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The interrelation of work-value preferences and students' image of profession

A b s z t r a k t In our study we examine the professional image of the students attending the University of Debrecen on the basis of their opinion of the ideal knowledge of the “good professional” and the real knowledge of the graduated professionals. We describe this professional image on the basis of answers given to open-ended questions. We compare the knowledge and ability components, (the professional image elements), to the Super work-value circles. This kind of approach offers the possibility to demonstrate the mutual influences and co-intervention of the professional image circumscribed by the two approaches. No previous similar examination has been conducted, thus the results seem to be new in the field of professional research.

Super work-value questionnaire, Raven test and a questionnaire about the students' socio-demographic background and their professional motivation were used in the survey. 3158 students were queried between 2001 and 2008.

Key words: university students, professional image, the Super work-value preferences

Introduction

In our recent study we examined the relation of students' preferences of work-value circle with the elements of the professional image. It is an approach that is available for a deeper analysis of the work-value examination itself. We looked at the professional image of the students with two open-ended questions – the results on the basis of these answers showed significant differences among the faculties. (Fónai, 2010, Fónai – Mohácsi, 2009, Fónai, 2009). The differences among the faculties essentially show the anticipative picture of the professions, which are mainly the social opinions and stereotypes in connection with the professions and they signify the influence of the social status of the given professions. In this article we connect the Super work-value preferences with the professional image based upon the open-ended questions. We predict that the elements of the professional image and the Super work-value circles will have mutual characteristics, that is certain knowledge and ability elements go together with certain work preferences. Therefore it makes it possible to describe a more plastic professional image.

Frames of the research: data and the methods

The current research is linked to a current university talent development program. In 2000/2001 the Rector of the University of Debrecen at that time initiated a new gift development program¹. It is closely connected to the existing programs, Student

¹ The name of this program: Talent development Program of University of Debrecen. Hungarian acronym: DETEP.

Science Circle, special courses and demonstrator network. The novelty of the program is the entrance process, first of all the tutorial system (Balogh – Fónai, 2003). The entrance process consists of three steps: First the faculties selected the upper fifth of the second year fulltime students who were the best students on the basis of their academic records who in the second step participated in a selection process where in a group setting they received three measurement instruments – the Super work-value questionnaire, the Raven test and a questionnaire about their socio-demographic background and their professional motivation. Then in the third step on the basis of individual interviews the faculties decided who could enter the program. In this period nearly 4500 students were placed into the selection process by the faculties. About 70% of these students, that is 3158 students, participated in the measure so the data relates to them.

From among the various methods used during the research on this database this study examines the answers given to the open-ended questions and the main results of the Super work-value questionnaire. We analyze the possible connections between the Super work-value circles and the elements of the professional image in major fields between preferences and the answers to the open-ended questions. In this analysis we compare the groups of students who choose certain elements of professional image and those who do not choose them. We did not perform comparisons according to faculties, genders or other variables. We intend to establish more general conclusions about the professional image of the total sample on the basis of the connections between the certain value circles and the answers of the open-ended questions.

About the Super Work-value Questionnaire

Work psychology has been one of the most intensively developing branches of applied psychology during the last decades. Choosing a career and selecting a labor force together with the questions of appropriateness is one of the important aspects of education. In addition to knowledge and abilities, special self-knowledge and career socialization development is an important part of the professional education. It appears in the education of teachers, doctors, social workers and psychologists, however, in different extents. Besides special skills and abilities, expectations and imagination related to the workplace play a large role in coping with starting a career and not leaving a career. D. E. Super (a humanistic psychologist) using Roger's theory in connection with personality developed a complex model (and a measurement connected to it) about the development of the professional personality. (Super, 1957)

Each value category of the Super-questionnaire can range between 3 and 15. On the basis of the earlier examinations – and it was confirmed by the current study – the average values can be minimum 7-8 and maximum 12-13. E.g. in the examination of Szilágyi the averages of values were between 7.4 and 12.4 (Szilágyi, 1987), and in the later examination of Kiss there were between 8.4 and 12.8. (Kiss, 1999). Thus, the 15 values are located in a 5-score range, consequently the differences can statistically be examined only with great difficulty. Significant differences can only be found between the winger values.

