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*Young Adults in Subjectively Difficult Situations. A Qualitative  
Research of the Ways of Confronting Problems in the Work  
Environment*

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Młodzi dorośli w sytuacjach subiektywnie trudnych. Jakościowe badanie sposobów konfrontacji z problemami w środowisku pracy

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ABSTRACT

The subject of the article is the functioning of contemporary young adults in situations subjectively difficult for them. The aim of the research was to reconstruct and analyse the ways of dealing with young adults in situations perceived by them as difficult. The research involved 122 people aged 20–35. The data was collected using a follow-up interview and a questionnaire. The studies were conducted using a research paradigm defining phenomena as a process (a processual approach), revealing its complexity of the phenomenon and internal mechanisms as well as their genesis (analysis aimed at reconstructing the diversity of its internal structure using qualitative analyses and one of the methods of *data mining* – Quinlan’s C4.5 algorithm). An empirical model was obtained showing the spectrum of ways of coping with difficulties encountered by young people in their everyday life: from (1) withdrawal or submission, or (2) controlling the area of activity by imposing/adopting rules, to (3) going beyond self-protection with minimising failures, or (4) perceiving confrontation with problems as a natural component of life.

**Keywords:** young adults; subjectively difficult situations; professional activity; qualitative data; Quinlan’s C4.5 algorithm

## INTRODUCTION

The article is devoted to identifying situations perceived by modern young adults as difficult and the ways in which they cope with them. The analyses focus on the diversity and origins of ways of coping with problems, and consider them in connection with various levels of involvement and the underlying mechanisms.

The research procedure proposed in the article is focused on the qualitative exploration of the phenomenon and reconstruction of its internal diversity. It uses the authors' own methodological solutions, which refer to the conceptualisation of the phenomenon as a process (Rzechowska, 2021). The applied solutions revealed a diversity of ways of coping with/confronting problems in subjectively difficult situations. In psychological literature, difficult situations, sometimes defined as crisis situations, are identified based on objective criteria, e.g. losses, changes. A preliminary analysis of the material revealed that the difficulties of young people did not so much concern their competences as they were a derivative of the level of personal maturity.

## CONTEMPORARY YOUNG ADULTS AND THEIR DIVERSE PATHS OF DEVELOPMENT

In the analysis of the development of modern young adults, in addition to the classical descriptions of tasks and roles, there are terms accentuating their variability and instability: emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004), quarter-life crisis (Robinson, 2008) and transitions (compare the broad definition: Guichard, 2007; Bańka, 2004). These definitions reflect the specificity of developmental changes occurring in the third decade of life, which is a period marked by instability, exploration of identity and focus on oneself, increased independence accompanied by social acceptance of some involvement in adult responsibilities and fulfilment of obligations (Arnett, 2004; Whitton & Kuryluk, 2012).

At this time, young people try to fulfil social obligations in their own way, but they do not define their adulthood in the light of implementation of developmental tasks (Sirsch et al., 2009). In their case, the roles they play (parent, partner, employee) and choices they make are elements of self-image and are ordered by the adopted hierarchy of values (Pasley et al., 2001), life priorities or projects of their own life (Brzezińska, 2017). The fulfilment of one's needs: for autonomy, efficiency (Lindell et al., 2017), competence (Schwartz et al., 2005), freedom, closeness (Nelson et al., 2014), stability (Deci & Ryan, 2008), as well as responsibility (Arnett, 2004), promotes the formation of self-awareness.

Sometimes, they are accompanied by the feeling of "being trapped" in a job or relationship, and the need to verify the validity of actions that have already

been taken or are anticipated (Robinson, 2008). At the same time, despite the availability of many life scripts, young adults feel overwhelmed by the demands of the environment regarding their education, career paths, lifestyles or roles. The fact that one's expectations and ambitions are inconsistent with orders from the outside creates space for conflicts.

Being an adult presupposes acting despite emerging physical, psychological and social difficulties (Ziółkowska, 2005). Active coping with difficulties is positively assessed (Marianowska, 2013) and desirable by employers (Górniak, 2015). In this context, the ways in which young adults function when difficulties arise become significant. The variety of reactions in the event of confrontation with the problem, as well as the subjective perception of a problem situation is a challenge for both the environment and young adults. Modern young people avoid or are protected from discomfort (e.g. by their parents), as a result of which they are deprived of the opportunity to gain experience necessary to develop ways of coping with difficulties in later life, including building a safe and supportive space (Adamczyk & Segrin, 2016). Young adults are expected to cope with "here and now" and simultaneously to 'think ahead' about potential difficulties by constantly acquiring new competencies and skills, needed among others in the labour market (Chirkowska-Smolak, 2007).

