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SHAPING THE SOCIAL PERSONALITY OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE DIGITAL ERA. AN OUTLINE OF THE PROBLEM

Summary

Young people function in two worlds, the real and the virtual. The impact of digital media is very significant. However, significant people and authorities must play an important role in the process of growing up. Despite their strong anchoring in the virtual world, young people feel the need for social relationships. They need good role models, inspiring conversations, listening skills and strong reference points. The article attempts to outline several perspectives and problems in the subject area. The personality of the significant other is important in implementing the idea of positively creating good role models among young people. Its influence can be decisive for a young person's entire life.

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KSZTAŁTOWANIE SPOŁECZNEJ OSOBOWOŚCI MŁODZIEŻY W ERZE CYFROWEJ. ZARYS PROBLEMU

Streszczenie

Młodzież funkcjonuje w dwóch światach, realnym i wirtualnym. Oddziaływanie mediów cyfrowych jest bardzo znaczące. Jakkolwiek jednak w procesie dorastania istotna rolę muszą odgrywać osoby znaczące, autorytety. Mimo mocnego zakotwiczenia w świecie wirtualnym młodzi ludzie odczuwają potrzebę relacji społecznych. Potrzebują dobrych wzorców, inspirujących rozmów, wysłuchania i mocnych punktów odniesienia. W artykule podjęto próbę zarysowana kilku perspektyw i problemów w przedmiotowym obszarze. Istotne znaczenie w realizacji idei pozytywnego kreowania dobrych wzorców wśród młodzieży ma osobowość samej osoby znaczącej. Jej wpływ może być decydujący w całym życiu młodego człowieka.

Słowa kluczowe: społeczeństwo, osoba znacząca, dojrzewanie osoby.
Kody JEL: I23, Z13

Introduction

Modern people function in a society of rapid changes, both in the technological and socio-cultural spheres. The development of technology, which is a process forcing changes in social life, helps people to communicate, but at the same time, in many situations, it makes communication more difficult. The pandemic has shown how important interpersonal relationships and communication skills are for one's sense of security. It is an essential element of the proper functioning of every person, regardless of age.

Voices about young people closing themselves off to other people are alarming. We may hear that young people do not need the real world, because everything they need – knowledge, relationships, entertainment – can be found in the virtual world.

The article aims to attempt to point out the basic problems of shaping young people's personalities under the influence of important people. The text attempts to answer two research questions. 1. What is the place and role of another person in the maturation process of the young generation? 2. Do young people need another person as a permanent reference point? These

questions, although they have been asked for a long time, are still valid, but they take on a different dimension because young people function in a flexible, fluid and relatively unstable reality.

1. Terminological foundations

Technology is constantly developing, and although it is fascinating and very useful in many respects, it cannot replace another human being in the young generation's maturation process. Every person who influences another person's life can be called a *significant person* (Bakiera, Harwas-Napierała 2016).

The definitional approach to the subject matter indicates its multidimensionality and ambiguity. When analyzing this scope, one can encounter different points of emphasis (Mead 1934). The basic conceptual category regarding the term was introduced by H. S. Sullivan (Sullivan 1940). The presence of a significant person and their influence is particularly important for shaping a personality (Denzin 1966; Siuta 2005). The influence of a significant other is fundamental in the development process, not only in childhood or adolescence, but also in adulthood (Kuźnik 2021). Importantly, significant people may change at different stages of life. Expanding the living environment of a child or youth allows them to find significant people outside the family, which is the primary source of reference.

Regardless of the functioning and quality of relationships in the family, parents are children's first points of reference. They are significant people because of their parental role. When analyzing the phenomenon, it is worth noting that significant people's influence may be different, not only positive. An adult who is a significant person can consciously influence a child's development, strengthen its strong points and promote its proper development. However, it is also possible that a significant other inhibits one's development, although this may be done unconsciously (Domagała-Zyśk 2004).

