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Despite – on Individual Learning Experiences in the Retrospective Accounts of Adults

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper was to expand theoretical andragogy resources by identifying the characteristics of the lifelong educational behavior of adults aged 50 years or more. Attempts were made to:

- 1) identify the subjective perspective on educational experiences in the aspect of activity stimulants and reducers,
- 2) gather knowledge about what determines the choices regarding the place and form of learning in adulthood, the success and difficulties experienced by the participants,
- 3) establish shared characteristics of education management experiences and educational competences in the unique individual conditions of personal memories.

The goal of the multiple case study was to explore educational careers from the subjective perspective of the participants (analytic generalization). Considering contextual knowledge, four types of educational careers were identified and described: Autonomous Autodidactic (autotelic, intellectual and utilitarian motivations), Ambitious (social and utilitarian motivation), Diploma Collector (utilitarian and social motivation) and Anchored Conqueror (social, promotion-oriented, utilitarian motivations). The following learning styles were identified: sequential (the closest to the traditional one), non-linear, patchwork-like (mosaic-like) and insular, as styles of new learning – from everything and from everyone, learning in daily life.

Keywords: learning in adulthood, managing one's own education, multiple case study, educational careers of people aged 50+ years, typology of educational career types

Learning is a lifelong process. It is connected with personal, social and professional development as well as overcoming our weaknesses and lifting the motivational barriers and barriers to act. The analyses focused on the lifelong educational experiences of four people born in the 1960s. The study participants graduated from high schools and universities later than scheduled, took part in extracurricular educational activities and pursued their hobbies. They achieved all this while maintaining a number of concurrent social and professional roles. This study presents their different educational paths, motivations, and learning strategies. The recognized theories of adult educational activity date from the second half of the 20th century. The awareness that the sociocultural and economic conditions today have changed was the impulse behind the attempt to contribute to the theoretical resources on andragogy (elements of adult education theory) through the inductive generation of characteristics typical of lifelong educational behavior and to suggest new types of educational careers for adults.

Life as an educational space

Growth processes are connected with educational processes. They are immanent and universal elements of the life process of an adult. The theoretical descriptions of adulthood fall within auxological, axiological, sociological, biographical and educational paradigms (Dubas, 2009, pp. 133–135), and are linked to the main idea behind andragogy – lifelong learning. The personal functions of adult education, which are important from an individual aspect, have the neoliberally rooted task of developing intellectual capital to serve economic growth (cf. Jurgiel-Aleksander & Jagiełło-Rusiłowski, 2013, pp. 67–70) and of promoting humanistic values, cultural awareness and cultural expression (Council Recommendation, 2018). Thus construed, the lifelong learning process has competence-related and emancipatory functions. It is responsible for acquiring knowledge and skills which are useful not only in gainful employment. It

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brings the anticipated effects in the form of social welfare, better social and professional situations, and civic participation. When multiplied, competencies autonomize an individual and free them from the tensions which are connected with decisions requiring flexibility, responsibility and agency as well as with activities helping one to maintain pace with economic, business and sociocultural change.

Personal growth and career building is largely assisted by skills acquired informally. The modern labor market prefers swift learners who seek the expected qualifications on their own. Such qualifications may be valued equally to those acquired through an institutional teaching process (competence validation) (Solarczyk-Szwec, 2013). Engaging in activities related to self-education is a desired characteristic and competence of an adult.

There is no legal obligation in the neoliberal socioeconomic order that would force adults to attend a school or a course. Educational options emerge in response to the needs of the labor market, the economy, political ideology and, less so, political correctness. Adult education is a kind of “voluntary obligation” (oxymoron intended) which results from the significance of the credentials¹ confirming one’s qualifications required for one’s free activity, such as in the labor market.

Educational commitment is the outcome of the factors of participation established by Roger Boshier in a study involving 233 randomly selected education participants from three institutions. The result of the study is reflected in the list of 14 factors of participation presented in Table 1 (Boshier, 1971, as cited in Liodaki & Karalis, 2016).

The 20th century theories on the educational activities of adults² discussed how far individual factors contributed to building a person’s educational commitment. These factors included: social stratification; current needs; educational experiences in one’s biography and how they influence the decision on whether to start or quit one’s education (educational activity

accelerators or reducers); self-esteem and the related attitude to education; environmental (family/professional) perception and interpretation of education as a value; current situation in life and transition periods; expectations related to educational participation and its consequences; knowledge about educational institutions (cf. Malewski, 1998; Solarczyk-Ambrozik, 2009, pp. 192–196).

