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Attributions of educational and professional paths: Analysing reasons for adolescent and young adults choices

Atrybucje ścieżek edukacyjno-zawodowych: Analiza przyczyn wyborów dokonywanych przez nastolatków i młodych dorosłych

Introduction

Choosing a career path is one of the key moments in the life of every (not only) young person, to determine their future. Many studies indicate that the

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choices made, although rational, do not always bring the expected professional satisfaction fulfilment (McLean et al., 2019; Nguti et al., 2019). On the other hand, Krumboltz (2009; Krumboltz et al., 2013) believe that career paths that lead to professional well-being are often the result of spontaneous and flexible decisions taken as a result of unpredictable circumstances or random but significant events. In view of these conditions, is it ideal to offer children and young people an educational environment that meets their needs in terms of preparation for entering the labour market, and at the same time provide effective support in choosing a future career path that best fits their interests.

An undeniable problem of today's labour market is its dynamic volatility. Students at the age of 14–15 years make the choice of secondary school, at the age of 18–19 years the choice of studies at higher education, but by the time they graduate (24–25) and entering the labour market, the market would not look the same as it did at the time when they did take decisions to shape their educational and professional path. Not only some professions cease to exist and new ones are created, but also the demand for particular professions changes according to the needs of the labour market. Additionally, careers with the greatest demand, such as those related to rapidly developing information technologies and artificial intelligence, require continuous further education, akin to chasing the rabbit by Alice in Wonderland.

The authors of the article were interested in exploring the notion of choice of educational and professional pathways in the perspective of defining the future of youths. The research problems being investigated are: How are adolescents and young adults choosing the shape of their educational and professional path? How do they attribute reasons for their choices to the demanding needs of the labour market. Therefore, attention was paid in particular to causal attributions and their importance in the process of explaining decisions made by young adults. Based on the results of a qualitative research, we will propose recommendations for career counselling practices, the implementation of which could improve the quality of career-focused education.

Literature Review

Determinants of the choice of educational and professional path

Research indicates that the majority of young people, for example, make decisions about the choice of education or profession under the influence of

relationships with peers or opinions found in social networks (Rutten et al., 2016). However, the research review conducted by Akosah-Twumani et al. (2018) shows that youths from collectivist cultures were mainly influenced by family expectations, whereby higher career congruence with parents increased career confidence and self-efficiency. Personal interest was highlighted as the major factor that influence career choice in individualistic settings, and the youth were more independent in their career decision making. Singh's (2022) research results showed that adolescents and young adults supported adolescents' career choices for reasons of personal growth and rejected their choices when their decisions were based on interpersonal relationships or hedonism.

Furthermore, parental influence was judged to be most important when the adolescents' decisions had negative moral consequences or focused on short-term goals. Contemporary understanding of the concept of career reflects these natural decision-making mechanisms, recognizing career planning as a lifelong, circular process of interaction between personal possibilities, preferences and the situation we are in (Savickas, 2019). On the other hand, Porzak (2018) stresses that decisions on the educational and professional career path are continuous and always developing, they are made in many steps, both during study and in subsequent stages of work.

Further research is imperative to guide the understanding of parental and peer influence, the environment, as well as the importance of other factors that are important in making decisions about the choice of life path by young people. Also, practical implications were taken into account, because identifying these elements may improve the career development procedure, so that young people can get the best support for their life path. The search for general regularities is significant, but it is also interesting cognitively to research specific groups, environments or nationalities due to the specificity of culture or the local labour market.

Career planning and choosing a career path in Poland

In Poland, from the beginning of 2017, an education reform has been introduced, the main goal of which is to better prepare students completing the entire education cycle to the needs of individual development and the needs of the modern labour market, for which a solid foundation of general education is needed. Compulsory education in Poland lasts 9 years and covers the last year of preschool education and an 8-year primary school. At the end of year 8 of primary education, there is a national external examination. Then, the

students make their first decisions regarding the choice of further education in secondary school.

At a time when it is difficult to find a job, and when outstanding specialists are sought on the labour market, education, experience and competences are sometimes not enough. In the contemporary labour market in Poland, where high unemployment still persists, we are dealing with a situation in which the labour supply significantly exceeds the demand for labour. On the other hand, changes in the economy generate demand for new, previously unknown professions and specialties. The observable scientific and technical progress causes changes in all spheres of life (Kukla, 2012). Rapid economic changes require frequent adaptation to the existing situations. To achieve all of this, young people should make good career choices, which is not an easy task.