The factors affecting the functioning of young adults have a multifaceted character which is difficult to be clearly classified. They include:

- situational factors (isolation from the previous environment and the need to find yourself in a new situation – Smykowski, 2013) and developmental factors (childhood experiences as a source of non-adaptive forms of coping with stress – Herman, 2000);
- personal factors (weak resistance to frustration, feeling of being rejected, low self-esteem, unrealistic expectations, high level of anxiety – Anyan & Hjemdal, 2018; Jobson et al., 2018) and relational factors (inability to be into close relationships, difficulties in communication, lack of support – Kornaszewska-Polak, 2013);
- family factors (conflicts in the family home – Braithwaite et al., 2010; cf. Lehmann et al., 2015) and professional factors (including problems with entering the labour market – Buchner-Jeziorska, 2011);
- socio-cultural factors (expectations, redefinition of roles, destabilisation of social norms; social isolation – Cross et al., 2000).

Taking into account the above factors and their different configurations, it can be concluded that young people may find it difficult to cope with them. Failures intensify the feeling of internal pressure to achieve success, and as a consequence – perceiving oneself as insufficiently effective, not very dynamic and creative, not meeting the expectations of oneself and the environment (cf. Tomczak, 2009).

What young people find important for effectively coping with difficult situations are relationship and personal factors, including close relationships and the ability to establish them (Adamczyk & Segrin, 2016), a stable system of values and a positive attitude to the environment, as well as having adequate competences and skills (Ponczek & Olszowy, 2012). People declaring their satisfaction with life, including professional life, have higher self-esteem, appreciate social values, have good interpersonal relations, which they cherish, and they effectively control what happens to their lives (Zalewska, 2003; Tomczak, 2009).

Employers expect effective actions, taking into account the company's needs, while ignoring employee's needs, including their need for development (Lichtarski, 2007) and their capabilities to adapt to expectations (Hogan & Roberts, 2000). Employees, especially young ones, having and wanting to fulfil a number of conflicting expectations in life (cf. Gajda, 2016) are looking for opportunities to realise them on many levels at the same time, including the professional level. As for young employees, on the other hand, the survey results show a diverse and often inconsistent picture of their competencies (Gajda, 2016; Żarczyńska-Dobiesz & Chomałowska, 2014; cf. Rosa, 2013; cf. Mazur & Wierzbicka, 2015). These are assessed by employers as not meeting their expectations, despite the fact that young employees themselves rate them highly (Rosa, 2013; Mazur-Wierzbicka, 2015).

Young people's clash with the requirements of employers makes it difficult for them to find themselves in a new situation for which they are not prepared. Employers expect young people to possess competencies that they do not have to the extent required, among others, maturity and the ability to control emotions (Rachwał, 2005), quick adaptation to the professional situation (Liszka & Barwińska-Małajowicz, 2016), attitudes of young employees (Gajderowicz et al., 2013), and the effectiveness of possessed competencies itself (Lichtarski, 2007). Employees, on the other hand, expect supervisors to appreciate them and to offer them opportunities for development (Żarczyńska-Dobiesz & Chomałowska, 2014), to be allowed to organise work on their own terms (Solomon, 2003), and to balance professional and non-professional commitments (cf. Wiszejko-Wierzbicka & Kwiatkowska, 2018). Taking into consideration the employee's needs may in the future result in an increase in their competency, motivation to work and attachment to the company with a simultaneous decrease in conflict situations (Cewińska et al., 2009; Eldor & Vigoda-Gadot, 2017).

The assumption, suggested by numerous studies, of the diversity of situations perceived by young adults as difficult and the individualised nature of their reactions and coping strategies (Kuczyńska & Janda-Dębek, 2002; Kraczla, 2013) are the starting point for the empirical reconstruction reflecting this spectrum of various states.

## METHOD

In the processual approach to the studied phenomenon, its complexity, internal diversity and variability are assumed by definition, as well as its latent nature and the fact that it manifests itself in the internal organisation of the life of an individual.

The aim of the research is to reconstruct and analyse how young adults cope in situations that they perceive as difficult. The initial question about confronting problems in subjectively difficult situations, especially those occurring in professional life, takes the form of detailed questions about the current structure of life, supplemented with a picture of its current course and predictions about the future, as well as the context of socio-cultural changes. Several complementary questions were thus posed: What is the structure of life paths of modern young adults? In what situations do they encounter difficulties and what constitutes the essence of these difficulties? How are they interpreted by young people? What is the specificity, origins and mechanisms of young people confronting (coping with) problems? In their context, how do young people confront problems related to professional activity? Due to the exploratory nature of the research, the authors decided not to put forward any hypotheses.

Idiographic data were collected using one of the versions of the exploratory interview and a questionnaire (Rzechowska & Krawiec, 2016). Both tools were used to obtain the largest possible amount of information that is potentially important from the researcher's perspective. The design of the interview and the way of formulating questions were subordinated to this goal. In conducting the interview, the researcher used a specific 'map' of issues considered – at the stage of research planning – to be significant in solving the problem (see Figure 1).

