DOCTORAL (PhD) DISSERTATION SUMMARY

ACTUAL PROBLEMS OF THE SCHOOL AND PROFESSIONAL ORIENTATION OF ADOLESCENTS FROM ROMANIA

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**Introductory Arguments**

Individuals’ choice for a certain school, high-school and educational route is determined by both individual (values, attitudes, stereotypes, representations, peer-group and reference-group based behaviors) and social-structural (economical context, social prestige of certain qualifications, existing social policy and school curricula, etc.) level aspects. Among the factors which determine the orientation towards a certain school and profession values, attitudes, personality traits and vocations developed during the period of primary and secondary socialization play a central rule. These factors, together with self-esteem and the socio-professional component of the self-identity, determine an orientation towards a specific type of carrier. Certainly, this process is not absolutely determinant, since in modern, democratic societies, educational and professional mobility, life-long learning practices and the rapid changes occurring in the employment market lead toward a dynamic phenomena in terms of school and professional orientation.

The literature of vocational psychology and educational sociology shows that the decisional process towards profession-choice begins early during the secondary education and then becomes more and more accentuated and clearer during the period of adolescence when individuals usually are opting for a certain higher education route or for a job. School orientation is thus situated at the intersection between the general valence of the professions at a certain moment of time, the socio-familial background and the individual aptitudes. As an application of the methods used in vocational psychology for the evaluation and analysis of school and profession orientation, in the final part of the fourth chapter I included four pilot studies which
were undertook among gymnasium and lyceum students, respectively among first-year higher education students.

Through my approach I intended to connect several dimensions of the much larger phenomenon of carrier choice. I used concepts, theories and studies regarding the individual development and vocational orientation. Through the empirical research which consists in two questionnaires applied on the level of two contrast samples of adolescents (two lyceums with different status), respectively on the level of two contrast samples of students (from different universities) I aimed to bring my study from the period of adolescence towards the period of early adulthood which is, in turn, considered in the literature as a period of aspiration seeking.

In order to identify certain trends and socio-professional options, I constructed the items of the questionnaires based on some relevant indices: informational sources, influences, representations of certain professions, evaluation, decision taking, the score of the self-esteem, etc. – these aspects being correlated in the analysis with socio-demographical data in order to help the analysis of the intersections. Finally, through a qualitative investigation, I intended to enrich the data revealed on the basis of the quantitative research and to provide an in-depth analysis of the linkages between certain components of personal development.

**Theoretical perspectives regarding school and profession orientation and carrier development**

Nowadays, concepts like vocation, school and profession orientation and carrier are both theoretically and empirically related to the major economical and social processes. However, explanatory models and theories of school and profession orientations, respectively those related to carrier development have a high degree of generality, an important explanatory power and can be applied in vocational counseling, they cannot explain the whole decision process. Their limits are rooted especially in the macro-social realities, which are extremely dynamic and thus show a circular effect on the mentalities. On the other hand, the attitude towards different professions during the course of individual development is very much context dependent (social climate, familial and educational context). The construction of aspirations thus occurs through the interplay of opportunities: i.e. during the decision process individuals usually take into account the possibilities they have in attaining their goals. Understanding the ages and related stages of
career development assists practitioners to identify where the individuals are in the career development continuum and suggest appropriate career related goals and activities. It also underscores the necessity to examine career development within the larger context of an individual’s roles and life style and how to achieve a life / work balance.

The problem of choice is a topic which is traditionally studied by sociology. The study of socio-demographical variables involved in option formulation is a typical approach in this regard. Moreover, sociological theories and empirical research are concerned with the consequences of decisions on social inequality and occupational mobility. The profession (occupation) determines the status of the person in his/her social environment, but also his/her income, wealth and lifestyle. A major research stream is that in connection with the generational reproduction of educational and professional mobility. The social theories applied in the educational domain are usually interpreted from the perspective of sociological flourishing of the epistemic construction of the field. The analysis of certain theoretical streams within my thesis seeks to outline this kind of relationship.

