

# PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES AS A COMPONENT OF FEMALE LIFE SUCCESS IN MIDDLE ADULTHOOD

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**Summary.** As one of the leading adult human activities, occupational activity has numerous functions and has an impact on a person's life as a whole. Work-related experience is subjective and its evaluation changes with each stage of adulthood. One of the contexts in which the phenomena related to work are assessed by an individual is life success. In the period of middle adulthood, where the phenomenon of midlife review occurs, the category of life success and achievements stands out even more clearly. This study presents the realm of experience related to female work in the middle adulthood period. The reported research was conducted in a qualitative approach.

## PRACA ZAWODOWA JAKO KOMPONENT SUKCESU ŻYCIOWEGO KOBIET W OKRESIE ŚREDNIEJ DOROSŁOŚCI

**Słowa kluczowe:** sukces życiowy, praca zawodowa, kobiety, średnia dorosłość

**Streszczenie.** Praca zawodowa jako jedna z wiodących aktywności człowieka dorosłego, pełni liczne funkcje oddziałując na całokształt egzystencji. Doświadczenie pracy jest subiektywne, a jego wartościowanie zmienia się wraz z kolejnymi etapami dorosłości. Jednym z kontekstów, w których zjawiska związane z pracą zawodową są oceniane przez jednostkę, jest sukces życiowy. W okresie średniej dorosłości, na którą przypada bilans połowy życia, kategoria sukcesu życiowego i składających się na niego osiągnięć wyraźnie się uwidaczniają. W opracowaniu przedstawiony został świat doświadczeń związanych z pracą kobiet w okresie średniej dorosłości. Omawiane badania zrealizowano w podejściu jakościowym.

## Introduction

The importance of professional activity in adult life, as a major interdisciplinary problem, has been very well described in the literature of the subject by representatives of various scientific disciplines. In the field of pedagogical sciences<sup>1</sup>, work is approached mainly from the humanistic social perspective, according to which – as claimed by Tadeusz Aleksander – work performed as occupation is an “accumulation of human efforts undertaken to maintain and improve human existence. It involves the systems and structures of sensorimotor and intellectual activities, adapted to the professional tasks, leading to the production of material goods, the provision of services and the formation of cultural artefacts. Work also has a creative function. When working, man transforms nature, creates his or her self and improves the traits of the human nature. Work develops dormant powers in a human being, subordinate the forces of nature to his or her own sovereignty, and to some extent work directs human beings towards the service of others”<sup>2</sup>. Thus, professional activity has numerous developmental functions, to a large extent structuring the life and functioning of an adult. It is simultaneously a human responsibility and a vocation<sup>3</sup>.

The above described properties of professional activity evidence the claim that work has a holistic impact on human existence. As a consequence, work is a point of reference in the assessment of adults’ own life achievements at the various stages of life, since it is a source of a sense of success, satisfaction or fulfilment.

In the context outlined above, career experience as a component of female life success in middle adulthood is interesting both in terms of cognitive development and from a practical perspective of supporting human development in adulthood. Conducting research in this area is justified by the specificity of the

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<sup>1</sup> Human work and related phenomena are subject to research within the field of pedagogy of work. This research domain is discussed in detail in e.g.: W. Furmanek, *Humanistyczna pedagogika pracy. Praca człowieka (z aksjologicznego punktu widzenia)*, UR, Rzeszów 2013; idem, *Humanistyczna pedagogika pracy. Praca człowieka (z aksjologicznego punktu widzenia)*, UR, Rzeszów 2013; idem, *Humanistyczna pedagogika pracy. Sytuacje trudne w pracy człowieka*, UR, Rzeszów 2015; R. Tomaszewska-Lipiec, *Praca zawodowa – życie osobiste Dysonans czy synergia?*, UKW, Bydgoszcz 2018; Z. Wiatrowski, *Podstawy pedagogiki pracy*, Akad. Bydg., Bydgoszcz 2005; Z. Wołk, *Kultura pracy: Etyka i kariera zawodowa*, ITE, Radom 2009; R. Gerlach, *Przemiany pracy i ich konsekwencje dla relacji praca – życie pozazawodowe*, [w:] R. Tomaszewska-Lipiec (red.), *Relacje praca – życie pozazawodowe drogą do zrównoważonego rozwoju jednostki*, UKW, Bydgoszcz 2014.

<sup>2</sup> T. Aleksander, *Nauki pedagogiczne wobec etosu pracy*, [w:] A. Kargulowa, S. M. Kwiatkowski, T. Szkuldlarek (red.), *Rynek i kultura neoliberalna a edukacja*, Impuls, Kraków 2005, s. 301–302.

