

EWA DUDA¹

Responsibility as the Result of Life Experience through the Adult Learners' Eyes

ABSTRACT

The meaning of responsibility, especially in young adults, plays an important role in contemporary life. It has an impact on the family life, social relations, ways of a work performance and many other aspects. The problem of taking responsibility by present-day people is discussed on different levels and in different areas. The point of view of adult learners of the formal education system still remains overlooked in academic discourse. This article presents adult learners' understanding of the concept of adulthood and its important component, responsibility. The present study examined opinions of learners attending upper secondary school for adults, using the phenomenography method. In anonymous survey with open-ended questions, 94 voluntary participants (aged 18–63) took part. This qualitative study examined how adult learners begin to recognize the importance of a sense of responsibility for themselves and how it influences their life. The results of the study indicate the traditional understanding of the concept of adulthood by adult learners. Personal development, as a result of a variety of life experiences, makes increase of the importance of responsibility for themselves, their family and surrounding. Though different life difficulties, awkwardness, lack of autonomy, the value of responsibility becomes more significant.

Keywords:

adult education, andragogical research, formal education, life experiences

¹ Institute of Education Policy, Faculty of Pedagogical Science, The Maria Grzegorzewska University, Poland, E-MAIL: duda.ewa@wp.pl.

INTRODUCTION

The age structure of learners in Polish upper secondary schools for adults has changed over last years. The majority of learners are young adults below 25 years old who increasingly decide to study in school for adults instead of youth school because of educational failures. There is a growing problem for teachers, how to treat their students, more like adults or as youths. Do learners in school for adults perceive the responsibility in traditional way? Are main characteristics and values still valid for them? The aim of the following article is to present adult learners' perception of adulthood, its categories, meaning and importance, significant in the process of adult education.

DEFINITION OF RESPONSIBILITY

According to the *Dictionary of the Polish Language* edited by Stanisław Dubisz, "responsibility is the moral or legal duty to be accountable for one's own or another's acts and their consequences; the obligation to recompense anyone upon whom one has inflicted damage or loss; taking on the obligation to take care of someone or something, do something" (Dubisz, 2003, p. 1165).

Responsibility is presented in close connection with action. It is not a matter of choice, it is an obligation. Human beings who can distinguish good from evil take actions that imply consequences. The assessment of one's behaviour is subjective but it is important to follow the rule not to harm others when striving to meet one's own needs. The definition also includes an element of responsibility from someone, to someone. When one makes decisions they should be guided not only by one's own good but also the welfare of others. Initiated actions and their consequences cause changes in a person's life, both their own, but also that of their family, neighbours, co-workers. The cyclic nature of the roles that are undertaken, the diversity of the environment, the geopolitical situation are domains of everyday life. Elżbieta Dubas (2014) noticed that adulthood is reached as an effect of changes in both external (social and cultural) and internal (personal) development. Life experiences make people conscious of their own personality, needs, and goals. Identity, personality and the understanding of one's own adulthood are developed. One becomes more independent and is able to make independent decisions on personal development. To decide what is important, what is worth trying, and what is irrelevant and worth resigning. One can select one's life goals, not because of their social value, but because they can be realized. Activity in

social relations contributes to the creation of a system of values, rules of conduct which become a support in taking new steps. Everyone creates one's own canon of universal principles governing participation in the events of adulthood.

Helena Radlińska, the creator of social pedagogy in Poland, wrote that “the most characteristic feature of adult life is determined by the reality of the tasks one undertakes, clear and direct responsibility for one's actions” (Radlińska, 1947, p. 11). Therefore responsibility is an attribute of adulthood. Human beings confronted by real problems have to make independent decisions. As imperfect individuals, they have the right to make mistakes. However it is important, to be able to consciously perceive, assess and predict their effects. Damage caused by making the wrong choice must be repaired. The ability to change as a consequence of initiated actions is an inherent property of the human being.

Władysław Szewczuk gave a similar definition of adulthood: “an adult person is solely responsible for himself/herself, constitutes the subject of his/her own activities, solely decides about his/her own life plan and manages the difficulties of its implementation, accounts to society for his own actions” (Szewczuk, 1961, p. 44). Responsibility appears as an intermediary between the individual and the group, normalizing social relations. The human being becomes the subject, creates the sense of his own identity, individuality, takes care of self-realization, but at the same time is open to others. Awareness of the impact of individual choices on the environment constitutes the essence of responsibility. Adulthood perceived as something intangible, an abstract phenomenon which adopts many different faces. Everyone feels it differently, autonomously.