K. Patricia Cross (1981) identified three barrier categories: situational, dispositional and institutional. She associated situational barriers with one’s situation in life at a given time, for example an unemployed person may be unable to reskill due to a lack of funds. She linked dispositional barriers to self-perception and to how individuals define themselves as students. For example, someone may believe they are too old to start a course. The third category specified by Cross applied to the institutional barriers resulting from the organizational limitations of educational institutions; for example, a course schedule inconvenient for the learner (Cross, 1981).

Learning is usually understood as a process. Still, occasional, mosaic-like or sequential episodes or even incidents also entail certain experiences. Each of them may become an educational experience provided that it is given such a meaning by the participant. According to Alicja Jurgiel-Aleksander (2013, pp. 15–55), educational experience can be considered as: a tool to rationalize an individual’s functioning in the socio-economic system, an activity naturally incorporated in human life, and a commitment of an adult to social (also educational) practices.

Study objective and method

The study focused on the educational experiences of individuals born in the 1960s, with their beliefs as to the causes, paths and personal consequences of their lifelong educational activity presented from a current, subjective perspective. An interpretative paradigm was applied.

Table 1. Factors of participation

1. Social Welfare	8. Cognitive interest
2. Social Contact	9. Educational compensation
3. Other directed professional advancement	10. Social sparing
4. Intellectual recreation	11. Television abhorrence
5. Inner-directed professional advancement	12. Social improvement and escape
6. Social conformity	13. Interpersonal facilitation
7. Educational preparedness	14. Education Supplementation

Source: Boshier, 1971, as cited in Liodaki & Karalis, 2016, p. 52.

¹ The value and potential of an employee are determined by their diploma and degrees (*their credentials*). For more see: Collins, 1979.

² For instance: H. Miller (1967) – Force field concept/Hierarchy of needs theory; R. Boshier (1971) – Personality symmetry model/Congruence model; K. Rubenson (2010) – Expectancy-valence paradigm/Force field theory of 1977; K. P. Cross (1981) – Chain-of-response model; V. McGivney (1993).

The objective of the study was to expand theoretical andragogy resources by generating the characteristics typical of the lifelong educational behavior of adults (analytic generalization)³ (Yin, 2009, p. 52). Attempts were made to:

- 1) identify the subjective perspective on educational experiences in the aspect of activity stimulants and reducers,
- 2) gather unique knowledge about what determines the choices regarding the place and form of learning, the success and difficulties experienced by the study participants,
- 3) establish common features, if any, of experiences connected with educational career management in the unique individual conditions of personal memories.

The following questions were asked:

- 1) How did the educational careers of the participants progress?
- 2) What meanings did the participants give to their own educational processes and experiences?
- 3) What are the common factors for the educational careers of participants born in the 1960s?

The study was conducted as an explanatory multiple case study. This method makes it possible to compare various unique, untypical cases and is applied when exploring questions of how and why a certain phenomenon occurs (Yin, 2009, p. 61). The interview was semi-structured, in-depth and focused on the participants' memories regarding their educational activities during the 30 plus years of their adulthood.

The participants were born between 1960 and 1969. They did not know one another. Several people invited to the study refused to participate or withdrew.

The final criterion of the purposive sampling was educational activity as an integral component of the lifestyles of two women and two men. The participants had similar the demographic, cultural and psychological characteristics – age, lifespan stage, social origin etc. (Giza-Poleszczuk, Marody, & Rychard, 2000, p. 32). Shared features of the participants: aged 50 to 57 years during the study, higher education, good financial standing, recurrent education,⁴ awareness of the compensatory function⁵ of adult education, desire to learn and grow.

Two to three sessions were conducted with each participant. The duration of each session was 1 to 1.5 hours. The purpose of the first part of the meeting, which lasted approx. 20 minutes, was to explore general questions. The point of this part was to establish the commitment of the participants to the analyzed issue, and to identify any areas important from their perspective which might shed a new light on it. The participants discussed their childhood, adolescence, families of origin and schools. Subsequent sessions were longer and involved reconstruction of the learning process in adulthood. At the end of the interaction the past was merged with the present to assess the effects of the activity on the current situation. Interview stages were based on the interview guide: leaving the family home (either symbolically⁶ or actually), initial life choices; the first “adult” education; intervals, subsequent educational processes and episodes, their causes; failures, burdens, costs of learning; successes, victories as a result of learning; areas of the self-learning activity; and giving meaning to educational events from a lifelong perspective. The interviews were transcribed. Only the content which correlated with the purpose of the study was analyzed.