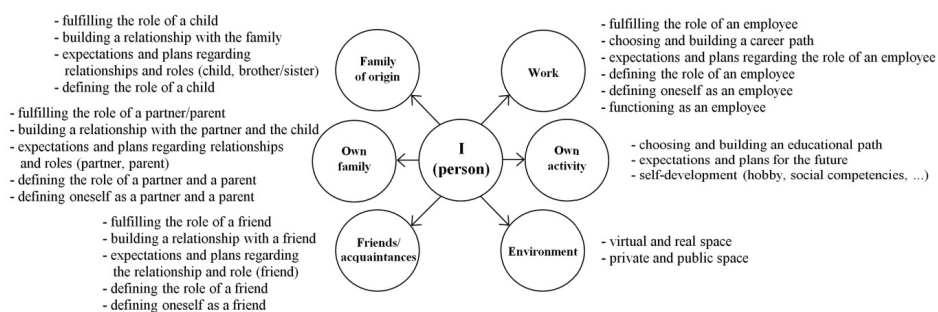


Figure 1. Content framework of the exploratory interview

Source: Authors' own study.

The research team consisted of 30 students participating in a master's seminar conducted by Ewa Rzechowska. These individuals were trained in how to conduct

an interview and questionnaire. The researcher, formulated general questions, opening or maintaining the narrative. He or she followed the respondent, gaining insight into the addressed issues, interpretations, doubts, judgements, etc. (see Rzechowska & Szymańska, 2017). The obtained answers allowed the researchers to identify the difficulties encountered by the respondents and to trace how they coped with them.

The study involved 122 persons (87 women and 35 men) aged 20–35 ( $\bar{x} = 25.8$ ,  $\sigma = 5.08$ ). They constituted a diverse group, among other factors due to their personal and professional situation as well as close relationships. The characteristics describing them were included in the database as its integral component. Contemporary young adults have been studied in a period of developmental transitions taking place in the context of rapid socio-cultural and technological changes (*emerging adulthood*, Arnett, 2004; Andrews & Wrestling, 2016). It also allowed us to explore the diversity of personal development, educational and careers paths.

The research approach used allows treating age and gender as belonging to a set of characteristics (cf. Figure 1) that describe each of the subjects. Additional analyses did not show that gender differentiates the functioning of young people entering the labor market.

The interviews were conducted individually. Each interview lasted approx. 2–3 hours. It took place in the place indicated by the examined person and was recorded with his consent. The subject could withdraw from the study at any time. Respondents were recruited by the “snowball method”, i.e. a group of respondents, initially small in number, is selected and each member of this group indicates others belonging to the general population. Such a method of completing the group was conducive to the rapid acquisition of additional respondents, while at the same time ensuring its high diversity, which in the case of process research is an additional advantage. Research anonymity was ensured, and the collected data was subjected to special protection by introducing independent letter and digit codes.

The processual approach adopted as the basis of research allowed the researchers to develop a strategy for the Process Transformation Reconstruction (*PTR Strategy*) (Rzechowska & Szymańska, 2017), which makes it possible to go beyond the hypothetical relationships formulated on the basis of existing theories and theoretical models. It is especially useful in the case of currently incomplete knowledge of the phenomenon and difficulties in developing a satisfactory conceptualisation of it that would allow for identifying its origin and mechanisms. The *PTR Strategy* is focused on the empirical reconstruction of the phenomenon in its diversity, while maintaining the initial characteristics of the studied subjects at each stage of the analysis. Idiographic analysis of individual cases (case study) is the basis for formulating generalisations: creating a multi-variant model of the phenomenon that reveals its internal diversity (see Figure 2).



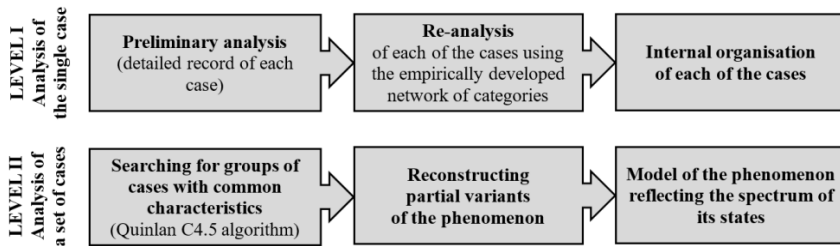


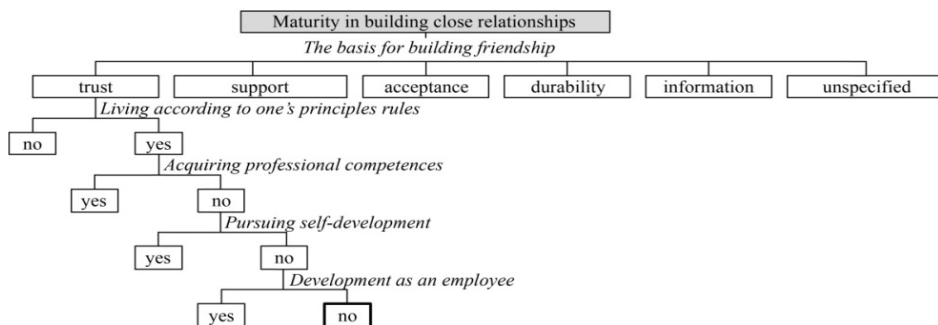
Figure 2. Data analysis scheme: *The PTR Strategy*

Source: Authors' own study.