Karol Wojtyła also stressed the importance of self-reliance: “man solely determines his actions and takes responsibility for them” (Wojtyła, 2001, p. 27). When a person performs a particular action and is aware of being the author of it, then he/she gains lived experience. Responsibility is based on free will and personal choices but the sense of it is duty.

DEVELOPMENT OF RESPONSIBILITY

Responsibility, a concept with a wide range of meaning, is the topic of many international research, public and academic discourses. It is used in different aspects, dimensions, contexts, including ethical, philosophical, cultural, educational, historical or ecological ones, and in different senses, including moral, legal, social or professional responsibility. The concept of responsibility is regarded as a behaviour differently carried out in various social situations. According to the central

complexity hypothesis (Mieg, 2016), increase at the level of complexity of a social situation, which implies the increase of social reflection, is positively related with higher level of involved responsibility.

The educational concept presented as the Youth's Cycle of Responsibility Development (Salusky et al., 2014) indicates four steps of learning responsibility by young people. First step includes the voluntarily agreement of taking on new obligations. Secondly, the process of fulfilling the obligations begins. It differs; some youth feel they will not manage with new role. Most youth are stressed out, feel uneasy or bored. They doubt their ability. There are youth who think about giving up, quitting their obligation. The achievement of the third step is completing obligations. It happens by dint of good self-concept of some youth or a support of the leader. The last step of the Youth's Cycle of Responsibility Development is personal change. They feel more confident, competent and perceive themselves as more responsible.

Responsibility used in the social sense is referred to teacher perspective as well (Augustiniene, Jociene, & Minkute-Henrickson, 2015). Presented model of social responsibility dedicated for pupils of comprehensive school contains three components. The first one is the school environment where teachers, students and their parents influence on each other. They see necessity of the development of social responsibility and capability of own actions. Factors influencing students' behaviour are regarded as the second component. These factors are: an inclination toward behaviour according to moral principles, values; subjective standards; supervising the behaviour. The negative viewpoint could cause low or even lack of development of responsibility, when student excuses own specific behaviour. The internal motivation is perceived as the third component.

Different approach to the attribution of responsibility is presented by critical constellations in modern society (Henkel & Åkerstrøm Andersen, 2015). The main questions in discourse refer to new mechanism of an imputation of responsibility when mistakes of individuals occur. What is the significance of human actions when the responsibility is not inseparably bound together?

Nowadays the lack of capacity or/and willingness to take sufficient responsibility for one's own life, especially in young adults, is a growing problem. Attaining independence is prolonged in time and raises the question about necessity of supporting young adults by their families, governments, markets (Settersten & Ray, 2010). The need to consolidate actions of various social institutions and promote the formation of new ones to encourage the transition from childhood into adult life is emphasized.

The return of young adults to parental home after graduation may affect negatively or ambivalently both parents and youths (Lewis, West, Roberts, & Noden, 2016). The phenomenon of returning home is regarded in literature as a “boomerang back” (Finn, 2016).

Many emerging adults are immature. Their behaviour features conformity and lack of autonomy (Arnett, 2000; Mergler, Spencer, & Patton, 2008; Kuran-towicz & Nizinska, 2012). The opinion has also been voiced that not only the individual is responsible for the action. Everyone else who does nothing to avoid it is likewise responsible (Doherty, 1998; Knight, 2010). Against this backdrop of different points of view on the topic, I would like to focus on the phenomenon of sense of responsibility in adult learners in the formal education as an important component of adult status.

CONTEMPORARY APPROACH

Is the traditional understanding of adulthood as a synonym of responsibility, presented in this article, still valid? Do values exist that are passed from generation to generation despite constant cultural changes? Are the priorities of previous generations still recognized and continue to be important for contemporary adults?

Intense technological progress causes us to live in a world largely created by the media which impose a mandatory system of standards and behaviours. Increasingly, it becomes significant not who we are but how we are perceived by others. Social networking sites are a new source of knowledge about people, their passions, achievements and beliefs. More and more young people, using the illusory sense of anonymity, try to express their opinions and comments without incurring any responsibility for them. The main goal is to build the image of the individual, to promote virtual actions, and to bring short-lived but spectacular effect. Manuel Castells notices: “the space of flows and timeless time are the material foundations of a new culture that transcends and includes the diversity of historically transmitted systems of representation: the culture of real virtuality, where make-believe is belief in the making” (Castells, 2008, p. 360).

