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THE DYNAMICS OF PROFESSIONAL SELF-REALISATION FROM CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE TO ADULTHOOD AND OLD AGE: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

This article provides a theoretical substantiation for the age-related dynamics of an individual's professional self-realisation from childhood to old age. Drawing on Ukrainian and international studies published between 2020 and 2026, it demonstrates that the psychological content changes in accordance with the key tasks of each life stage: pre-professional self-knowledge, career planning, entry into a professional role, mastery and proactive restructuring of activities, and selective-generative self-realisation. The invariant components of the process have been identified as professional meanings and values, autonomy, self-efficacy, self-regulation and environmental resources. The non-linear and heterochronic nature of professional self-realisation has been substantiated. The need to differentiate coaching tasks according to the stage of professional life has been identified.

Keywords: *professional self-realisation; personal self-actualisation; professional identity; age-related changes; coaching; self-reflection; self-determination.*

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ДИНАМІКА ПРОФЕСІЙНОЇ САМОРЕАЛІЗАЦІЇ ОСОБИСТОСТІ ВІД ДИТЯЧОГО І ЮНАЦЬКОГО ДО ЗРІЛОГО ТА ПОХИЛОГО ВІКУ: ТЕОРЕТИЧНИЙ АНАЛІЗ

У статті теоретично обґрунтовано вікову динаміку професійної самореалізації особистості від дитинства до похилого віку. На основі українських і зарубіжних досліджень 2020-2026 років показано, що її психологічний зміст змінюється відповідно до провідних завдань життєвого етапу: передпрофесійного самопізнання, професійного проєктування, входження у професійну роль, майстерності та проактивної перебудови діяльності, селективно-генеративної самореалізації. Визначено інваріантні компоненти процесу: професійні смисли й цінності, автономію, самоефективність, саморегуляцію та ресурси середовища. Обґрунтовано нелінійний і гетерохронний характер професійної самореалізації. Так, у дитинстві та ранньому підлітковому віці закладаються передумови: інтереси, уявлення про здібності, досвід вибору, готовність досліджувати різні ролі. У юності вони переходять у конкретні освітньо-професійні рішення; тут особливо значущими є кар'єрна адаптивність, самоефективність і прояснення професійної ідентичності. Початок трудової діяльності перевіряє ці рішення практикою: на перший план виходять компетентність, автономія та прийняття професійної ролі. У зрілій дорослості накопичений досвід розширює можливість впливати на саму організацію роботи, змінювати професійні ролі й критерії успіху. Пізня дорослість знову перебудовує пріоритети – більшого значення набувають

збереження працездатності, вибіркове використання ресурсів, наставництво, передавання досвіду та підготовка до зміни або завершення професійної ролі. Визначено необхідність диференціювати коучингові завдання залежно від етапу професійного життя. Одна й та сама коучингова техніка не має однакового психологічного значення на різних етапах професійного життя. У ранній дорослості постановка цілей виконує функцію консолідації професійної ідентичності. У зрілій – ревізії та реконструкції траєкторії. Тоді як у пізній – селективного збереження значущих ролей і підготовки до трансформації зайнятості. Тому ефективність коучингу слід оцінювати не лише за фактом досягнення заявленої мети, а й за відповідністю мети віковому завданню, ресурсам і професійному контексту.

Ключові слова: професійна самореалізація; особистісна самореалізація; професійна ідентичність; вікові зміни коучинг; саморефлексія; самодетермінація.

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Statement of the problem

Professional self-realisation refers to the extent to which an individual can transform their abilities, values, knowledge and professional intentions into activities that are personally meaningful and produce socially significant outcomes. This definition is insufficient for an age-based analysis, as the meaning of self-realisation changes in accordance with life's challenges. What manifests in a schoolchild as an interest in and an image of their professional future develops into choice and planning during adolescence; in early adulthood, into the testing of that choice through an actual professional role; and in a mature professional, into mastery, the restructuring of activities and a reassessment of one's career trajectory. Coaching support likewise cannot be identical at all stages: in adulthood, its focus is not on the mere fact of a career choice, but the quality of the individual's alignment of potential, values, professional identity, goals, resources and specific actions.

