

Young Women in Search for Autonomy. New Generation of Female Professionals Entering the Labour Market

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Introduction

Designing the research project, the authors focused on the main research question: “What are the attitudes of young Polish women (their life choices) in the process of adulthood entering the labour market?”. The literature on the subject shows that young people in Poland are now entering adulthood differently than their parents¹; Polish women give birth to the first children much later than their mothers while starting their professional career earlier, trying to meet their basic psychological needs² through/by building a particular hierarchy of priorities. Previously the

1 D. Wiszejko-Wierzbicka, A. Kwiatkowska, *Jeden czy wiele modeli? Raport z ogólnopolskiego badania młodych Polaków w wieku 18–29 lat*, “Studia Socjologiczne” 2018, vol. 2(229), pp. 147–176.

2 E.L. Deci, R.M. Ryan, *Self-determination theory*, [in:] P.A.M. Van Lange, A.W. Kruglanski, E.T. Higgins (eds), *Handbook of theories of social psychology*, Sage, Thousand Oaks 2012,

family orientation was the one that dominated among life choices, which resulted in the use of traditional patterns (woman, home, family). Nowadays emancipation movements mean that economic independence is much more visible in the sphere of the professional and social activity of women in this area³.

Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT)⁴ assumes that creativity, motivation and performance develop when three universal psychological needs are met: Autonomy, Relatedness and Competence. In circumstances satisfying all the three needs, individuals experience an event, work or task as self-determined, and behaviour is motivated by internal factors that result from personal goals and values, and not from external reinforcements or imposed requirements⁵. According to SDT, Autonomy is defined as a sense of control over processes and results and is associated with increased sustainability and efficiency through greater internal motivation⁶. Relatedness is the search for the possibility of establishing relationships with other people in a meaningful way, creating things and phenomena that matter to others. People have an innate need to establish close relationships with other people⁷ to avoid ostracism⁸ and create a sense of belonging to the group⁹. Finally Competence is a sense of efficiency and learning opportunities, also mastery in a given field. Sense of Competence is a central element in setting goals and motivating for success and avoiding failure¹⁰. Self-determination, according to SDT, occurs when these three needs are met.

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- pp. 416–437, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446249215.n21>
- 3 M. Friedman, *Autonomy, gender, politics*, Oxford University Press, New York 2003, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/0195138503.001.0001>
 - 4 E.L. Deci, R.M. Ryan, *Self-determination...*; E.L. Deci, R.M. Ryan, *The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior*, “Psychological Inquiry” 2000, vol. 11, pp. 227–268, http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01
 - 5 E.L. Deci, *Intrinsic motivation*, Plenum Press, New York 1975.
 - 6 E.L. Deci, R.M. Ryan, *The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits...*
 - 7 E.g. D.C. McClelland et al., *The achievement motive*, Appleton-Century-Crofts, New York 1953, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/11144-000>
 - 8 K.D. Williams, J.P. Forgas, W. von Hippel, *The social outcast: Ostracism, social exclusion, rejection, and bullying*, Psychology Press, New York 2005.
 - 9 R.F. Baumeister, M.R. Leary, *The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation*, “Psychological Bulletin” 1995, vol. 117, pp. 497–529, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497>
 - 10 A.J. Elliot, M.A. Church, *A hierarchical model of approach and avoidance achievement motivation*, “Journal of Personality and Social Psychology” 1997, vol. 72, pp. 218–232, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.72.1.218>; P.R. Pintrich, *The role of goal orientation in self-regulated*

A self-determined experience is crucial for the process of entering adulthood¹¹. Central to the present discussion, self-determination is a part of becoming an independent individual, as well as a citizen actively participating in democratic life on an everyday basis. Such an attitude produces positive outcomes such as intrinsic motivation, performance quality, persistence, professional and private life enjoyment, creative thinking, effective problem solving, well-being, mental health, and high-quality personal relations with others¹². When citizens are motivated by self-determined experiences, they are more likely to care for the common good, become active in shaping the local community life, and demonstrate effective performance, creativity, and problem solving¹³.

In the context of entering the labour market, self-determination may promote professional success and job satisfaction. Indeed, a greater sense of control over constructing the professional development strategy predicts the job market perception of fairness in the selection and promotion process¹⁴. These considerations may be particularly important for increasing the effectiveness of professional development among young women in the growing economy of Poland.

