

# Sense of coherence and adult educational activity

## Theoretical and research study

### Summary

The book focuses on the issues of educational activity, especially self-directed learning of adults in the context of their lifelong development. Anyone who undertakes education does so for some purpose and very often there are numerous reasons for this. Adults may seek to complete discontinued formal education or improve their qualifications in a particular area. Adults can learn for themselves, to improve their quality of life, out of curiosity, to better understand the surrounding reality, or for work-related reasons (for career advancement, job retention, or fear of losing a job). Therefore, when talking about adult education, we have to take into account its multifaceted, multidimensional nature.

Modernity is marked by numerous unpredictable changes that take place in the economic, social or political spheres. These changes entail many consequences at the macro level (functioning of the whole society), meso- (life activities of particular social groups) and microstructural (personal perspective). Political and historical events, social phenomena and economic changes have a significant impact on how individuals function, both in personal and social dimensions. These changes may affect both travel directions, investment plans, and education/occupational orientation at both individual and global levels. New geopolitical and social trends can motivate an adult to take new action, and modify their aspirations and plans. Group processes are transformed and come to affect the way entire social groups function.

The perception of phenomena and events at the level of entire societies is constantly changing. In this paper, educational activity will be analyzed in all these aspects, although the perspective of the person will be most emphasized. When analyzing the phenomenon of adult life activity, it is important to focus on its aspirational and aspirational dimension, self-directed education: why do adults who have a job, family, stable life, constantly set themselves new goals and tasks? Narrowing this down to the professional and educational dimension: why do adults who have gained an education and diplomas continue to learn independently, by spending their own time, money and other resources?

What drives them? We often have a situation where internal motivation (I learn because I want to) and external (I learn because I have to) co-occur in the educational process (see Reykowski 1992; Maslow 2013; Łukaszewski 2015). Adults learn by completing

courses, studies, training (formal education), self-directed learning (non-formal education) or investing in personal development (in-depth education). From the psychological and developmental point of view, it is interesting to analyze the educational activity of adults as a result of internal motives and therefore the phenomenon has become an inspiration for theoretical considerations and empirical research on the determinants of subjective educational activity connected with self-directed education processes (see Kidd 1966; Faure 1975; Legrand 1995; Pólturzycki 2014).

Self-directed education, for the purposes of this work, is defined as the ability of a person to plan their education independently and implement this plan in the long term. Such a person engages in educational activity on the basis of internal motives, is motivated to implement their own educational plan, educational activity is interwoven in both their work life and leisure time, and the process itself is multidimensional, relating to the person's individual interests and professional issues. Adult self-directed education activities can be realized either by themselves or by incorporating various educational offerings in their own educational path (see: Kidd 1966; Matulka 1983; Legrand 1995; Jarmużek 2006, 2011, 2014a; Pólturzycki 2014).

Self-directed education is defined as a subjective way of life, resulting from the aspirations, motivations and life goals of a person who actively seeks and implements development activities (see: Siciński 2002; Fatyga 2009, Jarmużek 2011, 2014a). It is a lifestyle in which a person consciously adopts a distinctive manner of being, individualized in scope and form, motivation, values, and goals of behavior (see Siciński 2002, pp. 22–23). We can characterize the self-directed education of an adult as a combination of values and aspirations with the choices that determine how his or her independent life will look and transform it into his or her own lifestyle, both emotional and cognitive. This dimension of lifestyle is emphasized by Barbara Fatyga when writing about the hierarchical patterns and patterns, values and behaviors constituting a certain lifestyle that is internally consistent and fulfilling the goals and intentions of an adult (Fatyga 2009, pp. 150–151).

The issue of self-directed education can also be seen from the perspective of a person's competences and resources, which determine the quality of the adult's educational commitment. The work will analyze the selected subjective conditioning of various adult education forms. Each adult individually identifies his or her own life goals, defines life success, formulates expectations for themselves and others, and aspires to life. They will also, in their own way, plan, specify and undertake educational activities. This definition of one's own and one's own life situation depends on many factors at macroscopic and micro-structural level. The stability of the living and working situation, whether this assessment is objective or subjective, will determine the activity of an individual in various areas of life. Therefore, the needs and educational possibilities of a person cannot be seen only in the metric context of the level of formal education achieved, but also in terms of individual educational, professional and self-fulfillment needs, the type of training motivation, and the life goals resulting from the individual concept of a successful, valuable life. The self-directed education of an adult will therefore be considered in the context of internal competences and personal dispositions as a self-designed and realized lifelong education process. In the context of modern educational and development concepts adults are perceived as "capable of being able to change, to realize something important in their lives" (Delors 1998, p. 101; Czerniawska 2011b, p. 11–23).

However, in practice, not everyone realizes their plans, dreams and develops their potential. The extent to which an adult's life becomes a source of deep satisfaction depends both on the external factors and the internal dispositions and competencies that enable the person to be artistic, the creative realization of the individual sense of life, and the ability to cope effectively and creatively with adversity. In this paper, we will analyze factors enabling us to realize our own plans and potentials, to skillfully create our lives in the context of educational activity, especially self-directed education.