2. Catalog of significant people

Parents as significant people have a special place among all other significant people that appear throughout one's life. This is because they appear first and without them, development, both physical and mental, would not be possible. At the same time, these are people who accompany a person on the path of

development for a relatively long time and usually significantly influence it (Appelt 2004). Parents' influence is related to the ability to develop an appropriate communication system with strong and lasting bonds. In the process of primary socialization, which takes place in early childhood, norms, values and behavioral patterns are accepted by the child uncritically. Parents are usually the whole world for their children. Yet, some children lose their sense of security when their parents' authority is undermined.

Nevertheless, at a certain stage of development, when other significant people appear, parents change their role. When relationships properly function, parents allow their child to confront what he or she has accepted in the socialization process. The process of critical socialization arises, and it may be an externalized process, often associated with teenage rebellion, but it may also be a hidden, unnoticeable stage. Parents, as significant people, should allow the child to go through this process and also find other points of reference, external to the family. Critical socialization allows a teenager to build a lasting, internalized hierarchy of values.

Parents accompany their children in building their identity, and they do not lose their importance in the child's life; their influence changes but does not disappear. It is the parents' responsibility to gradually reduce their influence on their child in favor of other people. A young person will achieve emotional maturity more easily if his or her parents give him or her permission to leave, separate from them and have more freedom, at the same time providing him or her with a sense of unconditional acceptance (Maćkowiak-Deskur 2002). Nevertheless, lasting bonds and relationships allow them to maintain the status of a significant person. As K. Appelt writes, "Although parents recede into the background, as if in the background, they do not interfere in the life of an adult child, but they always accompany him, support him all the time, experience his successes and failures with him" (2004, p. 5).

It should also be pointed out that the process also faces challenges and threats. Incorrect relationships in the family and the negative influence of parents often lead to completely rejecting their influence. Parents, as significant people, can also destructively influence the child. Freeing a young person from such a situation often requires the appearance of other significant people who reduce this negative impact.

In the family environment, which is a specifically understood system, there may be other significant people apart from parents. Their impact and the way of impact, especially in the phase of a young person's maturation, may be

very diverse. We can include siblings and grandparents as significant people in the family circle of influence.

The role of siblings in a young person's maturation depends on many factors. The fact of having siblings, taking into account the sibling's gender and birth order, is perceived as a resource that influences a person's identity. It determines the personal development and life attitudes of individuals (Przybył 2017). It should be emphasized that the bond between siblings is, in the long run, the longest-lasting social relationship that has a biological basis. One's relationship with their parents is also biological, which lasts shorter and has a completely different dimension. Parents are in a superior position towards the child (regardless of the quality of the relationship and the adopted parenting style), while siblings are in an equal position towards each other.

However, when focusing on siblings as significant people in the maturation process, one should start by considering the role of older siblings. The identity of older children (especially first children) is the result of parental influence. More often than not, children have a sense of loyalty to their parents, which is expressed in repeating the patterns and attitudes presented by them (Lewandowska-Walter, Połomski, Peplińska, Borchet 2019). Subsequently, younger children with older siblings find themselves in a completely different educational environment. The strength of identifying with parents decreases in favor of older siblings.

Of course, this depends on the age difference between siblings and the siblings' gender, but the number of significant people is increasing. In the process of sibling influence, those who are significant people, especially during adolescence, the factor determining the strength of influence is the quality of the relationship between siblings. In the early stages of life, the need for identification is so strong that the quality of relationships is not a key element. Younger siblings look at their older siblings as if in a mirror. However, in adolescence, the strength of influence depends on the quality of the relationship.

Proper relationships increase the influence of siblings. Unfortunately, just like with parents, siblings can also harm a young person's development. Nevertheless, as research shows, in our unstable modern times, relationships between siblings in adolescence do not lose their importance. On the contrary, close contact between sisters and brothers guarantees unconditional support, trust and a sense of security. Moreover, the bond between siblings strengthens as the frequency and quality of contact with parents decrease (Przybył 2017).

A specific situation, although not an isolated one, is combining the role of a brother or sister with the role of a parent. This situation may be temporary

or permanent. There are situations in which, for various reasons, parents are not the main educators in the family and their upbringing roles are taken over by siblings (Gadamska 2019). By fulfilling an educational role towards their siblings, they become significant people in two dimensions: as siblings and as those who fulfill parental roles. However, this is not an easy task. Parents and siblings play their roles differently, so combining them is difficult. In such situations, it is worth introducing an additional significant person from outside the family circle to the child, especially to a young adolescent person, who will support them in the developmental process.