Young people entering early adulthood are often perceived as irresponsible. What counts most for them are economic wealth and professional career, regardless of the consequences. Technological progress favours human development, it offers unlimited opportunities for self-realization, creating a life, involvement in adulthood. Active participation in social life often has a self-reward function which stimulates participation in future projects. On the other hand, the unpre-

dictability of the future, instability, environmental or economic hazards involve the risk of feeling lost, depression, frustration, failure. Stella Grotowska remarks: “experience of change is the commonplace of a modern human of late modernity and dually inhabitant of rapidly transforming Poland at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, it is associated with suffering caused by the devastating changes of the established order that one has to deal with. Even if its consequences are generally positive and in this way experienced by human, it is impossible not to undergo them, not to respond or notice” (Grotowska, 2010, p. 21).

The juxtaposition of tradition and modern culture triggered the present attempt to assess how the concept of adulthood is perceived by adult learners.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Five classes of an Upper Secondary School for Adults in Warsaw were randomly selected. All students from these classes took part in the study. There were 94 adults (45 men and 49 women), aged 18 to 63 years ($M = 23,7$).

PROCEDURE

The preliminary study consisted of an anonymous survey, conducted as a written interview. Participation was voluntary. The questionnaire contained open-ended questions concerning the concept of understanding participants' own adulthood. There was no time limit. The longest response time was equal 60 minutes. Participants answered questions independently. The analysis was conducted using the phenomenography method presented by Ference Marton and Shirley Booth (1997). Answers from the questionnaires were analyzed step-by-step in order to identify categories of meaning. The outcome of this analysis is a description of different ways in which learners experience and understand the studied phenomenon (Limberg, 2008).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When describing selected aspects of adulthood, the following issues were taken into consideration: how the narrator understands his/her own adulthood, whether the respondent regards himself/herself as a responsible person, the importance of responsibility in everyday life, difficulties in being adult, the respondent's attitude toward other people.

One of the questions concerned contemporary understanding of the concept of 'adult person'. The following responses were provided:

- responsible for words and actions – 77 students
- makes informed decisions – 34 students
- predicts the consequences of own actions – 30 students
- takes care of own family/wants to build a family – 27 students
- self-contained, independent – 25 students
- earns a living/financially independent – 21 students

The remaining answers were: 'abiding by generally prevailing rules, principles', 'when one makes mistakes, he can admit it and tries to compensate them', 'conscientious, honest, truthful', 'has the right to vote, pays taxes', 'respects others, is tolerant', 'takes care about education', 'should be a positive example for the younger'. Only one respondent answered that an adult is a person who has more privileges, such as buying and drinking alcohol, going to clubs.

The next question involved the sense of understanding of one's own adulthood as a consequence of 'being in the world'. The answers could be divided into five types of description of the meaning of 'adulthood', as expressed by the respondents.

The first type of description was an adult as a person who is accountable for himself/herself. Many participants had to learn how to take care of themselves. It was often a challenge for them:

I had to learn that my parents won't do everything for me. I need to make my own decisions, even if it is hard and not always made properly. Some things are easier but some problems overwhelm me. When I was a child my family helped me with all my troubles. Many times I even did not notice them because someone did it for me.

Difficult life situations are the domain of many students at schools for adults:

After my parents' sudden death all the responsibilities fell on my shoulders. I often make mistakes and it affects my life, all the time I have to change something. I learn how to live in harmony with myself.

A number of times young adults need to change their behaviour and system of values. Their adulthood is no longer carefree. The characteristic light-heartedness of youth is contrasted with concern for the fulfilment of basic human needs:

It was like falling into deep water. At secondary school I would go wild, going to parties, trying forbidden things. Now I have to take care of my job. Having fun is not as important as it was a few years ago.

Interlocutors stressed the lack of preparation for a new role. They repeatedly misconstrued the time of imminent independence:

Adulthood is terrible. Earlier everything was easy, only fun and enjoyment. Now I have to deal with school and work. Nobody told me how to manage my new situation. I thought everything would be easy then all of a sudden, overnight, the world turned upside down.

