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CRISIS PERIODS IN DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN LATE TEENS AND EARLY YOUTH

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ABSTRACT:

An indicator of a learning agent being mature in his or her attitude is the ability to plan post-school and post-university activities. Professional identity formation is not a single act — it is a process in which, during a certain period of psychological development, both intellectual and emotional factors are at work. This article analyses some aspects of career planning in upper school, as well as plans, intentions, and expectations of university students regarding their future jobs. The study of older pupils was conducted in comprehensive schools; the study involving students was conducted in one of Moscow arts universities. It has been found that there are signs of psychological crisis in professional identity formation process among eleventh-formers and second-to-third year students. The internal crisis factor common to both age groups is that both suffer from a situation of uncertainty regarding future education and/or work. The nature of this suffering in the two groups is, however, different. Older teenagers experience it due to motivational imbalance in choosing one's career field, profession within it, and the appropriate university. As for students, it results from poor understanding of their own abilities if engaged in prospective activity relevant to one's profession of choice, as well as from anxiety about and expectations of possible failure.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, topics of professional identity and subsequent professional development have been discussed within the domain of Labour Psychology.

At first sight, one's learning path may seem simple and schematic: choosing one's profession in the upper school or after leaving school → entering the right education institution → attending it with the purpose of acquiring necessary knowledge and skills → getting a job at an organization or manufacturing facility → further professional development on the job and career growth. However, this agenda is oversimplified (rather than being simple). The process it is trying to show is much more sophisticated.

An enormous number of studies have been undertaken to provide consistent classifications of jobs based on psychological factors (Klimov, 1995; Rubtsova, 2014; Shmelev, 1993; Shmelev, Serebryakov, 2006; Leung, 2008; Holland, 1975; Savickas, 2002; Super, 1957, etc.), develop techniques for further training in different career fields, model processes which could boost skills and marketability of professionals as well as psychological drivers of career growth, define competency parameters, etc. (Methodological Notes... www.s24004.Edu35.ru; Psychological support..., 1998, Mitina, 2014, Brown D.& Associate, 2002, etc.). General and specific topics related to professional development in the context of personal identification have been thoroughly studied and described in some psychological and sociological works (Borisova, 1995; Borisova, Loginova 1991; Kondakov, Sukharev, 1989; Kudryavtsev, 1985; Kudryavtsev, Shergunova, 1983; Leontyev, Shelobanova, 2001; Pryazhnikov, 1996, etc.).

This article contains findings of our own and others' studies, the latter conducted under our guidance. They address initial stages of professional identification. Psychologically, this process is very dramatic, being fraught with internal conflicts, doubts, and fears of the agents — upper-school pupils and university students. These points have been briefly described in our earlier publications (E. D. Bozhovich, 2009, 2018). This article will primarily focus on the evidence of professional identity crisis in late teens and early youth.

First, let's define the **key terms** of this article. Psychology endows the terms "personality" and "agent" with some common attributes, therefore some differentiation between them is needed.

Personality is a system which includes some subsystems: internal self-presentation of oneself, a hierarchical structure of motives, and experiencing oneself as a whole at each stage of life in terms of activity and relations with others.

Agency is a system of methods (or strategies) and instruments for implementation and actualization of one's personal goals and development and improvement of one's own personality.

Attitude of the learning agent is a specific psychological system, which includes: a) *the cognitive component* — disciplinary competence and the agent's overall understanding of the learning process; b) *the regulatory component* — a critical approach to one's learning process, the need and desire to develop it in order to meet one's internal demands; c) *the personal component* — understanding of education as something personally important,

selectivity regarding various aspects of educational content and methods, experiencing oneself as an independent learning agent. These concepts have been discussed in detail in our earlier publications (see Bozhovich, 2000, 2013).

Professional identity is related to the contents and functioning of this attitude as a whole. A special relationship, however, exists between it and the personal component, as it reflects envisioning oneself in the future, as well as one's sufferings, expectations, and doubts regarding the independent life to follow.

We distinguish two aspects of *professional identity* as a general concept: professional orientation and activity orientation within the chosen profession. *Professional orientation* is a career field, contemplated by the agent, a particular profession within this career field, and the intention to get appropriate training in this field. *Activity orientation* is the choice of activity within the province of one's chosen profession.