The most difficult methodological boundary to draw concerns childhood and adolescent. A child's interest in a particular profession is not yet equivalent to professional self-realisation: there is no stable professional role, no responsibility for the outcome of professional work, and no inclusion in the corresponding system of relationships. Therefore, within the present study, childhood and early adolescence are regarded as the genesis of psychological prerequisites rather than as a domain of professional coaching for adults. The experience of making independent decisions, perceptions of one's own capabilities, the mastery of roles, the alignment of interests with

the demands of the environment, and the vision of a desired future – all accumulated prior to entering a profession – form the basis upon which the mechanisms of self-reflection and self-determination subsequently operate.

A single choice made in youth does not determine the entire future of working life. Adults may change profession, organisation or form of employment; combine work with study; or move into managerial or expert roles. Such transitions require the renewal of competences, the reassessment of goals and the restoration of resources. It is precisely during periods of professional uncertainty that coaching becomes most functionally necessary. Through self-reflection, it helps individuals to identify their current situation and professional contradictions. Through self-determination, it helps to form an autonomously made decision; and through professional self-realisation, it helps to transform that decision into a concrete plan of action. In the later stages of a career, the focus shifts towards mentoring, generativity and preparation for the transformation of one's professional role.

Analysis of recent research and publications

In recent years, Ukrainian psychology has shown a tendency to distinguish more clearly between self-actualisation, self-improvement and self-realisation. S. Kopylova and O. Drobot [4] regard them as functionally distinct components of the life course: self-actualisation is linked to the immediate realisation of potential, self-improvement to self-forecasting and self-reconstruction, and self-realisation to the embodiment of individuality in social practice. In a subsequent work [5], the authors apply this logic to adolescence and link the movement towards internal self-determination with the development of self-awareness. Adolescence can be viewed as a pre-professional phase in which the psychological mechanisms for future self-realisation are formed, but a stable professional role is not yet established.

In international studies focusing on pupils, the concepts of career development, career adaptability and career construction are more commonly used than that of professional self-realisation itself. D. Wang, Y. Li and G. Wang [23] selected 25 studies from 419 initially identified publications on career interventions for upper secondary school pupils in a systematic review. The authors describe the outcomes of such programmes in terms of several interrelated indicators: career adaptability, research activity, self-efficacy in decision-making, professional identity and positive expectations regarding the future. The experimental career-building course by C. Gülşen, G. Seçim and M. Savickas [12] was tested with 80 ninth-grade students. Five sessions focused on future orientation, career adaptability and the ability to reflect on one's own life trajectory, that is, precisely those characteristics that precede actual entry into a profession.

In studies of adolescence, Ukrainian studies use directly the concept of professional self-realisation. M. Bodnar, A. Zablotskyi and Yu. Tymosh [1] surveyed 60 students aged 18-20: 23 per cent and 21 per cent of respondents, respectively, exhibited high and very high levels of aspiration for self-development, whereas 16 per cent and 10 per cent showed low and very low levels; whilst a high level of self-realisation was found in 60 per cent of the sample. M. Kazanzhy and G. Kotovska [3] identified positive correlations between types of professional self-realisation and professional competences, intuitive characteristics and indicators of psychological resilience in a sample of future psychologists. O. Sannikov [9] analyses professional self-realisation through a system of determinants, professional orientation, choice and behavioural regulation. I. Hornar [2] links it to intrinsic motivation for development within the chosen professional field. At the same time, O. Orlova [6] considers self-improvement and self-realisation as the basis for a teacher's professional growth. Taken together, these works shift the emphasis from the mere fact of choosing a profession to the psychological readiness to develop within it.

Direct Ukrainian longitudinal studies tracking the same sample from adolescence into later adulthood remain scarce. Consequently, this cross-generational comparison must be based, in part, on data from related studies. A. Parasei-Hocher [7] studied 150 women, divided into three groups of 50: 18-25, 26-45 and 46-65 years of age. The study concerns general, rather than professional, self-realisattion; nevertheless, its findings indicate an age-related restructuring of the psychological correlates of self-development. In the middle age group, associations with values, self-understanding, autonomy and temporal orientation were more pronounced, whilst in the older group, creativity, cognitive curiosity and communicative flexibility assumed greater significance. In 2026, S. Polishchuk and A. Bodnar [8] describe the professional development of a future teacher through the acmeological logic of subjectivity, reflection, self-learning and the consistent attainment of professional heights. O. Chykhantsova [10] considers psychological resources as a dynamic system of accumulation, mobilisation and restoration. This latter perspective broadens the age-based analysis: self-realisation depends not only on professional aspirations, but also on the ability to sustain and replenish resources amid prolonged social transformations.