Importantly, SDT does not consider the three needs to be equal in the experience of self-determination. Autonomy is accentuated as the key ingredient. In their review article, Deci and Ryan state:

[...] Autonomy occupies a unique position in the set of three needs: being able to satisfy the needs of Competence and Relatedness may be enough for controlled behavior, but being able to satisfy the need for Autonomy is essential for the goal-directed behavior to be self-determined and for many of the optimal outcomes associated with self-determination to accrue¹⁵.

learning, [in:] M. Boekaerts, P.R. Pintrich, M. Zeidner (eds), *Handbook of self-regulation*, Academic Press, San Diego 2000, pp. 451–502.

11 K.D. Williams, J.P. Forgas, W. von Hippel, *The social outcast...*

12 E.L. Deci, R.M. Ryan, *The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits...*; E.L. Deci, R.M. Ryan, *Self-determination...*

13 See: E.L. Deci, R.M. Ryan, *The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits...*

14 M. Łuźniak-Piecha, A. Lenton, *Supporting Employee Health and Well-being as a Strategy for Managing an Age-diverse Workforce. Greater London Authority Case Study*, “Zeszyty Naukowe Uczelni Vistula/Vistula University Working Papers” 2016, vol. 46(1), pp. 142–160.

15 E.L. Deci, R.M. Ryan, *The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits...*, p. 242.

Absent Autonomy, Skewes' modern take on SDT

In contrast to The Self-Determination Theory created by men and mainly focused on men as the participants of the labor market¹⁶, more contemporary approaches emphasize the participation of women in the job market. According to these concepts the Relatedness is argued to play a central role in achieving Autonomy and Competence, i.e. the whole self-determination experience¹⁷. In other words, it is emphasized that self-determination is based mainly on "Relational Autonomy" – as the ability to independently influence one's own life (autonomy) is largely dependent on the quality of our relations with important people and institutions in a social, political and economic context. Therefore, Relatedness is asserted as the key to understand how a particular social group will build its strategy of achieving goals. In the circumstances of the labour market being shaped by certain gender stereotypes ("giving birth to a child / developing a career" is most important to a woman), the social and political support for young women differs. When the social environment formulates particular expectations towards young women and indicates their certain social roles ("you should go to university / you should start family / you should earn a living"), the economic conditions such as the different pay for similar work performed by women and men will support specific life choices. Summarizing: the patterns of career chosen by young women will be strongly shaped by relationships emphasizing the importance of one and the low usefulness of other life decision. Young women's aspirations are therefore strongly influenced by relations with a specific social, political and economic environment.

According to Skewes Relatedness is crucial for understanding the kinds of challenges that different groups may face in achieving self-determination and in addressing those challenges. When social, political and economic environment is shaped by gendered norms and expectations, challenges to seeking and achieving self-determination might be different along gender lines. Therefore increasing self-determination among young women entering the labor market seems to be a worthwhile goal for efforts¹⁸.

16 S. Buss, *Autonomy reconsidered*, [in:] P.A. French, T.A. Uehling, H.K. Wettstein (eds), *Midwest studies in philosophy*, vol. XIX, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1994, pp. 95–121; J. Christman, *Relational autonomy, liberal individualism, and the social constitution of selves*, "Philosophical Studies" 2004, vol. 117, pp. 143–164, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/B:PHIL.0000014532.56866.5c>

17 M.C. Skewes et al., *Absent autonomy: Relational competence and gendered paths to faculty self-determination in the promotion and tenure process*, "Journal of Diversity in Higher Education" 2018, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 360–386.

18 *Ibidem*.

The entering the labour market process occurs within the context of significantly limited Autonomy, providing a unique opportunity to examine experiences of Relatedness and Competence importance in the self-determined experience seeking. According to the research results by Skewes et al.¹⁹, the situation of acting in the sense of Reduced or Absent Autonomy provokes the development of various strategies to follow professional aspirations for women and men.

In such a situation, women focus on developing Relational Autonomy, seeking and nurturing relationships with people who are creators of/participants in the situation. Skewes argues that the experience of self-determination for women hinges on relational competence.

The building blocks of competence that lead to self-determination, including information, are contextualized in Relatedness. How information is obtained, and feedback offered is more central to women [labor force] members' experience than the existence of objective rules about the process²⁰.