*Level I.* The analysis is focused on the identification of the characteristics reflecting the individual courses of the phenomenon under study (here: individual life paths, taking into account the levels of involvement relevant to the course of the analysed phenomenon, considered in conjunction with changes to which the context is subjected). The analysis includes subsequently: (1) precise reconstruction and recording of statements; (2) preliminary analysis, thematically ordering and structuring the collected material; (3) objectifying the records of individual life paths by recoding them using empirically developed networks of analysis categories. Individual data sets form the basis for creating a collective database for 122 persons described using 112 attributes, corresponding to the characteristics of the subjects, the activities undertaken by them and their contexts.

*Level II.* The analysis is focused on building a hypothetical model of the phenomenon and consists of three stages: (1) selecting sets of cases with common characteristics using one of the data mining methods – C4.5 algorithm (Quinlan, 1993), (2) analysing the branches of the decision tree and reconstructing partial models of the phenomenon, (3) empirical reconstruction of the hypothetical model reflecting the spectrum of states of the phenomenon (*models of confrontation with problems*).

Re 1. Quinlan's algorithm (C4.5), one of the data mining methods, is a tool enabling the generation of decision trees that show phenomena from a different perspective than the established theories. The algorithm is based on the assumption about the existence of hidden (unrecognised) knowledge in a large set describing the phenomenon, which the researcher will not obtain using classical statistical procedures (Nisbet et al., 2009, p. 231). The researcher prepares a database and selects the criterion for classification: *Maturity in building close relationships*, a derivative of personal development that translates into subjective interpretation and ways of dealing with these relationships. As a result of using the algorithm, a decision tree is developed (see Figure 3). The application of Quinlan's algorithm in psychological analysis is an original concept of Rzechowska (2004).



The presented fragment of the decision tree was the basis for the reconstruction of a variant (reflecting one of the models of confrontation with a problem), hereinafter referred to as *Variant C<sub>1</sub>*. The attributes and their values reflected: (a) the basis for building close relationships (*The basis for building friendship: trust*); (b) system of values (*Living according to one's principles: yes*) and attitude towards one's own development (*Acquiring professional competences: no, Pursuing self-development: yes, Development as an employee: yes*).

Figure 3. A fragment of the decision tree – the basis for the reconstructing *Variant C<sub>1</sub>*

Source: Authors' own study.

Re 2. Attributes and corresponding values are treated as criteria for classification, making it possible to identify groups of subjects with common characteristics (see Figure 3).

Based on the analysis of the configuration of the characteristics found in the decision tree, supplemented with data from the database, describing the identified groups of people, conclusions about the nature of their activities (including professional activities) were drawn, as well as about the ways in which they are conducted and emerging difficulties, their interpretations and assessments; about close relationships and their role in young people's coping with difficulties, etc. Individual variants (models of confrontation with problems) were considered in connection with and against other variants, making more and more precise differentiations, e.g. giving the right interpretation to the formally same characteristics which were essentially different because of their occurrence in different systems.

Re 3. In the *PTR Strategy*, a phenomenon is defined as a process whose internal diversity and course is reflected by the empirically developed model of that phenomenon. It encompasses the spectrum of ways of confronting problems (including work-related problems) in subjectively difficult situations. The detailed analysis of the spectrum allows for the reconstruction of a hypothetical model of the phenomenon, revealing its internal diversity. It is also the basis for explaining the diversity of its courses and connections with the context, as well as mechanisms and origins (explanatory function). The empirically identified spectrum can also be a starting point for making forecasts (prognostic function), which, given the



knowledge of the parameters of the state of the phenomenon at the analysed moment, may form the basis for formulating multi-variant predictions (cf. Grupp & Linstone, 1999, pp. 85–94).

*Assessment of research credibility.* Credibility is determined in relation to the results obtained at two stages of the research process. At the level of case set analysis, the credibility of the research was assessed, i.a., by determining: the error with which the decision tree was biased (15.6%; the acceptable error is 25%).

## ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

As a result of complex analyses, a spectrum of behaviours reflecting young people's coping mechanisms in subjectively difficult situations was identified. Before presenting the results, it is worth noting that when undertaking the study, the authors rather expected to identify problems specific to *particular* areas of life, including professional activity considered against them. Only tendencies identified at subsequent stages of analysis translated into the specificity of professional difficulties. In relation to the above, the presentation of results proposed in the article consists of two stages: (1) a description of empirically developed models of young people's ways of confronting problems in subjectively difficult situations, (2) location of them into the area of professional activity.

As a result of analyses, four models<sup>1</sup> of confrontation with problems were identified, hereinafter referred to as  $C_1$ – $C_3$ . Description of three of them demonstrates the specificity and origins of the difficulties, presenting them against the background of the characteristics of personality structures of young adults and their close relationships.

