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STUDENTS LIFE ABILITIES' NEED IN AN INSECURE WORLD

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Abstract

Starting from the theory of David Brooks considering life abilities (see *The Social Animal; The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement*, 2011), we were interested to investigate the level of this kind of abilities to our students. Using an adapted version of Casey Life Skills Assessment and focus group interview on 29 students with different specializations from Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti, we have found that students with high level of academic achievements have a low level of life abilities, especially regarding money management. So, an important and worry finding for us is the lack of financial education for investigated subjects, an irrational behaviour as consumer even if young people seems to wish to gain their autonomy, including financial one. Another finding was that our subjects consider that they are able to manage a CV, an application for a job, preparing for an interview, but they have difficulties about the issue of employees' rights, getting protection against harassment and discrimination. In technology era meant to facilitate communication, we have identified our subjects' preference for virtual world both for meeting a person and for solving work / professional tasks and this could indicate fear, insecurity for direct / real social contacts / relationships. Other results are discussed here.

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1. Introduction

We live a social fluidization, we are overwhelmed by information, rumours and, as a consequence, we develop Xerox behaviours and we indulge in formal, depthless relationships. In this world, our students seem to live in a paradoxes world.

We are surrounded by technology meant to facilitate our communication, and still we have difficulties to communicate efficiently; in a society focused on entertainment, young people are

complaining that are bored and tired; in a society that worships diploma, students have so many possibilities to study (from face to face classes to e-learning, e-counselling, blended learning etc.), the schools and universities' offers are various and numerous, and the criteria for selection are less harsh, and still the students have the tendency to abandon their studies.

In this context, in a university with a large campus, with a library and subscription for databases, with a hall for students' club etc. we have noticed that our students are permanently unsatisfied about their activities and their social lives. They are complaining that they are bored, that their voice is not heard, that the university do not offer them enough spaces and possibilities to communicate to each other and to develop extracurricular activities together.

Why are they so unsatisfied? Why is so difficult for them to find interesting occupations, to fill their lives? Is it their social abilities? Or, better said, is the low level of these abilities?

As we have already mentioned, many of our students confessed their concerns about their future, about their possibility to find a job that satisfy their needs, their interests and society demands / offers. So, we were interested to analyse the measure they possess the abilities that allows them to efficiently integrate to social life (personal and professional relationships etc.), starting from the supposition that the lack of social abilities prevents them for fulfil social and professional life.

2. Theoretical Framework

First of all, we have found that specialty literature / studies have approached different aspects of life abilities issue. Also, we have noticed three different concepts analysed in these studies: (social) *aptitude* (fr. aptitude, engl. ability), *competence* (fr. compétence, engl. capacity) and *ability* (fr. habilité, engl. skill).

There are also other concepts in this area. For example, David Brooks (2014) proposes a reflection on two lives story "of two people with successful careers, which have wined friends' respect and contributed significantly to their living community, country and world." (Brooks, 2014). He makes a review of different publications about possible explanations for the success of some people: he's talking about a non-cognitive aptitude, or life school, or an interior eye trying to emphasize the idea that "human being is not – essentially – the result of his conscious thinking" (idem). So, he pays attention especially to the effect of unconscious information processes on our lives.

Psychology Dictionary (Șchiopu, 1997) define aptitude as "a complex of relative stable traits of personality that are conditioning accomplishing (over the average) different intellectual, artistic (professional), scientific, organizational, sportive, technical or manual activities etc. The aptitude is expressed through a raised of efficiency and of quality for a small number of exercises – so, it is associated with an unusual facility for learning and developing skills".

Individual competence becomes a particular case of "capacity" or "implicit knowledge", or, if it has a high level, specialists are talking about "expertize" (Dragomir, Zamfirescu, 2006). The ability is "the acquired competence that leads to high levels of performance in the achievement of an attribution or a category of attributions" (idem). Ph. E. Vernon (cited by Șchiopu, 1997) describe ability as activities that allow to a person to make an activity rapidly, precisely, easily, efficiently (both in aspects quantitative and qualitative), with reduced consume of nervous and psychic energy. U. Șchiopu adds that "the ability

is present in manual activities, for work, self-service, satisfaction of needs' cyclically, and also in sportive, artistic, intellectual, ideational, cultural that correlates with general intelligence and ingenuity" (idem).

