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Success in a Career from the Perspective of Academic Youth

ABSTRACT

The contemporary study of careers requires taking into consideration multi-contextual changes in the world of work, which make individuals face new challenges. The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the numerous transformations taking place in the contemporary reality, including in the world of work, which influence people's professional career, the significance attributed to it and the success achieved through it. This article presents the results of own research concerning career success as perceived from the perspective of academic students from Poland. Particular attention was paid to two aspects of this issue: its objective and subjective nature, as well as the assessment of own chances for achieving it within one's career path. The results of the studies prove, that the surveyed youth perceives success in a career in a subjective manner, but that its objective dimension is also important for the academic students, and that the vast majority take a positive attitude towards their own professional future. The resulting empirical material may carry important implications for the educational practice.

Keywords:

career, career success, academic students, subjective sense of career, successful career

INTRODUCTION

In the knowledge-based economy, which actually means that our society is knowledge-oriented, career development of society members and investing in a career

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“portfolio” (which is an investment and renewability of career capital)² have become the key issue. As K. Obuchowski observes, this peculiar shift in the “orientation of the individual from the external conditions of existence to the internal conditions” (Obuchowski, 2000, p. 62), induces us to consider a career in connection with an individual as an individual entity, whose property is an individual career and a feeling of achievement that creating it entails (Obuchowski, 2000, p. 62). An individual develops a career on the basis of perception and his or her attitude to it, which means, as Patton & McMahon emphasize, that a career is “a model of influences which exist in an individual’s life” (Patton & McMahon, 2014, p. 2). This view represents an individualistic tendency (ambition, sense of agency, motivation to act), which finds its legitimacy in economic theories promoting investment in human resources potential within the organization (Rosenbaum, 2004, p. 330). This perspective is the basis for thinking about a career as a “property” of the individual, taking into account individual career choices, individual career planning strategies or individual career development stages.

The question of subjective meaning given to a career by an individual, in the context of the possibility of experiencing it in a satisfactory manner, cannot be overlooked in the consideration of a career. As E. Ginsburg states, “the career development process is open and its aim is to find a job that is as rewarding as possible” (in: Szymański, 2010, p. 82). The career development process has a strong impact on the quality of job satisfaction and the commitment to a career. Moreover, the results of B. Adekola’s research show that career development has stronger links with the person’s job satisfaction than with his or her involvement in the career (Adekola, 2011, p. 108).

CAREER SUCCESS – CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE ESSENCE OF THE CONSTRUCT

Career success as a result of individual’s experiences with career can be defined as “realization of the desired professional tasks at any moment of human professional experience [...], which means «achieving a desired goal» and «a successful attempt of achieving something»”(Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005, p. 179).

2 The issue of the quality of the global cultural ecumenu is discussed by the author in a much broader context in the other work (Cybal-Michalska, 2006, pp. 30–41). The issue of success in a career undertaken in this article constitutes a fragment of the author’s multi-context approach to the issue of a career in the world of permanent change, in the world in which “career makes a career”, taken up in the monograph (Cybal-Michalska, 2013).

The alternative meanings of career success, emphasizing what is “desirable” by the subject or being an assessment of “success” as a result of social comparisons, emphasize its subjective and objective perception.

The concept of success in a career is undoubtedly shaped in opposition to a one-sided approach to the issue. The interpretation of career success, referring not only to success in an objective sense (in relation to such indicators as: number of promotions, salary increase, etc.), or success in a professional context (the indicator may be the scale of satisfaction with a professional career, the position of an individual in an organization), may also enhance the success in other domains of the person’s life. In addition, success in a career can be evaluated through the perspective of a peer group, within or outside the organisation in which the individual has taken up a job. Particularly important is the question of the idiosyncrasy of success for the individual, taking into account his/her preferences and work-life balance (Arthur et al., 2005, pp. 177–178).