Typically, professional orientation forms in the upper school, while activity orientation is reserved until university period. We presume both to belong to initial stages of professional identity formation, which, of course, does not mean this formation is complete — they may change at any point in the agent's lifetime.

This study examines the following **problem**: which psychological mechanisms account for challenges and inconsistencies in professional orientation of upper-school pupils and activity orientation of university students.

By analysing preliminary observations of teaching practice we could hypothesise that they do not only reflect particular qualities of identity formation stages, but also some psychological development crises which occur in late teens and early youth. While caused by common mechanisms, these crises may show specific differences as well.

The objective of this study was to analyse psychological crisis of professional identity among the agents. We have limited our study by two periods, which, presumably, exhibit symptoms of crisis: 1) professional orientation of upper-school pupils (11th form); 2) orientation of psychology undergraduates towards a particular future activity (end of Year 2 – beginning of Year 3).

FOUNDATIONS OF THE STUDY

Child and education psychology widely explain the crisis of development as a period, during which an individual has outgrown his or her earlier needs, interests, relations and patterns of behaviour, and is getting rid of them while the new ones have not yet been shaped. It is common knowledge that the adolescent crisis (years 13–14), which L. N. Tolstoy figuratively called "the desert of boyhood", is the most severe one. This desert, however, boils with complex emotions sometimes manifested by intolerant behaviours: there is growth of emotional tension, neglect of adults' advice, aggression, internal motivational conflicts; difficulties in building relations with the opposite sex are felt very acutely, etc. The subsequent crisis of the upper teens and early youth is regarded as less dramatic: aggression subsides (though is still present), the

need to emancipate oneself from the adults is less urgent, personal attachments, including romantic ones, gain more stability, etc.

In addition, both upper school and early youth ages are dominated by pursuit of a bigger, though not always well-recognized, target — *identity formation*. In Russian psychology, I. S. Kon (1980) conducted a thorough study of differences existing in psychological development and socialization processes at these ages, based on the social situation, inner circle, wealth, and agential experience. He provides abundant evidence of complex — sometimes painful — reflections of young adults on peculiarities of their character, relations with others, changes in self-esteem, and apprehensions of future life. These crises can result both in positive and negative experiences. While creating subjective challenges, they are also shaping reflective understanding of oneself.

E. Erickson has also noted internal tension existing during teenage and juvenile development periods, accrediting it to *identity crisis*. He also emphasized, that the course of the crisis and its resolution depend as much on the age and individual traits of an agent as on the level and quality of spiritual development exhibited by society, as well as the dominating social values (Erickson, 1996).

However, it shall be remembered, that such crisis may not be global, i. e. embracing the whole personality, but partial, i. e. affecting individual psychological functions and complex formations, such as psychological systems. One of such systems is professional identity, which is an aspect of the general personal identity formation process.

For some representatives of these age groups (older teenagers and young adults), this process is relatively smooth: they follow their cognitive needs and motivation regarding their future activities, they choose the right university, balance their intentions with their abilities, complete their training successfully, and find the job they want. In such cases professional identity — per A. Maslow — naturally complements various social needs of the agent, such self-realization, self-actualization, and self-improvement

The other group of older teenagers and young adults experiences the negatives of this process, which inhibit both self-realization and development of proper motivation regarding prospects of one's life.

On the one hand, individuals are very future-focused in their late teens and early youth. Upper-formers are at the end of their school life, facing a different — new — life. They have only a vague notion of what it is going to be like, based on examples of other people or things learned from mass-media, fiction, the Internet, chats with friends, etc. Professional identity is not limited to the choice of one's profession, i. e. the school-to-university period. This process continues during university and for some people even during early stages of working career.

RESEARCH METHODS

At the beginning of our research we defined some parameters of professional identity which would qualify it as crisis-prone or crisis-free. They are:

- 1) balance/lack of balance exhibited by upper-school pupils in choosing the three items, related to professional orientation: *domain* of activity (e.g. astronomy, mathematics, healthcare, etc.), specific *profession* within this domain (e.g. general practitioner, pharmacist, etc. in medicine), *specific higher education institution (HEI)* to be entered in order to acquire the necessary knowledge (e.g. Moscow Institute of Entrepreneurship and Law, etc. for marketing).
- 2) confidence/lack of confidence exhibited by students when choosing the type of activity to engage in after graduation (research, teaching or practical work, e.g. at child development centres, consultancies, psychological departments of different organisations, private psychodiagnostic and psychotherapeutic practice, etc.).