<sup>3</sup> Z. Wiatrowski, *Podstawy pedagogiki...*; Jan Paweł II, *Encyklika o pracy ludzkiej, Laborem Exercens*, Watykan, Polish translation – J. Gałkowski, KUL, Lublin 1986.

developmental period of middle adulthood and its crisis-generating nature, during which both women and men often need and seek support in the progress or reconstruction of their professional lives. In the case of women, crises related to unsatisfactory career self-reviews result mainly from prioritization of life goals in early adulthood, when the implementation of maternal and family roles dominated.

## Life success in middle adulthood

Middle adulthood is in itself a diversified period, in which an individual experiences all shades of adulthood: from drawing strength from his or her own adult identity, activity and creativity, to the perception of the passing lifetime, which brings signs of aging and poses existential questions in a changing temporal and axiological perspective. Numerous conceptions of life-span human development deal with this period in detail (cf. D. Levinson, E. Erikson, R. Havighurst)<sup>4</sup>. The authors present widely understood “developmental changes in the psyche, which include cognitive, moral and socio-emotional functioning of the individual and changes in his or her personality”<sup>5</sup>.

The conceptions of human development referred to the above emphasise the crisis nature of middle adulthood. A person makes a review of life achievements and verifies the overall significance of the undertaken life activities. As indicated by Piotr Oleś, in the discussed developmental period, a person experiences a mid-life crisis, which is “a process of intense and subjectively difficult personality transformations, which concern the concept of one’s self, the world, values and life tasks, and which may result from the realization of the temporal limitation of life, reevaluation of hitherto realized life aspirations, and a need to adapt to the tasks and roles typical of the middle age”<sup>6</sup>.

One of the categories constituting a point of reference for reflection on the life of contemporary people is life success. Although people use various terms to describe life achievements, such as fulfilment, satisfaction or happiness, success is a specific vehicle for a contemporary culture of success, or even a cult

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<sup>4</sup> A. Dudak, K. Klimkowska, *Sukces jako doświadczenie biograficzne ojców sprawujących opiekę nad dzieckiem*, UMCS, Lublin 2017.

<sup>5</sup> H. Liberska, *Realizacja zadań rozwojowych a poczucie dobrostanu w średniej dorosłości*, [w:] E. Rydz, D. Musiał (red.), *Z zagadnień psychologii rozwoju człowieka*, vol. 2, TN KUL, Lublin 2008, s. 250.

<sup>6</sup> P. Oleś, *Psychologia przełomu połowy życia*, TN KUL, Lublin 2000, s. 135.

of success. And as such, even if indicated as not a supreme category, success remains a means of description and validation of one's own actions and achievements. The research conducted by Anna Firkowska-Mankiewicz<sup>7</sup> proves that the beliefs reported by contemporary Poles reveal a certain model of life success, which consists of achievements focused on four dimensions: 1) material (taking into account: high salaries, satisfactory material situation, possession of valuable material goods); 2) social stratum and prestige (including: education, work in a profession that enjoys social recognition or occupying a socially valued position), 3) emotional-associative (including: quantity and quality of close interpersonal relations – having a family, enjoying marital happiness and family happiness, functioning in a relationship based on mutual love, having close friends and a group of good acquaintances), and 4) self-realization (taking into account one's – subjectively assessed – most important achievements that are a source of joy and satisfaction for the individual, marking the fulfilment of personal dreams and ambitions. "A person derives satisfaction from seeing his or her life as a coherent whole, characterised by high quality, self-development and self-perfection in all its essential spheres – from intellectual, moral, emotional, spiritual to physical"<sup>8</sup>. The presented model assumes that the category of success addresses the whole life of a contemporary human being. In the process of subjective attribution of meanings to particular achievements, each person creates his or her own constellation of life successes, filling particular dimensions with those achievements that are significant and valuable to them. The subjective perspective is usually something nearest to a person – the creator of his or her life, yet it also stems from a model of life success functioning in a given culture. Both social and individual beliefs about what life success is change over time. Yet, the changeability connected with the subsequent stages of human life which generate new needs, pose new challenges and developmental tasks, and which change the perspective of seeing and assessing one's own life, is more evidently manifest from an individual viewpoint.

Differences in experiencing life success are determined by numerous factors.<sup>9</sup> Gender is one of the most important determinants of socialisation and upbringing, which has its roots in the socialisation and upbringing preferences in a given socio-cultural space. Women and men experience and evaluate their

<sup>7</sup> A. Firkowska-Mankiewicz, *Intelligence and success in life*, IFiS PAN, Warszawa 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, s. 51, [after:] K. Klimkowska, *Orientacja na sukces zawodowy studentów kończących studia translatorskie*, UMCS, Lublin 2013, s. 121.