*C<sub>1</sub>: Protecting oneself by withdrawing*

*Personality structure and close relationships.* The confrontation of the  $C_1$  respondents with problems comes down to and is focused on ensuring a sense of security and acceptance. They emotionally cut themselves off from their parents, finding them to be conflicting, making them emotionally dependent, and/or controlling. Expect their partners to be sensitive to their needs and accept them unconditionally. They treat their loved ones instrumentally. They want to use other people's resources and engage others in solving their own problems. They simultaneously desire and avoid closeness, fearing that they would reveal their weaknesses.

*Confrontation with problems: following external, subjectively interpreted expectations.* Defensive  $C_1$  avoid confrontation with the environment (people and situations) which they perceive as a potential threat. They are convinced that they

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<sup>1</sup> The fourth option, grouped competent people, effectively dealing with difficulties and adequately interpreting situations.

will fail and be criticised. It becomes difficult or impossible for them to use their own resources. Forced to be active, they subjectively interpret external expectations. Working out a solution is more a self-protective measure than an actual goal. Respondents instrumentalise relationships in order to achieve what is necessary to solve a given problem and to ensure them a sense of security. Instrumental treatment of others, however, does not ensue from a desire to manipulate but from self-protection and is situational and fragmentary. Focus on self-protection and willingness to adapt to external expectations coincide with the inability to adopt someone else's perspective. A task-oriented situation it is impossible to take into account the actual expectations of the other party and act in accordance with them. The discrepancy between one's own understanding and interpretation, and external requirements intensifies the sense of danger, increasing the focus on self-protection. They want close relationships, but being dominated by the need to acceptance, they build relationships adapting fragmentarily to beliefs, values, etc. attributed to the other party. They do not take into account objective conditions and external expectations. In cases where every signal of disagreement or lack of acceptance triggers a sense of danger, and accepting feedback requires the abandonment of one's own perspective, the response to friendly supportive instructions is at best a repetition of previously developed patterns. The failure to go beyond them intensify isolation and, consequently, avoidance of all situations and relationships that may potentially fail.

*C<sub>2</sub>: Protecting oneself by controlling the area of activity*

*Personality structure and close relationships.* C<sub>2</sub> respondents only seemingly meet external expectations. They used to be controlled by their loved ones, so they themselves also tend to control their surroundings. This gives them a sense of security. The training they underwent is conducive to triggering defensive behaviours, which facilitate the simulation of actions that are in line with expectations, and on the other hand – to acquiring behaviours useful in exerting pressure and manipulating others. In situations where they feel competent, they are very active; in problem situations – they passively submit to or try to impose their own rules on others. From the outside, this diversity of behaviours is perceived as incomprehensible. Despite their material independence, young C<sub>2</sub> are strongly emotionally dependent on their parents. Recognising them as overly controlling in relations, they employ strategies of avoidance: they evade confrontation, ignore difficult situations or act as if the relationship between them is functioning well. They expect an accepting and non-judging attitude from partners and friends.

*Confronting problems: controlling the actions of others or compliance.* C<sub>2</sub> persons enter into relationships aware of the diversity of requirements, equipped with a set of useful procedures. Depending on the degree of knowledge of the situation, they exhibit different types of behaviour. They actively seek opportunities to prove themselves by preferring familiar situations in which they never go beyond

subjectively defining problems and resort to well-tried patterns of action. Their implementation is focused on self-protection, and not on dealing with the problem effectively. They gain a sense of control over the situation, and by pretending to be effective they protect themselves against confrontation. In situations where they cannot use well-tried procedures, they choose to obey. They gain acceptance by temporarily taking over other people's ways of acting or by creating their own temporary solutions, even against themselves. These measures are adaptive in nature. They are intended to protect respondents from revealing weaknesses and deficiencies, shield them against criticism, and ensure a sense of being appreciated. Sometimes it becomes possible to regain control, adapt the environment to their own needs and return to familiar patterns. Lack of positive feedback gives rise to anxiety, secondarily enhancing the tendency to control oneself and the environment. Despite new experiences,  $C_2$  persons most often repeat the patterns they have mastered.

*$C_3$ : Going beyond self-protection while minimising failures*

*Personality structure and close relationships.* Young  $C_3$  move away from focusing on self-protection. Their activity gains a task-oriented character, and the relationships they build – a subjective character. The subjectification of relationships is conducive to seeing the needs of other people, supporting each other, correcting one's own behaviour, and building a sense of self-efficacy. It also makes it easier for  $C_3$  respondents to abandon the old patterns of action. However, the new solutions raise uncertainty and fear of judgement, which translates into difficulties in maintaining relationships based on partnership. Despite an increasingly better understanding of the world and its more accurate reception, young  $C_3$  still subjectively interpret situations in which they are involved.