The international evidence base regarding the transition from education to a career is significantly more extensive in quantitative terms. G. Stead, L. LaVeck and S. Hurtado Rúa [21] found, in a meta-analysis, a strong positive association between career adaptability and self-efficacy in career decision-making: correlations for individual components of adaptability ranged from 0.36 to 0.44, whilst the overall correlation in a

univariate model was approximately 0.63. L. Kvasková et al. [16], in a three-wave study involving 3,126 graduates of vocational education institutions in the Czech Republic, identified another important sequence: self-efficacy in career decision-making fully mediated the relationship between career adaptability prior to graduation and clarity of professional identity 20 months later. Consequently, during the transition period, adaptability gains practical significance through confidence in one's own ability to make career-related decisions.

At the beginning of professional life, a temporal self-concept, autonomy and identification with the profession are added to career adaptability. Z. Li, Y. Yang, X. Zhang and Z. Lyu [17], in a two-wave study of 239 employees, demonstrated that a clear image of one's future professional self is associated with greater well-being through self-management; a person-organization fit strengthened this indirect effect. J. Weiß, M. Bottling and T. Kärner [24] surveyed 79 young teachers four times over the course of one year. The resulting time series was as follows: professional identification after six months of training predicted the intention to remain in the profession over the following six months, whilst the links between identification and support for autonomy proved to be reciprocal. M. Gagné et al. [11] demonstrate that autonomy, competence and relatedness remain central psychological needs in a changing work environment. A. Hirschi and J. Koen [14] extend this perspective by linking contemporary career management to self-direction, clarity of value, flexibility and proactive behaviour.

In the mature professional phase, the nature of an individual's interaction with work changes: adaptation to given conditions is gradually complemented by their active transformation. D. Holman et al. [15], in a meta-analytical structural modelling of 58 independent samples comprising 20,347 employees, demonstrated that proactive changes to task resources and social resources are associated with positive attitudes towards work and well-being through corresponding job characteristics; changes to job demands, conversely, in some cases increased stress. S. Seibert, J. Akkermans and C.-H. Liu [20] define contemporary career success as a multidimensional outcome: objective achievements are complemented by a subjective assessment of the extent to which one's career aligns with one's own goals. B. Steindórsdóttir et al. [22], in a 15-year longitudinal study, showed that both upward and lateral career transitions can be associated with better objective and subjective indicators of career success; the positive contribution of lateral transitions to objective success was stronger among younger employees.

In later adulthood, professional self-realisation increasingly depends on how age-related changes relate to the characteristics of a particular job.

S. Scheibe and D. Kooij [18] emphasise the bidirectional nature of this interaction: age-related development alters motivation, resources and work behaviour, whilst long-term work experience, in turn, influences the subsequent trajectory of ageing. S. Schepp and S. Boehm [19], in a four-wave study of 2,769 German office workers over two years, found that certain strategies for proactively shaping one's work were associated with a subsequent increase in work performance. Work organisation proved beneficial for both younger and older employees, although some strategies had a stronger effect on the younger group. J. Wiktorowicz, I. Warwas, D. Turek and I. Kuchciak [25] demonstrated positive links between generativity and motivational outcomes, well-being, career success and behaviour aimed at contributing beyond one's formal role. Findings reported by G. Henning et al. [13] provide further support: amongst 2,595 employees in Germany, the average decline in job satisfaction over the decade preceding retirement was modest, although the decline became more pronounced in recent years. This does not align with the notion of an inevitable sharp decline in professional well-being in later age.