<sup>9</sup> K. Klimkowska, *Orientacja na sukces...*

life successes in different ways<sup>10</sup>. In the case of women, one of the leading – obvious and socially expected – life achievements is motherhood and family life. It involves numerous compromises and sacrifices in other spheres of life, such as professional career. In the period of middle adulthood, when adolescent or adult children no longer demand care, there occurs space in the life of a woman that needs to be filled with activities reaching outside motherhood. As Alina Kałużna-Wielobób explains, “many women, who previously focused on family goals, in middle age face the fact of not fulfilling their aspirations connected with their professional career and self-fulfilment. Hence, they experience the feeling that it is high time, perhaps the last chance, they undertook such ventures. Women who have invested in their careers at the expense of their personal lives can show a tendency to turn more towards that latter sphere of life in middle adulthood. There is a commitment to the realization of those aspirations, which previously remained unfulfilled [...]”<sup>11</sup>.

The challenges and processes described above are part of newly defined developmental tasks, distinct from those of early adulthood. As Karolina Appelt notes, among the tasks indicated by Robert Havighurst, two areas of responsibility clearly emerge: *for others* (related to relationships with adolescent children, aging parents and citizenship), and *for oneself* and one’s own development with the help of others (tasks such as “me for myself” and “others for me”). They concern the development of age-specific interests, acceptance of symptoms of one’s own aging and fulfilment in the professional sphere<sup>12</sup>.

*Work as a component of life success for women in middle adulthood – own research*

<sup>10</sup> E. Mandal, *Wyjaśnianie przyczyn sukcesów i niepowodzeń zawodowych doświadczanych przez kobiety i przez mężczyzn*, „Przegląd Psychologiczny” 1991, t. 34, nr 4, s. 637–646.

<sup>11</sup> A. Kałużna-Wielobób, *Obraz marzeń a kryzys połowy życia u kobiet*, „Polskie Forum Psychologiczne” 2009, t. 14, nr 2, s. 235; *Kryzys/bilans połowy życia u kobiet* opisany jest również w następujących publikacjach: A. Kałużna-Wielobób, *Kryzys połowy życia u kobiet – specyfika, problematyka i formy pomocy*, [w:] D. Kubacka-Jasiecka i K. Mudyń (red.), *Kryzysy i ich przezwyciężanie: problemy interwencji i pomocy psychologicznej*, Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2014; P. K. Oleś, *Psychologia przełomu połowy życia*, TN KUL, Lublin 2000; idem, *Psychologia człowieka dorosłego*, PWN, Warszawa 2011; W. Kozłowski, A. Matczak, *Sukcesja i merytokracja: stałość i zmienność kryteriów życiowego sukcesu*, Наукові записки Національного університету „Острозька академія”, Сер.: Психологія і педагогіка, 2013, vol. 25; M. Piorunek, *Kariery zawodowe ludzi na etapie średniej dorosłości. Ciągłość i zmiana na polskim rynku pracy*, [w:] M. Piorunek (red.), *Człowiek w kontekście pracy. Teoria – Empiria – Praktyka*, Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2009.

<sup>12</sup> K. Appelt, *Środkowy okres dorosłości. Jak rozpoznać potencjał dojrzałych dorosłych?*, [w:] A. I. Brzezińska (red.), *Psychologiczne portrety człowieka*, GWP, Gdańsk 2005, s. 525.

The aim of the research was to collect information about what makes up the notion of female life success in middle adulthood. This study presents selected research results, mostly related to the experiences of female narrators. Therefore, the following research questions have been posed: *Do females recognise the category of life success as pertinent to their lives? What contributes to female life success? How do work-related experiences fit into female life success?*

The undertaken explorations were of qualitative and quantitative character. Using a categorized interview, the author wanted to learn about the realm of experiences that are life achievements of the examined women in a biographical perspective. Socio-demographic characteristics of the research participants were obtained with the questionnaire technique. Selection for the study was intentional – the criterion for selection was gender and age (in the range of 35–55 years) and the status of a student of undergraduate or master’s studies. The research involved 48 persons. The average age of research participants was 38.7 years; most of them came from medium and small towns. Married women or women in relationships dominated among the respondents. 36 of them had children. The professional status of the participants was diverse: 23 women had full-time, permanent employment contracts; 12 women were out of formal employment, taking up casual jobs; most often it was child care for their friends. The remaining women indicated that they worked on a temporary part-time basis or under contracts for specific work or commissions.