*Confrontation with problems: going beyond the comfort zone, inconsistent self-esteem.* In situations known to them and perceived as non-threatening (known operating conditions), efficiently adapt to external expectations: they modify adopted or independently developed patterns of action, adapt suggested solutions, build new ones through trial and error, remain in various types of relationships flexibly changing positions. They perceive unknown situations or those not familiar enough as threatening. Personality factors seem to play a greater role than competency-related difficulties.

An internal contradiction is observed here: belief in one's own high competencies, and at the same time anxiety in assessing the results of one's own actions and fears of external negative assessment and rejection. As a result, young people inadequately interpret other people's reactions, which leads to growing discrepancies, which again intensifies difficulties. Then their actions become rigid and attempts to modify them are made too late or are inadequate. Such persons have difficulties developing new behaviours, often resorting exclusively to the method of trial and error. This makes the actions of young  $C_3$  persons be perceived as incomprehensible. In a self-fulfilling prophecy, they trigger another loop of failures that perpetuate fear and a sense

of defeat. An escape into creating one's image or into self-directed situations provides temporary comfort, but does not favour building authentic closeness and trust. As they acquire experience, gradually come out of the "limbo", revising the methods of action used so far. They relinquish non-adaptive mechanisms in favour of adaptive patterns of behaviour, which with time take on an increasingly mature form.

Contemporary young adults find various situations difficult and deal with them in many different ways. Below are the mechanisms underlying the various ways in which young people confront problems that may form the basis for formulating guidelines for employers. The focus was on the mechanisms of finding solutions, taking into account the competency-related as well as personal and relational aspects of the situation.

*Mechanism C<sub>1</sub>*: withdrawal as intolerance of uncertainty. Initial readiness to solve problems is quickly reduced by failures related to an incomplete understanding of tasks and the desire to meet requirements and expectations. The result of negative experiences in solving problems and building relationships is a generalised avoidance tendency and predict failure. A vicious circle begins: assuming failure causes the fear of assessment, and this leads to avoiding potentially threatening situations, as a result of which there is a lack of experience in confronting problems and coping with assessment, which in turn intensifies fear and a sense of threat and closes the loop, triggering escape mechanisms. Anticipation of failure is caused by the inability to use adequate resources or lack thereof. The subjective interpretation of the problem and the inability to read messages from others: (1) makes tasks and responsibilities be perceived as indeterminate, while (2) simultaneously not realising the wrongness of actions and/or the inability to ask for help and (3) equating messages other than those which show acceptance with a negative assessment. Together with perceived discrepancies between the achieved results and expectations, this increases the sense of danger.

At the root of these behaviours, there are factors conditioning the course of task construction and the achieved result (competency-related factors), as well as factors determining relationship building and their specificity (personal and relational factors). The first group of factors includes: the lack of sufficient professional competencies (or difficulty in applying them) that allow one to correctly interpret the problem and solve it. The second group of factors includes the subjective perception of external expectations, on the one hand, and instrumental treatment of relationships as ways of solving problems on the other. The latter is related to the desire to overcome obstacles in the absence of – in the opinion of young C<sub>1</sub> – real support (and even when it is present, treating it as situational support – or, alternatively, shifting the work onto someone else) and the fear of being too close to somebody, which is a situation that threatens to reveal one's weaknesses.

*Mechanism C<sub>2</sub>*: controlling the area of activity or compliance as ways of alleviating uncertainty and suppressing discomfort. The respondents are motivated;

they want to prove themselves, but are not fully knowledgeable about the problem; they expect not so much guidelines as confirmation of the correctness of their own actions.

*Attempts to control the environment.* Respondents attempting to control the environment are convinced of their own capabilities and knowledge of the expectations of the environment. They are often not aware that their understanding of the problem is incomplete and they do not have sufficient competency. They solve problems by simplifying them and not taking into account unnecessary – in their perception – requirements. They impose on others their own ways of acting, which often do not take into account the specificity of the problem situation, or in their own actions they duplicate the rigid patterns developed in different conditions.

*Submission to control (compliance).* If they are ineffective in coping in a given situation in spite of using familiar schemes in the actions taken, it creates fear and leads to adapting to the guidelines, commands and expectations. They perceive them subjectively thus often incorrectly, and therefore are unable to use them in a specific situation. This increases the fear of assessment. Attempts to help or kind advice are received as criticism.

In both cases, adapting to external expectations is hampered by competency-related factors (subjective perception of the situation and personal-relational factors (unstable self-esteem and fear of assessment).

*Mechanism C<sub>3</sub>:* Reduction of uncertainty and discomfort with their simultaneous intensification associated with the external assessment of their actions. Young C<sub>3</sub> are motivated, show initiative, are professionally qualified, know ways of coping with problems which they have developed in the course of confrontation. Their tolerance of the uncertainty of getting the desired result is continually increasing. They undertake actions that go beyond the comfort zone, spontaneously make corrections and modify strategies, treating the mistakes they made as guidelines. Failures as such are not a source of particular discomfort for the respondents. They consider the external evaluation of their the efforts they make and results they achieve. Going beyond the comfort zone and gaining experiences (including negative ones) makes it easier for respondents to cope with problems. External assessments are often misread – the respondents, make anxiety-based interpretations of all information related to their activities. It results in the intensification of fears and uncertainty, as well as avoidance strategies in order to avoid failure.