The presented comments on the sense of success in a career highlight its individual, subjective shades of meaning. In this sense, success, or actually the sense of success, can be judged “mainly on the basis of an individual’s report on its subjective state” (in: Majczyna, 2000, p. 44). “Subjective career success” in Van Maanen’s approach is defined as “individual’s internal apprehension and evaluation of his or her career, across any dimensions that are important to that individual” (Arthur et al., 2005, p. 179). In the trajectory of a career, the sense of satisfaction, contentment and self-fulfilment at work and the sense of success at the professional level are mutually reinforcing and determining (Szymański, 2010, p. 89). Success can evoke a number of experiences that make up the professional potential of everyday life. Originally, it derives from the conscious and perceptible general success in the field of career. Subjective shading of success, where each of us is heading for success in our careers, in consequence makes it difficult to talk about the development of identical careers, which A. Bańka (2016) emphasizes. Due to the possibility that individuals may react and feel differently about similar events, it is possible to experience, feel and adjudicate on success or non-fulfilment by performing the same sequence of works at the same time and place (Bańka, 2016, p. 25). A subjective understanding of a career refers to concepts expressing different subjective aspirations of a career. Individual careers of people in similar social or professions environments may overlap, but as Bailyn emphasizes, “«it would be a mistake ... to assume that all members in a particular social category» would share the same subjective career orientations” (in: Arthur et al., 2005, p. 179). It seems that it is no coincidence that Savickas in the proposed theory of career construction clearly emphasizes the fact that individuals differ in character traits, which include personality traits, self-concepts and abili-

ties. It is the degree to which an individual is able to demonstrate his or her qualities that determines the quality of the defined success in his or her career (Patton & McMahan, 2014, p. 63).

It is difficult to point out simple and direct correlations between variables in personality, environment and a sense of satisfaction or career success. Moreover, it is difficult to indicate the existence of a high correlation between happiness, career satisfaction, and career success. In this context, it is worth pointing out the originality of classical studies on the relationship between career satisfaction and career success by the following authors (see: Cytrynbaum & Crites, 1989, pp. 67–69). It is rather a chain of causative relationships. N. Frijda came to interesting conclusions in his research. The stimulator of positive emotions identified as an antidote to adaptation to happiness and the way of its extension can be gratitude. The concept of gratitude, understood as emotion, attitude or moral virtue and having common mechanisms with happiness and wellbeing, emphasizes the person's general disposition to positively experience everyday events, the ability to perceive opportunities, appreciate existing and new avenues, and invest mental energy in developing the worldview that life is a daily gift for an individual. It is assumed that prototypically gratitude derives from the positive perception of the results achieved by an individual as a consequence of his/her own activity and the activity of other people as their external source and as an outcome of relations with other people (Bańka, 2016, p. 18). At the basis of reflections on career satisfaction, the construct of gratitude – understood as a general disposition created in the everyday activity of a person, evoking its positive experience – certainly deserves its empirical undertaking.

The construct of success in the domain of career is a specific composition of subjective and objective elements. However, the notion of career success highlights its individual subjective undertone. The potential of a personal career consists of the sense of satisfaction and success from career development, and more precisely, the awareness, feeling and acknowledgement of an individual of the “happy ending”, “successful outcome”, “encouragement to take up the next challenge” and “achieving goals”(Kot, 2011, p. 129). In the trajectory of a career, success is the potential of a person's everyday life, and its development trends differ at different stages of a person's career. A cognitively interesting issue in the discussed context of the dynamics of career success is the assessment of one's chances of success in a career from the perspective of academic youth in the moment of transition from education at the academic level to the labour market.³

3 The study was conducted in 2012. A total of 352 students were surveyed. The subjects of the research were university students of the last years of studies, who were in the period of transition from education to the labour market. The respondents represented three higher education

SUCCESS IN A CAREER IN THE VIEWS AND OPINIONS OF THE EXAMINED ACADEMIC YOUTH

The studied group of young people responding to the issue of success in their careers, and being at the “pre-career” stage (in professional sense), reveal great optimism. Thus, it is in line with the predictions made by E. Giermanowska, pointing to the implementation of the strategy of “making a career” by young people, which for her is connected with the value of education, prestige and material prosperity (Giermanowska, 2001, p. 229). This is, of course, of great importance for grasping the semantic meaning given by the youth to career domain. Young people’s ideas about their careers situate their views and opinions in structural-functional orientation as an external system, an objective phenomenon, reflecting a publicly visible position, status, power, prestige, and money. This means that young people define career in terms of socio-occupational mobility, identified by them with the vertical mobility of human beings. The purpose of the research was to obtain a picture of success in one’s own career from the undergraduates’ perspective.

The chances of success in a career, according to the researched group of young people, are definitely high (75.5%) (“big” – 35.9%, “very big” – 39.6%). Although it is difficult to talk about the development of identical careers, young people living in a big city of over 100 thousand inhabitants (ANOVA; $p=0.017$)⁴

institutions: Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Karol Marcinkowski Medical University in Poznań, and Poznań University of Technology. Thus, the studied academic youth represented a variety of fields of study. In the case of social sciences, these were the following fields of study: Education, Special Education, for humanities – History, for legal sciences – Law, for medical sciences – Medicine, for technical sciences – Automation and Robotics, Computer Science, Electrical Engineering. In order to learn about the issue of success in a career, which was the subject of the research, perceived from the perspective of academic youth’s double transition: from adolescence to adulthood and from academic education to the labour market, the diagnostic survey method and survey technique were applied. In quantitative studies, specific statistical procedures were selected and applied to identify and grasp relationships between variables. The single-way variance analysis (ANOVA) procedure was used to estimate the statistical significance of average differences in many compared groups.