For men, the experience of self-determination relies more heavily on Informational Competence. Perception of competence begins with the rules and guidelines, and Relatedness falls a distant second. For men, written rules seem to be the place to start the process of the Informational Autonomy development. Men therefore try to compensate for the lack of Autonomy by seeking clear information on the procedures, requirements and specific actions that should be taken to ensure that they meet specific aspirations²¹.

Present Study – Own Research Project

The goal of the conducted study was to explore deeper needs as: relatedness, competency and autonomy (intrapsychic conditions of perception of own adulthood) as well as the perception of traditional social markers ('Big Five') within the group of young woman entering adulthood. The question we asked concerned self-fulfillment in different areas of life they indicate as important. The study was conducted in the period of May until August 2019.

The presented research attempts to understand self-determination among young women in the process of building their professional development strategy, becoming an active part of a democratic society from the political, economical and socio-psychological point of view.

19 *Ibidem*.

20 *Ibidem*, p. 378.

21 *Ibidem*.

Method

The conducted study was based on a qualitative approach. The individual in-depth interview (IDI) was used as the technique which enables the exploration of deeper needs, such as relatedness, competences and autonomy. The sample of young women entering adulthood was created in the procedure of “snowball sampling” used during the recruitment process.

The sample consisted of young women aged 18–29. The selected age range corresponds to the definition of emerging adulthood phenomenon according to Jeffrey Arnett²². Other variables taken into consideration within the process of sample creation are: vocational activity, having a child/ children, education. **Finally, 24 IDIs were conducted in the term of May – August 2019 year (this is part repetition of a previous sentence).** The structure of the sample is presented in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1. Structure of the sample

	1. Single/married woman with a child/children; higher level education	2. Single/married woman with a child/children and secondary level education (studying)/elementary education	3. Single/married woman without a child/children; higher level education	4. Single/married woman without a child/children; secondary education (not studying)/elementary education
Urban	Three women aged: 18–22; 23–25; 26–29	Three women aged: 18–22; 23–25; 26–29	Three women aged: 18–22; 23–25; 26–29	Three women aged: 18–22; 23–25; 26–29
Rural	Three women aged: 18–22; 23–25; 26–29	Three women aged: 18–22; 23–25; 26–29	Three women aged: 18–22; 23–25; 26–29	Three women aged: 18–22; 23–25; 26–29

Source: own, based on the conducted study.

In order to diversify the obtained empirical material, the sample was also differentiated. Women included into the sample were recruited from various social contexts, e.g. institutions for single mother’s or a celebrity’s environment. The average length of interview amounted approximately one hour. All of the interviews (IDIs) were given under full description.

22 J.J. Arnett, *Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties*, “American Psychologist” 2000, vol. 55(5), pp. 469–480.

Data Analysis

Our research team consisted of the four authors as well as another six interviewers. All interviewers were PhD or Doctoral Students, specialists in Psychology, Political Sciences and Social Sciences. Training and expertise among the research team members included quantitative research methods and data analysis, qualitative methods and analysis, social psychology, public policy and administration, political theory, ethics, feminist philosophy and community based participatory research. All team members identified as gender study interested, all are trained in humanist, qualitative, and quantitative traditions of inquiry.

The goal of the analysis was to understand how the SDT constructs of Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness emerged during interviews focused on entering adulthood. We investigated the process and strategies of entering the labour market. Attention was focused on exploring how young women experienced self-determination in becoming active citizens – context described by the Authors as Democracy in Action – and whether there were differences in the presence and description of these constructs. For the purpose of analysis Skewes' concept of Absent Autonomy was used.

Based on Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's²³ approach to qualitative data coding, the research team used Deci and Ryan's psychological needs (Autonomy, Relatedness, and Competence) as the "basic" categories of conceptual variables that we transformed into descriptive codes representing four main "strategies of Autonomy search" (see Figure 1). Two of them were adapted from Skewes concept of Absent Autonomy, the remaining two were a result of further analysis conducted by the authors. Additionally, two "sub-strategies" were identified (see par. 6.1, Figure 2).

Four members of the research team trained in qualitative research conducted the coding. The Coders reviewed the transcripts and identified emergent descriptors of all four "strategies" as well as two "sub-strategies". The team reconciled the coding decisions over multiple meetings. This process involved the multidisciplinary research team.