Employers, focused on assessing employees' professional qualifications, often overlook the personal factor or, in their assessment, reduce it to very general parameters. Young people's potential and their strong suits are highlighted, including technological proficiency in the field of solutions emerging in the market. At the same time, more and more attention is being drawn to young workers' failure to meet employers' expectations. There are questions about the factors

conditioning the unsatisfactory performance of young employees, but there are none concerning the origins of these difficulties.

The in-depth analysis presented in the article suggests that contemporary young  $C_1$ – $C_3$  persons' mechanisms of confronting problems have a common genesis: anxiety experienced by them that is manifested in various ways and concerns various spheres of functioning. The methods of confrontation they use reveal varied mechanisms of generating anxiety. Their descriptions together with suggestions for employers are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Mechanisms of confronting problems in  $C_1$ – $C_3$  and their implications for employers

	Withdrawal ( $C_1$ )	Control or compliance ( $C_2$ )	External assessment as a regulator of activity ( $C_3$ )
Implications for employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• recognising the way the employee defines tasks</li> <li>• defining tasks set for the employee and controlling how they are interpreted</li> <li>• providing ready-made procedures of action</li> <li>• monitoring employee activities</li> <li>• monitoring whether the applicable rules are observed in the team</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• allowing the employee to recognise the conditions of the task and define them</li> <li>• constructive criticism concerning the task instead of being directed at the person, provided at the stage of interpretation and realization of the task</li> <li>• avoiding tasks that require independent decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• applying ideas or solutions the employee suggested on their own initiative</li> <li>• proposing tasks that involve going beyond the comfort zone</li> <li>• monitoring the way feedback is provided to employees</li> <li>• support in building relationships and communication within the team</li> </ul>

Source: Authors' own study.

Young people's mechanisms of confronting problems in subjectively difficult situations and characteristics included in the analyses formed the basis for deriving implications for employers.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Adulthood is associated with conscious and planned building of one's own life, with the choice of effective methods and means of action, with the need for development and awareness of limitations.

Achieving success in confrontation with problems requires readiness to take action despite the lack of guarantee of its success (uncertainty of success) and lack of conviction about the possibility of its implementation. The manifestations of the former are escape behaviours and fear of judgement; of the latter – discomfort associated with failure or with lack of faith in success. The descriptions of subsequent models of confronting problems present behaviours indicating a varied and gradually increasing degree of tolerance of uncertainty of success and readiness to take action despite obstacles.



The article presents the internal organisation of confrontation was presented, revealing the special role of personal-relational factors and the direction of captured changes: from avoidance strategies focused on self-protection, through anxiety-driven going beyond the comfort zone and experiencing discrepancies between one's own and external assessment of own actions, to self-confidence, tolerating discrepancies and openness to confrontations with problems, which are seen as natural components of life.

When entering adulthood, apart from the natural identity crisis, modern youth face the need to cope with the ambiguity of the world and changing contexts. They do this with varying degrees of success, which largely depends on their personality structure and the strategies of confrontation they have developed. This forces employers to pay special attention to the personal aspect of the young employee's functioning.

From among the selected models of confrontation with problems, only young persons of the fourth variant are able to comply with life roles, and at work – submit to the superiors, ordinances and regulations. Other young people ( $C_1-C_3$ ), although they are burdened with fears and discomfort, strive for independence and self-sufficiency in their own way. However, their inadequate experience, subjective perception of the world and particular susceptibility to external assessments do not favour overcoming difficulties. Young people evade direct confrontation or develop their own strategies for coping with problems and establishing social contacts. These assume a specific form: they allow them to hide what causes discomfort and is critically assessed. Thanks to them, they gain the illusion of control, for which they often have to pay the price of feigned actions and instrumental relationships.

Their behaviour, which is a reaction to the subjective assessment of the situation, both real and predicted, is a derivative of the personal structure, overlapping unfavourable circumstances and mechanisms that prevent a positive solution to the problem. As a result, the respondents are not adapted to the requirements of adult life, which translates into their coping in relational and professional situations. It can be assumed that the basic problem, common to variants  $C_1-C_3$ , is the inability to effectively respond to a negatively interpreted situation. This is because their personality structure usually does not allow them to use their own limited resources, and taking advantage of the resources of others requires having a support network, which they are also unable to create. In such a situation, the respondents are vulnerable to being constantly overburdened with duties, both in their everyday and professional life, which makes them unable to invest in the development of new resources and in undertaking activity in general (Chirkowska-Smolak, 2007). This suggests that the respondents from variants  $C_1-C_3$  are essentially unprepared for the tasks that adult life poses to them (Ziółkowska, 2005), which in each of the variants results from various determinants and circumstances that seem specific to each of them.

