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Five stages of professional personality development: Comparative analysis

Abstract: The purpose of the study is to determine the characteristic features of personal functioning at different stages of professional development. The survey involved 139 professionals from various fields (74 women and 65 men) aged 24 to 67 years. The sample is divided into 5 groups according to the stage of professional development. A comparative analysis of groups by parameters of professional self-realisation, emotional burnout and psychological well-being is carried out. The results obtained demonstrate the nonlinear, complex dynamics of self-realisation of the individual throughout life and clarify the internal mechanisms of professional development at each stage. The stages of primary and secondary professionalisation are accompanied by the greatest need for self-improvement and at the same time, exaggerated and unrealistic ideas about one's own professional competence. An increased symptomatology of emotional burnout has been identified, which accompanies the peak of professional excellence and determines the next stage of professional activity decline after 30 years of work experience. The coincidence of the normative age and professional crises entails a profound crisis of the pre-retirement age, which is characterised primarily by a loss of goal-setting. People who continue to work in the post-retirement age have the highest rates of self-fulfillment, which leads to overall satisfaction with life and self. The described patterns open new perspectives for the development of ways of psychological counselling and organisational support of specialists.

Keywords: *Professional self-realisation, Psychological well-being, Burnout, Stages of professional development, Development crises*

INTRODUCTION

A person's professional life lasts for more than 40 years, covering the period of the highest activity and prosperity of the individual. During this time, the social situation of development changes significantly, professional plans and life goals are transformed, and the structure of activities is rebuilt. Usually, a person experiences several crises that determine their further professional development and life fulfillment. This determines the relevance of studying the psychological mechanisms and features of professionalisation at different stages. The complexity of this work lies in the fact that the chronological framework of the period of adulthood is blurred, since in each specific case the formation of

a personality depends on a number of factors: starting (family) conditions, external circumstances, subject orientation and lifestyle, as well as professional achievements and competencies.

This publication continues the series of works of the author and his colleagues devoted to the theoretical and methodological aspects of professionalism and its empirical testing. Previous studies have identified the impact of career orientations on personal growth of staff, identified socio-psychological features of self-realisation of teachers; analysed cognitive and existential ways of self-understanding of the individual in professional communication; described the formation of exogenous needs and determination of behaviour in terms of joint activities; determining the factors of value regulation of managers studied the

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symptoms of burnout in different professional groups (Bochelyuk et al., 2007; Bochelyuk, 2010; Bochelyuk et al., 2016a; Bochelyuk et al., 2016b). Preliminary analysis of the category of professional personality crises from a scientific perspective showed that the construct “professional self-determination” positions the individual not only as a subject of labour, but also as a subject of being in various conditions of life (Hu, 2021; Priyadi et al., 2021; Cobos & González, 2021; Márquez-Álvarez et al., 2021).

The purpose of this study is to determine the characteristic features of personal functioning at different stages of professional development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study sample included 139 specialists in various fields of activity (74 women and 65 men) aged 24 to 67 years. During data processing, it was divided into experimental groups representing respondents with different work experience. The periodisation is based on the typology of E.F. Zeer (2003), which continues the traditions of domestic and world developmental psychology and defines the trajectory of professional development as a process of overcoming a series of regulatory crises: professional growth in 30-33 years, career (professional values) in 38-40 years, socio-professional self-actualisation 48-50 years and loss of professional activity in 55-60 years. The restructuring of leading activities is crucial in the emergence and resolution of regulatory crises.

Since a modern career is often not a progressive path, but a repetitive cycle of professional transitions, we did not rely on age indicators, but on the experience of specialists (Table 1). In addition, the sample included 19 respondents who continued their professional activities after reaching

retirement age (due to the pension reform in Ukraine, the boundaries of this period are unclear; all participants were over 60 years old). All Ukrainian citizens with work seniority of 28 years or more can retire at the age of 60. Ukrainians with less than 28 years of seniority are entitled to retire at the age of 63. The option to retire earlier (after years of service) remains for workers in aviation, freight transport, railways, metro builders, some actors, doctors, and teachers, as well as athletes.

Psychological diagnostics of employees was carried out using a number of standardised questionnaires:

- Questionnaire for determining professional self-realisation (Kokun, 2014); determines the severity of the general level and ten components of professional self-realisation. According to the author’s concept, the disclosure of personal potential in the chosen activity occurs in two forms: external professional self-realisation (significant achievements in the activity, their recognition by the professional community) and intra-professional: self-realisation: improving competence, self-improvement in accordance with their own project of professional development, the formation of a “living and professional space”.
- Professional burnout questionnaire by K. Maslach to identify destructive and maladaptive manifestations of professionalisation (Test “Diagnosis of burnout”, 2008).
- Ryff scale of psychological well-being (2007) characterises the components of positive functioning of the individual, the degree of satisfaction with oneself and life.

