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Editorial. Becoming an adult - contexts of identity development

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As a result of political and economic, demographic and socio-cultural changes, which took place in Poland and Europe over the last 20-30 years, the process of becoming an adult member of society has changed significantly (cf. Arnett, 1997, 2000; Byner, 2005; Brzezińska, Czub, Hejmanowski et al., 2012). The direction of these changes is generally perceived as positive, nevertheless growing up in the postmodern era has also another face. Along with an abundance of different and often volatile offers, and a rather unstable socio-economic situation and, on other hand, the emphasis on self-reliance and self-responsibility, young people receive less support than they used to from significant adults, especially, from their parents and teachers, who nowadays very often become rivals for young people in an increasingly unpredictable labor market.

The lack of support, which would be adequate to the needs of young people who formulate their life projects and make their first attempts to verify their self-reliance and independence, increases the likelihood of experiencing uncertainty and anxiety, intensifies difficulties associated with a clear self-definition, and hinders the process of making important life decisions (Luyckx, Schwarz et al., 2008; Polish situation - Brzezińska, Czub, Nowotnik, Rękosiewicz, 2012). Perhaps, this is the reason why some researchers identify among young people groups of individuals who tend to consciously avoid making commitments typical of adults (Côté, 2000). As a means of describing these groups, researchers have been coining neologisms, often with pejorative connotations, such as

adulscents or *kidults*, suggesting that they are “childish adults” or “not fully adult”.

Social change as a challenge for identity formation

Researchers (among others: Arnett, 2000; Furstenberg, 2000) agree that nowadays entering adulthood takes young people the entire third decade of life, and sometimes it takes even longer. During this period, the traditional adult lifestyles are just some of many acceptable ways of functioning – therefore being *kidults* or *adulscents* should be considered normative in some sense. Ways of entering adulthood can be multiple, and it is difficult to *assess a priori* their relevance to social expectations. However, it is worth keeping in mind that one of the main features of the currently increasingly long duration of the transition to adulthood period is that, in the context of the rather unstable socio-demographic conditions, nothing is absolutely normative or non-normative (Arnett, 2000).

The time of overcoming the developmental threshold of transition from childhood to adulthood is a critical period, because it involves making important life choices and commitments. Not only does the level of individual resources affect its course, but also the historical context and the quality of socio-cultural environment. The debate on the condition of the young Polish generation that is just entering adulthood found its reflection in the report Youth 2011 (Szafranec, 2011), published by the Chancellery of the Prime Minister. According to the recommendations of

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This paper has been prepared as part of the NCN OPUS 2 No. 2011/03/B/HS6/01884 project entitled *Mechanisms of identity formation during the transition from adolescence to adulthood: regulative role of the self-awareness emotion for the years 2012 – 2015* (project leader: Professor Anna I. Brzezińska, principle investigator: Tomasz Czub, PhD).

this report, one should try to outline the direction of changes aimed at providing young Polish people (i.e. youth and young adults) support in the realization of developmental challenges, therefore in finding their own position in the adult world and their own way of functioning in this world. It can be expected that guidelines formulated in the report will enable the best use of the potential of the collected data, and will become stimuli to improve the social situation of young people in contemporary Poland.

Becoming an adult, both in the objective dimension (taking on different adult social roles – family and vocational ones, as well as those connected with civic duties) and subjective dimension (sense of adulthood, identity characteristics and identity status, sense of being on-time or off-time the developmental timetable), is closely related to factors external to the individual, as well as to the characteristics of the person. A crucial point in entering adulthood is the completion of education and the quality and dynamics of the education to work transition (Schoon, Silbereisen, 2009). It has been shown that individuals who don't study take on more social roles associated with adulthood, consider themselves to be more adult, and undertake more identity commitments than persons who study (see Brzezińska, Kaczan, Piotrowski, Rękosiewicz, 2011). The analysis of the problem of relation between type of educational path and the quality of identity can be located in the context of delaying and/or postponing the process of entering adulthood, which could have been observed lately not only in Poland (Brzezińska, Czub, Czub et al., 2012; Brzezińska, Czub, Nowotnik, Rękosiewicz, 2012).