Considering social aptitudes, the author mentioned above notices that "there is a large category of abilities involved in social accepted behaviour, connected by social roles and statutes, and also by behaviour in small groups, in official social relations, familial relations, preserving traditions etc." (Șchiopu, 1997).

We were also interested to identify the difference between ability and aptitude in specialty literature. There are specialists which consider that the aptitudes "have a large hereditary component, but they are not directly determined by it, as they organize progressively into "operational systems" for activity and learning and develop at different qualitative levels (Popescu-Neveanu, 1978)" (apud Dumitriu s.a, 2014).

"The term ability is less use to qualify an intellectual competence." (Dragomir, Zamfirescu, 2006). In everyday activities or in technic, artistic, sportive activities (that are based on practical exercise of action), the hierarchy of individual is based essentially on their level of ability.

U. Șchiopu (1997) also specifies that the ability is the result of activity and learning. So, the aptitude indicates the possibility of human being to achieve, to develop, through training, what nature has offered. Aptitudes have to be trained to become abilities. Through training and experience we could develop skills, and the quality of being able to do something is the ability.

Skill is "a sequence of activity or an activity that become through exercise an automatized component of the activity. (...) The skills are the foundation for the activities involved especially in primary socio-cultural integration" (Șchiopu, 1997).

Concerning social skills, for example, Eileen Kennedy-Moore (2011), PhD, clinical psychologist, defines them as "the abilities necessary to get along with others and to create and maintain satisfying relationships. (...) Social skills are about being able to flexibly adjust our behaviour to fit a particular situation and our personal needs and desires". The author considers that "there are three main processes that children (and adults) use to navigate the social world: Seeing, Thinking, and Doing".

If we consider the profile of nowadays world, dominated by technology, fact that is reflected also on social relationships, it's easy to notice that, from the three processes proposed by Eileen Kennedy-Moore as important for "navigation" through social world, dominant is the process of *seeing*. Thinking involve reflection (or information offered by environment it's already "processed" by others and ready to be taken) and doing, socially speaking, suppose meeting people, involving in relationships, accepting risks to deal with different people, with different education level and different conceptions about life and problems solving etc.

"Doing" in social relations, for us, is interacting face to face, but, today, seems that technology have offered so many possibilities for "doing" things without face to face interaction: telephone, computer, internet etc.

An interesting study (see Moise, 2013) in this direction indicate that adolescents are using SMS as socialization environment and the effect on interpersonal relationships is to grow individual selectivity, to develop a relation and not to extend social contacts. So, again, seems that nowadays society develop a model / pattern of relationship on distance, without involving necessarily the presence, physical presence

of the others – both on social and professional / work relationship and could be a sign for insecurity that people feel for social relationships, insecurity sustained by the *culture of fear* as some authors name it (for other details see Schrenk, 2010).

An interesting remark about the consequence of the lack of social skill development we have found in a study, made in Iran, concerning the influence of life skills on students' life quality prediction. They get to the conclusion that: "Life skills refer to those personal and social skills essential for children and teenagers to be exemplary-behaved, regarding themselves, others, and the society (Tavish, 2000). In the absence of these skills, one facing challenge and stress turns to inefficient and aberrant behaviours (Taromian and his colleagues, Sell 2006, Gorman 2005)" (apud Ahmadi Gatab s.a., 2011).

As a conclusion for all the abundance of concepts in this area, we choose to focus on abilities for our analysis and not on competence because our study does propose to analyse especially social implications of the issue.