In relation to the first issue addressed in the research – the sense of life success of women in the middle adulthood – the research showed that the participants recognised the category of success, while differentiating the way in which they valued it. The researched females often expressed their rejection of thinking in terms of success, because happiness and fulfilment are more important to them. – *“I know it’s about success, but success is about rat race. I have a peaceful, ordinary life, so that I can live a good life and have a feeling that I am a person that fulfils herself.”* (I 4). Some respondents *did* recognise success as a category, but abstained from using it – *“I never thought about myself that way”* (I 7), *“it’s just now that I can realize that I have some successes. Like a star, or what.”* (I 31), *“When you live a normal life, day after day, you don’t think about success or something. You do what you have to do. And yet, you attain something and it’s good to realize that from time to time.”* (I 12), *“I guess I’ll be thinking better about myself now. I am not worse than my husband. I can also boast of success, even if it’s small for someone. There is success in my life too.”* (I 10). For others, success was a familiar category, which they used to evaluate their own achievements. – *“Finally,*

*somebody is interested in whether a woman has any successes. It's not just the pots and diapers. Not anymore."* (I 41), *"I guess now it's everyone checks out if they have any success. Because it's as if we should have one. Everyone is chasing something. But you don't have to be God-knows-what kind of celebrity to be successful. By the way, are they really so successful? I am not sure they are. And when I think about my life, I would call it that."* (I 28).

The experiences of life success reported by the respondents are fully in line with the social model of life success defined by A. Firkowska-Mankiewicz. Women placed their life successes in all four dimensions indicated in the model, with the greatest number of achievements in the emotional-associative area. This is understandable taking into account the involvement of women in marital and family life, as described above. The most difficult task that the researched women faced was to categorize their successes in terms of material and social (stratum) and prestige achievements. The research also revealed a high representation of success in the self-realization dimension. – e.g.: *"Yes, it's changed now, when I'm in my forties. My success is that I fought for my happiness. I live this way without any major compromises. I focus on what's most important, not on what's shiny, but worthless."* (I 28).

The present and new objectives proved to be an important component of female life success – *"I realized I didn't have to do anything anymore. Now is my time. And this is my great success. I have concrete plans for my future. Graduation, for example. Doing what I have dreamed of."* (I 29), *"Children raised, and my husband is not a child, so now I'm going to show that I matter, too. Even as regards my studies, he was not enthusiastic, but why should I care. It's my life, my money and my studies. Nobody will stop me from realizing myself now. I've dedicated myself enough over the years."* (I 41).

In relation to professional activity, the research showed that it was an important component of life success for all the participants, as each recorded narrative made reference to work. Nevertheless, the stories differed. They used a temporal perspective as an ordering principle, and they referred to all dimensions of time. In the past perspective, work was a source of satisfaction or frustration due to un-realised ambitions or aspirations. In the present, work appeared to be a source of self-realization, financial independence, positive interpersonal relations, discovery of one's own space, or current disappointment with one's professional standing and a realization of a need to change it. In the future perspective, various issues related to work and professional career were the content of new life goals constructed in middle adulthood.

In the female narratives about their life success, the midlife perspective was clearly outlined. This midlife achievement review also covered various aspects of work, such as the overall professional activity, the place of career in life, or considerations regarding the rightness of or satisfaction with the professional decisions made. – *“When a woman is in her forties, she starts to think differently about her life. I look back and think about what I have achieved in my life, at work, in my family. It’s not always a good memory.”* (I 22) *“When I think of my life as a rather mature (but still young) woman, I look at what I have lost, what I have failed to achieve, but also what I have achieved. For example, where could I be if I once took up a job offer in another city? Well, career may not be my area of success, after all. Because it’s hard in the countryside. But it’s not bad, either. What matters is that I have a job. I fulfil myself in my family and here, as a student.”* (I 17) *“When I got this question about success, I thought it was time to do the reckoning. I am 43 years old and I think that at that age you have to ask yourself a question about what is my success – whether it is my family, work or home.”* (I 15).