Within the circle of significant family members, it is impossible to ignore the role played by grandparents. The presence of grandparents in children's lives supports them in both their mental and social development, and the time when grandchildren are growing up is often a new opportunity for grandparents to fill all the educational deficiencies experienced by their children, meaning lack of time or excessive severity (Międlar 2019).

It must be emphasized once again that significant people in the family circle are important primarily due to biological conditions and the children's strong need for identification and belonging. Significant people in the family circle have power and influence, bringing changes; yet, over time this may weaken or be completely replaced by other people outside the family circle. This is not an inherently negative phenomenon, because a young person's maturation process involves changing reference points and looking for other significant people.

Regardless of this, proper relationships in the family circle, a sense of security, and understanding the situation of changing reference points enable family members to maintain the position of significant people, although certainly in different dimensions during childhood, adolescence and adult life. In a properly functioning family, parents or grandparents should gradually withdraw from their dominant position and indicate other appropriate points of reference. Thanks to this, a young person going through adolescence can enter adult life as an independent and self-reliant person.

When analyzing the period of a young person's adolescence, it should be emphasized that, during this time, there are significant people outside the family circle who may also have a significant impact on the development and formation of one's personality.

The environment in which both children and teenagers spend most of their time outside the family home is school. It is a place to look for new significant people, who can become both teachers and peers. There can also include

people who influence young people in other, non-school environments, e.g., priests, coaches, members of youth organizations (both formal and informal) or instructors developing broadly understood talents and interests (musical, artistic, sports, etc.).

In the school environment, young people are exposed to the influence of school employees, including teachers and peers, not only in their class, but also from the extended circle of all school students (Sjaastad 2012). Nowadays, schools and, consequently, teachers are increasingly deprived of their educational function towards students. Although there is still a teacher in every class in the school structure who, at least formally, fulfills the role of an educator, this role is often limited only to supervising the proper course of students' education. This is certainly not only due to teachers' reluctance to perform an educational function, but also to the fact that teachers have been deprived of the right to be educators by parents as well as students.

Also, the authority once assigned to the teacher, once *ex officio*, is negotiable and must be developed. Nevertheless, it is still emphasized that schoolteachers hold a special position among teachers and are therefore expected to be more interested in their students. On the other hand, students expect help in solving problems and support in difficult situations at school and outside school (Olszewska 2002). Regardless of how an educator performs their role, he has a chance to become a significant person for young people.

An educator may become a significant person if mechanisms such as imitation, modeling or identification are activated (Olszewska 2002). They should become a companion in setting directions and methods of action rather than applying an ordering mode. The time of adolescence is a time of searching for one's identity, a time of testing and experimenting. However, young people are looking for clearly defined rules that will give them support.

As A. Rynio writes, among the features characterizing people who become significant for young people are authenticity, youth of spirit, courage in undertaking decisions, in expressing one's views, fortitude, responsibility, intuition, objective and realistic view of reality, the ability to observe and listen, having clearly defined goals, ideals and desires, diligence, conscientiousness, tact, consistency, joy, a sense of humor, honesty, simplicity and freedom. It is also the ability to unconditionally and kindly affirm others and give them the courage to be themselves, setting their own tasks, helping them to become truly free by stimulating their development. In practice, it turns out that nothing shakes a person up as much as the realization that he or she has been understood and deeply recognized by another (Rynio 1997, p. 126).

Research shows that extremely important in an educator's perception, who is a significant person, is the emotional bond established with an educator. This relationship is very strong and indicates that the stronger the emotional bond between the educator and the pupil, the more strongly the educator is perceived as a significant person and thus the strength of his or her influence is greater (Olszewska 2002).

Kindness also appears as one of the most important characteristics of an educator. It certainly enables establishing an emotional bond. Kindness goes beyond standards focusing only on imparting specific knowledge to students. It prompts one to stay with students, to take time, to show patience and forbearance, and at the same time it reinforces a decisive attitude if fundamental issues such as values are at stake (Slotwińska 2021).