Studies on coaching constitute a separate line of evidence for the analysis of adulthood [26-30]. A meta-analysis by de Haan and Nilsson [27] covered 37 randomised controlled trials, 39 independent samples and 2,528 participants; the pooled effect size for coaching was g = 0.59. Cannon-Bowers et al. [26] also confirmed, in a meta-analysis of workplace coaching, an average positive impact on organisational outcomes. A systematic review of positive psychology coaching by Peláez Zuberbuhler et al. [28] associates this approach with improvements in well-being and work performance, while van Zyl et al. [29] define positive psychology coaching as a process of identifying, optimising and utilising strengths and resources for the development and realisation of potential. In a Ukrainian study by A. Kulchytska [30], conducted on a sample of 84 trainee psychologists, coaching techniques significantly enhanced reflectiveness, broadened the range of personal resources, and supported goal-setting and accountability. Taken together, these findings suggest that coaching may serve as a relevant means of supporting age-related changes in professional self-realisation; however, they do not justify the assumption that the content and focus of coaching should remain identical early, middle and late adulthood.

The **aim of the article** is to provide a theoretical basis for the age-related dynamics of an individual's professional self-realisation from childhood and adolescence through to middle and later adulthood, and to identify age-specific tasks for coaching support of professional self-realisation in adulthood.

Presentation of the main research material

The theoretical comparison is structured according to a functional criterion: for each age stage, the primary psychological task of self-realisation was identified, together with the mechanisms for achieving it, the opportunities and limitations of the environment, and the outcomes by which the success of this process can be assessed. This principle is necessary for two reasons. First, it prevents the mechanical transposition of the adult concept of professional self-realisation onto childhood. Second, it preserves the continuity between early professional self-identification and subsequent professional development.

Professional self-realisation may be defined as a dynamic process and outcome through which, over the course of the life span, an individual transforms their abilities, values, knowledge, professional meanings and vision of a desired future into modes of activity and interaction. The effectiveness of this process has several interrelated characteristics: the competent performance of professional tasks, a subjectively chosen direction of development, a socially significant contribution and a psychologically acceptable cost of achievement. Three key characteristics of the concept follow from this definition. Self-actualisation is process-oriented, and its content may change. It involves the individual's active ownership of their professional trajectory, meaning that external success alone is insufficient. Its outcome is assessed according to at least two criteria: personal significance and professional or social productivity.

Coaching is regarded as a method of psychologically activating the professional potential of the adult individual. Its overarching structure is formed by three mechanisms. Self-reflection correlates the 'real self' with experience, resources, limitations and current professional needs. Self-determination transforms this awareness into personal choice and the formation of the 'I-perspective' as a zone of current development. Professional self-realisation links the chosen trajectory to action, professional quality and social contribution. The age-specific nature of these processes lies in the fact that the content of each mechanism changes with age. Thus, in early adulthood, identification and role-taking predominate; in middle adulthood, the reconstruction of activities and career decisions; in late adulthood, selectivity, generativity and the transformation of the professional role.

This definition establishes an important methodological distinction: childhood is not a period of professional self-realisation in the strict sense; however, it is precisely during this stage that its prerequisites are formed. The works of S. Kopylova and O. Drobot [4; 5] make it possible to describe this phase in terms of self-realisation and a gradual transition from external

regulation to greater internal self-determination. International research on career interventions specifies the career-oriented aspect of this process: exploring the world of occupations, forming a vision of the future, recognising one's interests and abilities, practising decision-making, and developing confidence in one's own capacity to make career-related decisions [12; 23].

In childhood and early adolescence, pre-vocational development is primarily associated with self-discovery through engagement in a range of activities. Fixation on a single profession at this stage is of limited development values; of greater importance is the opportunity for the child to try out different roles, receive clear feedback on their strengths, learn independence and see the link between their own efforts and the outcome. Career intentions during this period may change repeatedly, and such variability should not in itself be interpreted as a sign of inadequate development. It is more informative to consider whether a person can identify their own interests, evaluate several alternatives, remain proactive in the face of uncertainty, and envisage more than one possible path for their future.

During late adolescence and young adulthood, the nature of this process changes: one's professional future shifts from a general horizon of possibilities to a realm of decisions on which education, first employment and access to specific professional environments now depend. At this stage, self-realisation takes the form of career planning. Its mechanisms fulfil various functions: career adaptability supports the search for alternatives and the adjustment of plans in line with new information; self-efficacy in career decision-making influences the transition from intention to action; and clarity of professional identity links the choice to one's self-image. A meta-analysis by G. Stead et al. [21] demonstrate that adaptability and self-efficacy form a closely interlinked system. Longitudinal data from L. Kvasková et al. [16] clarify the temporal sequence: adaptability prior to the completion of studies may be linked to subsequent clarity of professional identity through the self-efficacy of decision-making.