4 There were certain statistical procedures applied to the results of quantitative research, so as to recognise and define the associations among variables. Analyses of interactions among variables were an important statistical data processing procedure used on the presented results, which made it possible to find out whether there was a correlation between two variables and how strong it was. The single factor variance analysis procedure (ANOVA) was used to assess the statistical significance of average differences in numerous comparison groups. For nominal two-level variables the Yule’s coefficient was applied, Cramér’s V coefficient was used for nominal variables with numerous levels, while the Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient was employed for ordinal variables (including all variables measured using the Likert scale).

present the greatest conviction about the career success, followed by respondents whose mothers have a bachelor's degree or higher (ANOVA; $p=0.005$), and subjects declaring very good material conditions in the family (ANOVA; $p\leq 0.0001$).

The quality of the educational reality of the respondents is a determinant of the evaluation in terms of defining the chances of success. Respondents who in secondary school were either aspiring or average students (ANOVA; $p=0.002$) and students who represent the field of medical, technical or legal sciences (ANOVA; $p\leq 0.0001$), evaluate their abilities and chances of success in their careers as much higher than in other groups of respondents. It is worth mentioning here that the anticipation of success in a career, as well as one's own definition of success in a career in the case of the studied group of young people, does not necessarily have to be consistent with its "objective" definition, so typical for a functional-structural perspective that identifies a career with prestige, power and material prosperity. All the more that, as J. Pollegrin and C. Coates put it, success in the early stages of career development is not usually defined in terms of prestige, power and income (after: Rokicka, 1992, pp. 124–125). In her 2008 research on the professional perspectives of law students at Warsaw University, E. Łojko emphasizes that the foundations for their future career success are the following: gaining recognition and respect in their professional environment, professionalism, recognisable position in the legal community and investment in social capital, articulated as a desire to "make professional network". Interestingly, the research on law graduates who have been working as judges for 25 years, evoked by the author, provides interesting comparative material and allows us to anticipate changes in the vision of professional success. For lawyers who have been judges for a quarter of a century, the work they do is supposed to mainly place them in the social structure. The desire for success is in fact a desire for: high salaries, prestige in the professional environment, personal satisfaction, professional advancement, and professionalism. It should be noted that taking into account the time dynamics, the source of developing professional identity of lawyers is an "objective success" in a career (Łojko, 2011, pp. 183–185).

Respondents who have not changed their career plans since the beginning of their studies (ANOVA; $p=0.001$) are the most convinced about the potential of achieving success in their careers. Linearity in the perception of the career perspective is conducive to anticipating a career success. Optimistic perception of the future in a career is accompanied by individualistic normative orientation⁵

5 J.F. Crandall's social involvement scale, as modified by W. Daab, has been applied to test the individuals' individualist v. collectivist tendencies in the researched group of undergraduates. The scale was made up of ten criteria pairs, of which one: elegant & tactful, was of buffer character.

(S; $\rho=0.154$; $p=0.007$). Young people with a dominant individualistic normative tendency formulate the tasks they face in their careers in terms of self-updating, development of their own potential, individual activity and responsibility for agency, which undoubtedly allows for anticipation of success in their careers as “an individual property”. Faith in the success of career progression depends on the individual activity. The results of the research indicate the importance of assessments related to the domain of quality of life satisfaction for the prospects of career success. In the study group of young people it turned out that the more frequent feeling of joy of life by students (ANOVA; $p\leq 0.0001$), the more favourable the assessment of their previous life (ANOVA; $p\leq 0.0001$), the higher the level of optimism for the vision of the possibility of success in careers constructed by the students. Feeling and conviction of being loved are not without significance for emphasizing the chances of success in a career (ANOVA; $p=0.012$). M. Piórunek (2009) emphasized the importance of the inner conviction of a person about the positive balance of life in the sense of success in his or her professional career. The author’s research shows that there is a connection between a satisfying self-experience and autonomy in decision making, productivity in the Erikson’s sense, subjective agency, and self-directedness. In the case of the studied academic youth, both the different ways of defining a career and the aspects of approaching it do not differentiate “planning attitudes” of respondents to success in their careers. There is no doubt, however, that the ability to allocate one’s competences and skills to the work environment will be of fundamental importance for career success. Particularly noteworthy are the factors that are conducive to success in a career. The undertaken theme can be illustrated by referring to the “career anchors” conceptualized by E.S. Schein (1978). The theoretical foundations of the discussed approach, referring to eight groups of individual priorities called “career anchors”, served as an inspiration to grasp the competences, motives and values that can serve as a satisfactory construction of careers of the studied academic youth.⁶