The second type of description was an adult as a person who accepts the consequences of his/her own actions. The repercussions of wrong choices in challenging situations can affect many planes of life. Students often undertake actions that have legal consequences:

I signed the contract, resulting in probation. It taught me to make decisions responsibly. All the time I'm learning how to avoid making mistakes for which you have to pay later.

The third type of description was an adult as a person who is responsible for others, i.e., takes care for children, spouses, parents, grandparents, and who notices the influence he/she has on other people:

If I hadn't grown up, I would be afraid to be responsible for someone's life. I strive for self-improvement to support my family.

Their work is important because it meets the needs of several people:

I take care of my wife and child. In order to create a sustainable future not only for me, but also my wife and child, I want to build a house. I also study to have better future.

Responsibility for the family brings joy and satisfaction:

I work to support my family. I became responsible for me and my family. When my daughter was born, I was the happiest man in the world. I feel fear for the children, whether I can take good care of them, raise them to be good people. I am also very proud of my children's successes. Last, I was on the school play, my son played piano there. It was a very touching moment.

Some respondents look after ill family members:

My son's serious illness meant that I had to become responsible. Every day now teaches me something new and above all that the welfare of others depends on my decisions. I can't give up, I have to be strong for my child.

For one student adulthood meant responsibility for an animal:

The biggest change in my life was to take care of the dog. I have duties, I am important, I feel it makes me more mature. If it weren't for my family, I don't know if I would continue my education.

The next type of description was an adult as a person who struggles with weaknesses or difficult situations. Among them are students who come from environments with low social capital:

I have a pathological neighbourhood – colleagues who draw me into different troubles. I have to fight hard to make me succeed. I want well, but often something goes wrong. Wind in the face, and not at my back.

Sometimes it is not easy even for their family:

I work to pay fees. I do not run away from problems, I gained the strength to fight them. You cannot linger when things are going badly, the most important is not to give up. I learned to be tough. Adulthood is the pursuit of a better life. This is done at the expense of children who are unable to see parents who work for most of the day.

The last type of description was an adult as a person who fulfils social relations. How they were perceived by their environment, their professional prestige was important for them:

It occurred to me that for everything in life there is the right time and place. It is worth learning. Others began to treat me seriously, I became more careful and aware. I work, people look at me differently. I have duties and responsibilities for what I do.

Learning the ability to build interpersonal relationships was another step in the maturation process. Adult school has become a place of knowing their advantages:

I learned how to be tolerant, responsible for myself and others. I learned to be in good relations with others. I learned not to hurt others, take into account their feelings. Current school for adults has had great influence on me. I feel a more valuable person. Although my grades are not too good, I'm still so proud of myself that with so many duties that I have every day, I manage to pass all my exams. I have found my place – work, family, school. I set goals that I manage to achieve.

Respondents perceive interpersonal relationships as a basis for their own development:

First, we take over examples of behaviour from our parents, grandparents, next, we have to show our children how to behave. Meeting people broadens our horizons, we want to draw from them the qualities that correspond to our principles. Every new experience, newly met person, has left its mark on my life.

CONCLUSION

The responses of the present survey indicate that the adult learners understand the concept of adulthood in the traditional way. Over 80% of respondents said that being an adult means responsibility, both for their actions and their words. Important for them was also informed decision-making, the ability to predict the consequences of their own actions, to accept the consequences and repair the damage done. Respondents appreciated the value of family, responsibility for children, but also self-reliance, independence, including financial independence. Some answers highlighted the importance of adapting to the generally accepted rules and the ability to vote on issues of importance to the state, society, and at the same time to themselves.

As a result of a variety of life experiences, adult learners change and they begin to recognize the importance of a sense of responsibility for themselves, their family and the actions they take. For some, change is a natural, spontaneous process which is the result of personal development. For others, it is violent, somewhat forced by external factors such as illness, death of loved ones, negative or positive impact of the environment in which they live. People are responsible for different stages of their life, uncorrelated with their age and biological development.

Liability is included in the process of adulthood. It is a factor linking human rights with duties. As an attribute of adulthood, it is an element regulating relationships, "I – the group". The man begins to create a network of relations between them as a single unit, and the environment which is the sum of the other units, forming a coherent whole. Recognizing own needs, one learns to understand and respect the needs of others. The person is a subject, but at the same time is trying to maintain a balance between self-realization and other people's right to development, learning to compromise.