Ukrainian research adds a value-semantic and resource-based dimension to this interpretation. Among the students studied by M. Bodnar, A. Zablotskyi and Yu. Tymosh [1], the combined proportion of those with a high or very high drive for self-development was 44 per cent, while 26 per cent had a low or very low level. This finding is important for the interpretation of adolescent self-actualisation, as participation in higher education does not in itself imply an equal subjective readiness to manage one's own development. The high level of self-realisation among 60 per cent of the sample indicates significant potential; however, this potential still needs to be transformed into sustainable professional goals and behaviour.

The findings from M. Kazanzhy and G. Kotovska [3] add a further dimension: the professional self-realisation of a future psychologist is linked to professional competence; therefore, it cannot be reduced solely to subjective satisfaction with one's choice (Table 1).

Table 1

Age-related transformation of the psychological content of professional self-realisation

Age stage	Leading function	Key mechanisms and indicators	Criterion for transition to the next phase
Childhood – early adolescence	Pre-vocational self-discovery	Interests, perceptions of abilities, academic autonomy, experience of making choices, exploration of roles, tolerance of uncertainty	Ability to relate one's own characteristics to various educational and career opportunities
Late adolescence and young adulthood	Career planning	Career adaptability, self-efficacy in decision-making, value clarity, vision of a professional future, clarity of identity. For young adults, coaching techniques can be used to clarify values, alternatives and selection criteria.	Transition from opportunities to informed choices and first career-oriented actions
Early adulthood, entering the profession	Identification and consolidation of competence	Professional identity, autonomy, self-management, alignment of the individual with the organisation, and assimilation of performance standards. Coaching focus: professional role; self-reflection, self-determination, and consolidation of the 'I-perspective'.	Consistent fulfilment of the role without losing one's sense of self, and a readiness to remain on the current path or to consciously change it
Mature adulthood	Mastery and reconstruction of activities	Proactive structuring of work, career management, horizontal and vertical transitions, reflection on meaning, balance of resources. Coaching focus: reviewing goals, identifying strengths, developing resource resilience	Aligning professional outcomes, subjective success, autonomy and resource resilience
Late adulthood / old age	Selective-generative self-realisation	Maintaining employability, targeted investment of resources, creativity, mentoring, knowledge transfer, and preparation for the end of working life. Coaching focus: role transformation, maintaining a sense of purpose, and professional self-realisation through contribution and mentoring.	Maintaining a sense of purpose and contribution whilst restructuring one's professional role, including the transition to retirement

Source: compiled by the author based on [1; 3-5; 11-25].

It is useful to distinguish the period of entry into the profession as a separate phase: the professional choice made is first confronted with the actual structure of the work. The image of the profession formed during training may not correspond to the actual requirements, pace, hierarchy, organisational norms and limits of autonomy. Consequently, early

professional self-realisation is tested in practice. The image of the future professional self sets the direction, but its link to well-being is realised through day-to-day self-management [17]. Professional identity is consolidated through experience and may be temporarily weakened during transitions to new tasks [24]. Weiß, Bottling and Kärner [24] demonstrated that the correlations between professional identity and the intention to remain in the profession at four measurement points ranged from 0.411 to 0.707, and the model explained up to 46.6 per cent of the variance in the intention to remain. For coaching support, this implies the need to work with the relationship between the 'real self', the 'ideal self' and the 'future self': not to fix the individual in their initial choice, but to help them reflectively assess how well their professional role aligns with their own values, capabilities and resources.

At the start of a career, autonomy takes on practical significance. It does not negate professional standards; the question is whether a young professional recognises the logic behind the requirements and can relate them to their own decisions and goals. In a study by J. Weiß et al. [24], the relationship proved to be bidirectional: early professional identification predicted subsequent support for autonomy, whilst support for autonomy predicted a subsequent strengthening of identification with the profession. Coaching at in this phase should support self-realisation rather than replace it with expert advice. The result is the young professional's ability to independently determine what exactly requires adaptation, development or change, to formulate decision-making criteria and to take responsibility for the chosen career move.