Results

The participants reported various approaches towards the process of entering the labour market (see par. 6.1). Depending on their experiences in these activities, participants expressed strengthened or diminished perceptions of perceived

23 M.B. Miles, A.M. Huberman, J. Saldana, *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook*, Sage, Thousand Oaks 2014.

Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness that lead to self-determination. While all participants described their subjective understanding of adulthood, independence, responsibility and particular life-changing processes as crucial to entering the labour market and therefore to building the Autonomy, the experience of Autonomy was fundamentally different among four groups of participants assigned to four “strategies of Autonomy search”. Understanding these divergent pathways may shed light on the types of interventions and support that could effectively assist the process of encouraging young women in becoming independent participants of a modern economy and a democratic society.

Results are discussed by STD categories enriched by Skewes²⁴ categories of Absent Autonomy with findings supported by illustrative quotes from the data.

In search for Autonomy – Strategies investigated in the present study

The authors of the research presented in this paper have investigated four main strategies for building autonomy in the process of entering the labour market (Figure 1).

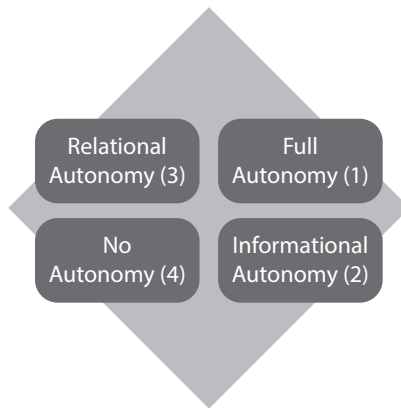


Figure 1. Four main autonomy building strategies in the process of entering the labor market

Source: own, based on the conducted study.

1. Full Autonomy – defined by us as a series of conscious decisions forming a strategy of professional development. This strategy combines informational competence with relational awareness. It therefore consists of knowledge

24 M.C. Skewes et al., *Absent autonomy...*

of the rules governing the labour market, and at the same time the ability to build relationships useful to developing a career.

Examples:

In fact, a woman never knows when she will be alone and will have to deal with various issues on her own. However, it is easier for her to deal with it having an education than without it. I believe that work is very important, and the [old times] when a man earned money for the family and women sat at home raising children, without education and without being able to discuss any topic, have already passed. So it seems to me normal and absolutely needed. [...] I would like to have a medical practice and work with mentally ill people. I think it is a matter of stubbornness and implementation [of the plan].

(Female, 27 years old, married with one child)

I moved out because I couldn't reconcile my autonomy and the one of my mother. Since I have moved out, everything is done 'my way' and I can do what I want. If I don't do something, I won't do it – it's my choice. [Dirty] dishes are my problem, nobody can yell at me. This is a burden... but on the other hand I think that I needed it so much. [For me] the biggest change and feeling of happiness comes from my independence.

(Female, 27 years old, single without children)

[...] my family questioned the choice of my life partner and got separated from me. Despite [this] fact, I've chosen my happiness [...]. Such a personal choice is an adult, mature decision. I understand that the family may be afraid that the choice of a partner is inappropriate, but well the process of growing up and choosing a life partner by my parents has already ended in my life and I'm already independent [...]. Whatever goes wrong, I can only blame myself at this moment and in my opinion it's fair.

(Female, 29 years old, single with one child)

2. Informational Autonomy strategy – the strategy described by Skewes as “male” – although constituting the choice of some young women.

Examples:

Career is... probably this ladder one climbs higher and higher. I gain new competences, higher and higher position, better earnings. One is in a different place than he/she was some time ago, [one] is able to do more.

(Female, 27 years old, single without children)

I think work is a great antidepressant. Work gave me a feeling of stability. That there is [...] something I control completely. Well [...] that work is for me... it is mostly predictable.

(Female, 29 years old, in partnership relation with one children)

In 5 years I see myself very high in the hierarchy, I do not like this word but I don't know how to name it differently. I already have a managerial position but I know that I can go one step further. Now I feel that I fulfill my potential and I know it not from the feedback I receive directly from the company's owners, but from the one I receive from my subordinates. They keep saying that I'm the best leader they could choose [laugh] I had to say it. I would not be myself if I didn't. I think that in general I still see myself being part of this company, although generally I think that it will be the end of my career. And this will be the moment when I will have some savings to fulfill my biggest professional dream – work and travel. [...] I could write a book about travelling [...].