The application of this method is widespread in Hungary in the research of the professions in connection with the educational systems. Following the first research of Csepeli and Somlai (1980) the Education Research Institution had an examination in Hungary in 1982 (Szilágyi, 1987) based on a representative sample. The correct validity examination of the method has not been done since then but we can get important comparative data about the development of the value preferences along the question circles considering the period up to the present and the students learning in different faculties and branches. This questionnaire proved to be a useful method in the course of the national and international comparative examination of professionalization in case of the new human professions or social worker education (Kiss, 1998, 1999, Kiss – Fónai – Fábián, 2001, Fónai – Kiss – Fábián, 1999).

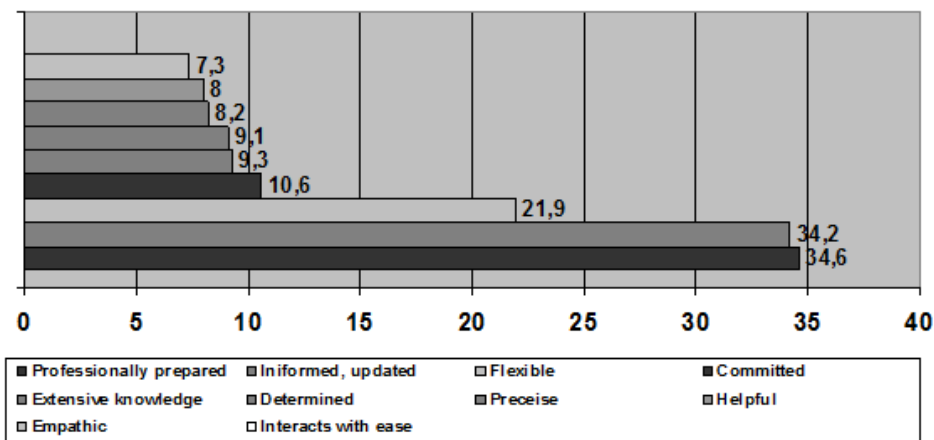
Opinions and anticipations of students about the knowledge of the graduates

Those in the study were in the second step of the entrance process of DETEP (Talent Development Program of the University of Debrecen) and elements of the students' career in particularly with regard to the expertise of the graduates was studied. We examined the students' opinions about graduates with open-ended questions. Such questions gave us the possibility to know their own opinion.

In our recent study we analyzed the answers to two open-ended questions. One of them was *"What is a good professional like?"* (having to characterize the professional in connection with their own branch). The other open question was: *"What knowledge and abilities does a professional need who graduated from your branch?"* Both questions were developed to address the career image and the *expectations* in connection with the graduates by the students who are at the beginning of their educational process. There are essential connections between the two questions but at the same time the first question is appropriate for a more general characterization while the second makes the students use a more concrete description of what the chosen profession's representative should be according to them. The two questions allow the students to characterize their career image, but in addition, it lets us examine the perfect professional image of the students. The following graph describes the answers given to the two open-ended questions² (Figure 1).

Figure 1: What is a good professional like (in percentage of the students' choice of the given statement)?

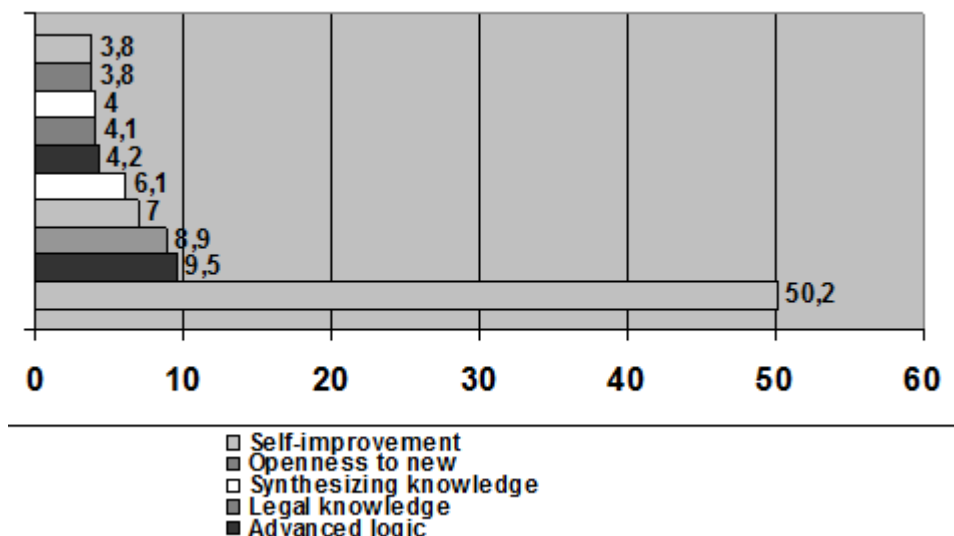
² We encoded these open-ended questions and demonstrated the first ten answers of these ones.