It should be emphasized that such an opportunity to become a significant person for a young person is possible not only for an educator, but every teacher. Such an opportunity is also available to adults outside the school circle who support the development of young people in various fields. People who support young people in developing their talents, such as sports or art, have a special place here. Research shows that, in addition to parents, coaches very often become significant figures, and their role is not limited to technical training issues, but they are a very important source of emotional support. Emotional support is particularly valuable in difficult and crises situations (Siekańska 2015). The opportunity to become a meaningful person also exists for those who accompany young people in the development of artistic competence. The necessity to be with the young person and to offer support in various aspects remains unchanged.

Undoubtedly, significant persons can also be found in various formal religious or secular organizations where there is a chance to establish a direct relationship based on trust, at the same time providing support and the opportunity for development. Religious movements and their leaders can also have an impact on youth development. Most religious youth organizations, by definition, aim to shape young people's moral attitudes and deepen their religious life. However, this does not mean that young people will find significant people in these circles. In order to become a significant person who has a positive influence on a young person's development, one has to form a mature personality, ready to accompany a young person in depth on the path to full development.

In the modern world, it is impossible to ignore the presence of significant media personalities, especially in relation to a young person's maturation process. When discussing the essence of the influence of significant persons, the

question of relationships arises, assuming close, direct relationships combined with emotional involvement. The existence of significant persons in the media, especially on the Internet, can be divided into two groups. On the one hand, these are people who have a two-way relationship with a young person. They function in both a real and a virtual relationship.

This group can include parents (especially in situations that necessitate separation), friends, teachers or other people who originally established the relationship in the real world. Next, the virtual world and modern means of communication make it possible to maintain the relationship and remain a significant person for the young person. There may also be a situation in which a relationship, an acquaintance, starts in the virtual world and later moves to the real world. This way of looking for new acquaintances who can become significant others also often occurs in the lives of young people. Regardless of where the significant person is met, their impact depends on the relationship they manage to build with the young person.

In contrast, young people identify themselves with something, looking for points of reference among people with whom they can only form a virtual relationship, which in many cases can only become one-sided, not based on a permanent bond. In such a situation, we are more likely to speak of an idol, role model or authority figure. Nevertheless, many people who function on the Internet become a point of reference for young people. Unfortunately, apart from many positive values and people who influence a young person's proper development, the Internet carries a powerful wave of destructive content. Modern media, in particular the Internet, are hijacking people's lives. Children and adolescents, without developed defense mechanisms, are most vulnerable.

The media shape young people's lifestyles and tastes so that they are uncritical consumers of the content and products they are provided with (Zawisz-Masłyk 2013). The question arises as to what the role of significant persons in this media hustle is. It seems that significant persons in the real world, be they parents, siblings, teachers or other persons outside the family and school circle, can stop the negative influence of the media on the formation of a young person's mature personality. A significant person, on the one hand, can be first and foremost a primary point of reference in terms of behavior, values or lifestyle. On the other hand, he or she can be a signpost in navigating virtual reality.

He or she can teach a young person the ability to verify information and use the media critically. Without denying the benefits of functioning in the media world, it should be emphasized that the stronger the influence of significant persons (e.g., parents), the lower the power of media influence, especially

the Internet (Gizicka, Michalski, Szwarc 2023). However, it should be remembered that the strength of the influence of the significant person depends on the quality of the relationship, their emotional involvement and the ability to support the young person in his or her development.

Conclusions

Young people need subjective and objective points of reference. This is especially important in the maturation process. It is difficult to overestimate any of the important figures who can be or become such a support. Based on the analysis in question, several general conclusions can be drawn.

First, although the influence of the media or peer groups may be strong, a young person needs significant adults to fully develop and form a mature identity. Nevertheless, to become a significant person for a young person whom they consciously and willingly accept, one must be a mature and responsible individual, aware of his or her influence.

Second, being a significant person requires, above all, emotional involvement, communication skills and the creation of lasting bonds and relationships. Not every adult in a young person's life will become a significant person, but it is worth being aware that young people need and will look for significant people in order to obtain relatively permanent points of reference and support in the process of becoming mature.

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