Especially in terms of vocational orientation, there was crystallized beginning from the 1960s the area of carrier psychology which studies the systems of reciprocal relations between the individual (considered in terms of personality traits, aptitudes and interests) the educational system, initial and continuous professional training, the properties of work associated with different kinds of jobs and the dynamic game between job offer and job request in the employment market (Jigău, 2001). The most important theoretical approaches of this area are the followings: the approaches from the perspectives of personality traits and factors; the sociological model of carrier development; the theory of the self; the perspective of personality theory and the behavioral approach of the personality (Osipow, 1983). In my thesis I undertook a synthesis of these approaches and insisted especially (even through the presentation of some pilot studies) on the practical application of these theories (e.g. J. Holland, 1997) which comprise six sub-types of personality: realist, investigative, artistic, social, entrepreneur and conventional. Holland’s Career Typology takes a cognitive, problem solving approach to career planning and this model has been extremely influential in vocational counseling. It has been employed by popular assessment tools such as the Self-Directed Search, Vocational Preference Inventory and the Strong Interest Inventory. It has also resulted in practical resources like the Dictionary of Holland Occupational Codes which applies Holland’s codes to major occupations.
One of the most important changes which occurred during the last decades in vocational psychology and carrier development is the so called constructivist, evolutionary and holist perspective.

Currently, ecological systems theory is the central framework for understanding socialization, including career anticipatory process. According to this perspective, many agents play a role in the socialization process including families, peers, media, neighborhoods, schools, and religious institutions. Within families, various subsystems are recognized, including the parent–child dyad, the co-parenting, marital, and sibling subsystems as well as the family unit itself. Families, in turn, are embedded in a variety of extrafamilial socialization systems (e.g., peers and schools) and they operate together with families rather than independently. A variety of factors such as child characteristics including genetic differences, personal parental resources, contextual factors, and ethnicity modify the operation of these socialization influences (Parke et al., 2007).

Contemporary authors brought new information regarding the carrier trajectory and the most important factors which influence it. According to the inventory of Feldman (2002) the evolutionary perspective consists in research related to vocational identity; the influence of early school based interactions and extra-curricular activities on interests, values and professional abilities; the influence of personality traits and personal styles on the ways in which individuals are perceiving their self, the environment and the carrier; the investigation of the stability of work patterns and skills, professional interests and personal values; the contexts under which such interests are changed during the life course; the relationship between personal abilities, interests and values and that of the organizational exigencies and their impact on well-being.

The relationship between educational system and social development

The evaluation of the educational reforms occurring in the second half of the previous century, respectively the changes occurred as a result of the 1960’s social movements showed that in spite of high educational mobility, educational reforms could not diminish the inequality in terms of educational opportunities (Boudon, 1973). Inequality has further perpetuated through
the permanent raising of the educational carriers (time spent in schools) required for certain high prestige social positions, through the fact that lower educational qualifications had lost their social values and through the fact access to education was unequally distributed along each educational level, but particularly in the case of higher education. Thus, welfare societies remained unequal in this respect and the democratization of education was marked by a number of failures. Moreover this contradictory process remain, in emergent countries such as Romania, problematic (Hatou, 2010).

Concern the curriculum theme, critical theory perspectives are concerned with curriculum as both the effect and the source of inequalities and social discrimination. Their focus is not only on how educational success and failure are created through curriculum, but also on how it builds social ideologies, power, and identities. Feminist and critical race movements have expanded critical theory and also challenged it conceptually, and have blurred some of the distinction between critical and poststructural approaches. New developments in this field include a reemergence of interest in social class; some advocacy of critical realist epistemology; and a critique of global and national measurement-based policymaking and its discriminatory effects (Yates, 2010).