Each pair contained one trait associated with the collectivist orientation and one trait associated with the individualist orientation. The respondents received the following instructions for selecting the appropriate adjective: “Please find below ten pairs of traits which may be used to describe people. All these traits are considered good. Please underline in each pair the trait which in your opinion is more desirable, and which might cause you to consider the person who has this trait as more valuable”.

6 The determination of “anchors” of the career, which in my work I call the “career guides” of the studied academic youth, was made on the basis of a questionnaire entitled “My Career”, developed by the Industry Development Agency (Agencja Rozwoju Przemysłu S.A.) based in Warsaw, within the project co-financed by the European Union under the European Social Fund. The questionnaire consists of 40 statements. In the book, they are quoted in their original wording. The respondents’ approach to the statements is expressed by assigning the following rank to them: 1 – if

Capturing specific “career guides”, because such a semantic meaning can be given to the presented results of empirical investigations, helps to outline (and not to capture, because the term “anchors” of a career, whose attribute is stability and continuity, needs to be approached in a processual context) possible areas in which the studied group of students can increase their chances to achieve success while constructing their own careers. Referring to empirical research on young university students, the factors conducive to career success that serve as specific career “guides” are the following: lifestyle, the need for security and stability, and professionalism. A lifestyle in which a career is perceived as one of many domains of life activity of a person focused on the sense of mental well-being, balance and harmony, occupies a central place in the value system of the studied academic youth. In the hierarchical system, the next place in terms of young people’s choices can be distinguished by their orientation towards autonomy and independence and devoting themselves to others. At the fourth level, creativity and entrepreneurship, as well as the challenge, should be singled out among the “signposts” of career success. Analyses of research results indicate that focusing university students on leadership, identified with increasing the scope of power as a “guide” for success in a career, is the least preferred value. For academic youth, who look to the future and are soon to be novices on the labour market, the aspect of having power and expanding their sphere of influence seems to be too distant. The closest life plans are directed towards looking for a job corresponding to education and the most suitable for respondents as a career development environment. As a result, it can be concluded that declarations of the studied university students, focused on objective and subjective indicators of professional success, refer to the attainment of the desired goals related to work. Both objective and subjective results are important indicators of professional success from the perspective of the examined group of young people.

CONCLUSIONS

The above narratives and references to empirical evidence allow us to conclude that one of the basic issues in the debate on success in a career is the question of subjective-objective duality of a career. It is worth mentioning that although this theme is not far from being inspired by the theory of structuration, which is the subject

the claim does not fit at all, 2–3 – if the claim fits in some situations, 4–5 – if the claim largely fits, 6 – if the claim fits completely. The questionnaire is actually a measurement scale and the sum of points in the selected subscale indicates the dominant career guide of the respondent.

of Giddens' propositions, it particularly emphasizes the inherent "bilateralism" of the career concept. The duality and interdependence of the subjective and objective perspective on success in a career calls for a combination of both the objective and subjective side of success in a career and for a clarification of the nature of the relationships between the distinguished sides of career success (Arthur et al., 2005, p. 181). After Van Maanen, it can be confirmed that "This two-sidedness stems from the observation that 'there is little reason to assume the [subjective and objective careers] coincide on any dimension', and that the degree of coincidence is a crucial issue for careers research", and that this theme (the degree of correspondence between them) is often taken up in career research (Arthur et al., 2005, pp. 179–180). The subjective and objective duality of a career is also the subject of reflection on a possible compromise between work and family, work and leisure time. It is in fact a quest for an answer to the question of a possible compromise between the objective expectations of a career and the subjective preferences of the individual in his or her career. Thus, it points not only to the need of capturing the success of both sides in research, but above all, to the lack of ignorance of the role of time in the relativistic approach to the correlation between subjective and objective careers (Arthur et al., 2005, p. 181). The relationship between a career in the objective sense and a career in the subjective sense evokes questions about other variables, which undoubtedly include success in a career (its variability and diversity) and the relationship between its objective and subjective character.

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