Issues related to social status, which is, probably, one of the factors partially responsible for the extension of the phase of adolescence, both due to results obtained in higher education (McNeal, 2001) and due to financial capabilities, should also be taken into consideration. Continuing full-time studies is usually associated with such a financial situation of the person and his or her family that enables the young individual not to take up paid work, but limit oneself to undertaking only odd jobs. It can be expected that the phenomenon of a prolonged adolescence will pertain mainly to young people from the middle and upper class.

When analyzing the causes of a prolonged period of adolescence one must, naturally, take into account a variety of factors from the immediate environment of the individual. Undeniably, factors such as family structure, relationships between family members, views on adulthood, etc., strongly influence the attitude toward commitment making. On the other hand, peer environment and the growing impact of broadly defined media (especially the Internet) shape the contemporary approach to life, also to undertaking life roles (Szafranec, 2011).

The problem of a postponed adulthood, observed recently, requires further studies to determine whether this phenomenon is a result of the individual developmental path variation, which is primarily influenced by factors specific to the given person, or it rather is a matter of a more global response to the changing social conditions and a symptom of a "new adaptation" of young people to the new reality.

The question of which social group this phenomenon concerns the most also seems to be important – whether it is common, or whether it is a phenomenon indicative of a progressive social stratification and growing discrepancies between different groups of the social structure.

In the light of observations and studies pointing to the positive relationship between possessing higher education and having a well-paid job and more rewarding professional experience, the social processes taking place in Europe promote extending the period of education (Belfield, Nores, Barnett, Schweinhart, 2006). The long-term policy of the European Union and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) puts a strong emphasis on continuing education to ensure success on the labour market (Osborne, Sankey, Wilson, 2007). Undoubtedly, global changes of this kind affect the process of identity formation and promote extending the period of education, and thus are conducive to the postponement of the age at which young people make commitments and identify with adulthood.

An absence or a shortage of social and/or economic resources, which affects some communities, often determines the delayed start in adulthood, or even makes it impossible for young people to undertake roles typical of adulthood. In Poland, this phenomenon pertains mainly to poor and rural communities, in which problems with an access to high-quality medical or psychological care and to technological achievements, and a relatively low level of education, often significantly reduce opportunities that young people can benefit from (Szafranec, 2011).

Postponed transition to adulthood and changing criteria, both external and internal, of evaluating whether one has already become an adult, do not concern all young people equally. Formation of the sense of adulthood may take different forms in groups that differ in respect of ethnic origin and socio-economic status. Studies indicate that young people from minority ethnic groups and with a lower social status feel that they will have to undertake adult roles earlier. What is more, if we take a closer look at the age at which such individuals commence the realization of certain social role, we will see that they indeed significantly differ from their more socio-economically privileged peers (Benson, Furstenberg, 2007).

The phenomenon of postponed moving forward to the next developmental phase does not pertain exclusively to the period of transition between adolescence and adulthood, but also to the transition from early to middle adulthood (at the age of about 35/40). As it has been pointed out by researchers (Freund, Nikitin, Ritter, 2009), the progressive processes of an increasing de-standardization and individualization of life paths affect differently young adults and middle-aged individuals. Young people feel a strong pressure associated with the necessity to tackle many tasks at once. During the short period of early adulthood and the beginning of middle adulthood (20-35/40 years of age) they have to finish the substantial phase of education, become independent from their families of origin, commence professional career, and establish families of their own, in order to shortly after start to achieve successes in each

of these spheres. The phenomenon of tasks accumulation, intensified by postponing or delaying the realization of some of these tasks, is referred to as the so-called “rush hours” (*op. cit.*).

Therefore, what emerges from the above remarks, is a quite paradoxical image of the early adulthood period. It seems that there is a lack of clear and congruent normative pressures on undertaking particular developmental tasks and, at the same time, there is a marked social consent to postpone the realization of these tasks, which very often is dictated by various objective conditions, such as rules currently prevailing on the labour or real estate market. On the other hand, the number of offers targeted at young people has been constantly increasing. There is only one catch to this – these offers come with a proviso that their “expiration date” will be expired soon, so if a young person does not take the opportunity now, later it may turn out that it is already too late. Such a situation may be a source of serious difficulties and the emergence in young people, who receive equivocal information about themselves and their situation, of a sense of confusion. This may, in turn, constitute a further obstacle on the road to becoming an adult and cause the postponement in the process of making important life decisions.