Descriptive statistics were calculated in the groups and the normality of data distribution was checked. Univariate ANOVA analysis of variance was used to compare five samples simultaneously. All calculations were performed in the SPSS programme.

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample and experimental groups

Group	Stage of professional development	The essence of the period and the normative crisis of development	Group size
1	Primary professionalisation: up to 7 years of work experience	Mastering new activities and difficulties of professional adaptation. Divergence of expectations and reality. Formation of stable independent productive activity.	N=32 16 women, 16 men.
2	Secondary professionalisation: work experience of 8-18 years	High quality and productivity of labour. Dissatisfaction with career growth and increased efforts aimed at professional self-affirmation (professional development). Developing personal professional position.	N=34 15 women, 19 men.
3	Proficiency: work experience of 18-30 years	Qualitative improvement of labour methods and means, development of an individual way of activity. Dissatisfaction with opportunities to realise oneself and one social and professional status.	N=38 15 women, 19 men.
4	Pre-retirement age: work experience 30-40	Narrowing of the professional field. Psychophysiological changes and deterioration of health.	N=16 8 women, 8 men
5	Post-retirement age (after official retirement)	Retirement and a new social role. Involvement in socially useful activities.	N=19 16 women, 3 men

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the questionnaire of O.M. Kokun (2014) the average trends in the groups were calculated – Table 2. The dynamics of professional self-realisation generally corresponds to the established ideas about the course of the stages of professionalisation. Individual elements of self-realisation make it possible to clarify the content and tasks of normative crises and corresponding periods of development.

As can be seen, the need for professional self-development is highest at the stages of primary and secondary professionalisation (Groups 1 and 2); then it gradually decreases. This is also a period of active formation of one's own "living and professional space". The highest level of creativity, discovering personal potential and abilities in the profession is noted in Group 3 – this reveals the content of the proficiency stage, when a person starts to redo the usual ways of performing

activities and develop their own unique style. An urgent problem at all stages of professional development was the lack of a project of their own development, which prevents a specialist from setting consistent goals according to a certain career plan, and therefore – to see potential opportunities in changing working conditions and activities.

Interestingly, subjective satisfaction with their own achievements at all stages of professional development was approximately equal. At the same time, junior employees somewhat overestimate their contribution to the team's activities, the degree of use of their achievements and expertise by colleagues. According to the results of the professional burnout questionnaire, young employees also have the highest assessment of their own professional effectiveness (Table 3). This result does not reflect the actual level of competence, but rather a sense of one's own resourcefulness and ability at the beginning of a professional career.

Table 2. Average trends in self-realisation at different stages of professionalisation

Components of professional self-realisation	Characteristics of experimental groups					Value of group difference*
	1 under 7 years of experience	2 8-18 years of experience	3 18-30 years of experience	4 30-40 years of experience	5 after retire- ment	
The need for professional development	9.5±2.6	9.3±2.6	9.0±2.4	6.1±2.1	9.7±2.2	0.000
Existence of the project of own prof. development	6.5±2.7	6.4±1.6	6.2±2.4	5.7±1.5	7.2±1.2	0.037
Overwhelming satisfaction with one's own professional achievements	7.2±2.1	8.4±1.9	7.3±1.6	7.7±2.0	8.5±1.3	0.088
Constant setting of new professional goals	7.6±2.3	8.4±1.9	8.6±2.9	6.5±0.8	9.4±1.3	0.000
Formation of own "living and professional space"	8.1±1.8	8.1±1.8	7.8±1.9	7.3±1.7	9.4±1.2	0.014
Achievement of set professional goals	7.8±1.6	7.8±1.7	7.8±2.5	7.4±2.2	8.8±1.5	0.126
Recognition of the achievements of a specialist by a professional society	7.8±1.8	8.2±2.0	8.1±1.7	6.9±1.1	10.3±2.1	0.004
Use of professional experience and achievements by other specialists	7.1±2.3	7.6±2.1	5.8±2.5	6.3±1.4	6.7±1.1	0.036
Discovering personal potential and abilities in the profession	8.4±1.5	8.4±1.8	9.1±1.0	7.4±1.9	8.3±1.6	0.044
Manifestation of a high level of creativity in the activity	8.0±1.7	8.3±1.7	8.4±1.7	6.0±1.3	8.7±1.5	0.009
General level of professional self-realisation of a specialist	78.1±14.6	80.9±13.3	78.1±15.7	67.3±10.1	87±13.5	0.000