Table 2. Characteristics of the participants

Respondent	Age of receiving master's degree/program	Job status	Age (years)	Place of living – type/population
M1	36/full-time	self-employed	57	province capital (population of 800,000)
M2	39/part-time	retired	52	local capital (population of 10,000)
W1	26/part-time	educator, career advisor	56	local capital (population of over 84,000)
W2	31/part-time	university teacher	50	local capital (population of 18,500)

Source: author's own work.

³ “Using a case study in an empirical study leads to conclusions that help confirm, reject or modify the theory based on which the study was designed. Actually, just one case contradicting a theory may be enough to deny certain precisely formulated theories.” (Perry, 1998, as cited in Zaborek, 2007).

⁴ In adult education theories, recurrent education is also referred to as “second-chance education.” The essence of the term comes down to an adult being able to resume their education, even a long time after leaving it; this is connected with the openness of educational paths.

⁵ The compensatory function means a kind of compensatory alphabetization to supplement and grow one's knowledge and to model new skills and social competencies.

⁶ Understood as taking on roles assigned to adults by the social environment but to a limited extent, e.g. starting one's own family while sharing the household with one's parents, financial dependence (cf. Wojciechowska, J., 2004).

Structural determinants of education

During the childhood and adolescent years of those born in Poland in the 1960s, education was already compulsory (Pyter, 2015, p. 113).⁷ The desired model of education was vertical, while for a professional career it was linear development within one's profession, spread over time, through a laborious process of gaining experience and reaching mastery. The adult education system worked well in its surrogate form as there were numerous – evening, part-time, extramural, correspondence or even radio & TV – schools for adults, including (according to encyclopedias) the Farming Technical Secondary School (1970–1990), the Radio & Television Teaching University (1976–1992), as well as part-time and evening higher-education programs for those who worked. Finding a job was not a problem as unemployment was latent. Subsidized by public workplaces, the professional upskilling and training system was where adults pursued their cognitive activity. There were plenty of non-school educational forms overseen by the state other than courses, such as teaching programs, general-access universities and, to a lesser extent, folk universities and universities of the third age (starting from 1975). However, higher education was an exclusive commodity, with access to universities and higher education schools limited to those with very good admission test results. For a long time, higher education was a privilege, involving just 6.5% of adults (data from the National Census 1988).

The participants received formal education in the People's Republic of Poland. The youngest of them took her secondary education exam in 1987. Their early adulthood was a time of system and economic transition – they were 21 to 29 years old between 1989⁸ and 1990.⁹ They came from a generation of people who played with their colleagues without their parents' supervision, with the house key around their necks, without access to foreign language courses, tourism or foreign travel. "For many of them it was not until they became adults that they faced the need to learn the missing skills, such as foreign language skills, and to upskill" (Marianowska, 2018, p. 98).

"In the early 1990s, lifelong learning became a central concept in adult education [...]. Instead of focusing on professional scientific knowledge, the lifelong learning concept starts to promote informal experience as a source of knowledge" (Wojciechowska, Z., 2018, p. 90). The 1990s disorganized the adult education system in Poland (Szczepeński, 1996,

pp. 9–10), with its almost complete privatization. Educational services became an expensive commercial product. This was a time of critical transformations in higher education. These involved a rapid growth in the number of non-state higher education schools.¹⁰ The percentage of Polish people with higher education skyrocketed. The 2002 National Census showed that over 10% of the population had higher education, 17% in 2011, and 26.4% in 2017 (Polish Central Statistical Office – GUS, 2018, p. 166).

In 2004, the year when Poland joined the European Community, the participants were 36 to 44 years old, middle aged.

Educational careers – multiple case study

The study material made it possible to describe the educational paths of the four participants, identify their critical memories, and capture the dominating causes of their educational commitment. The application of analytic generalization led to identification of the learning types and educational career types. This part presents the educational processes and episodes presented by the participants.