Becoming an adult and identity formation

The process of identity formation during the extended period of transition from early adolescence to early adulthood is currently a central issue in psychology of youth. On the one hand, the existence of a vast variety of offers creates the opportunity to expand the fields of exploration, i.e. experimenting with and testing different alternatives, and to make commitments according to individual aspirations and preferences. On the other hand, the increasing instability and what Bauman (2006) calls “liquidity” of the social, cultural and economic environment of development may pose a lot of threats that impede decision-making, engaging in the realization of decisions, identifying with the made choices, and taking responsibility for their both positive / negative, expected / unexpected or desirable / undesirable consequences.

Identity continues to form throughout the entire life, from infancy to adulthood. The results of current studies point to the significant impact of an early emotional and social development on the future functioning and the ability to take on challenges, overcome difficulties and shape one’s own way of living (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, Collins, 2005). The period from early and late adolescence to emerging adulthood (Arnett, 1997, 2000) seems to be pivotal from the point of view of what developmental trajectory the individual is on at the moment of entering early adulthood, and what quality of identity status the person possesses, both at the onset of the next stage of identity formation and modification, and at consecutive stages of adulthood, which emerge in response to new challenges and personal life plans. From this life-span point of view, the factors that can be regarded as crucial for identity formation during the period of transition from adolescence to adulthood are sex

and age in the context of school type and the educational level, on the one hand, and social experiences connected with type of social participation and emotion regulation, on the other hand.

The classic two-stage model of identity formation proposed by James Marcia (1966) was applicable to stable, modern societies. Nowadays, however, this model no longer appears to be an adequate and sufficient means of describing identity and the processes underlying its formation, or of predicting the paths of its further development in consecutive phases of adulthood. In response to new approaches to identity, Stephen, Fraser and Marcia (1992) modified the classic model (the repetitive moratorium – achievement – moratorium – achievement, i.e. MAMA cycles), acknowledging that identity status in adulthood can alter under the influence of changes in one’s individual perspective and/or changes in the environment. The assumptions underlying the dynamic dual cycle model of identity formation by Koen Luyckx et al. (2006, 2008) appear to be a very promising proposal that fundamentally changes the approach to the description and analysis of identity formation.

Difficulties, either objective or those that stem from the lack of understanding on the part of significant others and the lack of support adequate to the needs of individuals taking up developmental tasks characteristic of entering adulthood, strengthen the feeling of otherness and result in building an identity based more on knowledge of one’s own limitations and deficits than on assets and already mastered competences. Thus, it seems that a disturbed entry into adulthood becomes a secondary consequence of these limitations, which could be overcome by investing in education (including early childhood care and education), and – perhaps above all – in identifying and meeting basic human needs (Brzezińska, Czub, Nowotnik, Rękosiewicz, 2012).

The role of shame in identity formation

Analyzing the possibility of applying the concept of shame to the explanation of mechanisms of identity development, it is necessary to focus on the motivational aspect of this emotion. Regardless of differences between various theoretical approaches, shame can be treated as one of self-evaluative emotions. It means that experiencing shame is associated with an evaluation of one’s own *self*. If we presume that identification with commitment is a central process of identity formation, the assumption about the involvement of self-evaluative processes and emotions in its development seems to be legitimate. As researchers of identity development assume, the ongoing process of referring to personal and external standards, both at the stages of selecting and choosing particular offers, social roles, views or beliefs, during testing these choices in the course of various social interactions, and during making decisions about whether or not to finally identify with the commitments, constitutes an integral element of the process of identity formation (Grotevant, 1987).

Shame as a self-evaluative emotion is, thus,

engaged in crucial for identity development processes of evaluating personal activity with reference to standards, both external and internal. Researchers stress various aspects of continuously intertwining processes of evaluating and adjusting personal commitments to the internal and external standards of their assessment. Jennifer Kerpelman et al. (1997; also Adams, Marshall, 1996) emphasize the role of information and evaluations formulated by “significant others” in the process of identity formation. In turn, Alan Waterman (1990, 1992, 1999) points to the subjectively experienced satisfaction and the level to which the so far shaped identity enables the person – in his or her opinion – to realize individual life projects in line with the personal standards and, at the same time, makes it possible to find and maintain the right, according to the person, direction of life.