Note: significance of intergroup differences according to univariate ANOVA analysis calculations

Table 3. Professional burnout at different stages of professionalisation

Symptoms of professional burnout	Characteristics of experimental groups					Value of group difference*
	1 under 7 years of experience	2 8-18 years	3 18-30 years	4 30-40 years	5 after retirement	
Emotional exhaustion	10.5±7.9	18.6±8.2	25.7±5.5	20.2±5.6	22.5±5.9	0.000
Depersonalisation	3.4±5.3	7.7±4.1	11.3±6.9	7.9±6.5	9.6±4.8	0.000
Professional efficiency	38.5±7.5	34.4±5.2	31.2±4.6	34.0±6.1	33.9±5.6	0.003

Note: significance of intergroup differences according to univariate ANOVA analysis calculations

On the stage of proficiency (Group 3), when the real productivity of a specialist increases, employees, on the contrary, are more critical of their own achievements and their recognition by the professional environment. During this period, the degree of criticism that experienced specialists, unlike young specialists, receive from management and colleagues really increases. This, in turn, can affect the self-esteem and development of the individual style of activity of highly qualified workers.

From Table 3 it is seen that the stage of professional mastery is accompanied by pronounced symptoms of professional burnout. Indicators of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation during this period are the highest among all groups, which leads to the formation of a sense of their own incompetence and inefficiency ($p = 0.000$). This is an important result that outlines the dangers of professional development. Recent results of Ukrainian researchers have already pointed to similar phenomena (Bochelyuk, 2010; Glavinska et al., 2020). A study of representatives of professions with a high risk of burnout (Glavinska et al., 2020) showed that although in general professional self-realisation has a positive effect on the formation of psychological well-being (in particular, such

components as self-acceptance and competence in managing the environment), in some cases high indicators of professional self-realisation were associated with burnout and the desire to leave professional activities.

The crisis of pre-retirement age is especially pronounced (Group 4). It is characterised by a loss of effective goal setting, which concerns both setting new goals and the degree of their achievement; a decrease in external and professional activity and creative self-development. These manifestations can be a protective mechanism that can slightly reduce the severity of burnout. But the imbalance of the profession and other spheres of life leads to a decrease in the overall level of psychological well-being ($p = 0.027$). These signs of pre-retirement age are caused not so much by the dynamics of professional activity, but by age-related changes – a general decrease in activity and health disorders.

The most pronounced differences between groups in the structure of psychological well-being at different stages of professionalisation were found in relation to the components “personal growth” and “goals in life” (Table 4). It is these aspects of the positive functioning of the individual that determine professional development

Table 4. Psychological well-being at different stages of professionalisation

Components of psychological well-being	Characteristics of experimental groups					Value of group difference*
	1 under 7 years of experience	2 8-18 years	3 18-30 years	4 30-40 years	5 after retirement	
Positive attitude	54.8±6.9	55.1±6.1	54.3±6.9	56.4±6.3	57.4±5.5	0.096
Autonomy	59.1±7.1	59.9±7.7	52.7±8.3	51.5±8.1	53.3±7.0	0.001
Managing of the environment	60.2±7.4	59.7±6.8	59.0±6.5	61.2±5.3	60.1±6.6	0.577
Personal growth	66.3±8.2	63.4±7.2	59.2±6.1	50.4±5.3	53.4±9.7	0.000
Life goals	62.7±7.3	64.1±6.6	62.1±8.1	55.8±4.9	59.9±10.1	0.000
Self-acceptance	58.3±8.4	56.5±7.2	52.1±9.3	53.1±6.9	56.4±8.7	0.042
Psychological well-being	361.4± 35.1	358.7± 33.8	339.4± 27.1	328.4± 28.8	340.5± 40.5	0.027

Note: significance of intergroup differences according to univariate ANOVA analysis calculations

at the first and second stages of professionalisation, and in a broader context – determine the strategy of life realisation. Along with this, with age, the sense of one's own autonomy decreases, which determines the social situation of development. It is known that adults have a wide range of social roles (family, professional, social, etc.) and corresponding responsibilities, which can cause internal conflicts.