M1 57 came from a family with an average and stable financial standing. He did not pass the secondary education exam at the high school of his choice, because he was more interested in the cultural life of a big city than in school. He became a father at the age of 21. To be able to support his family financially, he found a job and he passed the secondary education exam at a high school for adults. He concurrently graduated from a course for car mechanics and gained a professional driving license. He never utilized these qualifications in his work. His employer referred him for a part-time university program in a city 80 kilometers away. He quit after one semester. Six years later he took a high-intensity summer course in a foreign language. He simultaneously participated in an amateur theater group and developed his passion for photography. A year after completing the foreign language course he passed the admission tests for a university philology program with the top result. He was 29 and had family obligations. The decision to enroll was approved by his wife. During the studies, while he was inactive on the labor market, he received a scholarship. He compensated his family for his lack of regular income with the money he made during seasonal summer jobs in the countries of Western Europe. After graduation, he tried various jobs, but they limited him and failed

⁷ Compulsory education was introduced in 1944. The school reform initiated by the Polish Parliament Act of July 15, 1961 introduced free-of-charge 8-year elementary schools nationwide: "[...] education and upbringing were to be one of the primary leverages of the socialist growth of the People's Republic of Poland. The purpose of the educational and upbringing system was to prepare qualified workers for the national economy and culture – conscious builders of socialism" (Pyter, 2015, p. 113).

⁸ System transition – Round Table, Parliamentary election of June 4, 1989.

⁹ 1990 – economic reforms known as the Balcerowicz Plan.

¹⁰ There were 128 universities in the 1992/93 academic year, 18 of them being non-state universities, while in 2010/2011 the numbers were 470/328 respectively (Szarota, 2012).

to bring him satisfaction. He took an opportunity to do an enological internship in one of the European regions. His qualifications were ineffective in Poland at that time, as society was not ready for sophisticated consumption models. He completed two separate license courses (see: Litawa, 2006, pp. 61–62) necessary at that time to practice regulated professions (315 and 260 hours respectively). As a graduate, he pursued an individual career and worked with clients interested in his services. He registered as a sole trader at the age of 38. Self-employment was a source of satisfaction and income. At the age of 46, he completed another qualification course, allowing him to work in the industry and company of his choice. He paid for the courses with money from his household budget. As a result of an unemployment episode, he decided to take an offer from a job agency and complete another foreign language course, financed from the European Social Fund. He prepared for the national exam with the additional assistance of a native speaker. He passed the exam with a very good result. He polished his language skills through self-learning at home. Remaining self-employed, he took obligatory exams every year, subjectively assessed as bothersome, but they were the prerequisite for continuing to do business with the company of his choice. While discussing those exams, he said that he had been “extremely put off by the matter, completely uninterested in the content, and had felt under pointless duress.” Informal learning, on the other hand, done for pleasure, was an integral part of his life. “Actually, I don’t feel like I’m learning.”

M2 52 came from a family with an average financial standing. He graduated from a vocational school as scheduled. He lost his mother while serving in the military. Her death was a traumatic experience for him, especially since his father was in a relationship with another woman and lived in a city far away. After his military service, he took a job in a car garage. He started a long-term relationship with a woman who worked for the uniformed services. Encouraged by her, he passed his secondary education exam at a high school for working adults. He got a job in the same place as his partner. Wanting to prove his intellectual capacity to her (as she was promoted to an officer rank) and to their colleagues, he started a part-time university program in a province capital, several dozen kilometers away. After he failed the exams, he changed the major of his master’s program. He graduated with a very good result at the age of 39. He had a very high opinion of his studies, he believed they had helped him grow. He also took part in a number of upskilling events organized by his employer, he referred to them as “training.” He started an informal relationship with a woman whom he met while studying. He described that relationship as very intense. He said that his partner had opened new perspectives for him, “he started to look at the world through her eyes.” He harnessed the micro worlds he was discovering by using his newly acquired competencies, he stated in the interview that the relationship had helped him

broaden his horizons: “I had to run to keep up with her.” Immediately after the studies, he started a two-semester (full-time) postgraduate course in a province quite far away. Once he received a diploma, he was promoted to a managerial position. He completed another postgraduate course, required of management. Despite that, he was unable to get along with his subordinates. “They were acting up, they envied me.” To compensate himself for his failures, he developed pastimes. He focused on social activities and self-learning. He started to organize foreign trips and go on them together with an association, of which he had become the leader. He was passionate about photography and pursued several other pastimes, including angling, skiing and mountain biking. Disillusioned with his social and professional reality, he retired. He started to work as a teacher at a local school. He thoroughly prepared for the classes. However, the students showed no interest in the material so, discouraged, he quit. He started to build a house, he took up apiculture, kept exotic birds and grew garden plants. The participant’s numerous spontaneously emerging interests can be treated as episodes which broadened his competencies for the time being.

