Education and Political Subjectivity. A Study Report

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Abstract

It is obvious that the educational system shapes the skill of critical thinking, also in the sphere of the assessment of political phenomena. The educational background of a person determines the kind of decisions he or she makes. These decisions refer to political activity both defined as interest in political issues and manifested in the form of active political participation. The aim of this paper is to identify relations between holding a university degree and political subjectivity. The study, conducted with the use of a survey questionnaire, involved students from the University of Zielona Góra and from the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń.

Keywords: *education, political subjectivity, democracy*

Among different concepts of democracy, it is those, which stress citizens' involvement as the prerequisite for the development and proper functioning of a regime that are of prime importance (Diamond, 2002, p. 213; Thomassen, 2007, pp. 418–434; Dahl 1957, pp. 201–215; Dahl 1998, pp. 217; Sartori, 1998, pp. 58–298; Morison, 2007, pp. 134–156). There may be different types of citizens' political activity: engagement, and passive and active participation. The broadest notion concerning political activity is an individual's interest in politics which takes different forms (e.g. attitudes to political values, manifesting one's political views, etc.). Participation refers to people's activities undertaken for the sake of

changing or continuing policy, thus determining their attitude towards it (Kruikemeier, van Noort, Vliegthart, de Vreese, 2014, pp. 903–920; Sotwin, 2003, pp. 12–23; Turska-Kawa, 2011, pp. 267–280; Wolfson, n.d.). Political participation and involvement may assume different forms (symbolic vs. real, or idealistic vs. realistic), but they are based on the same factor, referred to as political subjectivity.

The category of subjectivity was borrowed from social psychology. As Wiesława Sotwin points out, subjectivity can be of an external or internal nature, with both kinds mutually excluding each other. They “represent two basic aspects of subjectivity, i.e. the possibility of being the driving force for the external environment and for oneself” (Sotwin, 2003, p. 14–16). Both phenomena are a reflection of the state of mind. Subjectivity should be viewed on a few levels and with reference to various situations. According to Milton Rokeach, personality is determined by a system of values (Rokeach, 1973, pp. 14–16), which do not have to be mutually contradictory as they are based on logic. Their primary task is to influence the psychological sphere of an individual. Rokeach claims that one of the fundamental dimensions of the analysis of beliefs is the criterion of openness-closedness. Their bases include sources of information, its relevance and irrelevance, and an individual’s ability to select it. As Sotwin points out “the more closed the mind is, the more difficult it is for it to distinguish between information and its origin, and to evaluate them separately. A sense of danger and fear are the main reasons for which the mind closes” (Sotwin, 2003, p. 48–53). This determines authoritarian attitudes consisting in a belief that one has to subject to authorities, who constitute quite an idealized picture. It is also connected with the conviction that one cannot make decisions concerning his or her life and has no influence, whatsoever, on the surrounding reality. Therefore, the subjectivity of an individual becomes shaken as a consequence of the external influence of the society as a whole, or its particular groups (for example, a family). What is the opposite of an authoritarian attitude is people’s conviction that they can both decide on their faith and have an impact on the surrounding reality. Thus, subjectivity emerges, following the comparison of intentions with the accomplished targets.

This also concerns political subjectivity. Krzysztof Korzeniowski listed four models of political subjectivity. The first of them occurs in the dimension of effectiveness vs. helplessness, i.e. individuals’ belief that they are able to influence the reality vs. the conviction that they cannot do it. The second dimension refers to sense/nonsense, i.e. the belief that our actions are meaningful or are pointless. The third sphere concerns a sense of enomy vs. anomy, i.e. the assumption that people have/do not have the capability to assess the reality. The final domain involves a sense of identification vs. alienation, i.e. a sense of belonging to and integration

with the system vs. a sense of alienation and lack of identification with the system (Korzeniowski, 1993, pp. 155–192).

The subjectivity of an individual is undoubtedly affected by one's upbringing, but also by education at all levels – starting from nursery school to the university. The educational system allows people to develop the skill of critical thinking. This also concerns the political phenomena. As a result, an individual's decisions concerning the sphere of political activity are confined to taking an interest in politics or to political participation. One of the primary tasks of the educational process is to take care of the comprehensive growth of an individual, taking into consideration the necessity of developing personal talents. This poses a number of challenges for the system of schools and higher education, which may result in the fulfilment of some very important social functions (Brennan, 2008, pp. 381–393; Luvalo, 2014, pp. 1206–1212; Cortese, 2003, pp. 15–22). The requirements for the individual stages of education assume that each of them should support an individual in the increasingly comprehensive growth of personality and a sense of subjectivity. It contributes not only to the development of an individual, but also of human capital, which is necessary in the process of economic growth and for the stabilization of democracy as a political regime. In turn, education which does not favour the development of subjectivity, including the political one, is conducive to the intensification of populist and authoritarian attitudes.