In previous studies, it was found that throughout the entire period of adulthood (early, middle and late maturity), the determining components of a person's psychological well-being are self-acceptance and managing the environment – the ability to create conditions for achieving their own goals (Chen & Oh, 2019; Lavrentieva et al., 2020; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2019). When experiencing a middle life value crisis and transitioning to late adulthood, significant changes occur in the structure of psychological well-being. People over the age of 40 have relatively more positive relationships with others; under the age of 40, they are more clearly focused on their own intentions and goals. In people aged 25-39 years, all components of psychological well-being form a close conglomerate of relationships, which contributes to flexible social adaptation and active life. At the age of 40-59 years, the internal integration of components of psychological well-being weakens. Personal autonomy and achievement of one's own goals, which act as system-forming components in the internal structure of well-being up to 40 years, lose significance, their place is taken by benevolence and personal growth (Hernández & Mena, 2021). The results obtained fully fit into this picture and confirm the conclusions made earlier.

Preliminary studies of Ukrainian scientists have documented a significant increase in the overall level of professional self-realisation and its individual forms after 40 years (Kokun, 2015; Korniyaka, 2015; Kovalchuk, 2021; Kolosovich, 2021). These trends are explained by the expansion and deepening of competencies, peaks in the productivity of physical and mental functions, the acquisition of life and professional experience, the achievement of personal maturity, and other processes that accompany the personal and professional development of an adult. However, data on the growth of individual components of self-realisation need to be clarified. For example, O. M. Kokun (2015) in a mixed sample of Internet users found that after the age of 40 the indicators of shaping one's own life-professional space and expressing creativity in activities increase the most. A similar study on a sample of teachers showed other results: after 40 years, the need for self-improvement “freezes” and does not increase, the activity of designing one's own professional development, setting and achieving new goals, and the indicator of unlocking one's potential and abilities in the profession, even slows down development (Korniyaka, 2015). In other words, satisfaction with achievements increases not due to success and activity, but due to a decrease in the level of claims. This is consistent with the concept of a middle life crisis as a period when a person critically reviews life

prospects and “learns to be content with what they already have”.

Among the results of the study, attention is drawn to a significant increase in almost all indicators of external and internal professional self-realisation in the post-retirement period. Employees over the age of 60 are most satisfied with their own achievements and their recognition in the professional community, but at the same time, they demonstrate a high need for self-improvement, constantly set new work goals, and actively form their own vital professional space. At the same time, they design their professional path more consciously, unlike younger groups of employees.

This unexpected result can be explained by the fact that the prolongation of professional activity is characteristic of people who have an extremely high resource capacity, an active life position, and retain their physical and psychological potential for a long time. Such active, persistent, and at the same time experienced, authoritative and high-status employees make up this professional category. At the same time, continuing professional activity after official retirement is accompanied by a significant increase in the level of psychological well-being among older people (Figure 1).

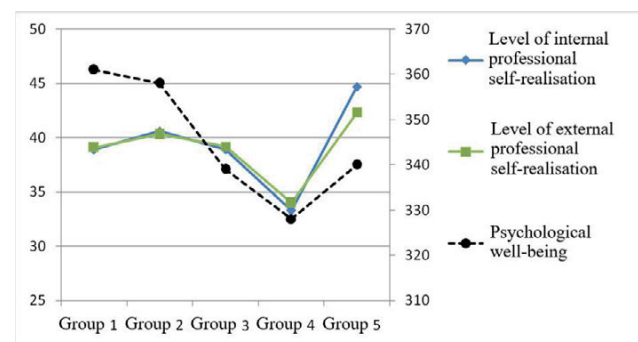


Figure 1. Average indicators of professional self-realisation and psychological well-being in groups with different work experience

All of this provides a different perspective on the workforce potential of people of the “third age” and further confirms the feasibility of developing the concept of lifelong learning (Mosso & Ghio, 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

Our study made it possible to clarify scientific ideas about the mechanisms and stages of the professional development of an individual. The components of professional self-realisation have heterogeneous and nonlinear dynamics at different stages of age-related development. The highest need for self-improvement and the greatest resource potential is inherent in the first stages of professionalisation. At the stage of professional skill, along with the peak of creative self-realisation, a critical attitude to one's own activities increases and burnout symptoms accumulate to a critical level. Goal setting and the need for professional development are significantly

reduced after 30 years of experience, which should be taken into account in the organisational and psychological support of personnel. At the same time, continuing professional activity in post-retirement age is an effective means of maintaining physical activity and psychological well-being.

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