The first parameter was defined based on the following methodologies: "E.N. Klimov's Map" (2003) for the respondents to identify their preferred career field; two survey methodologies developed by E. I. Fadeyeva and M. V. Yasyukovich (2004). These questionnaires contained not only questions about one's profession, if already chosen, and the university of choice, but also about the respondents' own qualities making them, presumably, fit for the chosen profession, and qualities which may prevent them from learning it. The survey involved 69 eleventh-formers from three comprehensive schools.

The empirical part of our study was conducted by A. M. Gafurova (2007) under our guidance.

The second parameter was defined using a methodological instrument tailored specifically for our research. It included three methodologies: two surveys and an experimental one.

The first survey revealed which careers students considered to be most encouraged by society, prestigious and with good prospects. This helped to determine if career choice was influenced by conformity of students. The second survey helped identify which type of activity the students have chosen as their future career: research, teaching or practical work.

The survey was followed by a *vis-a-vis* experiment. The respondents were asked to read three short scientific texts: a theoretical piece from the book "Essentials of General Psychology" by S. L. Rubinstein (1998, p. 73), a didactic piece from the handbook "Methods of Teaching Psychology" by I. V. Vachkov (2008, p. 62–63), and a practical piece from the article "Challenges in Diagnosing Mental Development" by E. M. Borisova (1996, pp. 282–283).

After this, the student was asked which piece of text he or she found most interesting, and if they would like to continue working in this dimension. This helped to check how stable was the choice of activity when completing the questionnaire and working on the text.

The next step was group discussion. Each student explained why he or she favoured the chosen activity. Other students aired their views on whether a particular activity was reasonable or not, its opportunities and restrictions, whether it was attainable or not for a young employee. Thus, the group analysis

covered each of the three dimensions in which psychologists work, which helped to identify the reflective aspect of the choices.

The methodologies were implemented in steps with intervals of 1.5–2 months. The study involved sixty 3^d, 4th and 5th-year students attending the University of Psychology and Education (Faculty of Educational Psychology).

The empirical part of the study was conducted under our guidance by N. V. Goncharenko (2014).

FINDINGS

Let's look at the data regarding the first parameter of professional identity, which is — professional orientation of older teenagers.

The study showed top career fields chosen by 11th-formers to be journalism and two sciences: astronomy and mathematics. However, when choosing a career field, profession and higher education provider (sometimes the exact faculty was specified) a mature and consistent attitude was demonstrated only by few respondents, that is, 20–25 % of pupils across different schools.

The rest show noticeable differences between the chosen career field and profession, profession and higher education institution (HEI), or career field, profession and HEI altogether. E.g.: career field — astronomy; choice of profession per Questionnaire 1 (E. A. Klimov) — dentist, per Questionnaire 2 (E. I. Fadeyeva and M. V. Yasyukovich) — lawyer. Or, choice of profession per Questionnaire 1 — policeman, per Questionnaire 2 — lawyer, HEI of choice — Moscow Institute of Road Traffic. Or, career field — journalism, choice of profession per Questionnaire 1 — top manager, per Questionnaire 2 — doctor, HEI of choice — National Research University of Electronic Technology. These are the most blatant examples of inconsistency exhibited by the 11th-formers regarding their career intentions and plans. However, when comparing data obtained by using different methodologies, partial inconsistencies are shown by 36–75 % of respondents in different schools.

Table 1 contains total figures reflecting inconsistency in professional identity responses obtained using the above methodologies. The table lists minimum-to-maximum percentage of "divided" respondents in different schools. Interestingly, many pupils are present in several categories of: career field and profession, career field and HEI, and profession and HEI.

Table 1. Inconsistent professional identity results demonstrated by 11th-formers (%).