The respondents also perceive the difference between the real world and their cyberspace. Virtual reality is only a form of escape. They can, however, leave it and live responsibly in the real world, realizing themselves in the role of wife/

husband, parent, or employee. Social networking is like memories of childhood, the moment of “detachment” from daily duties or hassles, but also a source of self-esteem. It is an alternative space for the development of relations between people, not a substitute for them. Although adulthood presents a variety of faces, its main characteristics and values are really the same.

References

- Arnett, J. (2000). Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens Through the Twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55 (5), pp. 469–480.
- Augustiniene, A., Jociene, J., & Minkute-Henrickson, R. (2015). Social Responsibility of Comprehensive Schools: Teachers' Point of View. *Social Sciences*, 87 (1), pp. 74–88. DOI: 10.5755/10.5755/j01.ss.87.1.12315.
- Castells, M. (2008). *Spółeczeństwo sieci*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Doherty, B. (1998). Blame Society First. *Reason*, 30 (2), p. 8.
- Dubas, E. (2014). Zmiana i uczenie się w perspektywie edukacji dorosłych. Przykład projektu Lives in changing “Butterfly”. *Rocznik Andragogiczny*, 21, pp. 461–479. DOI: 10.12775/RA.2014.033.
- Dubisz, S. (2003). *Uniwersalny słownik języka polskiego*. Vol. 2. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Finn, K. (2016). Young Adults Living at Home: Independence, Intimacy, and Intergenerational Relationships in Shared Family Spaces. In: S. Punch & R.M. Vanderbeck (Eds.), *Families, Intergenerationality, and Peer Group Relations [Geographies of Children and Young People, Vol. 5]* (pp. 1–17). Singapore: Springer.
- Grotowska, S. (Ed.). (2010). *Doświadczenia zmian społecznych*. Kraków: NOMOS.
- Henkel, A., & Åkerstrøm Andersen, N. (2015). Introduction: The Necessity of a New Understanding of Responsibility for Modern Society. *Soziale Systeme*, 19(2), pp. 221–232. DOI: 10.1515/sosys-2014-0203.
- Knight, C. (2010). Justice and the Grey Box of Responsibility. *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, 57 (124), pp. 86–112.
- Kurantowicz, E., & Nizińska, A. (2012). *Trajektorie uczenia się w instytucjach kształcenia ustawicznego*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej.
- Lewis, J., West, A., Roberts, J., & Noden, P. (2016). The Experience of Co-Residence: Young Adults Returning to the Parental Home After Graduation in England. *Families, Relationships and Societies: An International Journal of Research and Debate*, 5 (2), pp. 247–262.
- Limberg, L. (2008). Phenomenography. In: L.M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (pp. 611–614). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Marton, F., & Booth, S. (1997). *Learning and Awareness*. New York: Routledge.
- Mergler, A., Spencer, F., & Patton, W. (2008). Personal Responsibility: The Creation, Implementation and Evaluation of a School-Based Program. *Journal of Student Wellbeing*, 2(1), pp. 35–51.

- Mieg, H.A. (2016). Social Reflection, Performed Role-Conformant and Role-Discrepant Responsibility, and the Unity of Responsibility: A Social Psychological Perspective. *Soziale Systeme*, 19 (2), pp. 259–281. DOI: 10.1515/sosys-2014-0205.
- Radlińska, H. (1947). *Oświata dorosłych. Zagadnienia, dzieje, formy, pracownicy, organizacja*. Warszawa: Ludowy Instytut Oświaty i Kultury.
- Salusky, I., Larson, R.W., Griffith, A., Wu, J., Raffaelli, M., Sugimura, N., & Guzman, M. (2014). How Adolescents Develop Responsibility: What Can Be Learned From Youth Programs. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 24 (3), pp. 417–430. DOI: 10.1111/jora.12118.
- Settersten, R.A., & Ray, B. (2010). What's Going on With Young People Today? The Long and Twisting Path to Adulthood. *The Future of Children*, 20 (1), pp. 19–41.
- Szewczuk, W. (1961). *Psychologia człowieka dorosłego*. Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna.
- Wojtyła, K. (2001). *Miłość i odpowiedzialność*. Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL.