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PROACTIVITY OF STUDENTS – BETWEEN DIAGNOSTIC ASSUMPTIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS

ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to indicate selected possibilities of analysing the construct of proactivity. This goal was achieved by referring to selected definitions and the concepts of proactivity and by discussing a research project aimed at recognizing the proactivity of students towards their professional career. To measure the level of proactivity, the Scale of Proactive Behavior in Career was used, which includes four types of proactivity: general, cognitive, in building a support network and in building psychological comfort. The independent variables in the research were: taking on professional activity during studies, using services offered by a Career Office and a career counsellor. 271 students from four Polish universities took part in the study. The highest mean score was on the general proactivity scale, followed by the proactivity scale in building a support network, the scale of proactivity in building psychological comfort, and the lowest on the scale of cognitive proactivity. These means differ statistically. The conducted analysis also proved that the level of proactivity is statistically significantly differentiated depending on whether the respondents used the Career Office or a career counsellor. The conclusions from the analysis were discussed in two perspectives – diagnostic and methodological.

KEYWORDS: proactivity, career, career design process.

Introduction

Many fields other than education undertake research on the construct of proactivity. This construct is present in psychological, sociological and management research as well as in journalistic studies. It is also an intensely present topic in the field of adult education, especially in its practical dimension (see Jackson & Tomlinson 2020). Proactivity is analysed as the aim of educational influence, as a desired trait of an adult human being, and as an effect of projects proposed to adults. It is worth noting that many educational, activation and preventive student support services are designed as a response to a previously diagnosed deficit in terms of broadly understood proactivity. It is assumed that support programmes offered to people and assigned to disadvantaged or marginalised groups should, among other things, be aimed at strengthening proactive attitudes. Within theoretical perspectives of adult education, there are also concepts explaining inactivity and concepts that point to certain factors that strengthen

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proactive attitudes. An example is Patricia Cross's chain of interaction model or Kjell Rubenson's expected value paradigm (see Malewski 1998; Solarczyk-Ambrozik 2004).

When analysing proactivity in the context of adult education and when designing research on this field, two areas that require clarification can be identified. The first concerns the semantic scope of the category of proactivity. One can get the impression that this term is used quite freely and can be used to describe various phenomenon and processes. From one point of view it is indicated that it is a human trait, when from the other point of view, it is described as a behavior in terms of taking or not taking action. It is also described as a goal, and at the same time a postulate, or rather the necessity of strengthening proactive attitudes is promoted, emphasising the comprehensive nature of the term in question. The second area that requires consideration and regulation is practical. It concerns the possibility of diagnosing proactivity – both the operationalisation of the subject of this diagnosis and the selection of adequate methods, techniques and tools, and designing methodical student services related to building, developing and strengthening proactivity. This practical aspect in particular seems to be of great importance in adult education. It poses the question: what are the grounds for building projects aimed at counteracting inactivity and strengthening proactive attitudes?

The aim of this article is to highlight several possibilities for analysing the construct of proactivity and to indicate methodical solutions directed at students, that are aimed at building and strengthening proactive attitudes towards a professional career. This goal will be achieved by referring to selected definitions and the concepts of proactivity and by discussing a research project aimed at recognising the proactivity of students towards their professional career. The selection of the test group and the detailed subject of research is non-accidental. Young adults undertaking education at the academic level are in a period of transition from educational to professional activity. Some of them, already during their studies, undertake activities related to gainful employment, gaining professional experience, and building competence resources. While other students postpone issues and actions related to professional activity and career design. Recognition of the determinants of taking or not taking actions related to the near future has a significant cognitive value, but also – which in the context of educational practice seems to be particularly important – may constitute the basis for projects aimed at strengthening proactive attitudes. These projects can focus on strengthening individual student resources but also take into account the institutional and systemic aspect.

Proactivity as a subject of analysis

Defining the meaning of proactivity is essential for diagnostic and research projects. Adoption of the selected concepts allows the subject of diagnosis or research to be clarified. As already indicated, proactivity can be analysed from multiple perspectives (see Bańka 2016). For the purposes of this article, four perspectives were selected.