Source: DETEP 2001–2008.

The students used more than forty different answers to characterize the imagined ideal professional. We will show the rank of the first ten answers (the situation is similar to the other open-ended question. It is remarkable that in the first part of their university education the students regarded professional skills to be the most important characteristic – and their expectation of being professionally prepared is related to this criterion. On the part of the students it also means that they primarily expect the university to prepare them appropriately. The other features of the ideal professional are rather basic features and abilities: flexibility – commitment – accuracy – sturdiness – empathy – contacts – and they can be grouped together into two bigger groups: the “*expressive*” (flexible, committed, helpful, empathic, having good relationship with people) and the “*instrumental*” (extensive knowledge, sturdiness, precision). The students’ expectations of the “ideal professional” seem to meet the professionalization patterns of the professions. How do the students see the chosen professional’s knowledge and abilities? (Figure 2)

Figure 2: What knowledge and abilities do the graduated professionals need (in percentage of the students’ choice of the given statement)?



Source: *DETEP 2001–2008*.

The students heavily emphasize thorough professional knowledge in connection with the knowledge and abilities of the graduated professional, indicating the educational process they primarily expect the transfer of the professional knowledge. Other knowledge elements or types are considered to be less important. Apart from this it should be stressed that communication abilities and empathy are relatively important components of the students' image of profession. Compared with the "ideal professional" differences can also be seen: the ideal professional is more characterized by the features of "expressive" and "instrumental" elements, while the "graduated professional's image" is rather lean: they should be professionally prepared, generally informed, should communicate well and be emphatic enough.

The interrelation of the Super work-value preferences and the students' image of profession

First we will examine the answers to the "What is a good professional like?" question. This question described the "ideal professional" and their knowledge and features. The "ideal professional" is mostly seen to be professionally prepared by the students. We have found *significant connections* to the following work-value circles (by Mann-Whitney Test). Hereafter, we compare the preference averages referring to the value circles of those mentioned and those who did not mention the features in case of the significant differences.

Table 1. *Professionally prepared (Mean scores of value circles)*

	Mention	Not mention
Social relations	12.30	12.64
Security in connection with work	10.19	11.06
Self-assertion	12.30	12.49
Variety	12.45	12.59
Physical surrounding	11.09	11.15

Those who mention “to be professionally prepared” consider these value circles less important than those who do not mention it at all – from the “professionally prepared professional” point of view the social relations, security, self-assertion, variety and the physical environment are not so important. He does not have to deal with self-assertion permanently, in the activity itself he does not have to find variety and social relation either. It means that according to the students for the professionally prepared professional it is the activity itself that is important.

Table 2. *Informed (Mean scores of the value circles)*

	Mention	Not mention
Social relations	12.71	12.42
Security in connection with work	11.36	10.45
Financial compensation	10.88	10.83
Self-assertion	12.57	12.36
Physical surrounding	10.83	10.17

Those who mention “informed” regard these value circles more important than those who do not mention it. According to students if somebody is “informed” they consider social relations very important. There is an obvious connection in the case of security and self-assertion as well. The connection between social relation and being informed seems to be obvious but it is less true in case of the choice of the other value circles. “Being informed” seems to be identified with organizational awareness and organizational existence as something that enlarges safety in connection with work and contributes to the validation of self-interest and to the claim of a better physical environment.