Nevertheless, both in the case when identity formation is analyzed from the perspective of standards and expectations formulated by the environment, and when internal motives and standards directing identity construction are stressed, it has been emphasized (see Grotevant, 1987) that the level of satisfaction from the already formed identity is connected, principally, with the level of exploration intensification (when this satisfaction is low, exploration remains high). When, on the other hand, the person strongly identifies with the undertaken commitments, the tendency to explore decreases and identity stabilizes (Bosma, Kunnen, 2001).

Therefore, it can be assumed that the desire to minimize the frequency of shame experiences, stemming from the motivational value of this emotion, results in actions that influence both the intensity and direction of exploration processes, and the durability, strength and content of commitments that the individual undertakes.

According to the neo-eriksonian approach, the process of identity formation takes place in mutual, interrelated interactions between the person and his or her social environment, and the aim of this developmental process is not only to stabilize the self-image, but also to develop such adaptive strategies that will enable the person to realize the chosen commitments (Erikson, 1968; Kröger, Marcia, 2011). Thus, it can be expected that frequent utilization of maladaptive strategies of emotion regulation may be an important factor disrupting the correct course of identity development. This has been confirmed, indirectly, by the results of studies conducted in Poland (Brzezińska, Piotrowski, Garbarek-Sawicka, Karowska, Muszyńska, 2010), in which it was demonstrated that emotional reactivity, i.e. a predisposition to react with strong emotions in a wide variety of situations, is connected, mainly, with an extensive engagement in exploration, both adaptive (in breadth and in depth) and maladaptive (ruminative exploration).

Dynamic system theory and research on identity formation

The most promising perspective, enabling comprehensive research on identity development and its

determinants, appears to be the more and more frequently utilized in the field of psychology concept of dynamic systems (Abraham, 1990; Van Geert, 1994; Smith, Thelen, 2003; Thelen, 2005; Fogel et al., 2008; Kunnen, 2012). Under this concept, a developing identity, together with all its internal (personal) and external (environmental, also situational) determinants, can be treated as a complex multi-level dynamic system that comprises a number of mutually connected subsystems composed of a number of interrelated elements.

According to this approach and in line with the concept of identity adopted by us, the “dynamic identity system” is primarily composed of five mutually related dimensions: exploration in breadth, exploration in depth, commitment making, identification with commitment and ruminative exploration. Identity understood as a dynamic system is, however, something more than any of these dimensions taken separately, or a mere configuration of these dimensions in the form of a profile. It is not a simple sum of the five dimensions, too. Dynamically changing identity can be rather understood as an effect, or a “product” of numerous interactions occurring between constituents of the entire system.

The main “product” of these interactions is an identity status, determined by a specific to each individual configuration of identity dimensions and, according to the fundamental premise of the dynamic system approach, when the intensity of particular dimensions changes, relations between them change and, thus, the identity status alters as well.

Successive circles of constituents of the dynamic identity system shape the manner of experiencing self-awareness emotions and mechanisms of emotion regulation. The widest circle pertains to the external environment of the person, particularly, to his or her social environment treated as a source of offers and – in an even wider perspective – the cultural context. Type of social participation dominating in the person’s functioning (Reinders, Bergs-Winkels, Butz, Claßen, 2001) decides in the consecutive stages of development about the kind of social experiences the person accumulates, which in turn has an influence on (1) the shape of emotion regulation process, (2) the degree to which beliefs about oneself and one’s own life can be modified, (3) the scope and character of the crucial, from the point of view of the identity status development and location of the person on the given developmental trajectory leading to adulthood, processes of exploration, commitment making and identification with commitment.

Conclusion

In the face of the progressive individualization of development and the prolonged period of entering adulthood, it seems necessary to verify the knowledge about identity development. In recent years, the socio-cultural context of young people’s development has changed dramatically. It seems to be an issue of fundamental importance to conduct a thorough diagnosis of this process, and to distinguish factually occurring trajectories of entering adulthood,

allowing for psychosocial determinants of this process – beginning with the phase of early adolescence, when, as a matter of fact, young people are still children (the beginning of lower secondary school), via the phase of making first steps towards greater autonomy (late adolescence and emerging adulthood), up to the point when a person achieves the status of a young adult, i.e. overcomes the threshold of early adulthood, defined both from the social perspective (social roles of adulthood) and the individual one (subjective sense of adulthood).