(Female, 25 years old, married with two children)

Well, I would like to work professionally in some [...] boutique clinic. By boutique I mean not a corporation in the Hotel, but some very nice, intimate clinic. Expensive. Very expensive. But also providing services of a very high quality. Thus, I realize that I also have to [gain some experience] to be good. Well, because my profession is a type of craft work. So I just have [improve] certain skills.

(Female, 29 years old, in partnership relation with one child)

3. Relational Autonomy strategy – described by Skewes as “feminine”

Examples:

Stabilization and getting to know the right life partner who could possibly help to get this certainty in life [are very important].

(Female, 29 years old, single with one child)

As we can see, nowadays, marriage doesn't matter that much [...] But for sure if the child is brought up in such a family... [people] ask. You know, yes? When there is a mum and dad who are married, [they] have the same surname.

(Female, 27 years old, married with one child)

4. No Autonomy – which would constitute lack of strategy per se, or a strategy of passive waiting for the external support. It assumes relying on other people's decisions rather than on making any active choices.

Examples:

My parents insisted on me to go to work, because after finishing school I stayed at home for a year and did nothing. I got a nice job and now I cannot imagine not working.

(Female, 26 years old, single without children)

[Laugh] My, my dream job... I don't know. Maybe one day I will find one At the moment I haven't found one yet, but maybe when I will raise my children, I will start something on my own. I do not know.

(Female, 29 years old, married with two children)

Frankly, I don't even know what I would prefer, because on the one hand I would like to stay at home if my husband would earn so much that I could only look after the house and children, but on the other hand I know that I would miss working.

(Female, 26 years old, single without children)

We also investigated two sub-strategies (Figure 2):

- A. Difficult Autonomy – describing individuals who realize that there is a significant lack of autonomy in their career strategy and therefore struggling with this realization. This realization might constitute a beginning of the search for the Full Autonomy, if the person who reflects on it starts to develop solutions and ideas for gaining independent life. We describe it as Full Autonomy subcategory (1A).

Examples:

I [started studying various] degrees and I still don't know what I would like to do in my life. I am calm that I don't have to worry about the finances so far, but I would like to do something because of stupid boredom. Because... I'm just sitting and I'm bored. Ymm... And now I signed up to another make-up school. Well, maybe it will work, but I'm not sure either.

(Female, 29 years old, single with one child)

Every day [my kids] set requirements for me. Not only them, my husband too. We know everyone would like you to be 100% efficient and... and 100% amazing. And that at home everything would work and shine. What about the job? [...] You go [to work] for 9 hours, then you come back [home], cook... You should cook, clean and take care of children. [...] Thus, there are daily requirements being made. Well... But if you would worry about all this, you would be worn-out.

(Female, 29 years old, married with two children)

- B. Insta-Autonomy – absent in the Skewes concept²⁵, however quite significantly present in the research data collected by the authors of the presented research. The Insta-Autonomy strategy is based on seeking operators of the Relatedness of one's own work in the eyes of others. Those are a very particular Relatedness operators – the so-called “Likes” and “Stars in reviews”. It is a strategy that includes proficiency in navigating a digitized environment, a strategy of informational competence in accordance to the cyber-reality actions combined with the fluency in building relationships in a virtual world. This strategy goes beyond gender stereotypes, therefore we define it as a sub-strategy

25 *Ibidem*.

of a Full Autonomy (1B). However, we do not define it as fully mature mode. It is rather a strategy built on the assumption that dreams come true. The strategy adopted from celebrities, inspired with Insta-Life presented by idols and role-models of a young generation.

Combined with growth, hard work, motivation and actual search for opportunities this strategy might result in building ambitious but realistic aspirational plans for the future. When dreams and ambitions are no longer foggy and distant, when they become operationalized, planned choices, taking into account the political, social and economic circumstances in which young Polish women live, this may become a Full Autonomy. Without a time bound realistic plan, this strategy remains however just an Insta-Dream dreamed in virtual reality.

Examples:

Future dream job? I [...] wanted to open my hairdresser's school to be able to teach girls there, or I wanted to [...] do hairstyles, but for more famous people, not for ordinary people.