The transformations taking place in today's world, related to, *inter alia*, with competition, new technologies and globalization, people who want to stay and develop in the labour market must plan and shape their professional development from the very beginning of entering the career path. At a time when the most popular words on the labour market are: mobility, flexibility and re-training, one cannot talk about traditionally "assigning" a person permanently to a specific industry. The key to success is skills, extensive qualifications and conscious and mature building of the professional path. Some support in this regard is provided by formal and non-formal education (Tłuściak-Deliowska & Duda, 2022).

In Poland, thanks to formal education, educational and vocational counselling is carried out, the main goals of which include: familiarizing students with the diversity of professions on the labour market, developing a positive and active attitude towards professional activity, and creating opportunities to learn about and develop students' interests. In addition to formal education, young people can take advantage of various training, courses, organized educational activities or a career counselling system. It is assumed that work orientation and assistance in choosing a profession are important determinants of professional success. On the other hand, these activities are not always responsible for the choice of life path by young people.

Research Methodology

Research Background

Attribution theory assumes that the processes of explaining and interpreting events play a large role in understanding human behaviour (Muschetto & Siegel, 2021). The ability to explain the events that have occurred ensures order and stabilization of the image of the world, and also gives a sense of understanding and elementary control over the surrounding reality. Attribution processes are not only indicative but also regulative. The way of interpreting and explaining events affects the type of emotions experienced, social attitudes and, above all, the effectiveness and sense of the actions taken. Attributional patterns can have consequences for the kind of tasks people choose to perform, in students for the elective courses they register for, and in the end for the careers people choose to perform in their life path (Szabo, 2006). Moreover, research results show that attributing career decisions to uncontrollable, external and stable factors (i.e., displaying a pessimistic attributional style for career decisions making) is a barrier to effective career development (Janeiro et al., 2014).

The issue of the role of attribution on the choice of educational and professional paths by young people is relatively rarely discussed in Polish research. Even if attributions and causal explanations are indeed the subject of such research, the term “attribution” itself is usually absent from them. Meanwhile, a choice of a specific educational and professional path is an important decision and seems to be subjected to attribution processes. It should be remembered that attribution theories generally do not (or only indirectly) penetrate into the real causes of a given behaviour, but focus on the perceived reasons for a given decision. In other words, the subject of attribution research is how an individual explains events and/or decisions made, as well as the consequences of such explanations. It follows, therefore, that the basic subject of the analyses presented in the further part of this article does not actually concern the actual impact of individual factors on making these decisions, but only their opinions on why they made such decisions.

In our study, attention was focused on causal attributions and their importance in the process of explaining the decisions made. This is of great importance from the application point of view, because the knowledge of the specifics of the causal and dispositional attribution processes in relation to the

choice of the educational and occupational path allows of a better understanding and guidance on making these choices.

Sample and Procedures

The qualitative study was conducted with the participation of 35 participants, which included 25 females and 10 males, in the final year of general secondary schools in Warsaw. The average age was $M=18.6$; $SD=0.7$ (for women $M=18.6$; $SD=0.6$, for men $M=18.7$; $SD=0.9$). They represent following class profile: biological and chemical (10 participants), humanistic (8 participants), social (5 participants), mathematics and geography (3 participants), journalistic (2 participants), linguistic (2 participants), mathematical and physical (1 participant), medical (1 participant), geographical and historical (1 participant), military (1 participant), economic (1 participant).

The research design adopted for this study was qualitative research. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews (Patte & Newhart, 2018). The research plan was developed by the authors of this study, while the interviews were conducted by Master students (majoring in human resource management), as a practical exercise to develop research. The selection of the research sample was purposive. The necessary criterion was the condition of studying in the general secondary school graduating class at the time of the research. The interviews conducted lasted approximately 20 minutes. All of them were recorded with the consent of the persons participating in the study.