The results allowed for tracing the development of ways of perceiving oneself and the environment and of mechanisms of coping with difficulties. Respondents from variant  $C_1$  avoided subjectively difficult situations or reacted by isolating themselves, because their resources and level of anxiety did not allow them to face the problem. An additional factor that impeded functioning were previous negative experiences leading to low self-esteem and problems in establishing close relationships (Kornaszewska-Polak, 2013; Anyan & Hjemdal, 2018; Jobson et al., 2018). In addition, the lack of supportive relationships may reduce the ability to cope with difficult situations (Adamczyk & Segrin, 2016).

In the case of variant  $C_2$ , the respondents cope with discomfort taking control of the situation or adapting to it. Thus, they avoid an assessment of their skills as a potentially threatening situation. These various reactions to situations interpreted by the respondents as difficult can be treated as adaptive because they allow them to function in a situation they find uncomfortable, but also as inhibiting development, because they boil down to protecting oneself and keeping oneself in the comfort zone. The lack of factors that support coping with difficulties may be an element consolidating the above-mentioned mechanisms (cf. Adamczyk & Segrin, 2016).

Respondents from variant  $C_3$  rate their professional competencies highly. At the same time, when performing a given task (e.g. a work assignment), they experience a negative perception of themselves from employers or colleagues when their competencies turn out to be insufficient (cf. Gajda, 2016; Żarczyńska-Dobiesz & Chomątowska, 2014). A discrepancy between one's opinion of their competency and its negative assessment by the environment causes the respondents to withdraw from their tasks in order to avoid being assessed. It can be suspected that giving up on tasks already started does not have a positive effect on the self-esteem of the respondents, nor on how they are perceived by the environment, which can additionally increase the sense of maladjustment and affect the positive image of oneself in the context of failures (see Rosa, 2013; Gajda, 2016; Mazur-Wierzbicka, 2015; Wiszejko-Wierzbicka & Kwiatkowska, 2018).

The conducted research revealed that the difficulties of young people were not so much related to their competencies as they were a derivative of the level of personal maturity. Revealing the specificity of confrontations leads to a number of implications that are relevant for employers hiring young people, drawing their attention to the characteristics of young employees unrelated to their professional competencies.

The results of the research suggest that it is personal factors (factors related to personal maturity), not competence or financial factors, that are the direct cause of the difficulties of young people in coping in the labour market (see Buchner-Jeziorska, 2011; Chmiel, 2002). Examining young people's mechanisms of action will facilitate the understanding of their behaviour and the development of

adequate ways, accepted by employees and employers, to create an optimal work environment. It will also make it possible to eliminate the negative effects of the collision of inadequate expectations of both parties and to step out of the vicious circle of misunderstandings and stereotypes.

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The results of the research reveal a diverse and, despite all of the above, positive image of young employees. Problems in functioning are the result of a clash of different circumstances, not only the result of having specific characteristics or competencies. Contemporary young employees function in conditions that hamper coping with problems. Expectations regarding their level of education, professional experience or professional and relational competencies overwhelm young people without giving them a chance to cope with their shortcomings.

Applying the right approach to the problems that have arisen or are expected to arise as well as understanding their dynamics and diversity will better prepare the work environment for the inevitable encounter with employees from the younger generation. Their way of functioning may turn out to be less problematic than employers assume, and this will again allow them to achieve a higher level of not only productivity but also cooperation and further professional development.

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## ABSTRAKT

Przedmiotem artykułu jest funkcjonowanie współczesnych młodych dorosłych w sytuacjach dla nich subiektywnie trudnych. Celem badań była rekonstrukcja i analiza sposobów radzenia sobie młodych dorosłych w sytuacjach postrzeganych przez nich jako trudne. W badaniach wzięły udział 122 osoby w wieku 20–35 lat. Dane zostały zebrane za pomocą wywiadu podążającego oraz ankiety. Badania przeprowadzono z wykorzystaniem paradygmatu badawczego definiującego zjawisko jako proces (podejście procesualne), ujawniającego jego złożoność i wewnętrzne mechanizmy oraz ich genezę (analiza ukierunkowana na rekonstrukcję różnorodności jego wewnętrznej struktury z wykorzystaniem analiz jakościowych oraz jednej z *metod data mining* – algorytmu C4.5 Quinlana). Uzyskano model empiryczny ukazujący spektrum sposobów radzenia sobie z trudnościami napotykanymi przez młodych ludzi w codziennym życiu: od (1) wycofania lub podporządkowania się bądź (2) kontrolowania obszaru działania poprzez narzucanie/przyjmowanie reguł do (3) wykroczenia poza ochronę siebie poprzez minimalizowanie niepowodzeń czy (4) postrzegania konfrontacji z problemami jako naturalnego składnika życia.

**Słowa kluczowe:** młodzi dorośli; sytuacje subiektywnie trudne; aktywność zawodowa; dane jakościowe; algorytm C4.5 Quinlana