The research problem and methodology

The aim of the study presented below is to identify relations between higher education and political subjectivity. A survey questionnaire is the best choice in the case of examining such specific phenomena as relations between one's education and his or her sense of agency. It makes it possible to present a large catalogue of questions concerning the issue.

The study was conducted between October 2018 and March 2019. Its participants included students of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń and the University of Zielona Góra. There were a total of 129 respondents: 47 people from the University of Zielona Góra and 82 from the Nicolaus Copernicus University. The main research problem concerned the relationship between one's level of education and a sense of political subjectivity.

Research findings

The group of questions regarding education included those about the reason for studying (three answers could be ticked). The respondents most frequently stressed their willingness to become a highly qualified specialist, the need to raise their social status and to ensure permanent income. Leading an interesting life as a result of obtaining a university degree was also a popular answer.

Table 1. Why did you decide to study.
Based on the authors' own research

	N	Mini- mum	Maxi- mum	Mean	Standard deviation
I wanted to become a highly qualified specialist in the chosen field.	129	0	1	.27	.446
I wanted to raise my social status, have a more prestigious position in the society.	129	0	1	.34	.476
I wanted to secure myself a steady income in future.	129	0	1	.36	.483
I wanted to prolong my school years (without having to work, with no obligations, etc.).	129	0	1	.13	.340
I believed that a university diploma (regardless of the kind of studies) would be useful in life.	129	0	1	.31	.464
I wanted to meet my life partner here.	129	0	1	.04	.194
My parents insisted I take up studies.	129	0	1	.08	.268
I thought that a university degree would allow me to lead an interesting life now and in future.	129	0	1	.38	.487
I believed that owing to studies I would become a well-educated and well-mannered person.	129	0	1	.19	.397
I wanted to continue a family tradition and follow in my parents' (or one of the parents') footsteps regarding the choice of profession.	129	0	1	.02	.151
I wanted to live and study in a big city.	129	0	1	.12	.331
I decided to study because almost everyone does so nowadays.	129	0	1	.09	.292
I wanted to experience students' life, have fun and entertain myself.	129	0	1	.17	.378
It is difficult to say.	129	0	1	.03	.174
Valid N (excluding with observations)	129				

From the perspective of our study, it was important to ask students about the reasons for choosing the field of study. The most frequent answer was that after graduation, they could work in a socially useful profession (sociology and internal security).

Table 2. Why did you choose this field of study?
Based on the authors' own research

	N	Mini- mum	Maxi- mum	Mean	Standard deviation
I am interested in this field of knowledge.	129	0	1	.60	.492
I was not admitted to my dreamed field of study.	129	0	1	.06	.242
It was easy to get in this field of study.	129	0	1	.15	.356
There are good job prospects after completing these studies.	129	0	1	.29	.454
My parents persuaded me.	129	0	1	.03	.174
My friends/colleagues chose this field of study.	129	0	1	.06	.242
It is a prestigious field of study.	129	0	1	.09	.292
This is an easy subject, there is not a lot to learn, not much effort is needed.	129	0	1	.16	.363
It is a family tradition.	129	0	1	.02	.124
After completing my studies, I will be able to work in a socially useful job.	129	0	1	.47	.501
Owing to obtaining a degree in this field of study, I will be able to travel all around the world.	129	0	1	.12	.331
Valid N (excluding with observations)	129				

The respondents indicated self-development and the possibility of acting for the good of other people as the most important benefits of doing their chosen job in the future.