(Female, 23 years old, single with two children)

When my friends post photos, many of them are just 'so perfect'. Perfect smiles, perfect hairstyle, makeup etc. No place for natural look. So insta-genius. Yes, because generally when I upload [pictures] they are like this. Maybe it is a kind of self-admiration. It annoys me a little that these photos must be brilliant to have more value. If likes are what counts, then this picture pays off.

(Female, 18 years old, single without children)

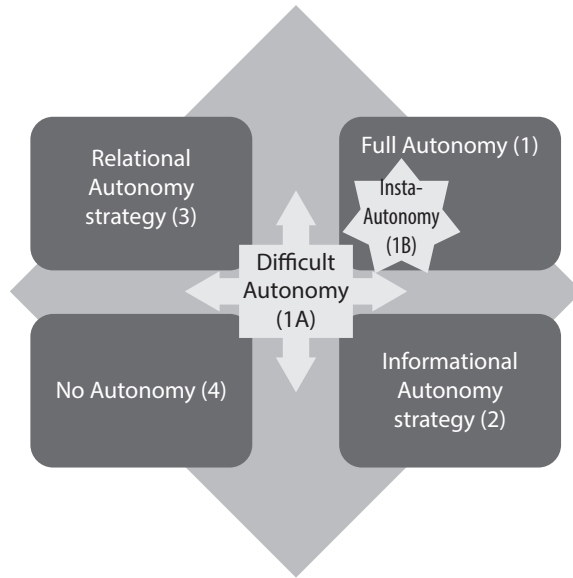


Figure 2. Two sub-strategies in the process of entering the labour market

Source: own, based on conducted study.

Sometimes it might be necessary to go from Insta-Autonomy through Difficult Autonomy to reach Full Autonomy.

Discussion

The goal of the analysis was to understand how the constructs of Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness emerged during interviews focused on entering adulthood, building independence and entering the labour market process. The authors investigated the young women’s experience of self-determination in becoming active professionals. The main question was focused on the differences in the emergence of these constructs among participants while referring to different levels of perceived Autonomy.

Certainly, individual differences in perceived autonomy play an important role in this process, greater perceptions of autonomy relate to greater intrinsic motivation, satisfaction, and well-being²⁶. However, searching for labour market opportunities is conditioned by an externally imposed evaluation, making it low in autonomy according to Deci and Ryan’s definition²⁷.

26 E.L. Deci, R.M. Ryan, *The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits...*; M.C. Skewes et al., *Absent autonomy...*

27 E.L. Deci, R.M. Ryan, *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*, Plenum Press, New York 1975, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-2271-7>; E.L. Deci, R.M. Ryan, *The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits...*

Conclusion

This research contributes to the wider discussion on gender in the workforce and in shaping the economical and socio-psychological status of women, and to the literature on gender studies. The authors analyzed the search for Autonomy in a low-autonomy situation investigating the youngest generation of females while introducing their choices and strategies into an everyday economic and professional context.

Because the context of entering the labour market, being evaluated (selected) is inherently low in autonomy²⁸, providing support for competence and relatedness needs during the whole process may be crucial for self-determination. This also means that becoming an independent, fully grown professional may be a process of going from Absent Autonomy to Full Autonomy. Promoting a self-determined process of labour market participation may be particularly important for enhancing the advancement of young women's professional development.

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Abstract

The Paper presented here examines a part of findings of the research project "Polish Women Entering Adulthood". The authors focus in particular on adulthood patterns accompanying young women entering the labour market. The theoretical foundation of the analysis is Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, however, the authors of the study also referred to modern and innovative developments of this concept.

The research conclusions contribute to the discussion on building new lifestyles and the professional development opportunities for young Polish women. Important elements of this process are the views of young women on the socio-psychological conditions of their development, as well as on the factors shaping their professional environment. The data analyzed in this paper gives us a micro-scale picture of the lifestyle of the youngest generation of female employees entering the labour market. This is therefore the analysis of the socio-political dynamics of change facilitated on a day-by-day scale by the youngest generation of professionals. Public policy makers will find this study a useful source of information on the professional aspirations of the youngest generation of women building the future shape of the Polish economy and labour market.

Keywords: young women, entering the labor market, Self-Determination Theory, Insta-Autonomy, Difficult Autonomy, Full Autonomy