The first approach considers proactivity as a human trait. It is worth referring to the concept of proactive personality by Thomas Bateman and Michael Crant (1993). It describes a man who is unfettered by situational forces and who influences changes in the environment. According to the assumptions of this approach, proactive people seek opportunities, show initiative, and take actions until the desired change occurs. A proactive personality is characterised by a set of features such as seeking change, perceiving opportunities, creating a situation, initiative, taking action. On the other hand, non-proactive personality is described by features such as passivity and reactivity, and adaptation to circumstances (Crant 2000). Analyses conducted by Crant (2000) show that the proactive construction of personality is positively correlated to extraversion, conscientiousness, the need for achievement, the need for domination, and at the same time it is not related to such characteristics as openness, neuroticism, agreeableness, locus of control, mental abilities and response bias. In the context of the subject matter of this article, it is also worth referring to the research of Seibert, Crant and Kraimer (1999), who examined the relationship between a proactive personality and professional success. According to their findings, proactive personality is positively correlated with both objective achievements, such as remuneration and promotions, and job satisfaction perceived as a subjective indicator of professional success. The authors showed that a proactive personality positively correlates with innovation, political knowledge and career initiative.

The second approach to proactivity places it in opposition to passiveness understood as non-interference, submission, subordination to events and people, inactivity or reduced activity, lack of aspiration or reduced tendency to influence the social environment (Poznaniak 1999). This approach seems to be more interesting and useful from a diagnostic perspective, as it proposes explanations that interpret inactivity. Wojciech Poznaniak (1999), while analysing the mechanisms of social passiveness, identified as many as thirteen. He exposed temperamental predispositions to passiveness, passiveness of externally motivated people, passiveness as a result of learned helplessness, as a manifestation of a fatalistic attitude, as indifference to evil, as a neurotic mechanism of resignation, as a value, as a result of social training, as a difficulty in making decisions, as a 'burnout syndrome'. He also indicated passiveness caused by shyness, passiveness

due to satiety and psychopathological passiveness. Such a wide catalogue of passiveness mechanisms facilitates etiological, teleological and prognostic diagnosis. Such perception of passiveness / activity has a significant practical value if the diagnosis is undertaken in order to design rational support programmes, and not only for cognitive purposes.

Another approach to proactivity is seeing it as an attitude. Referring to the three-factor concept of attitudes popular in social sciences (see Wojciszke 2015), it is assumed that the attitude consists of three components: cognitive, affective and behavioural. Such an approach to a proactive attitude illustrates well the difference between being active and being proactive. In this approach, activity understood as action will constitute the behavioral component of the discussed attitudes. Such perception of a proactive attitude broadens the possibilities both in the diagnostic and methodical perspective. The subjects of analysis are not only actions, but also knowledge and emotional and evaluative attitudes. In turn, in terms of educational support programmes, not only are skills developed, but also work in the area of knowledge, beliefs, opinions and attitudes is proposed.

The last concept of proactivity selected for the purposes of this article is the operationalisation of the construct of proactivity proposed by Augustyn Bańka (2016, pp. 42-43). For the purpose of this article, it is particularly interesting as it directly relates to the issue of designing and implementing professional careers. The author distinguished four types of proactivity: general, cognitive, in building a support network and in building psychological comfort. General proactivity is a socialisation initiative aimed at building a self-schema centred around the central goal of 'positive careerism'. This factor most closely resembles the general and enduring personality tendency to react proactively in any situation. Cognitive proactivity is an initiative of the subject aimed at searching for information. The prevailing belief is that an individual is constantly looking for information about the environment on which career development depends and the further sending of information about potential job candidates. Another, proactivity in building a support network is the initiative of monitoring the social environment and treating it as a career facilitator. The last of the distinguished types of proactivity includes activities in the field of building psychological comfort, understood as an initiative of the subject in the field of the ability to build social capital with a view to strengthening the ability to cope with stress and with a view to the possibility of using a support network to solve the problem of employment. This approach to proactivity was used in a research project to study students' proactivity in the context of their careers.

Proactivity of students towards the career design process

In this part of the article, data from a larger research project on students' proactivity towards their professional career will be presented. The aim of the mentioned research project is to identify the elements of proactivity and factors that shape it.