Table 3. *Flexible (Mean scores of the value circles)*

	Mention	Not mention
Altruism	12.26	12.02
Social Relations	12.93	12.41
Security in connection with work	12.19	10.36
Self-assertion	12.46	12.37
Independence	12.66	12.50
Physical surrounding	11.46	10.10

Those who mention “flexibility” regard these value circles more important than those who do not mention it – “flexible people” are altruistic, want work security, are self-assertive, independent and physical environment is important for them as well. “Flexibility” as the feature of a professional goes together with such value circles that rather exclude each other like with altruism or self-assertion. We can interpret it in a way that according to students “flexibility” itself depends on situations and cannot be a general feature to all situations. In some situations a “flexible” person is an altruist and wants work security. It is the organizational, institutional, team conditions and situations that make them flexible.

Table 4. *Committed (Mean scores of the value circles)*

	Mention	Not mention
Social Relations	12.26	12.55
Security in connection with work	10.59	10.88
Physical surrounding	10.00	10.45
Work performance	11.55	11.32

Those who accept “committed” regard these value circles less important than those who do not mention it – with the exception of the work performance. What can these preferences explain? The “committed” seem to be really committed in their work performance, that is in their work and professional selves. Thus, other things like social relations or security in connection with work or the physical environment only

hinder them in being committed, in that they do not allow the committed professional to concentrate on work itself. It can result in a slight case of tunnel vision for the professionals obsessed with work.

Table 5. *Extensive knowledge (Mean scores of the value circles)*

	Mention	Not mention
Intellectual incentive	11.07	11.43
Management	8.93	8.54

Surprisingly, those who selected “extensive knowledge” are primarily in a directing position rather than stimulating others intellectually. To simplify, it means if the person has a broad knowledge base it entitles that person to direct others. Extensive knowledge is not the consequence of intellectual incentive. It is rather interpreted by the students as “tool-like”. We have already indicated that they regard it to be one of the important conditions of managing. Related to the knowledge of “good professionals” we could see in the case of other components as well that the students consider the organizational and institutional influences important, that is in connection with the value circles they are often linked to the elements of knowledge with some organizational influence.

Table 6. *Determined (Mean scores of the value circles)*

	Mention	Not mention
Security in connection with work	10.21	10.81
Physical surrounding	10.02	10.44

Those who mention “determined” consider these value circles less important than those who do not mention it. For the “determined,” security in connection with work and physical environment are not important. It also relates to what they think about the “professionally prepared” professional: one who is prepared and determined and one who will not consider security in connection with work and physical environment important. Work itself will be important as it also refers to the “committed in work” professional in many ways. The image seems to describe the good or ideal professional on the axis of “professionally preparedness, determination and commitment”.

Table 7. *Precise (Mean scores of the value circles)*

	Mention	Not mention
Security in connection with work	9.60	10.86
Physical surrounding	9.64	10.47
Aesthetic	9.18	9.60

The choices of precise show that their precision provides safety in itself therefore safety in connection with work and physical environment and aesthetic are less important for them. Those students who consider accuracy, as work-value important, seem to interpret precisosity as an element of professional preparedness.

Table 8. *Helpful (Mean scores of the value circles)*

	Mention	Not mention
Altruism	12.82	12.01
Security in connection with work	10.06	10.82
Physical surrounding	10.00	10.43
Prestige	11.82	10.82

The choice of “being helpful” is not in one direction. Altruism is important which is easily understood, however, at the same time they consider prestige important. Security in connection with work and physical environment are less important for them. Maybe they consider human components and team relations more important than organizational and institutional components. They are motivated by team influences and team dynamism rather than the conditions and security of work. This may also explain why prestige is important for them.

Table 9. *Empathic (Mean scores of the value circles)*

	Mention	Not mention
Altruism	12.73	12.02
Aesthetic	10.10	9.53

These are choices that seem to be very obvious. Those who select empathy as the feature of the profession will consider altruism from among the value circles, which seems to be an inherent feature or value.

Table 10. *Good interpersonal skills (Mean scores of the value circles)*

	Mention	Not mention
Independence	11.08	11.13

It is not surprising that those who have good interpersonal skills and who are good communicators will consider independence less important than those who did not choose this knowledge element. A good relationship can be created even if you do not want to be independent. This choice will also strengthen our presumption between the features of the “good professional” and the preferences of the value circles: the students primarily choose the features of the good professional from the organizational, institutional side. What do they need to be able to find their ways in an organization, to be able to adapt to the operation of the organization or to be able to manage it? They give less important role to the characteristics that go together or result from group influences. It means students regard formal organizations more important than informal groups – they might learn how they work only in the world of work. How will the answers and value choices of the students change if it is about more practical knowledge and abilities, that is about the knowledge of the *graduated professional*?