Occupation-related phenomena represent a complex network. Assessing the importance of the individual aspects of work is highly subjective, but some beliefs about the most significant work-related issues are socially shared. One such aspect is the economic dimension of work. One of the most common criteria for assessing the value of work is income, accompanied by other financial benefits such as bonuses, awards, etc. For the researched females, it was not the level of earnings that was particularly important, but enjoying their financial independence. As regards the representation of various aspects of work in the respondents’ stories, their narratives more often than not emphasized self-fulfilment rather than the income-related aspect – *“Years later, I think I’ve fulfilled myself at work. Maybe I was lucky enough to find a job I love. Then maybe I will never grow old?”* (I 19). *“I managed to achieve professional independence. I am an accountant. That was my ambition. I can even say that this is some reason for me to be proud of myself. I am financially independent, and I can now study out of passion.”* (I 11). *“After all these years, I do what I always wanted, what I dreamed of. I took a risk and changed my job. I am about to complete my studies and work with young people. My earnings are not great, you know, but yes, I am fulfilling myself”* (I 7). *“I don’t earn too much, but I wouldn’t change this job with my kids for nothing in this world. For more than 10 years now, and this is still mine and it gives me happiness.”* (I 24). *“Maybe it’s not a dream job, but I can make a living. I don’t have to ask for money and depend on a sponsor. We live modestly, but I even*



*managed to save up for college. I can support myself and my daughter, and that is the most important thing. I am not in the red, either*" (I 28).

Talking about the value of professional work, one can define it in terms of an autotelic value: something good for its own sake; or an instrumental value: used to achieve other values and goals. The narratives of the research participants clearly emphasized the instrumental function of work as a means by which they have already achieved or expect to achieve other essential values in the future, such as self-esteem, power, agency or the sense of possessing desired qualities, such as goodness – *"With this promotion, I think better of myself. I began to feel more confident, so much more valued* (I 20). *"And professional success is important to me. After all, they talk a lot about people, about how much they are worth. But that's not all that matters. But it is important. I think that working in a help centre tells something about me, that I am a good person"* (I 32). *"I also have to admit, I'm a successful professional. For a woman, because we know that it is more difficult in our lives, because we have children and duties. But I got out of unemployment and for over 7 years now I have been working all the time and I have enough to make a living. And this is a proof that I am strong, that I won't let life push me back, that I can't be broken"* (I 30).

The last issue concerning professional activity presented in this study, which was clearly revealed in the collected responses, were achievements related to work as a component of expected future success. Women emphasized the present (midlife review) as a turning point in their careers. In the future plans and life goals of many of them, various achievements concerning work and career – taking up a job, changing jobs, promotion – were precisely defined:

*"As for work, I don't think I can say that I have any achievements. The children were more important. But that's what I want to change now. I'm not old yet, I can stand up for myself. I want to have a job that I will love when the children are grown up"* (I 18). *"I think I can also call my professional life a success. I started very early, I was 16, in a vocational school, as a kitchen assistant, but I broke out. I worked hard, the headmistress saw that I had a good sense for children, so she said – complete your secondary school. She was appreciative of me. I was better than those who had completed their studies. Now that the children are old enough, I can complete my studies and get promoted. I will become a kindergarten teacher. And this will be my accomplishment. When you ask me in a year or two, I think I'll be there after that success."* (I 43). *"I have plans for the future. That's why I went to university to find a better, more ambitious job. I'm not worse than the young ones"* (I 16). *"I am here to get out of home. I'm already getting them used to the fact*

*that mother is not a piece of furniture in the kitchen, because she is always there. I have to go to work for myself. My husband earns money for us, but I want not to be dependent on him, I want to earn my own money” (I 35).*

## Conclusions

The realm of experiences drawn from professional activity of the researched women in middle adulthood is vast. The presented research results reveal the sense – and identity-forming role of work in the life of mature women. For many of them, work has an instrumental value, as it allows them to achieve other values, necessary for the sense of success and happiness.

Although a synthesis of the stories provided by only a few dozen women has been presented here, the author hopes it can serve as an impulse for designing educational activities addressed to adults like them. The research confirmed the author’s observations made in her other studies of life success: that life success is an important and positive category for contemporary adults, and that participation in qualitative research concerning success is usually a strong positive developmental experience for the participants. It allows them to put their achievements in front of their own eyes, acknowledge their efforts and feel pride. One of the survey participants directly stated that *“I didn’t even think that I could think of my life as something interesting, let alone its being interesting for someone else.”*

At the same time, there emerges a need for education for success – life success understood in the ecological sense, rather than as a rat race: a need to compile a list of specific achievements in order to think about one’s life in terms of success. Both the research reported in this study and the author’s practical experience in empowering adult human development lead her to the conclusion that it is not only important or desirable, but in fact imperative to create opportunities for adults to think and talk about themselves and their lives in a positive perspective – in terms of resources, achievements and accomplishments. This is particularly important in crisis periods of life, such as middle adulthood. This is equally vital in relation to groups that experience life complications or breakdowns in their professional careers, e.g.: mothers who stay out of the labour market for a long time, women who want to enter the labour market after long-term unemployment, people who experience radical, often unexpected changes in their careers, like the need to find a new job, to change a position in the wake of their company’s transformation etc.

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