

MATERIALISM, EMPATHY AND WILLINGNESS TO HELP AS CORRELATES OF UNIVERSITY AND FACULTY SELECTION

SABINA KOŁODZIEJ

Kozminski University,

Jagiellonska Str. 57, Warsaw, Poland

E-mail address: skolodziej@kozminski.edu.pl



ABSTRACT

The article presents results of two studies on the issue of individual characteristics as factors related to the choice of the type of university or faculty. The study 1 is focused on the level of materialism as well as the definition of a life success formulated by private and state university students. The study 2 analyses the propensity to help other people and the level of empathy among pedagogics and business students. Studies were conducted with DSM (Górnik-Durose, 2002) scale measuring materialism and designed life- success questionnaire (study 1) or IRI scale developed by Davis (1980) measuring the level of empathy (study 2). The sample amounted to 92 respondents in both studies. Results show that private university students are characterized by a higher level of materialism than public university students. Students from private university, in comparison with state university students, also score higher success in life of a person with higher income. According to the results of study 2, students of pedagogics declare higher willingness to help than business students and are characterized as experiencing more positive feelings for other people who are in a difficult situation.

Key words: materialism, empathy, willingness to help, success, education, students

INTRODUCTION

In the broader literature on career counseling and human resource management the role of personality determinants in particular profession choice, as well as achieving success in the chosen profession is often emphasized. However, the majority of these studies are focused on personality traits that may contribute to a better fit of the individual to requirements of a specified job, and analyze such features as creativity, resistance to stress or risk propensity (Farsides, & Woodfield, 2003; Wu, Foo & Turban, 2008; Brandstatter, 2011; Saklofske et al., 2012; de Haro, Castejon, & Gilar, 2013). But rather rarely researchers undertake the issue of individual characteristics as factors related to the choice of the type of university or faculty. However, beliefs and opinions on the personality characteristics of students of

different faculties, as well as various universities are present in the social awareness, especially in Poland (CBOS, 2013). This country is an example of a European country, where the qualitative and quantitative change in the higher education system was one of the consequences of socio-economic transformation.

One, among many different consequences of this transformation, was the emergence of private schools providing services at every stage of the education process. The necessity to pay tuition fees for educational services that are offered for free in state institutions results in different social perception of graduates from private schools. The most common opinion is that the state school diploma is worth more than private one (CBOS, 2013). In addition, the height of tuition fees creates a social barrier limiting access to the school (although scholarships are offered by many private schools). Perhaps for this reason, students from private schools are considered as more materialistic than from state schools.

Materialism is widely known and used in the public sphere but conceptualized in various ways. Some authors define materialism as a personal value that demonstrates the importance of personal possessions (Richins, & Dawson, 1992) or personality traits that express people's orientation towards possessions (Belk, 1988). According to Browne and Kaldenberg (1997) materialism is a cluster of values and traits that focus on possessions. Holt (1995) stated that materialism describes the use of goods and people's perception of those goods value. The majority of those definitions emphasize the negative consequences of materialism, such as envy and possessiveness (Belk, 1988), reduction in the importance of interpersonal relations (Kasser, 2002) or excessive attachment to products and simultaneous reduction of the rank of experiences (Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2003). Comprehensive analysis of the concept of materialism and theoretical approaches functioning in this area was carried out by Schrum and colleagues, who developed the following definition of materialism: "the extent to which individuals attempt to engage in the construction and maintenance of the self through the acquisition and use of products, services, experiences, or relations that are perceived to provide desirable symbolic value" (Schrum et al., 2013, p. 1180). In this definition authors expand the possible ways of acquiring material goods that means not only buying but also receiving and other non-purchase means. Moreover, authors accentuate the use of those goods and extend the definition by including services, experiences and relationships, that in previous definitions were placed in opposition to materialism. This allows us to see that the symbolic nature of the acquisition and use of goods is a signal in today's world. Finally, authors indicate functions of materialism as a construction and maintenance of the self through possessions.