Methods

Participants

271 students participated in the study (86% women and 14% men). The respondents were students from four universities (29.9% of participants were from the University of Gdańsk, 29.9% from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, 17% – from Collegium da Vinci in Poznań, and 23.6% of participants were from the University of Zielona Góra). The research covered both first-cycle and second-cycle students: 35.1% of the respondents (N = 95) were first-cycle students, 22.1% (N = 60) of the second-year, 20.3% (N = 55) in the third year of first cycle studies and 22.5% (N = 61) of the second year of second cycle studies. The subjects ranged from 17 to 52 years of age (M = 22.63; SD = 4.61). The sample was purposeful.

Procedure and materials

To measure the level of proactivity, The Proactive Behaviour in Career Scale (*Skala Zachowań Proaktywnych w Karierze*) (Bańka 2016) was used. The questionnaire contains 26 declarative statement-type items, (7-point Likert-type scales, where 1 means 'Strongly disagree' and 7 'Strongly agree'). The Proactive Behaviour in Career Scale consists of four subscales: general proactivity (10 items), cognitive proactivity (5 items), proactivity in building a support network (5 items) and proactivity in building psychological comfort (6 items). The result of each of the subscales is the average score. The reliability of the entire Proactive Behaviour in Career Scale is very high (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.94$).

The main research question concerned the level of proactivity of students in regards to career in the indicated subscales. Additionally, the respondents were asked:

1. Did you take up a job during your studies for which you received remuneration/ payment?
2. Are you currently working?
3. Did you use the services of the Career Office at your university during your studies?
4. Did you use the service of a career counsellor during your studies?

These questions provided data that not only informed about the undertaken activities, but also constituted independent variables that differentiated the level of individual components of proactivity assessed in the Proactive Behaviour Scale.

Participants completed the questionnaire and answered the above questions both ways, in an online survey and paper version.

Results

Referring to the main research problem, the proactivity of students towards their professional career was described using the subscales indicated in the Proactive Behaviour in Career Scale. The data presented in Figure 1 below illustrates the average results obtained by the respondents in the individual proactivity subscales.

The highest mean was obtained by the respondents on the general proactivity scale ($M = 4.73$; $SD = 1.09$), then on the proactivity scale in building a support network ($M = 4.45$; $SD = 1.27$), and on the proactivity scale in building psychological comfort ($M = 4.16$; $SD = 1.1$), and the lowest on the cognitive proactivity scale ($M = 2.96$; $SD = 1.39$). These means differ statistically significantly. These are interesting data, especially regarding the importance of cognitive proactivity. Bearing in mind that it concerns an initiative aimed at searching for information, further questions can be proposed that require in-depth analysis on the basis of which the respondents design activities aimed at designing and implementing careers and what importance they assign to knowledge in this field.

Data on the mean scores for each subscale were analysed in the context of four independent variables.

Proactivity and previous work experience during studies

A T-test analysis showed no statistically significant differences in the mean levels of proactivity subscales between students who had previous work experience during their studies and those who hadn't had such experiences: general proactivity $t(269) = 0.93$; $p = 0.35$, ns, cognitive proactivity $t(269) = -0.012$; $p = 0.99$, ns, proactivity in building support network $t(269) = 1.57$; $p = 0.11$, ns; proactivity in building psychological comfort $t(269) = 1.2$; $p = 0.22$, ns.

Proactivity and current employment

Similarly to the above mentioned results, no statistically significant differences were found between students who are currently working and students who are not, regarding the levels of proactivity measured by the Proactive Behaviour in Career Scale (T-test results as following: general proactivity $t(269) = 1.64$; $p = 0.101$, ns, cognitive proactivity

$t(269) = 0.19$; $p = 0.84$, ns, proactivity in building a support network $t(269) = 1.62$; $p = 0.105$, ns, proactivity in building psychological comfort $t(269) = 0.21$; $p = 0.83$, ns.).

Therefore, neither work experience during studies nor current employment differentiates the levels of proactivity among students.

Proactivity and using the services of the Careers Office

A T-test showed that the levels of proactivity of students who had used the Careers Office service differs from the levels of proactivity of student who hadn't used such a service. Differences were observed in the mean levels of cognitive proactivity $t(269) = 2.78$; $p < 0.01$; $d = 0.52$ and proactivity in building a support network $t(269) = 2.46$; $p < 0.05$; $d = 0.46$. Students who had used the services of their university's Careers Office are characterised by a higher mean level of cognitive proactivity ($M = 3.6$; $SD = 1.28$) and a higher mean level of proactivity in building a support network ($M = 4.97$; $SD = 1$) than students who had not used such a service, respectively $M = 2.87$; $SD = 1.38$ and $M = 4.38$; $SD = 1.29$.