3. Methodology

3.1. Purpose of the Study and Participants

Our study proposed to analyse the level of life abilities of our students in order to demonstrate their need to develop these abilities. We have started from the hypothesis that students feel un-satisfaction and insecurity about their lives, and these feelings are demonstrated by their lack of life abilities (concerning their everyday life, their insecurity for finding a job and developing a career, and, especially for planning / managing their money).

For this purpose, we have involved in our study 29 students, with high academic achievement level, aged between 18 and 26th years old, students with different specializations (Education Sciences, Economics, Philology) from Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti.

3.2. Research Methods and Instruments

The main research instrument for our research was an adapted version of *Casey Life Skills Assessment* (source: <http://www.performwell.org/>). This assessment consists of 113 items that assess skills, knowledge, and awareness in seven areas: Daily Living, Self-Care, Relationships and Communication, Housing and Money Management, Work and Study Life, Relationships and Communication, Career and Education Planning, and Looking Forward.

For the reasons mentioned above, we have been focused for this study on three of these areas: Daily Living, Housing and Money Management, and Work and Study Life.

In order to complete / clarify research findings, a second research method we have used was focus group interview.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Daily Living Skills

From the results of Daily Living issue (Casey Life Skills Assessment) and focus group interview, we mention few significant aspects like:

- *Using computer / internet.* As we have expected, due to the age and education / school experience of our subjects, most of them have indicated a high rate of computer use for daily living: getting access to the internet, using e-mail, finding information, creating, sending, and printing documents. Also, the majority have confessed that they are aware of the danger / risks that are exposed to the experience of meeting people on the internet, hurting someone by exposing details about that could affect his / her image. Still, unfortunately, some of them, during focus-group interview, have demonstrated that they are not quite aware of the risks that they are exposing to making public pictures about their private life; for us, this is a clue for their lack of reflection about the information that they are receiving (during education process) – they have received information about the risks, but they do not put in practice these information.

- *Keeping connection with trustful adults that could offer help.* In spite of their intention to demonstrate autonomy, most of our subjects have declared that they mostly appeal to an adult that could help them in case of emergency. We consider this confession as a proof of their reflection on their autonomy (they have admitted their need for help), a recognition of their limits.

- *Self-care* (shopping for food, using a shopping list, cooking, washing laundry, cleaning the house, using a fire extinguisher). These items that have been focused our subjects' autonomy. Here we have found differences between our subjects' answers according to their age. The subjects aged between 17 to 19 years old have mentioned many problems (in the order of their rank): they do not use a list for shopping, do not know how to use a fire extinguisher, are not preoccupied about the influence of food on their health (do not know to read / do not read a food label, do not know to make meal with / without a recipe) or about washing laundry or keeping clean their living place. Starting from 20 to 26 years old, "the list" of their problems is shorter: they have also the problem with rational shopping (do not use a shopping list), making meals, thinking about eating healthy food (being aware about food's influence on health, reading and understanding labels' information). This indicates that irrational behaviour as consumer is still a problem even after 20 years old.

4.2. Housing and Money Management

We have found in this area the most problems of our subjects. A possible explanation could be the lack of practical financial education in schools for our subjects (born in 90's, when educational system was doing its first steps on reform), and the fact that they are living in an irrational consumer society. The results indicates that all young subjects, aged between 17 and 19 years old, and the most of other categories (subjects aged between 20 and 26 years old) have difficulty on these items. Another explanation for these results is the cultural model of Romanian society that still promotes mostly traditional relations: young people, unmarried (and sometimes even couples, married or not) are living with their parents and prefer to use their incomes for "entertainment", travelling, spending them with

friends. Still, the model of living in parents' house is still embraced by many Romanian young people, but most of them are using parents' money / financial and moral support for "living alone".

From the results about Housing and Money Management, we mention few significant aspects like:

- *Taking care of finances* (knowing how interest rates work on loans and credit, understanding the disadvantages of a credit card, what is a credit score, making economies, asking an adult for financial help if he / she needs). From our subjects' answers, we have found that most of them declare that do not possess enough information about loans and credits, do not know the advantages / disadvantages of using credit cards, do not have / use savings accounts, but know and appeal to the aid of an adult for financial support. Our youngest subjects (17 to 19 years old) have mentioned the longest list with problems to the mentioned issues – concerning financial balance / managing efficiently the incomes.