##	Inconsistent professional identity results (choices)	Variation	Average (%)
1	Career fields and professions	60–76	68
2	Professions (per different surveys)	36–40	38
3	Career fields and choice of HEI	46–55	50.5
4	Professions and choice of HEI	19–40	29.5

Analysis of the empirical data obtained from respondents has shown the top motives for choosing a career field to be one's cognitive needs — learning interests — and success in the respective subjects. The choice of profession is dependent on its social prestige, subjective understanding of career prospects, and wealth. HEI's are chosen if they are easier to enter, and if parents can help. In other words, school-leaver's planning of his or her professional life is driven by a combination of motives.

Per se, it is not surprising: any activity, decision-making process, or choice of regulatory devices to resolve a certain situation is always governed by multiple motives (polymotivation). However, polymotivation and imbalance (and/or even contradiction) of motives are two different things. They may be governed by maturity/immaturity of one's self-esteem, self-attitude, by failure to analyse situations where one has to make a choice, etc. However, the respondents showed no signs of internal conflict or cognitive dissonance. One of the strongest mechanisms of defence — rationalizing — is at work here. The pupils claim that inconsistencies in their choice of career field, profession, and HEI are due to numerous options for shaping their future, and the fact that there is still time to think it over or talk it over with parents. In other words, they are conscious of the fact that their motivation regarding professional identity is unbalanced, but unconsciously — as psychological defence — consider it an advantage.

When pupils were answering questions about their qualities necessary or desirable for the profession of choice, they mentioned those which are essential for any profession, job, or life in general: competence, responsibility, purposefulness, sociability, etc. However, specific qualities required for a particular profession were not mentioned.

No answers at all were given to the question about qualities which may prevent one from learning a profession and succeeding in one's job afterwards. The question was misinterpreted: instead of mentioning qualities which may prevent one from entering a university or succeeding in one's profession, the respondents pointed out external negative factors: dishonesty of their rival applicants and — in the future — co-workers, destiny, early family life, force majeure circumstances, etc.

There is a feeling that professional identity of upper-school pupils shapes itself without involving self-understanding and self-analysis. They do not feel this crisis, but it does not mean it is non-existent: the previous — school — stage of their life is almost over, while the prospects of the new stage are very vague.

Now, let's examine the data pertaining to activity orientation — the second professional identity parameter used for evaluating choice of activity relevant to one's profession.

Our respondents had chosen their profession and entered the HEI. Moreover, they had already been attending it for two or three years. They are acutely aware that they need to choose an activity within the province of their future profession, and, judging by some questions asked during lectures and tutorials,

are deeply concerned about doing it right. The learning agent's attitude is now combined with the prospective attitude of a professional (Cherkasova, 2020). As any profession may offer a large number of different activities, we focused on those which are relevant to our respondents, studying at the university of psychology and education. These activities include research, teaching, and practical work. The survey data was compared to the data obtained during the experiment with three types of texts — theoretical, methodological, and practical — we described above.

Table 2 summarises activity choices made by second- and third-year students and different groups. Generally, students in these years provided uniform data, so it is being presented as a whole (in the minimum-to-maximum range).

Table 2. Future professional activities planned by students (%).

Activity	Choices per survey	Choices by text content	Average
Research	5-8	1-3	2
Teaching	7-11	10-32	21
Practical work	48-81	20-65	42

It is apparent that choice of activity by students is rather stable and unaffected by the method used for defining it. The motivation for making the choices was, as it has been mentioned above, explored during discussions of pros and cons of each activity with students. We will not quote students' statements, as examples of how they assess different types of activities were given in our earlier publication (E. D. Bozhovich, 2018).

There is, however, one interesting point — the reasons students give their positive or negative judgement about a particular activity. All positive judgements regarding a particular activity address the activity itself or interests of the students. To be specific, with respect to research students observe that it is important to continue development of psychology as a science, without being content with the knowledge already obtained; teaching was regarded as a very noble profession, which needed development of new training methods; as for practical work, it was stated that a lot of people needed a psychologist to help them solve their problems, so it is an opportunity to help others.