The approach proposed by Schrum and team (2013) indicated that materialistic motives may not only be fulfilled through the consumption of material goods and services (expensive journeys), but also can be satisfied symbolically by developing appropriate social relationships (well-off, well-

-known friends or attractive partner), and the pursuit of certain experiences (expensive sports or hobbies). In such a broad definition of materialism it can be assumed that one of the forms of its manifestation can also be choosing studies at a private university with the necessity to pay tuition fees (at private university both full-time as well as part-time students pay tuition fees), especially in a country where there is a wide range of similar studies offered at state universities, with no tuition fees (in the case of Polish state universities tuition fees are paid only by part-time students). In this case, tuition fees serve as an additional, informal selection criteria (in addition to the formal university criteria) deciding on belonging to a particular social group.

Another psychological feature that is relatively linked with a specific profession is empathy. According to the literature review, empathy is often considered as an attribute related to the choice of helping and care professions, e.g. nurse, midwife or doctor (Austin et al., 2005; McKenna et al., 2011; Bugaj et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2016). However, some researchers claim that empathy is also associated with the psycho-pedagogic profile of the teacher (Tettegah, & Anderson, 2007; Suditu et al., 2011). Empathy is a theoretical construct present in the field of philosophy since the early 18th century and more recently in psychology (Davis, 1980; Hoffman, 2000; Tettegah, & Anderson, 2007). It can be defined as a universal moral emotion, existing in many societies as well as an emotion aroused under the influence of someone else's experience. Empathy may relate to both positive (joy, happiness, excitement) and negative (sadness, fear, shame). Therefore, Hoffman (2000) defined empathy as involving an affective response with a focus on the other person more than one's self. There was a dispute over the nature of this phenomenon - whether it is emotional or cognitive. More recent literature indicates the complexity of this concept, citing four dimensions of empathy distinguished by Davis (1980): personal distress, empathic concern, perspective-taking and fantasy.

According to Zhou et al. (2003) "empathy motivates helping others and the desire for helping others, as well as inhibiting aggression, facilitates people's social competence for interacting with others, and provides a sense of connection among people" (p. 269). Therefore, it is linked with socially oriented professions, where empathy is essential for patient and client care. Similarly, empathy is considered as an important disposition for teachers and educators in order to facilitate positive relationships among students as well as students and teachers (Tettegah, & Anderson, 2007). Eisenberg with team (1991) claim that "empathy plays a significant role in promotion of positive behaviour such as helping and interpersonal understanding, as well, as in inhibiting aggression and antisocial behaviour, improvements in the measurement of empathy will benefit research on optimal functioning". (p. 279). The relation between the four aspects of empathy distinguished by Davis (1980) and faculty selection (pedagogical vs. business) is analyzed in the present study.

ISSUES OF CONDUCTED RESEARCH

As it was stated above, the appearance of private universities was connected with the process of political transformation in Poland. Another example of this change was the unprecedented increase in the number of students enrolled at tertiary level of education. According to the OECD (2012) statistics 52% of young Poles aged up to 25 years were studying or had the university degree in 2010, which placed Poland in the first place of all the analyzed countries (the further places were taken by Australia – 50% - and Ireland – 49%). Achieving such a result was possible thanks to the private universities network created in the last quarter of century, that widened the educational offers of previously existing state universities. As a result of this development the number of private universities in Poland exceeds the number of state universities. According to the above cited OECD data, the private sector participation in higher education in Poland also achieved the highest score.

At the same time, along with a visible increase in the number of students and people with higher levels of education (Poland is at the forefront of countries with the fastest growth in the number of people with higher education within the European Union) the opinion about the decline in the quality of education at university level has become quite common. According to these voices, rapid quantitative growth did not entail qualitative improvement, understood as the adaptation of the educational offer to the changing demands of the labor market. In fact, Poland is also a country with a very high percentage of young people unemployed, compared to other European countries. Moreover, number of faculties chosen by Polish students is not too wide, which also may contribute to the difficulties in entering the labour market. The most popular majors are economics and management, and the social sciences, especially Pedagogics and sociology. There has been a deficit of interest in technical studies for a long time, that are considered as difficult and whose enrollment requires expensive and extensive technical facilities, often not existing at the majority of private universities.

Notwithstanding the foregoing considerations, Polish public opinion shows the privileging of higher education in the state universities (although international rankings of universities often point out that Polish private institutions provide higher quality education than state ones). As a consequence, in the public mind the fact of studying at a private university combines with possession of certain values or personality traits. As stated above, one of differences mentioned in these opinions is the attachment to material values, that is considered as different in these two groups of students. Therefore, the first goal of the present study was to verify the above assumption. Therefore, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H1. The level of materialism is higher among private university students compared to students of state universities.

