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Is Double-Degree Goal Equally Good for All Students? : Moderating Impact of Interval Activity Style

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Is Double-Degree Goal Equally Good for All Students? Moderating Impact of Interval Activity Style

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Similarly as in the USA, more and more students in Poland decide to pursue multiple degrees in order to improve their chances of success on the job market. The aim of the study (N = 1070) was to investigate some differences between students who aim at double degree with those who study one major only. The role of the range of goal categories connected with interval vs. point activity style (Wieczorkowska & Burnstein 1999, 2004 a, b) was analyzed. Data confirmed that Intervalists are more likely to choose two majors and if they do that they feel better than if they do not (which shows the importance of Goal-Activity Style congruence). Limitations of the study and further research directions are discussed.

Keywords: action style, goal setting, double-degree students.

Czy studia na drugim kierunku służą wszystkim studentom? Modyfikujący efekt przedziałowego stylu aktywności

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Podobnie jak w USA, coraz więcej studentów w Polsce podejmuje decyzję o równoległym studiowaniu więcej niż jednego kierunku, w celu zwiększenia szans na osiągnięcie sukcesu na obecnym rynku pracy. Celem badania (n = 1070) było rozpoznanie czy podejmowanie więcej niż jednego kierunku studiów ma związek z przedziałowym vs. punktowym stylem aktywności (Wieczorkowska, Burnstein 1999, 2004a, b). Wskazano na różnice pomiędzy studentami dwu- i jednokierunkowymi o przedziałowym vs. punktowym stylu aktywności w zakresie doświadczania negatywnych emocji oraz oczekiwania sukcesu zawodowego i akceptacji mało atrakcyjnych ofert pracy. Omówiono ograniczenia przeprowadzonych badań, przedstawiono kierunki dalszych poszukiwań.

Słowa kluczowe: styl aktywności, wyznaczanie celów, studenci dwukierunkowi.

JEL: J24, J29

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Observations of young people's educational choices allow us to differentiate between at least two strategies of preparation for their future professional careers. Some students try to gather as many educational resources as possible (Pawłowska, 2016), broaden their knowledge, and pursue various opportunities – “just in case”; others focus on a limited number of resources, but try to deepen their knowledge, while exploring one, often relatively narrow discipline (Turska, 2014). The first group may be called “generalists”, the second – “specialists”.

One of the strategies which may be used by generalists is to pursue multiple majors and degrees, either in related (e.g. business management and economics; so-called “hyper-specialists”) or distinct fields (e.g. business management and physics; so-called “hypo-specialists”; Pitt, Laster, 2011). Many argue (Friedman et al., 2002) that such an approach is beneficial, as interdisciplinary majors may enhance students' ability to think critically and analytically, and find themselves on the quickly changing job market. As the 20th century problems become more complex, interconnected, and drawing from many areas, traditional unidisciplinary majors become increasingly out-of-date (Kolodny, 1998). On top of that, a decision to pursue a double major may also be rewarded financially, with an increase of approximately 2.3% to 3.4% of post-graduation earnings, compared to those of single majors (Del Rossi & Hersch, 2008; Pitt & Tepper, 2012).

Considering these advantages, it is not surprising to find an increasing number of multiple majors. For instance, at Georgetown University, the number of double majors grew from **14%** in 1996 to **23%** in 2002; at Washington University, from **28%** in 1997 to **42%** in 2002 (Lewin, 2012). About 25% to 35% of students at top graduate schools of business decided to pursue double majors at the beginning of the new century, an increase from 15–20% observed just a few years earlier (Weber, 2003).

Studying two or more majors has also appealed to some students in Poland. Unfortunately, data shows that only **51%** of students who enrolled for a second major in 2012 continued it during the second semester, with merely **28%** making it to the fourth semester (compared to 76% for the general population of Polish students; MNiSW, 2014; Figure 1). Considering such a **high attrition rate**, it is important to explore the differences between students who aim at a double degree with those who study one major only.

So far, we know of no studies that approached the problem of individual predispositions to studying more than one discipline. I decided to compare one vs. two degrees students regarding the differences in interval vs. point activity style based on the theory proposed by Wieczorkowska-Siarkiewicz (1992).

The theoretical framework and results of the research (Wieczorkowska-Nejtardt, 1998; Wieczorkowska-Wierzińska, 2011) can be summarized as follows:

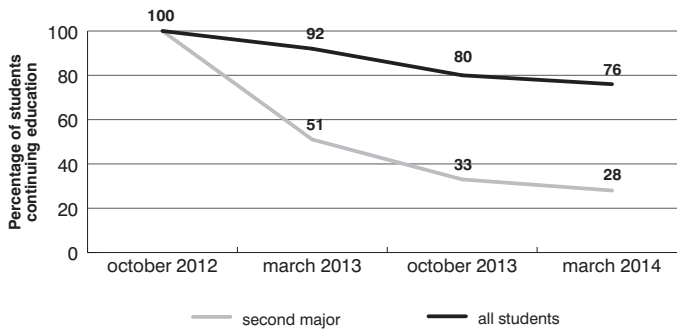


Fig. 1. Percentage of students who continue education in consecutive semesters (all students vs. those who enrolled for a second major) based on MNISW, 2014 data