Proactivity and career counseling service

The results of the t-test indicate that the mean level of proactivity differs between students who had used the service of career counsellors and those who had not. Statistically significant differences were observed for three types of proactivity: cognitive ($t(269) = 4.17$; $p < 0.001$; $d = 0.85$), in building a support network ($t(269) = 2.24$; $p < 0.05$; $d = 0.46$) and in building psychological comfort ($t(269) = 2.33$; $p < 0.05$; $d = 0.47$). The level of mean general proactivity did not differ due to the tested variable ($t(269) = 0.32$; $p = 0.75$, ns).

Students who had used career counselling services are characterised by a higher level of cognitive proactivity ($M = 4.01$; $SD = 1.4$), a higher level of proactivity in building a support network ($M = 4.98$; $SD = 0.92$) and a higher level of proactivity in building psychological comfort ($M = 4.64$; $SD = 1$) than students who had not used career counselling services, respectively: $M = 2.85$; $SD = 1.34$ cognitive proactivity, $M = 4.4$; $SD = 1.29$ proactivity in building support network and $M = 4.11$; $SD = 1.1$ proactivity in building psychological comfort.

Proposals of methodical solutions

In our opinion, the analysis presented above constitutes an interesting starting point for reflection on counselling and educational services which, at the level of higher education, may support the proactivity of students towards their professional careers. Services aimed at psychological support based on therapeutic help will be omitted,

because this type of impact is always designed to meet specific individual needs and it would be difficult to suggest systemic solutions in this respect.

Agnieszka Cybal-Michalska (2013) analyses the attitudes of academic youth towards professional careers and points to the need of developing proactive attitudes, understood as an (auto)education strategy in the world of multiple opportunities. This means that among other things, such student competences should be developed which will enable them to take responsibility for the perpetration resulting from their own preferences. The combination of support programme offers designed in the area of career counselling and academic counselling seems to be of particular interest in the context of promoting proactive attitudes. While career counselling in Polish universities has a long tradition and a well-developed methodology of activities, academic counselling still seems to be unknown to many students and may be a fragmented solution. Career counselling and academic counselling are student support services that are not in opposition to each other. They are complementary, and with the appropriate collaboration between support programmes from these two areas, a synergy effect strengthens proactive attitudes. It seems important to propose such educational and counselling support that will build an attitude of mindfulness, reflection and a critical approach to labour market data, and develop competences in the field of planning, analysing and strategic management.

Further, Don G. Creamer (2000, p. 19) indicates that the basic goal of academic counselling is not only the development of students in the academic field, but also in the individual and personal area. This goal is achieved both through individual work with students and through group work methods that make use of group dynamics and collaborative learning mechanisms. From the perspective of universities, it is important to build favorable conditions for counselling understood in such a way. This means creating support programmes that develop skills and also deepen reflection on the possibility of integrating educational goals with those related to other aspects of life.

For the purposes of this article, we would like to emphasise the solutions that we perceive as effective in the process of strengthening all components of attitudes towards a professional career. The first of them would be obligatory classes in the field of planning educational and professional careers. Due to the obligatory nature of this programme, it can be regarded as the first-class prevention of career failures. Such classes not only provide a favourable space for students to acquire necessary knowledge and develop relevant skills, but also to develop reflections on their own responsibility for the course of their professional career and the quality of individual career resources. In our opinion, the student support services as obligatory classes should be integrated into the study programme and related to ECTS points. Apart from the obligatory programme, support services based on the assumptions of tutoring or individual counselling are also beneficial. They are more suited to the specific situation of a student or students

of particular faculties. During these classes, students can pursue goals related to the development of competences in the field of career design and management. When it comes to working with students, it is important to update the knowledge in the field of support programmes not only in the labour market area, but also in informal and non-formal education. Particular importance can be attached to the knowledge of the system and the ability to use its programmes related to market qualifications or the PEUs mechanism. The third category of support programmes related to strengthening proactive attitudes concerns students with special educational needs. This group requires specific and sometimes specialist support. Various solutions are proposed at universities in this area. Some of them place student support services at individual faculties, while others propose centralised solutions.