According to definitions presented above, a high level of materialism is associated with high grade of material possessions and desire for their collection. Therefore, it can be assumed that people who differ in regard to the level of materialism would also differ in defining the concept of life success, because values such as money, career, family life and leisure have various meanings for them. The second hypothesis referred to such differences:

H2. Life success is defined differently by students from private and state university.

Similarly, representatives of the professions involved in the provision of educational and care services are considered as people characterized by greater sensitivity to the suffering and to needs of others, that is identified as empathy and higher honesty and reliability. In accordance with the results of public opinion surveys (CBOS, 2006) teachers are in Poland the third group of professionals in the ranking of solidity and honesty. It can be assumed that such characteristics can be seen among candidates to this profession, that was the basis for the next assumptions in this study:

H3. Students of pedagogics are more prone to help others than business students.

H4. Pedagogical faculty students have higher level of empathy than business faculty students.

In order to verify those hypotheses two studies were conducted. Results are shown below.

METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

Questionnaire surveys were conducted among students from three different Polish universities: one private and two state.

In the first study, aimed at measuring the differences in the level of materialism and determinants of life success two questionnaires were used. Materialism was measured with the DSM scale (Górnik-Durose, 2002). According to the author of the scale, materialism is defined as a multidimensional, three-layered theoretical construct. The upper layer is functional (instrumental) materialism, meaning that a person accumulates material goods because they are necessary to ensure the fulfillment of the individual's needs. The middle layer is axiologic materialism – focused on measures that allow the acquisition of another's goods. The deepest layer is terminal materialism. That layer describes the addiction to prosperity and material goods. In this context materialism is a part of human nature, while its intensity differs across individuals (Górnik-Durose, 2002). The DSM scale contains 20 questions about material goods and personal opinions regarding those possessions. The questionnaire examines the importance of material goods for the person. Sample question: „People who own expensive goods, houses, cars, etc. have my admiration and respect”. The respondent's task was to select one of the responses illustrated by a Likert scale, where 1 experience strong

disagreement with the statement, while 7 meant strong agreement with the statement. The theoretical result therefore was in the range of 20-140. The analysis of reliability expressed with the Cronbach's α coefficient was 0.81.

Another variable included in this study was the evaluation of life success. This assessment was made using designed questionnaires, that provided three profiles of people with different levels of income as well as the amount of time spent with family and at work. The respondent's task was to read these characteristics, and then assess the life success of each person using the 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates small success in life, while 5 is high success in life.

In the second study the relationship between choosing pedagogical or business studies and the level of empathy and willingness to help other people was analyzed. The level of respondents' empathy was measured using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) developed by Davis (1980). This questionnaire consisted of 28 items answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "does not describe me well" to "describes me well". The measure has 4 subscales (with 7 items for each scale):

- a. Perspective Taking (PT) - referring to the spontaneous tendency to adopt others' psychological point of view. Sample question: "I try to look at everybody's side of disagreement before I make a decision".
- b. Fantasy (FS) - measuring the ability to understand emotions of fictitious characters as well as to imagine oneself in feelings and behaviour of the characters from the movies, books and plays. Sample question: "I really get involved with the feelings of the characters in a novel".
- c. Empathic Concern (EC) - assessing "other-oriented" feeling of sympathy and compassion for other people who are in a problematic situation. Sample item: "When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them".
- d. Personal Distress (PD) - evaluating the "self-oriented" negative feelings of personal anxiety in a situation of other people suffering and problems. Sample item: "I sometimes feel helpless when I am in the middle of a very emotional situation".

The minimum score for each of the scales was 0 and maximum 28. According to the data obtained by the author of the questionnaire (Davis, 1980), it had very high reliability coefficients at each of the separate scales. The Cronbach's α were following: a) Perspective Taking - 0.75 (men) and 0.78 (women); b) Fantasy - 0.78 (men) and 0.75 (women); c) Empathic Concern - 0.72 (men) and 0.70 (women); d) Personal Distress - 0.78 (men and women).

Propensity to help others was measured using a designed questionnaire. The questionnaire contained description of six hypothetical cases where there was a possibility to help people (friends or strangers), who found themselves in a difficult situation. Respondent had to define his/her own tendency to help in a particular case on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 meant definitely yes, and 5 - definitely not. In addition, subjects were asked to state the amount of money (in the range 0-12 500 €, of their own money not needed

in the near future) they would be able to devote to the charity foundation chosen by themselves.