In mature adulthood, the primary function of self-actualisation changes. The accumulation of competence creates opportunities not only of operating within a given system, but also of reshaping the organisation of one's own work. Self-realisation takes on a proactive character: the professional redistributes tasks, seeks resources, changes their network of professional contacts, initiates projects, and moves between roles or organisations. A meta-analysis by D. Holman et al. [15] demonstrates that such activity has positive consequences when it genuinely alters the resource structure of one's work. For coaching in mature adulthood, this is a key distinction from the adaptation phase: the work focuses on revising criteria for success, reassessing goals, seeking alternative trajectories, utilising strengths and creating a realistic plan for restructuring one's activities. Self-reflection here must lead to a self-determined decision, and the decision to professional self-realisation.

Career transitions in later life should also not automatically be interpreted as a sign of instability. Fifteen-year data from B. Steindórsdóttir

et al. [22] show that both vertical and horizontal transitions can be associated with career success. This finding shifts the criteria for assessing a professional trajectory: vertical advancement cannot remain the sole benchmark for development. For some professionals, self-realisation manifests itself in deepening their expertise, changing their functional area, transitioning to project-based work, combining several professional roles, or consciously reducing their managerial workload in favour of more meaningful activities. This is precisely why the assessment of mature self-realisation must consider two types of outcomes: objective career indicators and the subjective sense of how well one's career aligns with one's own goals [20].

In the Ukrainian context, this logic is compounded by the need to rebuild one's professional trajectory following forced interruptions, relocation, changes of workplace and prolonged periods of stress. O. Chykhantsova' resource model [10], in which resources are accumulated, mobilised and replenished, helps to explain non-linear self-realisation. In coaching practice, this requires moving away from the normative assumption that every request must culminate in more intensive career goals. Following significant stress, a temporary scaling back of ambitions, adjusting the pace, or changing the format of work may be resource-based decisions [29; 30].

Data on late adulthood do not support the deficit model, according to which professional self-realisation inevitably diminishes after a certain age. A review by S. Scheibe and D. Kooij [18] demonstrates significant inter-individual heterogeneity in ageing at work and the plasticity of human interaction with the professional environment. Data from S. Schepp and S. Boehm [19] elaborate on this position: proactive work organisation maintains a positive association with continued work capacity even among older employees. Coaching support in this phase should be structured around the selective use of resources: identifying the functions the individual wishes to retain, the roles they are prepared to hand over, and the forms of professional contribution that correspond to their current capabilities. Self-realisation here manifests itself not in maximising activity, but in the conscious choice of its content and intensity.

In the later stages of a career, the generative dimension becomes more prominent: the development of junior colleagues, mentoring, the transmission of professional ways of thinking, the upholding of community standards, and the preservation of organisational memory. A meta-analysis by J. Wiktorowicz et al. [25], involving 30,540 participants, demonstrated links between generativity and motivational outcomes, self-efficacy, career success and well-being. In the coaching model, generativity is a form of professional self-realisation in which the outcome extends beyond individual career achievement. Coaching enquiries may relate to the transition from the

role of an executor or manager to that of a mentor, expert, consultant or custodian of professional memory, whilst the criterion for success is the preservation of meaning and contribution as the form of activity changes.

Preparing for retirement constitutes another phase of functional reorganisation. According to G. Henning et al. [13], the average decline in job satisfaction prior to the end of a career was statistically significant, but small. For coaching support, issues such as managing one's time perspective, the ability to adjust one's workload, maintaining meaningful professional connections, and integrating one's professional identity into a broader life context are more important than assumptions about an inevitable decline. Self-reflection helps to distinguish between the loss of a formal position and the loss of professional value; professional self-realisation helps to find avenues for mentoring, consultancy, expert, community or voluntary involvement, provided these align with personal priorities.

The age-related dynamics of professional self-realisation can be described in terms of specific levels of continuity, which explain what is retained during the transition from one stage to another (Figure 1).