W1 56 came from a family with a stable financial standing. She passed the secondary education exam as scheduled and enrolled in a full-time university program in a city about 100 kilometers away. She quit before end of the first semester because she married and had a baby. Two years later, she started a part-time university program with a different profile. During the studies, she gave birth to another child. She combined her family obligations with her studies, which failed to give her satisfaction as they were “a disappointment as the specialty had no job-related advantages.” After receiving a master’s degree, she started a full-time job. As a teacher, she upskilled through workshops, in a self-learning team. She completed annual courses – one qualification course and one upskilling course. Once the education legislation changed, she was no longer permitted to work as a teacher – this applied to her subject. She felt that her colleagues treated her new position as a dormitory supervisor as a demotion. Among teachers of school subjects, a dormitory supervisor, an after-school club supervisor or a teaching librarian have a lower status than regular educators. They made it clear to her, and she felt like a second-class employee. She wanted to have her own professional identity, she invested in an expensive make-up artist course, which aligned with her interests. She really felt “the small-town mentality of the place where she lived.” While commuting to Warsaw, she made plans connected with a service business. A lack of clients prevented her dreams from becoming reality. Women in Poland were not ready for what she had to offer. And so she stuck to the teaching profession, she attended workshops, conferences etc. Around the age of 40 she was promoted to the highest teaching rank. At the same time, she developed her interests in esotericism, becoming a numerology and tarot

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expert. She did not present her skills to strangers, her hobby was her secret. To fulfill the teaching load requirements in terms of hours, she worked in several places. She worked temporarily with the local job agency, where she taught “self-presentation techniques and make-up art.” When she was 40, she was diagnosed with a tumor. She overcame the disease. She completed a 3-semester post-graduate qualification course. She was dismissed at the age of 45. This was tough for her. She brought an action in a labor court and found a part-time job in another city. “The library job was just temporary.” Once she won in court, in order to preserve the continuity of employment, she took a job inconsistent with her qualifications as an after-school club supervisor. “I didn’t care, I just wanted a full-time job. I turned out to be good at it. I was strong, I was creative.” She joined a trade union, expecting protection against the autocratic decisions of her superiors. She sees this as a pragmatic episode. She started another postgraduate course. At the age of 49, she became the school counselor. She succeeded, winning the respect of students, colleagues and superiors. She returned to her teaching duties, putting a lot of effort into preparing the classes. When she was 50, she enrolled in another postgraduate course. “Just in case,” she said. Not knowing what else might happen to her professional group, she did not yet rule out another “diploma collecting” commitment, as she described her educational path. Lifelong learning was her “insurance policy, reskilling addiction, a neurotic habit of preparing herself for unforeseeable events. I am not becoming a specialist; I need to keep reskilling. I have paper, but no competencies. It is a kind of hobby, a form of compulsion.”

W2 50 came from a family of modest means working on a farm. Her mother’s medical condition and her father’s alcohol addiction were not conducive to a happy childhood. She claims to have been brought up to work hard. She passed her secondary education exam as scheduled. She quickly married and had a baby. This led to 6 years of educational absence. She went to university when she was 26. While she was in her second year, she started to work (dormitory supervisor). She commuted to a province capital for her weekend classes. She had trouble reconciling her duties as a mother with her student and employee obligations. She paid for the studies from her earnings, and sometimes her mother supported her. Despite one failed exam, which shook her self-esteem, she had the highest GPA in her year. Motivated by her master’s thesis supervisor, she decided to write a doctoral dissertation. She completed a postgraduate course and started a job as a special education teacher. She worked additional hours at a university branch. This was where she had an opportunity to interact with and consult researchers, ask questions. She was very tired at that time – she had her regular job on weekdays, her teaching job based on an independent contractor agreement at the university during weekends, and every month she had to attend consultations for her

doctoral program in Warsaw, which was far from her home. She severely felt the burden of commuting, “I always lived very far from big cities. Schools on weekdays, university job during weekends, monthly consultations within the doctoral program, studying for my doctoral exams... Winter! Train, ice-covered metal stairs, I’m running to make it, knowing my last bus home is at 11 p.m.” She took a job at a college. “I would read 15 scientific books at once.” At the age of 41, she decided to invest her strength and funds in high-intensity foreign language courses abroad. The cost of the courses was *astronomical*. She made the money for the courses by teaching classes for studies financed from EU funds. She gave up on any vacation trips and she spent all savings on language schools and fees for native speakers: “The courses were charged to my credit card, I paid them off by working overtime.” She spent 12 hours a week learning a foreign language: “I was so exhausted I wanted to cry. If it wasn’t for my inborn sense of responsibility, I’d have quit.” Unable to count on her husband for support, she divorced him. Health problems appeared. She was concurrently preparing for her post-doctoral program, which she completed successfully. She started to pursue an international career: “I’m setting more and more goals for myself, and due to my efforts, I can pursue my dreams. I’m carried by success!” She gave lectures and held discussions at foreign universities in a foreign language, the success made “the time, cabs, fatigue, back pains and bad atmosphere among colleagues” insignificant. She felt satisfied.

