of the failure to make decisions was inversely proportional to the level of their parents’ education.

As we can see, three different attitudes to career planning are distinguished among the lifestyle preferences of the present young generation. In the order in which they have been mentioned in the above report on the empirical data, these attitudes are:

- thinking in terms of personal success on the labour market, which requires a very long-range approach to the planning of the career, mature preparation and flexibility;
- a level of competence sufficient for planning for shorter periods only — the subsequent stages of such subjects’ professional paths may result from short-term emergency decisions;
- and finally, an attitude which may be construed either as the subjects’ intentional rejection of their culture principles of the functioning of the market, and particularly of the values of practical independence and the ability to cope

with the challenges of the contemporary world, or as a continuation of the previous stage of their personal development, viz., of the mentality of the childhood, conspicuous in their avoiding responsibility for the further course of their lives and their careless drifting in the cultural milieu and expecting a fortuitous opportunity. Has this class of young people been produced by the world-wide pattern of the evolution of the youth, or are they the heritage of the previous period of our nation's history, when the state was the distributor of such goods as work or education, virtually depriving them of their worth and thus making the youth so susceptible to external influences?

The principal tasks of career guidance targeted at the youth

Considering the characteristics of the three homogeneous groups of young people discussed above, one may ask if it would not be profitable to provide more educational guidance to the present young generation, designed based on certain distinctive features and approaches to the planning of the future which have been revealed in the present study.

The first group of the subjects hardly need any guidance other than, possibly, encouragement of their feasible plans or pointing out certain angles which they may have overlooked. Unfortunately, this is not the case of the other two groups in the sample.

Almost a third of the sample needs typical orientation guidance which explains the factors determining the present situation in the labour market to its clients, makes them assess the chances of carrying out of their plans, and facilitates their understanding of themselves. As a result, young people who have not yet chosen a preferred pattern of their future functioning on the market of education and labour, will be able to make firmer decisions and will understand the long-term and complex nature of decisions about the choice of a career, which many young people are not able or willing to realise.

Finally, representatives of the third group need to become targets of both a long-range action with a view to helping them to develop intellectual, emotional and practical competence that will make them responsible for the development of their own careers, and extensive customised psychosociological support responding to their individual needs. Each type of activity requires different skills from career counsellors working within the educational system. Of utmost importance, however, are psychological and pedagogical skills, particularly necessary when helping clients to realise their axiological-and-normative preferences, acquire a coherent vision of the seemingly chaotic society, identify the aims of their lives and control

their careers, whose protean unpredictability discourages many people from making plans and personal involvement.

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In the member states of the European Union, various forms of guidance are available to young people who make decisions concerning the choice of education and career, since each nation has a different tradition and local situation. Specific forms of career guidance have been developed for predefined groups of young people, while individual clients who face particular problems of their own, may obtain assistance. The following types of career guidance are in place (Trzeciak, Drogosz-Zabłocka [eds.], 1999, p. 39):

- providing information on the available educational opportunities (including further education) and on the labour market (trades, employment requirements and available jobs);
- diagnosing the clients' preferences and work potential (usually by means of standard methods of assessment);
- counselling in order to control (with a varying degree of supervision) and optimise the clients' educational and professional paths;
- non-controlling counselling, with a view to activating the clients' self-awareness;
- trade orientation under programmes for the improvement of the knowledge and skills of people who have taken certain decisions concerning their education and careers;
- employment exchange activity (finding employers or employees for those seeking them);
- negotiating with the labour market institutions on behalf of and for the prospective employees;
- tutelage (following the biographies of school graduates and supporting their educational and professional development in a more or less formal manner).

The present study has shown that many of these forms of career guidance, upon having been adapted to the Polish conditions, may be successfully applied in our country.

Conclusion

The harsh reality of the contemporary labour market, which is competitive and favours aggressiveness, creativity of action, professional competence and high skills of employees, as well as the threat of unemployment which young people must

continuously face, may seem to produce an attitude of active control over their careers in the youth, and thence, of mature planning of long-term, coherent, flexible and adaptable professional paths. In the present situation, individuals' visions of the future must remain mere guidelines giving them a freedom of movement in the changing world and defining only the general framework of their social and professional activity while allowing an efficient modification of the details if required by the circumstances. Sadly, a considerable percentage of the subjects of the present study do not realise this, focusing their professional plans on the immediate future and failing to identify the strategic aims of their lives. At the time when the fear of unemployment and financial difficulties is commonly expressed, these people do not reconnoitre the labour market thoroughly, do not prepare alternative professional plans or, paradoxically, altogether give up attempts at controlling their futures.

Those are the people who must be covered by highly efficient and diversified programmes of career guidance.

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