Results

Choosing a secondary school

The first important choice that young people make, which shapes their further educational and professional path, is the choice of post-primary school. To gain a deeper understanding of these choices, we asked survey participants what helped them to choose a post-primary school. Most respondents gave external attributes to their choices. 17 interviewees indicated that the main reason for their choice of school was the opinions of others: colleagues, parents, older siblings, students met during open days, but also strangers posting their opinions about a given school on the Internet. They indicated that they did not really know what to do at that moment, that they were not convinced about their choice of class profile or their preference for the languages taught. They

had the feeling that they were being directed by someone else – *“I made the decision to choose a secondary school thanks to the opinion of my older friends who attended this school”* (R32).

One participant in the study, who was guided by students’ opinions when choosing a school, attributed the misguidedness of her choice to these very opinions – *“At the open day you talk to the students, now I know after three years of education that they are chosen by the teachers. It is unlikely that the person who stands at the open day will tell you that they are unhappy, because such a person will not be put there”* (R22).

Another important reason for choosing a particular secondary school indicated by one in four survey participants was the location of the secondary school. One participant also linked it to his personality – *“Above all, I like to get a good night’s sleep, so I wanted the high school to be close to my flat”* (R29).

Six interview participants indicated that they were guided by the level of education offered by a given school, and this was most often measured and referred to a high position in secondary school rankings or the results obtained by graduates of given schools during secondary school final examinations. It is worth noting the statement of one of the participants, who emphasizes the external attribution. It is the school with a high level that will take care of his future achievements – *“no one would clip my wings and that everyone would help me to succeed in life”* (R20).

In relation to the choice of the direction due to a specific subject or professional profile, there were both external and internal attributes. External attributes were most often associated with the choice of school with a professional profile, giving a sense of security about the future career path. Profits in the form of easier access to university education, the prospect of finding an interesting and well-paid job after studying economics and Information Technology were indicated. One of the participants indicated a desire to continue interests initiated in primary school through participation in an atypical educational project. The internal attributes were related to interests, achievements in a given direction, dreams, predispositions, curiosity about a given profile, “fancy”.

Choosing further educational and career path

In the further part of the interview, we asked the participants about their plans concerning the shape of their further educational and professional path. More than half of the respondents expressed uncertainty or even lack of deci-

sion concerning their future. The difficulty of making a decision was emphasized many times. However, the lack of decision was most often attributed to external attributes, including situational factors such as waiting for the results of the matriculation exams results, labour market conditions and what professions are currently in demand, particularly those related to mathematics – “*My further plans are not specified, I would certainly like to have my own business, it depends on how life goes. We will see what life brings*” (R13).

Interview participants, who had no doubts about their choice of further education, clearly formulated internal attributes, associating their future with interests, passions, aptitudes, predispositions, dreams – “*I have always put my personal development and the fulfilment of my goals first*” (R32). In the opinion of 11 participants of the survey, the choices made were fully independent, made without the involvement of third parties and without being influenced by the opinions of others. Respondents emphasized in their statements that they would like to do what they think is beneficial for them and not for their environment. Ten participants clearly stressed their autonomy of choice, or the feeling of independence shown by their parents who “*left them free*”. One of the participants, on the other hand, expressed her sadness for not having someone in her environment who would encourage her to make a concrete decision concerning the shape of her educational and career path.

However, in many statements, in addition to the indicated interests, which are the basis for the decisions made, external attributes were created, concerning earnings, the possibility of travelling, the possibility of easily finding an interesting or prestigious job – “*I would like to study diplomacy, because in the future I would like to work in an embassy. This path will hopefully be related to languages, travels*” (R30); “*I always had it in my head that I would go to law school. But, of course, law studies last 5 years, and then there is the application, so I think it may change during my studies. Everything can still change, especially now that there is a pandemic, everything is so interchangeable, I am giving myself time*” (R12).

Twenty participants in the study declared that their family influences the decisions they make about their future. Among them, nine indicated both parents, seven the mother, one the father, one the brother, one the grandmother and one the grandfather. The family was repeatedly presented as strongly supporting, advising, not infrequently financing discovered passions, inspiring to

follow, modelling certain behaviours, transmitting values, shaping attitudes and behaviours of young people from their early childhood.

Teachers contributed to the choices of ten participants, with two of them indicating teachers in general as being supportive of them. Eight participants identified a particular teacher who had instilled a passion or interest in a particular school subject or in learning about dance, horse riding – *“I think my teacher who teaches me management and such economic subjects. He really impresses me with the fact that he just never gave up and pursued what he has now, despite the bankruptcy of his company he still didn’t give up and pursued his goals”* (R26), but also such a teacher who consciously participates in the process of making life decisions by their students – *“This is the most important thing, if a teacher helps you, shows you the way, I think it’s much easier later on than if you have to find everything out on your own”* (R21).