Overcoming powerlessness – giving meaning to educational events

According to Elżbieta Dubas (2009, p. 137), growth during adulthood is dynamic and entails crises, especially during “breakthroughs” in life and critical, often difficult personal and global events. Dubas emphasizes that development-related crises are not neurotic, destructive or pathological. They are growth opportunities as they bring the individual to higher development levels, even if sometimes through regression.

In the presented interviews, the participants showed the complexity of their educational careers. They identified their educational experiences, and certain sub-worlds. They presented their own motivations, gained insight into the consequences of their own choices.

M1 developed individually, horizontally, non-linearly but sequentially, consistently in terms of the areas of interest. His learning process was spread over decades. His goal was to perfect his specialization, while at the same time pursuing his interests. He considered his second attempt at the secondary education exam at the high school for adults as the hardest time. Becoming a husband and father early in life, he was forced to change his plans and to immediately find his way to adulthood and seek a job. He quit his first university program because he found it uninteresting. He describes the period of combining his job

with family duties and out-of-town studies as “dark, void of perspectives, with no future, robbed from his biography.” He experienced family tensions due to his living situation – not having his own place. It must be added that these events coincided with the period of martial law in Poland (1981–1983). When M1 was 27, he began a high-intensity foreign language course. He was inspired to take that step by his interest in the culture dominated by that language. The course helped him overcome his lack of faith in himself. This led to the decision to enroll at a university and helped him pass the admission test with the top result. The participant mentioned the negative consequences of the time spent during his early adulthood – the full-time university program pursued with a 10-year lag led to his inactivity in the labor market and to stagnation in his professional development, lack of financial independence and disrupted family relations. Financial dependency was very hard for M1: “due to the full-time university program, I was unable to make money.” After he graduated, he became a subordinate employee: [my employer] “had me do tedious work.” However, due to the studies and self-learning, he developed his skills, found self-fulfillment in an appealing job that matched his interests, experienced professional satisfaction, earned recognition from his clients and explored interesting tourism destinations. M1 invented his career, he had an idea around which he centered the process of improving his qualifications. He used educational possibilities other than formal ones to obtain a license to practice a specific profession, but he relied on self-learning for his self-growth (initially by reading books and journals, later by using the Internet and audiobooks). He was convinced that the system and economic transition from 1989–1990 came at least 10 years too late. “It will be better, easier for those born later. A different start, different conditions.” He plans to keep developing and expanding the areas of his professional activity. He was termed an Autonomous Autodidactic.

The education of M2 was mosaic-like. As he had no family support while building his professional position, he used the formal education resources at his disposal. Without solid educational grounds, he ambitiously built the components of subsequent diplomas. His educational shortcomings were the cause of his hidden insecurities. His motivation was built on ambition, perhaps even egotism. He looked at his reflection in the eyes of others and he wanted to prove his worth to the world. His educational activity was triggered by a social mirror, the competencies of his life partners, the desire to be a match for them. After graduating from a university, he used the upskilling forms available at his workplace. This was often a matter of chance. Social motivations kept taking him towards new interests, which he pursued informally. This allowed him to experience satisfaction from his own growth. By earning a master’s degree, which balanced his self-knowledge and self-esteem, he opened up to self-learning. M2 recognized his own potential, and as a consequence noticed the room for further

growth – he was proud of what he had achieved. He perceived the two-semester university program pursued at a ministry-managed higher-education school, obligatory for the desired promotion, as the hardest part of his education. He had bad memories from that time. He was annoyed with the excessive formal requirements, the “stress, the exam terror, the lack of respect for attendants, and the nonexistent knowledge of some professors.” The studies took place from Monday to Friday, they were marked by “strict discipline and barrack-like manners.” He suffered a serious injury during one of the classes and he had to undergo surgery. The diploma he received did not become a source of personal satisfaction, despite the promotion: “This was knowledge to learn by heart rather than put in practice, completely useless.” After retiring, he focused on his deteriorating health and new hobbies: “photography, nature observation, foreign travel, bicycle trips.” He explored new places and met new people. He learned to “listen to birds” and actively enjoy his free time. This style of educational commitment was termed Ambitious.