The study 1 was conducted on a group of 40 people (including 27 women). Half of the respondents were students of the private Polish university while the second part were studying at the state university. Both groups consisted of full-time students. Age of the subjects was in the range from 19 to 26 years, with the mean of 20,92. In the second study 52 respondents participated (including 42 women) at the age from 20 to 28 (mean 21,94). The vast preponderance of women in this study was due to the specificity of the pedagogical studies (in the group were only women). In this study business students were recruited from a private university while pedagogical were from a state university. All respondents were full-time students, as in the first study.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The first study focused on the relationship between the university ownership form and its' students' materialistic orientation. The following graph shows the mean score in the questionnaire measuring the level of materialism (DSM) in distinguished two groups of students.

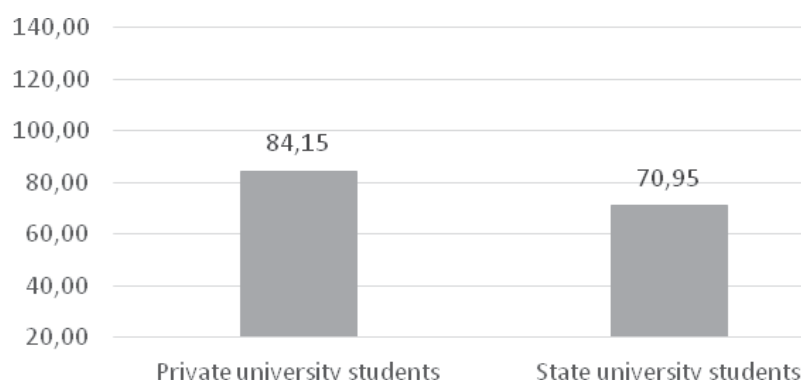


Figure 1: The mean level of materialism among students from private and state university.

Source: Own research

According to the above graph, private university students were characterized by higher levels of materialism than state university students. The significance of these differences has been confirmed by the Student's t test, which amounted to 2.32, $p < 0.003$. This result confirmed the first hypothesis, claiming the higher level of materialism among students from private university in comparison with the level of materialism among state university students.

The second step of the conducted analysis aimed at measuring the expected differences in relation to the evaluation of the success in life among the two identified groups of students. In order to verify the second hypothesis

respondents were presented with descriptions of three people spending different amounts of time at work and with family and having different levels of earned income: 1) Person A – relatively short working time, a lot of time spent with family, low income; 2) Person B – time spent at work proportional to the time spent with the family, average earnings; 3) Person C – a large number of hours spent at work, a very few with family, very high salaries.

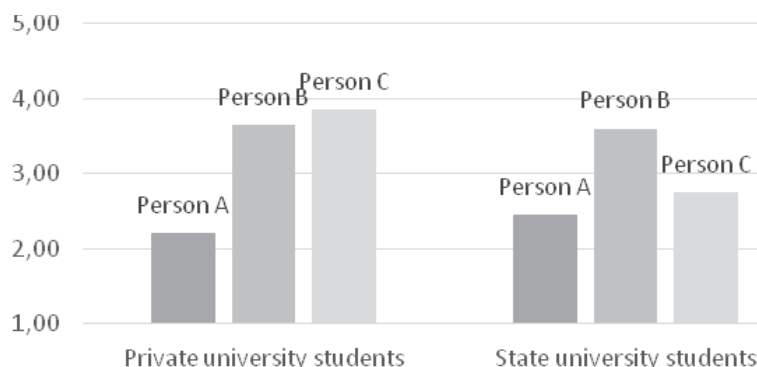


Figure 2: The life success evaluation of three different people by private and state university students.

Source: Own research

Analyzing the chart above, it can be stated that private university students assessed the highest success in life to the richest person (Person C, mean score 3.85), while the lowest to the low-income person (Person A, mean score 2.2). State university students rated the highest success in life to the person with average income as well as balanced work and family time (Person B, mean score 3.6). The evaluations of the person A and C were similar among state university students.

Due to the fact that the distribution of these variables deviated from the normal distribution, in order to verify the second hypothesis an analysis based on non-parametric statistics was carried out. The results were presented in the table below.