Two more participants were influenced in their decision making by the opinions of older colleagues, two participants planned to make a decision based on their academic performance, one participant said that *“it just came by itself”*, and one participant made a decision based on a prevailing stereotype – *“When we think of an economist, we see a man wearing a suit and earning well, and when we think of a humanist, they don’t earn that much”* (R24).

The role of formal, non-formal and informal education

Interviewees who declare to have been influenced by significant persons in their career decisions were more likely to engage in educational activities, whether delivered through formal or non-formal education. This was manifested in statements that emphasized the role of family members or teachers, thanks to whom individuals were particularly committed to learning particular school subjects or participating in extra-curricular interest groups. Their achievements in a particular field were not attributed to giftedness or aptitude, but to the passion or interest that others were able to instil in them. As an example, one of the participants said that her grandmother had played a key role in her choice of education and career path. It was her grandmother who introduced her to the various books on geography for the first time. When her grandmother – a teacher – was preparing a lesson with her students, the participant would often sit next to her and listen with interest as she read or repeated the material. On more than one occasion, she and her grandmother evaluated the students’ performance. This was an informal way of absorbing knowledge. She also enjoyed reading geographical science magazines or dis-

cussing the latest research with her grandmother. In later years, her grandmother was a great help to her in her secondary school studies and preparation for her matriculation.

Those who did not have crystallized plans for their future often blamed the school system for this state of affairs. One participant said: *“if I had started tutoring in maths earlier, I think I would be a candidate for a science degree today. From what I understand there are more opportunities for finding better and better paid jobs after graduating in science”* (R8). It was also pointed out that there is not enough emphasis on learning foreign languages, both to increase job opportunities in Poland and abroad, and to broaden horizons. There were statements from respondents that the school psychologist entered the classroom once, gave the students a test and did not support them again in their further educational choices. There is a lack of interesting workshops that are offered in schools to give an introduction to the fields of study that are offered by different universities. Students are often overwhelmed by the number of courses on offer, and are often unaware of what is actually on offer.

Discussion

Choice of educational and professional path is one of the biggest dilemma and challenge in any student's life. It involves an interplay of many factors which are intricately intertwined (Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017). It is not a straightforward task and involves a difficult process of decision making. This issue is not confined to Poland only but is universal in nature. However, it is worth noting that the issue of the attribution role in the choice of educational and professional paths by young people is relatively rarely explicitly addressed in Polish research.

Using qualitative research, we attempted to better capture the issues surrounding young adults' educational and career choices. Our findings show that depending on the educational stage – associated also with age – the attribution of these choices varies, which is in line with other studies (Dietrich & Kracke, 2009). With regard to the earlier educational stage, external attribution is dominant. Respondents attribute their choices to a significant share of external factors, both rational and practical – the proximity of the school to their place of residence, easy access to school or the attractiveness of the profile in the case of vocational schools, and factors related to the emotional sphere,

the advice of people they trust – family, friends, or being characterized by significant social influence – social media or high school's recruitment marketing (Sawitri et al., 2014).

The obtained results correspond with the findings of foreign researchers dealing with this issue. Career theories illustrate that the main determining factor in the choice of further educational path is the family of the student (Havelka et al., 2015). Also, in a study conducted by Kazi and Akhlaq (2017) aimed at factors which affect the choice of career among students, several significant factors were identified. The results show the parents influence as most significant, followed by influence from peers, gender, print media, financial reasons, interest and others.

In addition to external attributions, internal ones begin to matter to a large extent in the choices at subsequent educational stages. The role of parents, loved ones and authority figures, although still important, changes in emotional colouring and is assigned a supporting, assisting rather than a decisive value. It is worth noting, however, the disturbing fact that more than half of the respondents expressed uncertainty or even no decision about their future. The difficulty of making such a decision has been repeatedly emphasized. The lack of a decision was most often attributed to external factors, including situational ones, such as waiting for exam results, conditions on the labour market and what professions are currently in demand.