For W1 her learning process, despite some features of continuity, was mosaic-like, patchwork-like, often random. What W1 found the hardest in her education was the university program, also due to the material: “Not those studies! It was decided randomly, I had no information about the occupation.” Family obligations, enjoying her role as a young wife and mother kept her away from her studies. “The commuting took time away from my other duties.” W1 took any upskilling opportunity to avoid being jobless. “But youth gave me strength and courage for all the activities.” She did not hide her disappointment in what postgraduate education had to offer: “Some classes were methodologically unacceptable. We bought those diplomas, while those classes could have been taught differently.” She has bad memories of some episodes from her postgraduate course: “One professor merged groups, instead of in the classroom we would sit with her in a restaurant with her beer, supposedly alcohol-free.” Her motivation was initially utilitarian, later on she fought to keep her position in the professional group that she joined. Her “professional downfall,” as she termed her dismissal, took a toll on her. Despite seeing some of her educational experiences in a negative light, she did not lose her joy of learning. She pursued her individual interests in the free educational market and through self-learning. She identified self-growth opportunities, recognized her own potential, she was proud of her achievements when she was exploring her interests. She used a course completed as a hobby to make money. She like to learn. Her expectations included “social and family peace and professional fulfillment,” she wanted to have “time for her pastimes.” She stayed vigilant, looking for new educational options: “Despite everything and just in case.” W1 represents a style termed Diploma Collector.

W2 pursued her goals linearly, sequentially, vertically. She was guided by ambition: she completed a university program, a postgraduate course, a doc-

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Table 3. Education models and educational career types

Education models	Autonomous Autodidactic	Ambitious	Diploma Collector	Anchored Conqueror
Formal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> adult high school part-time university program full-time university program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> adult high school part-time university program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> full-time university program part-time university program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> part-time university program doctoral program post-doctoral program
Non-formal	courses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> car mechanic professional driver's license high-intensity foreign language two license courses qualification course second foreign language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> continuous upskilling training postgraduate course at a ministry-managed higher-education school HR management postgraduate course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> various obligatory and optional forms of upskilling qualification course upskilling course three postgraduate courses make-up artist course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> postgraduate courses foreign language courses
Informal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> amateur theater group downhill skiing travel foreign language self-learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> photography downhill skiing mountain biking organized tourism apiculture keeping exotic birds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> esoteric knowledge interior design 	–
Learning style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sequential horizontal non-linear for interests: patchwork-like 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> mosaic-like vertical for interests: patchwork-like 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> mosaic-like patchwork-like horizontal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sequential linear vertical

Source: author's own work.

toral program, a post-doctoral program and language courses. She focused on her career but she invested the most energy and money in learning a foreign language. "I felt uncomfortable during the course because I lacked the vocabulary. I had problems understanding what was being said. A high absence level was the result of my professional duties. I felt like an idiot. I kept saying 'Could you repeat that please, because I don't understand.' I felt bad. The learning led to financial problems, fatigue, the hardship of commuting, deteriorating health, disappearance of social life and envy of the work environment." Educational experiences contributed to her self-growth, satisfaction and pride in her achievements, they allowed her to give lectures in a foreign language, resulting in the international recognition of her competencies: "It was worth it!" W2 made informed and appropriate choices when it came to the areas of her educational activity, she used the support of mentors to consistently improve her social and professional status, she kept repeating enthusiastically: "It's all ahead of me!" This type of educational career has been termed Anchored Conqueror.

Shared factors of educational activity

Andragogy theories fail to align when it comes to describing a participant of educational events. According to Ewa Solarczyk-Ambrozik, "the image of

a learning adult (...) is constant. (...) A general profile of adult education participants emerges clearly" (2009, p. 183). In turn, Stephen Gorard (as cited in Golding, McDonald, & Malec-Rawiński, 2015, p. 62) claims that the participation of adults in learning processes is not differentiated by origin, family status, gender or age. However, the presented study helps identify certain shared characteristics. All the participants were born in 1960s and they were the first in their respective families to have higher education. They came from families of average or modest means. Their initial capital was poor: early birth of children or loss of a mother (when the participants were between the ages of 18 and 21), lack of gainful employment. This prevented them from preserving their educational continuity. In the interviews, they mentioned that their debut in adulthood had been "burdened." They had no support from their families of origin. Early adulthood was a difficult time for them, also financially. Each of the participants rationalized their functioning within social and professional circles. They successfully overcome the obstacles and proved they were able to cope with change. After some time, they returned to university studies. They participated in many forms of education. They chose adult schools and universities for their recurrent education, postgraduate courses, internships, workshops and traineeships, and consultations. This shows they were well aware of what the

educational market had to offer. They participated in education according to the technological models, they did not have neoliberal corporate careers (Melosik, 2018).