Table 1. The analysis of the differences in the assessment of life success among students from private and state university.

Person A	Mean range	Z	Significance
Private university students	19.20	-0.745	-
State university students	21.80		
Person B	Mean range	Z	Significance
Private university students	20.60	-0.058	-
State university students	20.40		
Person C	Mean range	Z	Significance
Private university students	25.60	-2.849	0,004
State university students	15.40		

Source: Own research

The conducted analyzes indicated a partial confirmation of the second established hypothesis - students from private university significantly scored the life success higher of person C, who was characterized by the highest levels of income, but also the highest number of hours spent at work. There were no significant differences in regard to the students' evaluation of the two other personal characteristics. These findings are consistent with the results indicating that people with higher levels of materialism tend to price the value of other people through the prism of their possession of material goods. Intangible goods, however, such as the ability to spend time with the loved ones are priced much lower and do not constitute the life success of the individual.

The study 2 focused on the relationship between chosen personality trait (empathy) and faculty selection as well as willingness to help others. In order to verify the next hypothesis, assuming that pedagogics students are more prone to help other people, a questionnaire measuring the tendency to help was developed. Mean scores for each item obtained by the two groups were presented in Figure 3. The graph specified behavior undertaken in order to help friends or strangers.

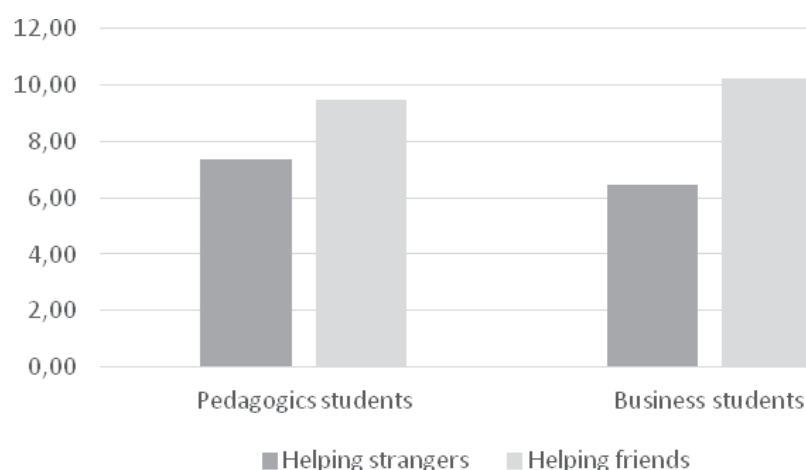


Figure 3: The mean willingness to help other people among pedagogical and business faculty students.

Source: Own research

Both groups were characterized by higher propensity to take actions aimed at helping friends than strangers, that is a well-known fact. However, while students of pedagogics were more likely to help strangers, business students proved to be a bit more helpful in relation to their friends. The statistical analysis showed significant difference only in relation to the propensity to help strangers ($t = 2,24$; $p < 0,03$), showing that pedagogical faculty students declared higher willingness to help than business students. This finding was in line with the stated hypothesis.

Furthermore, students were asked to declare the amount of money (in €) they would be able to devote to charity. The obtained result indicated signifi-

cant differences in regard to the money declared by two groups of students, that was showed in Table 2.

Table 2. The t-Students test on the differences in the tendency to support charitable organizations among students of pedagogical and business faculty.

The amount of money devoted to charity	Mean	t	Significance level
Pedagogics students	668.52	2,19	0,03
Business students	313.50		

Source: Own research

According to the above result, the group consisted of pedagogical faculty students proved to be significantly more generous in comparison to the business students. Therefore, both the analysis and the results shown in Figure 3 provided evidences to support hypothesis 3.

The last field adopted in the study hypotheses related to differences in the level of empathy among students of pedagogical and business faculty. This variable was measured using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, that consisted of four scales: Perspective Taking (PT); Fantasy (FS); Empathic Concern (EC); Personal Distress (PD). The mean scores obtained in the study was presented in the following figures.