Table 3. What benefits resulting from doing your future job are especially important for you? Based on the authors' own research

	N	Mini- mum	Maxi- mum	Mean	Standard deviation
The possibility of making use of and developing one's talents, the possibility of self-fulfilment	129	0	1	.39	.489
The possibility of acting for the good of other people, doing a socially useful job	129	0	1	.44	.499
The possibility of performing a creative job	129	0	1	.11	.312
Respect from other people	129	0	1	.27	.446
High social prestige	129	0	1	.17	.378
Well-paid job	129	0	1	.29	.454
The possibility of having a high position in the society	129	0	1	.10	.302
The possibility of cooperating with other people	129	0	1	.40	.492
A lot of free time	129	0	1	.03	.174
The possibility of solving problems autonomously	129	0	1	.09	.292
Lack of physical effort	129	0	1	.05	.227
The possibility of finding a job abroad	129	0	1	.12	.331
No health risks involved	129	0	1	.02	.151
Flexible working time	129	0	1	.05	.227
The possibility of acquiring new knowledge and skills	129	0	1	.43	.496
The possibility of early retirement	129	0	1	.29	.454
Valid N (excluding with observations)	129				

What is interesting, social sensitivity, which the respondents indicated as one of the reasons behind choosing their future position, is not a hint when it comes to the choice of ideological orientations. The majority of students under survey identified themselves with national-democratic (27.9%) or liberal (22.5%) views. As our other studies show, the respondents' answers reflect the lack of political knowledge rather than their actual political beliefs (Marszałek-Kawa, Plecka, 2018, pp. 20–29). The following research findings confirm this statement.

Table 4. Which of the ideological orientations below is the closest to you?
Based on the authors' own research

		Empiri- cal prob- ability	Percent- age	Valid percent- age	Cumula- tive per- centage
Valid	Communist	2	1.6	1.7	1.7
	Socialist	2	1.6	1.7	3.3
	Social-democratic	4	3.1	3.3	6.6
	Liberal	29	22.5	24.0	30.6
	National-democratic	36	27.9	29.8	60.3
	Ecological	4	3.1	3.3	63.6
	Christian-democratic	14	10.9	11.6	75.2
	None of the above because each of them has flaws.	4	3.1	3.3	78.5
	It is difficult to say because I do not know what they differ in.	21	16.3	17.4	95.9
	Centrism	1	.8	.8	96.7
	Democratic	2	1.6	1.7	98.3
	Islamic	2	1.6	1.7	100.0
	Total	121	93.8	100.0	
Missing data	99	8	6.2		
Total		129	100.0		

Against the background of political beliefs, the issue of political activity, as a reflection of political subjectivity, looks quite interesting. While it was to some degree possible to state that the respondents were able to identify their ideological preferences, these are not manifested in the public sphere whatsoever. The majority do not support any forms of protest regardless of their character (55% of the people under survey). If any form of a demonstration of political views appears, it is confined to signing endorsement lists referring to specific actions.

Table 5. In what way do you demonstrate your attitude?
Based on the authors' own research

		Empirical probability	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Valid	I take part in: demonstrations, picket lines.	11	8.5	8.6	8.6
	I sign endorsement lists.	31	24.0	24.2	32.8
	I take part in happenings.	8	6.2	6.3	39.1
	I do not support any forms of protest.	71	55.0	55.5	94.5
	9	7	5.4	5.5	100.0
	Total	128	99.2	100.0	
Missing data	99	1	.8		
Total		129	100.0		
	National Radical Camp, All-Polish Youth	2	1.6	1.6	44.5
	I identify myself with no political party or social movement.	71	55.0	55.5	100.0
	Total	128	99.2	100.0	
Missing data	99	1	.8		
Total		129	100.0		

Another form of expressing political subjectivity is electoral participation. More than a half of our respondents (53.5%) cast a vote in the last presidential election (2015). This clearly shows that students under survey consider electoral participation a lot more important than any other form of participation in the public sphere. However, we cannot state that this formula best reflects a sense of political subjectivity without further in-depth research in the field.

Table 6. Did you vote in the last presidential election?
Based on the authors' own research

		Empirical probability	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Valid	0	18	14.0	14.1	14.1
	Yes	69	53.5	53.9	68.0
	No	41	31.8	32.0	100.0
	Total	128	99.2	100.0	
Missing data	9	1	.8		
Total		129	100.0		

Conclusion

The results of our study show that university education is of value to students thanks to the opportunities it opens in future – both in the individual and social dimension. Higher education shapes civil and social subjectivity – this is a conclusion from the most frequently chosen answers in the questionnaire. Educational background, however, does not significantly affect political subjectivity as manifested by participation or expressing one's political views. If we narrow down participation to electoral activity, we can observe a certain relationship between the phenomenon of education and political subjectivity – there is a growing awareness of participation, which is a sense of agency, i.e. the conviction that one can influence the surrounding reality.

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