The role of the education in the wider context defined in Lisbon (2000) relies explicitly in promoting sustainable development by the development of human capital. Policies which facilitate the access to education are aimed to reduce social exclusion and poverty. The main goals of educational policies on the macro-level are the followings: education as a vector for social cohesion; education as a promoter for social inclusion through the development of active attitudes towards social change and through the raising of economical and social competencies of the individuals in order to enhance their integration into the labor market; the school as a concrete institution for social action and development (Voicu, 2004). Curriculum reform refers to attempts to improve the selection and organization of school knowledge and associated student learning. However, the reform process is complicated by different views about curriculum purposes, priorities, and processes. The result of these differences, and of the politics they generate, is that the record of lasting and successful curriculum reform is weak. To achieve its aspirational intent, curriculum reform will be best served by a democratic approach to both ends and means, a challenge to the large-scale and centralized nature of recent reform efforts (Gilbert, 2010).
The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) role in contribution to the development of higher education in known. As an international organization composed of 30 member countries and actively collaborating with 70 nonmember countries, the OECD is uniquely positioned for collecting international comparative data, promoting the international exchange on good practices and developing international guidelines. It has been recognized by all the OECD countries that higher education plays a vital role in driving economic growth and social cohesion, and it is now understood that a high-quality system of higher education is central to the ability of nations to participate successfully in the global knowledge economy. This context has led the OECD to focus on higher education in its work related to education and innovation. Some analysis of higher education policy and practice (Yelland, 2010) runs across the four functional divisions of the directorate: (1) education and training policy, (2) Educational research and innovation, (3) indicators and analysis, and (4) education management and infrastructure. The main work includes: e-learning in post-secondary education and training, the future of higher education, guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education, higher education and regions, internationalization and trade in higher education, and thematic review of tertiary education.

Results of the empirical research

In order to establish the most important motivations and aspirations associated with adolescents’ and students’ school and professional options I used the following sociological methods: two sociological, questionnaire based surveys (applied to a number of 160 secondary school students from two different schools, respectively to 180 students from two different universities); qualitative research techniques like interviews and observations in quality of participant observatory (school counselor and teacher involved in both secondary and higher education). After the statistical analysis of the data I could formulate the following relevant trends:

A) Subjects’ aspirations and options are in strong correlation with the socio-educational status of their parents;
B) There appear relevant differences between the subjects in terms of the influences from the part of their families and reference groups: in the case of those subjects which are better off in terms of their social status the influence of the family and reference groups on youngsters aspirations is greater than in the case of those subjects which are in a less privileged social status. In this latter case the decision about school and education is taken individually or through the help of school counselors or peers;

C) There is a strong, significant correlation between parents’ socio-educational status and the school option. However, the pecuniary pattern of certain jobs plays an important role in professional aspirations in the case of each of the four categories of subjects. The effect of social class background on young adult earnings is more modest, but consistent with other studies (e.g. Rumberger, 2010). In both cases (the two samples), the relationship varies widely among gender and school category.

D) Exploration of the reciprocal relations between these cognitions and adolescents' activities supported both unidirectional and bidirectional effects, with different patterns emerging for aspirations and expectations. In multiple regression analyses, future-oriented cognitions predicted adult educational attainment; follow-up analyses indicated that the effect of adolescents' expectations was partially mediated by participation in extracurricular activities. These results suggest a potentially important influence of adolescents’ future-oriented cognitions on their current behavior and future attainments. This aspect was nuanced through the qualitative research;

E) The social perception of the future profession determines the selective perception of the carrier under discussion, subjects maintain those aspects of the profession which are favorable in building the social image of the job, with some differences in representations in early adulthood groups of students.

F) There are some gender based differences among the adolescents in terms of their aspirations: previously masculine jobs like architecture and law-base professions are now a serious options for girls as well, respectively previously feminized options like art-based employment are now important options for boys as well;

G) There occurs an important association between self-esteem and individualistic motivation in the orientation towards future profession, respectively between self-esteem and the certainty of the decision taken.
H) From the correlations between the indices of self-esteem and socio-demographical variables and that of the items of professional orientation there are constructed several typical profiles which are discussed in detail at the end of the thesis.

Conclusions

Situated at the intersection between vocational psychology and sociology the thesis try to connect some of the new approaches concern the school and professional orientation at adolescents. A major theme that runs throughout all chapters is the concept of change. The results obtained are in accordance with previous conclusions made on the basis of similar studies undertook in Romania, but there are revealed several newer aspects as well. Thus, I succeeded to reveal some more rational elements in youngsters’ motivations: the pecuniary element and that of selective optimization of the chances are well represented, statistically significant. Moreover, a salient issue involved in the aspirations is the role of the economical crisis in shaping youngsters’ aspirations.

Regarding the relationship between vocation and carrier choice, the results of the qualitative investigation suggest the idea of the need to adequately adapt school curricula to the Romanian social realities.

At the end of the thesis, bases on the results of the empirical research I tried to envisage some possible applications as well which aim to optimize vocational and professional counseling actions.
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