There were a number of contributing factors to their educational participation, including the desire to have higher education, which in turn catalyzed their subsequent cognitive activity. The participants made their educational decisions without any regard for their social security. They felt a need to learn and they satisfied it, with the cost to be repaid from their future success. Education was a value they desired, and they trusted that they would successfully tackle the educational challenges. Strong factors that triggered their educational participation included: people and groups treated as reference standards; the way the participants were seen by the environment; interpretation of education as a desired value; and a desire to climb up the social ladder. They built their educational careers while having a number of social roles, at great financial cost. They placed significant effort in gaining their diplomas. Each of the participants experienced an event (usually during university studies) which distorted the symmetry between their self-knowledge¹¹ and self-esteem (a failed exam, an unfair evaluation, incidents connected with unemployment). Despite that, they did not withdraw from their educational environments. These findings show a positive correlation with the existing andragogy resources.

The participants consciously guided their decisions, and anticipated their own future. However, the decisions were often random – based on opportunity, coincidence. They remembered the fatigue, financial problems, family disruptions at the beginning of their “adult” education, a feeling of being forced into the situation, and their determination in overcoming the barriers. They did not give up on growth, self-learning. They found their way during a difficult time of political and economic transition and in the reality of a learning society. The principle of credentialism may also apply to those experiences (Collins, 1979, pp. 191–204), reinforced by game theory in the case of W2¹² (Gromadzka, 2014, p. 202).

The ultimate profit that came from learning exceeded the experienced losses. They reached full satisfaction later in life, once they raised their professional and social status.

Conclusions

Which of the andragogy-based adult educational activity theories may be used to describe the gathered material? The difficult Polish reality of the early

adulthood of the participants makes it impossible to rely on any contemporary Western theory. This is because of the cultural and socioeconomic differences typical of the Polish past and the transition costs. The andragogy paradigm shift from lifelong education to lifelong learning additionally requires caution in applying the findings of the 20th century theoreticians and researchers to the interpretation of modern individual learning strategies and styles.

The identified educational types (Autonomous Autodidactic, Ambitious, Diploma Collector, Anchored Conqueror) may be compared with the professional career patterns described by (1) Markieta Domecka and Adam Mrozowicki (2008, pp. 136–155) as: anchor-like, patchwork-like and structure-like career, and by (2) Danuta Urbaniak-Zajac and Ewa Kos: broken-through, linearly organized (steplike), arabesque-like (Urbaniak-Zajac & Kos, 2013, pp. 167–169).

The study helped establish a subjective perspective on the learning story of people in their fifties set in the context of the social relations and the places where it happened. While reconstructing the events, the study participants interpreted them (Urbaniak-Zajac & Kos, 2013, p. 95). In this way they gained insight into their own educational micro-worlds. The new learning, as we may call the style of insular learning from everything and from everyone, learning in daily life (see: Field, 2000) and non-linearly, is characterized by turning away from traditional educational institutions and systems. Having collected the required diplomas later than normally scheduled, in the face of credential inflation (Collins, 1979), the participants realized that a university education did not guarantee success in the labor market (Melosik, 2018). They recognized not having a university diploma as a clear excluding factor, but they also knew that the knowledge coming from lecture halls was not enough. They personalized the learning process and took advantage of their educational episodes and processes to build space for self-education, develop their social and professional careers and constitute themselves (cf. Mark, 2013). They learned outside the system, choosing forms and content, and obtaining certificates to prove their additional competences. They gave their experiences, including critical events, a cognitive meaning. They pursued utilitarian goals, so important in the culture of individualism, and they expected to be rewarded with profit, promotion and prestige. Brought up in a traditional education system, they found meaning in lifelong learning. By learning, they broadened and multiplied their own intellectual culture. The showed respect for knowledge and they gained the respect of their surroundings.

¹¹ Awareness of the determinants of one's own development and awareness of the methods of organizing that development.

¹² According to Monika Gromadzka: “The theory centers around a ‘player’ who analyses what behaviors will bring him or her profit or loss, and keeps applying this analysis to other ‘players.’ This way the player is in a way creating a game strategy – a complete action plan accounting for all potential scenarios [...]. The result of the ‘game’ is determined by the number and quality of the credentials gathered by the participants. And the reward is an attractive, satisfying, well-paid job” (Gromadzka, 2014, p. 202).

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