- *Finding / estimating costs for renting a house* (reasonable and safe affordable housing, filling a rental application, finding emergency help for paying a bill, paying assurance, planning / estimating monthly costs, including a car costs). We have found here a paradox: they declare that are "mature enough" to live out of the parents' house, but still are not able to win enough money / balance their incomes that allow them to pay their expenses.

4.3. Working and Study Life

The results indicate that our subjects consider that they are able to manage with CV, application for a job, preparing for an interview, but there are serious gaps considering employees' rights, getting protection against harassment and discrimination (although they declare that they know the sense of these concepts, they do not know the procedure for these situations and there are a lot of media signals that a dangerous phenomenon – "workaholic" / "work dependency" – is growing in companies in Romania). Maybe legislation classes could be useful for some of them; we consider useful to familiarize the graduated with the role / function for different institutions that could offer legal advice, social protection etc.

Another problem, partially explainable, is that they do not possess abilities to understand the information from a salary document, to complete / understand income tax forms. We consider "explainable" in the context that most of our students involved in the study do not have economic studies (although they study Economy – seems that only theoretically – since high school).

If getting help about changing school, for school work, preparing exams do not represent a problem for them, some students indicated as a problem for them respecting deadlines, getting for school / work on time; and also they do not have the practice to verify their work – looking over for finding mistakes. This could be a problem of abilities for time management.

Unfortunately, counselling services in Romanian schools are not so valued, or, at least, are not supported by authorities (including policy makers). Although many students said that they know and appeal in need to mental health services in schools, during interview they do not demonstrated too familiar with counselling services. In Romania, counselling is a mental health service that exists in schools / universities, but is too little promoted for pupils / students and also there is assigned a reduced number of hours and counsellors.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Present research had started from the aim to identify the level of life abilities of our students concerning their everyday life, insecurity for finding a job and developing a career, and, especially for planning / managing their money.

An important finding of our study was that students demonstrated that they have a low level of life abilities in spite of high level of academic achievements, result that could be explained either by dysfunctions in students' curricula or in the lack / low level of these abilities in adults (parents, teachers) or in education errors of adults (which are not conscious enough about the importance of these abilities for their children / students' success). Obvious, low level of life abilities on students – in the context of a society characterized by profound and rapid changes – generates difficulties in their socio-professional integration, and implicit an emotional disequilibrium in their personal life.

More, from our investigated subjects' answers we have found their preference for virtual world both for meeting a person and for solving work / professional tasks. Some specialists indicate this as a culture of fear amplified by media – an insecurity in social contacts that become a vicious circle that involve generations after generations.

Another important and worry finding for us is the lack of financial education for investigated subjects, and that make us to recommend: even if new curricula support / encourage developing knowledge / information about financial issues, maybe practical courses would be efficiently). It is a paradox: young people wish autonomy, including financially, but demonstrate also irrational behaviour as consumer, maintaining traditional model of living with their parents at least until finishing studies / getting married (and move into another place) and frequently appeal to parents' money to pay bills, find difficult to find and maintain a job, to find / select / rent a house.

Based on the results of our study, we also recommend to policymakers and educative and cultural institutions / organizations:

- to develop young's abilities for life by making partnerships that encourage young people to be in contact with various social categories of persons (rich and poor, managers and rough employees, young and old people, Romanian or foreigners etc.);
- to involve them in educative projects meant to develop a rational consumer behaviour;
- to encourage voluntary activities.

Voluntary activity is an important activity, specific to non-formal / informal education that allow to the students to discover abilities and, especially, to build and develop life abilities. We think that, through voluntary activities, students could discover what they like to work for living, and also if what they like to do fit with they are able to perform (if interests, aptitudes and abilities met). We intend that in our future studies to analyse the image of our students about voluntary activities (benefits, risks) and the correlations with their life abilities.

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