Table 11. *Thorough professional knowledge (Mean scores of the value circles)*

	Mention	Not mention
Social Relations	12.39	12.66
Security in connection with work	10.12	11.40
Physical surrounding	9.99	10.81
Work performance	11.44	11.25
Creativity	12.02	11.81

Social relations, safety in connection with work and physical environment seem to be less important for those who chose “thorough professional knowledge”. They regard work performance and creativity more important. In certain elements this image is similar to the “professionally prepared” expectation. It strengthens the assumption that thorough knowledge and preparedness makes one self-confident. Social relations or security in connection with work are less important. On the basis of their choice regarding work performance and creativity we can state that those people who consider professional knowledge important will regard performance important too but performance goes together with creativity as well. Having a thorough knowledge in the work itself and performance can be attractive.

Table 12. *General awareness (Mean scores of the value circles)*

	Mention	Not mention
Self-assertion	12.64	12.41
Hierarchy	11.36	11.06
Management	9.08	8.35

“General awareness” appeared as the feature of “ideal professional, good professional” as well, so now we are able to compare the peculiarities of the two areas. In the case of “good professional” those who chose “being informed” interpreted it as organizational awareness – as the ability of being informed in the organization. In the more practical knowledge of the graduated professional this image can also mean being informed they regard self-assertion, hierarchy and management important as value circles. It corresponds to the “orientation into the organization” general expectations and in practice self-assertion, hierarchy and management are very important for them. It is critical that that person is informed who can enforce their interests, and that person can enforce their interests who is informed.

Table 13. *Good communication abilities (Mean scores of the value circle)*

	Mention	Not mention
Physical surrounding	10.05	10.43

According to the students, physical environment plays a smaller role in the case of “good communicators” – it is not what determines the quality of communication. It was surprising that good communication skills, which were regarded as important as part of the knowledge of the graduated professional, and which is highly appreciated in the labor market, correlated with so few things in the field of the students’ work-

value preferences. As a result we cannot judge if they regard communication skills - both informal /group and formal /organizational - as being important.

Table 14. *Empathy (Mean scores of the value circles)*

	Mention	Not mention
Altruism	12.57	12.03

Empathy appears both as the ideal feature of the good professional and as the knowledge and ability of the graduated professional. In both cases it shows connection with altruism as a work-value circle. There is an “expected” connection between the value circle of altruism and empathy. People who are emphatic are also altruists both “ideally” and in practice as well.

Table 15. *Practicality (Mean scores of the value circles)*

	Mention	Not mention
Security in connection with work	10.22	10.79

Those who mention practicality among the competencies of the professional regard security in connection with work less important than those who do not choose this feature. One who is “practical” in an appropriate way will feel more secure at work. It is similar to the role attributed to the thorough professional preparedness – the people can feel that their work is secure are those who are thoroughly prepared, accurate and practical, probably regardless of the work (not including physical work).

Table 16. *Advanced logic (Mean scores of the value circles)*

	Mention	Not mention
Intellectual incentive	12.00	11.37
Security in connection with work	11.53	10.73
Financial compensation	10.31	10.87
Creativity	12.44	11.89

“Advanced logic” as the feature of the graduated professional shows a double “image”: those who consider “advanced logic” important prefer intellectual incentive and creativity from among the value circles – mentioning together the feature and the value circles seems to be “natural” as well as the less frequent choice of financial matters. “Security in connection with work” seems to give a frame to them, that is those who regard “advanced logic” important are rather creative than competitive type of people.

Table 17. *Legal knowledge (Mean scores of the value circles)*

	Mention	Not mention
Financial compensation	10.37	10.87

Those who accept “legal knowledge” as the knowledge of the professional consider finances a bit less important than those who did not choose legal knowledge. This result might indicate that the students see little connection between “legal knowledge” and finances. Rather, it is about the necessary legal knowledge in connection with any work or job. Additionally, those who possess more of this type of knowledge are less material than those who do not mention it, that is “if you are familiar with the legal information then financial risks will not threaten you”.