This result may cause some concern, as it may indicate insufficient preparation of young people to choose a professional path, which may result in making decisions “in the spur of the moment”, due to certain external conditions occurring at a given moment, which – taking into account today's fluid reality – it can change just as quickly. This, in turn, may result in temporary involvement or greater susceptibility to changes as a result of the emergence of new external factors. The choice of an educational and professional path is a long-term decision (development decision) aiming at making choices for the individual's effective functioning in the long term. For this reason, self-confidence and prudent decision making seem to be important (Safta, 2015).

It is significant to properly prepare young people to make such decisions. Not only by showing the possibilities, predispositions of individuals and market needs, but also it would be worth paying attention to the conditions of the decision-making process and its consequences. Therefore, the role of appropriate career guidance is significant. Career guidance practitioners encourage

students to make independent decisions regarding their future careers. They emphasize the notion of informed decision-making, however, there are cases where parents/carers are involved through private and collective meetings, conferences and career guidance fairs (Oomen, 2016). Participants then have the opportunity to learn more about current post-secondary education opportunities, as well as learn about new career paths that evolve every day, such as AI (Artificial Intelligence) careers.

Conclusions

One should keep in mind that choosing a career path and planning a career takes place at a particular development time – during adolescence. It is a time of intense physiological and psychosocial changes, overlapping with a process during which young people get to know their predispositions and resources, discovering what activities are satisfying, what they would like to do in their life. They are also very susceptible to the opinions of their peers and people who are important to them. It turns out that the Internet is also an important source of information about the school. There, students search for and find opinions about the institutions that interest them or about the teachers. Negative information is much more readily available, that is why creating the image of a school in the media is of great importance nowadays.

The development of information technologies, including the Internet, has a significant impact on the changes in the process of managing organizations, including the schools, especially in the area of information and communication. In the competitive and changing environment of educational activities, shaped by the development of the information society, the importance of careful selection of the communication channels is used in order to create a convincing message about the school and its offer. A properly implemented process of marketing communication allows you to create and strengthen relationships with (potential) students, increase the interactivity of contacts and personalize the information sent. These factors – properly used – can be the basis for increasing the effectiveness of marketing activities of schools, which emphasize the good preparation of their students to the labour market. Using the Internet, training can also be prepared and disseminated for users who are faced with making a decision.

The research carried out represents an initial, indicative stage of the project to guide further quantitative research. It forms the basis for the development of a research tool derived from the information collected and the results obtained. Further quantitative research will enable an in-depth exploration of the relatively complex research topic undertaken, fulfilling the limitation of the presented study, which is that it is not possible to generalize the research findings due to its qualitative nature. Our research suggests that an increasing number of students' choices about their future are accompanied by uncertainty and a related external attribution justifying the difficulty of making key life decisions. This novelty of the study points to the importance of addressing the issue in changing times of rapid technological progress and labour market instability. With this in mind, the article is part of a series of publications outlining the complex research conducted by the authors of the text.

Abstract: The choice of a specific educational and professional path is a significant decision. In the presented qualitative research, attention was focused on causal attributions and their importance in the process of explaining the decisions made by students of Warsaw general secondary school graduating class. Findings show that: (1) depending on the educational stage, the attribution of choices varies; (2) regarding the earlier educational stage, external attribution is dominant. The knowledge of the specifics of the causal attribution processes in relation to the choice of the educational and occupational path allows of a better understanding and guidance on making these choices.

Key words: Educational and professional path, Formal education, Career guidance, Attribution theory

Streszczenie: Wybór określonej ścieżki edukacyjno-zawodowej jest ważną decyzją. W prezentowanych badaniach jakościowych zwrócono uwagę na atrybucje przyczynowe i ich znaczenie w procesie wyjaśniania decyzji podejmowanych przez uczniów ostatniej klasy warszawskich liceów ogólnokształcących. Wyniki pokazują, że: (1) w zależności od etapu edukacyjnego atrybucja wyborów jest zróżnicowana, (2) w odniesieniu do wcześniejszego etapu edukacyjnego dominuje atrybucja zewnętrzna. Znajomość specyfiki procesów atrybucji przyczynowej w odniesieniu do

wyboru ścieżki edukacyjno-zawodowej pozwala lepiej zrozumieć i ukierunkować dokonywanie tych wyborów.

Słowa kluczowe: ścieżka edukacyjno-zawodowa, Edukacja formalna, Poradnictwo zawodowe, Teoria atrybucji

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