Several relatively stable components run through all stages of life: professional meanings and values, autonomy, self-efficacy, self-regulation and available environmental resources. In adulthood, coaching can only engage with these components through specific age-related tasks. It does not add yet another universal characteristic to the model, but rather organises a cycle of self-reflection, self-determination and professional self-realisation. At one stage, identification becomes predominant; at another, the reconstruction of work; and at the third, generativity and role transformation. Therefore, the same degree of change on the self-efficacy or well-being scale may have different meanings depending on age and professional context.

The invariant core of all phases can be represented by four interrelated domains: potential and competence, values and meanings, agentic regulation, and the context of opportunities. In adulthood, the coaching process links these domains to three mechanisms. Self-reflection clarifies the current relationship between the domains; self-determination defines the next trajectory; and professional self-realisation tests decisions through action. In early adulthood, this system operates primarily to facilitate role entry; in mid-adulthood, to foster mastery and proactive adaptation; and in late adulthood, to promote selectivity, the transfer of experience and the preservation of a meaningful professional contribution [26-29].



Fig. 1. Ontogenetic model of professional self-realisation and age-specific coaching support in adulthood

Source: compiled by the author based on [1-30].

This interrelationship of components indicates the heterochronic nature of professional self-realisation: its individual components reach their

greatest prominence at different stages. Learning speed or openness to new technologies follows one temporal dynamic, whilst professional expertise, meaningful selectivity and generativity follow another. Because of this unevenness, age-related differences cannot be adequately reduced to a simple 'more–less' scale. A more analytically precise question is which resources become dominant at a particular stage, which of them compensate for changes in other resources, and to what extent does the professional environment allow them to be utilised.

Following the end of formal employment, professional potential may be realised outside the confines of one's usual role. Accumulated competences and professional identity retain their significance if a person finds other ways to express them: mentoring, consultancy, participation in professional communities, voluntary or community work, or passing on knowledge to younger colleagues or family members. In such a situation, it is the channel of realisation that changes, rather than necessarily the substance of the professional contribution itself. At the same time, continuing professional activity after the end of one's career should not be turned into a normative criterion for successful ageing. Shifting the focus of one's life interests beyond the profession can also be consistent with self-realisation, provided it aligns with personal values and priorities.

Age-specific aspects of coaching support

A comparison of age-related data and research on coaching makes it possible to formulate the principle of age-appropriateness: the same coaching technique does not have the same psychological significance at different stages of professional life. In early adulthood, goal-setting serves to consolidate professional identity. In mid-adulthood, it serves to review and reconstruct one's career trajectory. Whereas in late adulthood, it involves the selective retention of significant roles and preparation for a career transition. Therefore, the effectiveness of coaching should be assessed not only by whether the stated goal has been achieved, but also by how well the goal aligns with the age-specific task, available resources and professional context.

Self-reflection, self-determination and professional self-realisation remain cross-cutting mechanisms. Their interrelationship can be represented as a movement from the 'real self' to the 'prospective self', with the 'ideal self' as a point of reference, but without requiring complete identity between them. The coaching process should help an adult individual identify the area of current professional development, that is, the next step that is simultaneously value-compatible, resource-feasible and professionally meaningful [26; 28–30]. This logic makes it possible to avoid two extremes:

passive adaptation to constraints and unrealistic maximalism, which increases the risk of exhaustion.

Conclusions and prospects for further research

The analysis has shown that age-related changes in professional self-realisation cannot be described by a single 'more–less' continuum. It is the specific task that a person addresses at a particular stage of their career path that changes. In childhood and early adolescence, the foundations are formed: interests, perceptions of abilities, experience of making choices, and a willingness to explore different roles. In youth, these develop into specific educational and career decisions; career adaptability, self-efficacy and the clarification of professional identity are particularly important at this stage. The beginning of working life tests these decisions in practice: competence, autonomy and the acceptance of one's professional role come to the fore. In mature adulthood, accumulated experience expands the individual's capacity to influence the organisation of work itself, change professional roles and revise criteria for success. In late adulthood, priorities are restructured once again: maintaining work capacity, the selective use of resources, mentoring, the transfer of experience and preparation for changing or concluding a professional role become increasingly important. Coaching support in adulthood should therefore be differentiated in accordance with these distinctions. Its mechanisms are identified as self-reflection, self-determination and professional self-realisation. The content of each mechanism varies according to the professional and age-related phase.

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