Table 18. *Synthesizing knowledge (Mean scores of the value circles)*

	Mention	Not mention
Intellectual incentive	10.67	11.42
Altruism	11.44	12.10
Social Relations	11.54	12.56
Management	9.31	8.55

“Synthesizing knowledge” seems to appear as a component of management in the students’ professional image and not as some kind of theoretical or analyzing knowledge. It shows that the value circle of intellectual incentive, altruism and social relations are more important for those who did not choose synthesizing knowledge as the characteristic feature of the knowledge of the professional. Taking the choices regarding the features and the preferences of the good professional into consideration, the students seem to characterize management with extensive knowledge, general awareness and synthesizing knowledge, but this knowledge is not theoretical or analytical knowledge. Rather it is practical and directed toward the organization.

Table 19. *Openness toward new things (Mean scores of the value circles)*

	Mention	Not mention
Security in connection with work	9.93	10.79
Physical surrounding	9.42	10.44
Management	7.98	8.60
Creativity	12.32	11.90

“Openness toward the new” as the possible feature of the professional shows typical relationships. Those who name this feature as the characteristic feature of certain professions will prefer creativity as a value circle, which seems to be totally obvious. Security in connection with work, physical environment and management seem to be less important for them. It also means that they see the “managers” with synthesizing knowledge but – as noted – less open to new things. On the other hand those who are open to new things will consider security in connection with work and physical environment less important. We have seen that this goes together with thorough professional knowledge and preparedness as well as with accuracy and practicality both in the case of the ideal image and in practice too. It can be said that those professionals who are open to new things are prepared and practical. Self-improvement as a possible ability of the professional, with respect to their knowledge showed no significant differences with the value circles.

Summary

In the “good professional” the peculiarities of the students’ professional image are characterized by the “*expressive*” (flexible, committed, helpful, emphatic and having good interpersonal abilities) and “*instrumental*” (extensive knowledge, determination, accuracy) groups. The expectations of the students referring to the “ideal professional” seem to correspond with the professionalization patterns of the jobs. In case of the “graduated professionals” the situation is different: the students emphatically emphasize *thorough professional knowledge* in connection with the knowledge and abilities of the graduated professional. Other knowledge elements, or types, and professional abilities are considered less important. Essential differences can be seen in the images of the good professional and the graduated professional: the ideal professional is characterized by the sketched “expressive” and “instrumental” elements, while the image of the “graduated professional” is rather lean: they should be professionally prepared, generally informed, must communicate well and must be sufficiently empathic.

The students’ work-value preferences are surprising in more relations. In connection with the work-value circles the knowledge and abilities of the

professional are emphasized by organizational and institutional respects. This is demonstrated by what they think about the “professionally prepared” professional: They place the good or ideal professional on the *professional preparedness, determination, commitment* axis. “Helpful” will be those who do not consider organizational and institutional components important in work but the human components and groups relations. They are less motivated by working conditions as opposed to the group influences and group dynamism. At the same time they give a lesser role to the features that go together with group influences that are shown in the study. Now students consider the formal organization more important than the informal groups. They will get to know their behaviors perhaps only in the world or work.

It is interesting how they see managers – more precisely the elements in connection with management. Students seem to characterize managers with extensive knowledge, general awareness and synthesizing knowledge, but this knowledge is not a theoretical or analytic one rather it is practical and orientates to the organization. One more element of the students' choice that is worth underlining is the openness to new things. In connection with management it indicates that they see “managers” as having synthesizing knowledge but being less open to new things. However, they consider the prepared and practical professional to be open to new things.

Appendices

Rank and average of the value circles in the total sample

Value circles (Rank in the total sample)	Average	Standard Deviation
1. Variety	12.54	2.02
2. Social Relations	12.52	2.25
3. Self-assertion	12.43	1.97
4. Altruism	12.07	2.55
5. Creativity	11.91	2.22
6. Prestige	11.50	2.28
7. Intellectual incentive	11.39	2.23
8. Work performance	11.35	2.01
9. Independence	11.13	1.99
10. Hierarchy	11.09	2.36
11. Financial compensation	10.85	2.59
12. Security in connection with work	10.76	3.02
13. Physical surrounding	10.40	2.73
14. Aesthetics	9.57	2.55
15. Management	8.58	2.70
N = 3158		

Source: DETEP 2001-2008.

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