All tentative or downright negative judgements regarding a particular activity are not about the activity itself, but rather about doubts and expectations of the students regarding their own attitude and success or failure when engaging in this activity. To be specific, students express the following concerns: in research — that one will fail to discover anything new, to "contribute something to science"; in teaching — that one will find it difficult to keep the attention of the audience and may not have sufficient knowledge to answer questions asked by students; as for practical work, one may not have enough experience, fail to help a client, or it may be difficult to evaluate a situation and choose the right approach for a particular person; work of psychological departments at organizations is rigorously regulated, so a person cannot unlock his or her potential. These judgements, doubts, and expectations are mixed with internal anxiety and insecurity.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

Why do we qualify these two periods in identity formation as periods of crisis? Firstly, because both are in keeping with the common concept of psychological crisis: needs and intentions of the previous period are outdated, while customary activity patterns are preserved through the current life period, approaching its end; the new period, however, has not dawned yet, but is here as a prospect, the notion of which is still vague.

Secondly, because this creates a situation of uncertainty, which has innumerable variations and is felt differently at any age. It is known, however, that this situation is fraught with both positive and negative factors influencing personal development. It may be difficult to handle it at this stage of life, where pupils and students have to make plans about their future.

Upper-school pupils may only hypothesise how this uncertainty will unfold in the future. However, instead of seeking effective ways to make their life prospects more certain, they are trying to stockpile options for doing this in the future. Psychologically, this means staying open to experience and immaturely reflecting on one's future at the same time, as imbalanced choices of one's career field, profession, and university speak to the fact that there are no properly motivated options regarding professional identity. Each choice may have a separate option behind it, which is no more than one of its elements: either career field, or profession, or university.

Students choosing an activity according to their education try to analyse pros and cons of their choice, however being unable to determine if they are fit for it, which results in anxiety and fear of failure.

The crisis situation is different for pupils and students in that uncertainty of the situation is broader and more overwhelming for the former, while the latter are looking for options within the domain which is limited at least by the chosen profession, university, and acquired knowledge, i. e. one can see some "room" for resolving the uncertain situation, but this does mean it is resolved. The main challenge for students is to determine the level of one's abilities as a professional in the future.

It is possible to resolve this situation? We believe it is.

This can be accomplished by better career guidance at school. However, there is little hope that this work can be done by any school psychologist — it needs people professionally trained in this particular area of psychology. In addition, we need methods to help pupils identify their personal and cognitive abilities needed for the chosen profession, and determine traits of personality and character unwanted in it. This, however, assumes not only development of psychodiagnostics, but also training techniques for pupils to auto-diagnose their own character traits, reasons of failures, and success factors.

As for university students, this situation can be resolved by changing the way practical (field) training is organized. Today, practical training of students is based on well-defined, obligatory-for-all programmes. We believe that it is a

pedagogical error. Practical training should give each student a chance to test how well they will do in their prospective activity. Thus, some students will focus on independent theoretical or empirical research during their practical training sessions. Others will have to develop a programme of at least one mini-course and then use it in a group. Others will practice in consulting. And so on. While students are doing all this, it is very important to give them maximum freedom, provide your advice only upon their request, and, during the period following practical training, encourage students with positive feedback and — by all means — insightful comments and suggestions. In other words, inspire a feeling of success in your students, as success is a powerful motivator and helps one get rid of anxieties and increase self-esteem. It is equally important to discuss the student's own assessment of his work and analysis of his or her earlier choice of activity.

CONCLUSION

The study has shown that professional identity formation process in late teens and early youth bears signs of crisis. Though not pervasive in all age groups under study, it embraces a large mass of students.

In both cases, the crisis is connected with the situation of uncertainty, the nature of which is different at these ages.

In case of older pupils, this situation accounts for the lack of balance in one's motivation when choosing a career field, specific profession, and prospective HEI, while fostering subjective view on the situation as expanding the range of choices (causing no feelings of anxiety or time pressure, for the time being). Objectively, however, an 11th-former should have a more concrete career plan for the nearest future.

In early youth, i.e. at university, the situation of uncertainty occurs in the second and third years. We presume that unification of practical training programmes may cause the subjective feeling of uncertainty to strengthen in some students before graduation. It has nothing to do with the choice of career field, profession, or university, as this stage is in the past. Students have to address another challenge — find out what one would like or be able to do within the province of their chosen profession, which type of activity to engage in. It is at this age — unlike late teens — that emotional calm is replaced by anxiety and doubts, connected with one's self-esteem.

Overcoming, or at least mitigating, these types of crises requires a deeper approach to development of professional identity both at school and university. Instead of school psychologists and student group mentors at university, such efforts should be lead by professionals specially trained in this area.

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