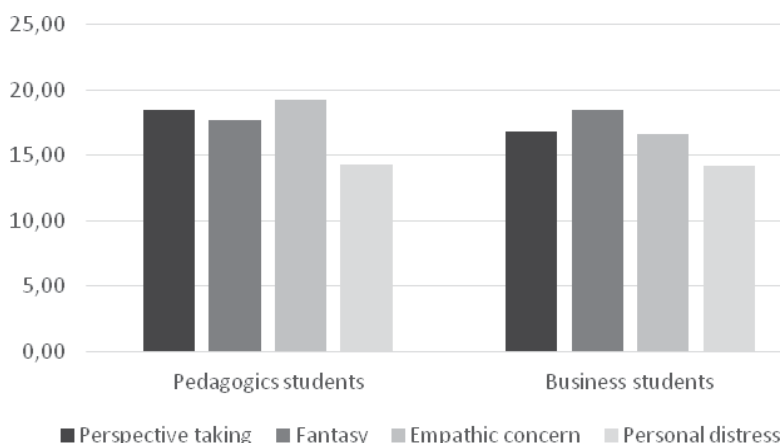


Figure 4: The mean level of four dimensions of empathy among students of pedagogical and business faculty.

Source: Own research

The results obtained using IRI questionnaire showed a similar level of four empathy scales distinguished by Davis (1980) among pedagogical and business students, as shown on the graph. In order to verify the hypothesis assuming that students of pedagogical faculty had higher level of empathy in comparison to business students the following analysis was conducted.

Table 3. The t-Students test on the differences in empathy among students of pedagogical and business faculty.

Perspective Taking	Mean	t	Significance
Pedagogics students	18.44	1.39	-
Business students	16.88		
Fantasy	Mean	t	Significance
Pedagogics students	17.70	-0.47	-
Business students	18.44		
Empathic Concern	Mean	t	Significance
Pedagogics students	19.22	3.07	0.003
Business students	16.68		
Personal Distress	Mean	t	Significance
Pedagogics students	14.30	0.07	-
Business students	14.20		

Source: Own research

According to the data, the two analyzed groups of students (of pedagogical and business faculty) significantly differed in regard to one out of four dimensions of empathy: empathic concern. Pedagogics students were characterized as experiencing more positive feelings for other people who are in a difficult situation. The mean level of the other aspects of empathy did not differentiate the two groups of respondents, therefore, the fourth hypothesis was only partly confirmed.

DISCUSSION

The present studies were conducted in order to verify assumptions about the relationship between specific individual features and type of university and faculty selection. According to the literature review and public opinion surveys, people assign specific personality traits to students at private or state university in Poland as well as to representatives of specific professions. The relevance of these adjustments was the subject of both presented studies.

The first study focused on the differences in the level of materialism and life success evaluation between students from private and state university. Results of the conducted analysis showed that private and state university students indeed differed with reference to this feature. Private university students achieved higher level of materialism in comparison to state university students. This indicated that the choice of university type may not only be associated with the objective factors, relating to the quality of education. The necessity to pay for tuition, especially when state universities have similar educational offer, may be treated as additional, informal recruitment criteria and a sign of material status.

In line with previous findings presented by Schrum et al (2013), the symbolic nature of materialism can manifest itself in social reality shaping, where

one of the components of this reality may be studying at a private university. Moreover, the significantly higher rating of life success of a person with high income (despite the lack of time for personal and family relationships) made by private university students (the indirect measure of materialism) again indicated higher materialistic motives in this group.

The second referred study analyzed the differences in the level of empathy and willingness to help others between students of pedagogical and business faculties. Public opinion surveys and previous studies showed that empathy is desirable not only among the medical and paramedical professions but also among teachers. On the contrary, business students are considered as more materialistic and less willing to selfless help. As assumed, students – candidates as educators – showed significantly higher willingness to help strangers as well as declaring more money for a charitable organization.

With reference to the last formulated hypothesis, it can be stated that students of pedagogics in comparison to business students differ in one out of four aspects of empathy – empathic concern. As it was stated above, this scale measures sympathy and concern for others and refers to the emotional dimension of this phenomenon. In fact, sensitivity to the needs and feelings of others, especially in difficult situation, is a desirable feature of the teacher (Schulzhenko, & Sayko, 2015). This result, together with the higher willingness to help others, both in material and immaterial ways, shows the relevancy of social assessment regarding this profession.

In conclusion, both studies indicated non-formal, associated with personality, factors that may influence the choice of the faculty or university. Those factors may not only lead to the choice of faculty consistent with personality profile and individual preferences. It may also contribute to the fulfilment of other needs, through the choice of a particular university.

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