The determinants of adult learning will be considered in the context of salutogenesis. The founder of the salutogenic approach was Aaron Antonovsky (1923–1994), professor of sociology. Born in Brooklyn, New York, in the United States, he initially he studied history and economics, then the sociology of medicine. After obtaining his doctorate in sociology in 1955 he emigrated to Israel in the 1960s. While there he worked at the Israeli Institute for Applied Social Research Hebrew University of Jerusalem, co-founded the University of Ben Gurion, wrote and published 12 books and over a hundred scholarly articles. In 1972 he withdrew from professional and scientific life. At present, there are many research institutes in salutogenic thinking, many research centers, clinics and hospitals use the SOC concept as a tool to assess the level of coherence and its components in order to predict how people will cope with therapy, mourning or convalescence.

In the remainder of my work, I will refer to contemporary trends and directions of research on the sense of coherence in Poland and in the world. The key concept for Antonovsky's concept is the sense of coherence (SOC), which is a constant disposition of personality in adult life and determines the way we think, interpret, and make decisions and actions in our lives. The sense of coherence is characterized by a dimensional character (from weak to strong SOC) and is defined as a global orientation expressed in the individual's feeling of certainty that their external and internal environment is understandable and meaningful and that life is worth the effort and commitment (Antonovsky 2005, p. 34; Jarmużek 2014a, pp. 245–247).

In this work it is assumed that one of the important determinants of effective personal and professional development and the ability to fulfill one's own life plans and personal dreams is a high level of coherence, understood as the belief that an adult can make the world understandable (sense of comprehension and sense of resourcefulness) and that these are in life, things and people worth engaging (feeling sensible). It was also assumed that the motives of education, educational plans and the intensity of educational activity, especially self-directed education, depend on both the level of coherence and the dynamics of individual components. Otherwise, one perceives the educational opportunity of a person with a high sense of coherence, and the opposite of the person at the opposite end of this personality disposition. In one case, the goal is long-term education, self-directed education, aiming to fulfill one's own dreams and goals, the other being education solely for the purpose of obtaining a diploma, or pursuing an isolated short-term goal of gaining specific skills or knowledge.

These considerations have become an inspiration to write an unpublished doctoral thesis *The sense of coherence and self-education of adults* and to carry out research among 427 adults who were active students. The author's goal was to diagnose self-education processes (self-education motivation and self-study activity) in the study group in question. The research problems highlighted above do not exhaust the whole and depth of the

problems and consequences stemming from Aaron Antonovsky's concept. The theoretical analysis of salutogenetic assumptions and an attempt to empirically verify selected issues resulting from the adoption of this model is the goal of the work. The consequence of this goal is the following work structure.

The First Chapter *The sense of coherence in the light of salutogenic theory* presents the most important issues of Aaron Antonovsky's theory. It is presented in terms of the characteristics of the salutogenic approach and the main differences between this and the pathogenetic approach. Next, I present coherence (SOC) and its components and the theme of life experiences that shape SOC, also discussing the stability of the sense of coherence throughout human life. I then go on to discuss the very important issue of SOC limits and the elasticity of coherence, which have a huge impact on adaptability and coping with stress (sudden and chronic).

In Chapter Two, *Sense of coherence and human functioning*, I analyze and explain the determinants of the development of coherence in the various stages of human life and the influence of adult activity in different spheres of life. Then I present the key essence of the issue of generalized immune systems that have an inevitable impact on how humans function, especially in new, difficult and conflicting situations. There are further reflections on the typologies of coping with stress in the context of a salutogenic approach and references to numerous studies examining the impact of coherence on various aspects of human life.

In the third chapter, *Contemporary transformations of adult education*, I describe the transformation of the human sphere under the influence of economic, technological and civilization transformations. I attempt to present selected issues that modify the role of education in adult life. I refer to the concept of a knowledge-based society and a learning organization (Senge et al. 2008; Senge 2012) by analyzing the most important changes in the current professional situation of man. I also present the role of social capital in building a new type of society.

Chapter Four, entitled *Selected aspects of adult development in the context of educational activity*, refers directly to an adult as an individual, on the one hand showing the specificity of the adult learner's performance, and on the other hand, I emphasize the developmental aspect: what developmental tasks in the light of selected concepts determine the way an adult functions? In the second part of this chapter, selected internal determinants of educational activity are presented. The role of motivation in learning and the process of learning as an important adaptive mechanism are also discussed. Adult education in this sense is perceived as a lifestyle for a person who wants to remain flexible, competitive and responsive to changes in the surrounding world. This is very often a prerequisite for the job market.

Chapter Five is entitled *New Dimension of Education. Education for development and describes* current trends and transformations in adult education. I refer here to selected documents defining the directions in which modern education is being transformed. I go on to present the concept of self-directed education and point to the determinants of the self-directed education process. I strive to show the role of the implementation process in the processes of self-directed education from an early age, and the influence of subjective factors on the course of self-directed education.

In Chapter Six *Self-directed learning of adults. Own research in the salutogenic perspective* I discuss the research procedure, formulate problems and research hypotheses. In the fi-

nal and seventh chapter I present the results of empirical research and the relationship between the most important variables for this work. The purpose of this publication is to bring to the general public a wide range of issues related to the concept of coherence, salutogenic approach and adult education.

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