Regardless of the form and adopted organisational solutions, the aim of these classes should be to strengthen all components of the attitude towards a professional career. This goal can be viewed from two perspectives: making up deficits or strengthening resources. From a methodical point of view, it makes the most sense to integrate these two approaches. In this regard, we attach particular importance to reflection on one's own career resources and responsibility for actively building one's own professional capital.

Conclusions

Proactivity research reveals a problem with the operationalisation of this concept. The arrangements for the components of this construct are important both for research and diagnostic projects and for educational or counselling support programmes. The Proactive Behaviour in Career Scale used for the purposes of this study is one of the possible options for analysing proactivity. However, it is not a perfect option. It has significant limitations, especially in the field of research with a practical purpose related to the design of educational, counselling or social offers. Description is a necessary condition but not always sine qua non to explain and interpret phenomena and processes.

Based on the data obtained, we want to propose conclusions regarding two perspectives. The first is diagnostic, the second is methodical. In the diagnostic perspective, the main challenge is to recognise proactivity and its determinants. The scale used in this article is one of the possibilities. Its significant limitation is that it only enables a classification and typological diagnosis, which in the context of educational projects aimed at strengthening proactivity or building proactive attitudes is not only unsatisfactory, but above all insufficient. On the basis of such a type of diagnosis, no data that would enable a teleological or prognostic diagnosis can be obtained. This means that it is advisable to build more extensive research projects allowing not only for the description of proactivity, but also the analysis of the factors shaping it, guiding it and

dynamising it. Nevertheless, without a reliable classification diagnosis, it is difficult to adopt a common and intersubjectively communicable concept of the analysed category. The classification diagnosis enables the operationalisation of variables and the selection of indicators. Importantly, it also makes it possible to distinguish proactivity as a complex construct from activity understood as action.

From the methodical perspective, the data described in the article may constitute a premise for counselling and educational projects addressed to students. Three conclusions should be emphasised in this area. The first concerns the role of knowledge in students' career resources. As shown by the obtained data, the respondents obtained the lowest results in terms of cognitive proactivity. It is worth deepening this research observation. In counselling and educational support programmes, students can be offered opportunities to reflect on the extent to which they base their decisions and actions on beliefs and opinions, and to what extent on verified and substantive knowledge. An important goal may also be to develop competences in the field of information retrieval and critical analysis of its sources. The second conclusion concerns the enhancement of student activity in the area of using the student support services of university Career Offices and career counsellors. The respondents using the Career Offices were characterised by a higher level of cognitive proactivity and in building support networks. The respondents that used career counselling services additionally revealed a higher level of proactivity in building psychological comfort. Avoiding the temptation to over-interpret, it can be assumed that thanks to their resources in proactivity, they took advantage of support programmes. However, it can also be assumed that contacts with a career counsellor strengthened proactivity within given subscales. This hypothesis is worth verifying through further research. In terms of educational and counselling interactions, however, it can be concluded that contacts with professionals broaden the perspective of the topic, reveal unconscious incompetences, strengthen the need to develop social resources and help in the development of individual career projects. This observation leads to the third conclusion that we want to propose in the context of the carried-out analyses. The obtained data revealed a disproportion between the results on subscales. On the cognitive proactivity scale, the mean score is lower than on the other scales. In our opinion, these results form a challenge for universities in terms of designing solutions of a systemic nature. Bearing in mind that consultations at Career Offices and meetings with career counsellors are voluntary and optional, and their student services are used by a small percentage of students, it is worth considering solutions addressed to a wider population. One of such solutions can be designed as part of the study programme or support programmes based on guidelines for career or academic counselling. Many universities undertake activities in this area. They can have different forms, sometimes they are classes included in the study programme, in

other cases they are tutoring, workshops, counselling carried out as part of additional and optional projects. The form, however, is secondary to the aim. It is important that student support services aimed at enhancing proactivity take into account the postulate – or rather the necessity – of the operationalisation of this construct. This postulate will make possible not only designing rational methodical support programmes, but also evaluating them and their effects.

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