Nevertheless, it seems that in order for the studies to yield ecologically accurate, because allowing for the dynamically changing social conditions of young people's lives, they need to involve individuals who differ in respect of both social environments of their lives and various internal characteristics, and not only, or predominantly, the age, and to analyze the relationships between these variables and their interactions, and identity (see the concept of identity capital suggested by J. Côté, 1997) in a long time perspective.

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In the articles included in this volume, we present the results of studies carried out under the project NCN OPUS2 No. 2011/03/B/HS6/01884, entitled *Mechanisms of identity formation during the transition from adolescence to adulthood: regulative role of the self-awareness emotion* for the years 2012 – 2015 (project leader: Professor Anna I. Brzezińska).

The studies were conducted in two stages. The first stage – pilot study – was realized in 2011, and it involved young people in the phase of early and late adolescence, and young adults. The results of the pilot study have been discussed in the articles: Konrad Piotrowski, *Identity in adolescence and emerging adulthood: relationships with emotional and educational factors*; Małgorzata Rękosiewicz, *Type of social participation and identity formation in adolescence and emerging adulthood*; Paweł Jankowski, *Identity status and emotion regulation in adolescence and early adulthood*, and Konrad Piotrowski, Radosław Kaczan and Małgorzata Rękosiewicz, *Off-time higher education as a risk factor in identity formation*.

The second stage, realized in 2012, involved only young people in the phase of late adolescence - students of three types of vocational schools. This stage has initiated a cycle of six wave measurements in a longitudinal study devoted to the investigation of identity formation process and its determinants. The planned longitudinal study will be completed in 2015. Preliminary results obtained during this first stage have been presented in two articles: Radosław Kaczan, Anna I. Brzezińska and Julita Wojciechowska, *Social participation, identity style and identity status in late adolescence among students of three types of vocational schools*, and Paweł Jankowski and Małgorzata Rękosiewicz, *Type of social participation and regulation of emotion among students of three types of vocational schools*.

Investigated (in both stages) individuals were young people in early and late adolescence and young

adults. The subjects attended the following types of schools:

1. **lower secondary school** (in Polish: *gimnazjum*): a 3-year full-time general secondary education for pupils who have finished the 6-year primary school. It is compulsory for all pupils (intended for pupils aged 13 to 16 years),
2. **general upper secondary school** (in Polish: *liceum ogólnokształcące*): institution that provides a 3-year general secondary education (for pupils aged 16 to 19), where students can take the maturity exam and obtain a maturity certificate,
3. **basic vocational school** (in Polish: *zasadnicza szkoła zawodowa*): a 3-year school (students aged 16 to 19) that enables students to obtain a diploma confirming vocational qualifications upon passing a vocational exam,
4. **technical upper secondary school** (in Polish: *technikum*): a 4-year technical school (students aged 16 to 20) that enables students to obtain a diploma confirming vocational qualifications upon passing a vocational exam, and to take the maturity exam and obtain a maturity certificate,
5. **specialised upper secondary school** (in Polish: *liceum profilowane*): an institution that offers 3 years of full-time general and specialised secondary education for students aged 16 to 19. Studying in such a school enables students to acquire a diploma confirming vocational qualifications. Students can take the maturity exam and obtain a maturity certificate.
6. **university** (in Polish: *studia stacjonarne*): higher education institution that provides full-time programmes,
7. **post-secondary school** (in Polish: *szkoła policealna*): offers programmes that are a form of a follow-up to upper secondary education. They enable students who have completed upper secondary education to acquire a diploma confirming vocational qualifications upon passing a vocational exam; in our study participants took part in the following full-time courses: medical rescue, massage therapy, cosmetology, occupational therapy.

Two articles constitute an introduction to the problem of identity formation. The first one – by Tomasz Czub, *Shame as a self-conscious emotion and its role in the identity formation* – analyzes the relationships between one of the most important self-awareness emotions and the process of identity formation. The second – by Anna Izabela Brzezińska and Konrad Piotrowski, *Identity and markers of adulthood: relationship between two constructs*. – emphasizes the necessity of analyzing the process of identity formation from both the external and internal (subjective) perspective.

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