- 1) Decisions in everyday life, whether in a trivial domain or in an important one, such as choosing your career path, require us to categorize the various available options into three sets: (1) options we reject, (2) options we accept, and (3) options we are indifferent to. The second subset is called the ACCEPTANCE set or GOAL-category¹ (Wieczorkowska & Burnstein, 1999).
- 2) The size of ACCEPTANCE set (range of goal-category) has a number of important implications.
 - a. Since our cognitive resources are limited, the BIGGER the ACCEPTANCE set, the less “cognitive space” is left for cognitive representation of the goal and planning of how to achieve it. In other words, the broader the goal category, the less precise and detailed is the planning.
 - b. The bigger the size of acceptance set
 - (1) the less precise the cognitive representation of a singular goal;
 - (2) the less meticulous the planning;
 - (3) the bigger the number of comparisons we have to make to choose the best option;
 - (4) the longer the time and the more energy is consumed by the process of choosing;
 - (5) the lower the frustration and the easier the substitution when our goal is blocked, so the easier the adaption to ordinary everyday changes;
 - (6) the easier the distraction when trying to do something;
 - (7) the more difficulty in the estimation of the time needed to perform a single task.

The consequences of the tendency to reject a lot and form narrow acceptance sets: sequentiality, meticulousness in planning, focus on details,

etc. is called **Point Activity Style**. People who express this style strongly are called **Pointists**.

The consequences of the tendency **to accept a lot** and form broad acceptance sets: simultaneity called multitasking, imprecise planning, lack of concern for details, focus on big picture, etc. is called **Interval Activity Style**. People who express this style strongly are called **Intervalists**.

The major differences between the point and interval activity styles are summarized in Table 1.

Point style	Interval style
when making choices rejects a lot and forms NARROW goal-categories.	When making choices accepts a lot and creates BROAD goal-categories.
Tries to achieve one goal at a time.	Tries to achieve many goals at a time (multitasking) .
When comparing objects, “ the same ” means EXACTLY the same.	When comparing objects, “ the same ” means MORE or LESS the same.
Pays attention to detail and considers them important.	Does not pay attention to detail and considers them unimportant.
Carefully plans and prepares.	Does not plan or prepare carefully.
Reluctant to shift or substitute goals when current goal is blocked.	Readily switches or substitutes goals when a goal is blocked.
Rigidity: persists in attempts to complete an activity before switching to another.	Flexibility: readily gives up an activity before it is completed and switches to another.
Accurately estimates time needed to complete a task.	Unaware of or underestimates time needed to complete a task.

Tab. 1. Comparison of point and interval activity style. Source: Wieczorkowska & Burnstein, 2004b.

The range of goal category (size of acceptance set) depends on several factors, such as the importance of the domain, costs of bad choices, the person’s resources and the resources afforded by the environment, so it is **more variable over the domains than activity style**. From a rational point of view, the best is to behave flexibly – once Point-like, once Interval-like, but it was proven that often-used action strategies may acquire functional autonomy and become more stable *action styles*.

Adaptive value of point and interval styles (also in the context of educational choices) depends on the characteristics and properties of the environment (Wieczorkowska & Burnstein, 2004a, b):

1. when the resources and options are limited, and/or the environment is unpredictable and changing rapidly, intervalists function better, due to

their ability to accept more diverse offers and simultaneously focus on many tasks;

2. when the resources and options are plentiful, and/or the environment is relatively easy to control by an individual, point style is more adaptive, as it protects from analyzing too many offers and allows achieving mastery in the chosen fields of interest.

Referring these considerations to the situation of young people's transition from higher education to the labor market, one should note the important differences between these two environments. In the process of education, young people are able to benefit from a whole range of various resources offered to them by both the university, as well as other institutions. In such a situation, pointists should function better, due to their ability to focus on a limited number of options. However, the main purpose of education is to prepare students for their entrance to the labor market – a fast changing environment characterized by limited resources and relatively few opportunities to find satisfying employment. For this reason, it is adaptive for students to prepare and collect different skills and competencies “just in case” – a strategy preferred by intervalists. Such a conclusion is supported by the results of a survey performed among the unemployed (Wieczorkowska & Burnstein, 2004a) which showed that interval strategists found a new job significantly quicker ($M = 5.96$ months) than point strategists ($M = 11.82$ months). This trend has been particularly strong for women: the point strategists were out of work for on average of 22.4 months, the interval strategists – 9.47 months. The same pattern was discovered by the authors in the analysis of the Polish General Social Survey data.

Current study

My study aimed at answering the question whether students with a broader goal category (trying to achieve a double-degree goal) differ from those with a narrow goal category (focus on a single-degree goal) in respect to their actions style, expectation of professional success and acceptance for less attractive job offers.

Three hypotheses were formulated:

- 1) Double-degree goal is more adaptive and, as a consequence, more common among intervalists than pointists.
- 2) Students with a DOUBLE-degree goal, comparing to those with a ONE-degree goal:
 - declare higher expectation of professional success,
 - experience less negative affect, and
 - show a lower level of adaptability by acceptance for less attractive job offers.
- 3) Students with Goal-Activity Style [GAS] congruence (double-degree goal & interval style, one-degree goal & point style), comparing to those with

GAS incongruence (double-degree goal & point style, one-degree goal & interval style):

- declare higher expectation of professional success,
- experience less negative affect, and
- show a lower level of adaptability by acceptance for less attractive job offers.

Method

Sample

A total of 1070 students (66.7% females, 84.6% of the respondents were between 20 and 25 years old; 15.4% of respondents were older than 25 years old) took part in the survey conducted in 2011 and 2012.

Variables

Goal-Category Range was measured by the **number of studied majors** – (1 major; more than 1 major).

Action style (Point vs. Interval) was measured by **Meticulousness Scale** consisting of 10 items ($\alpha = 0.827$) focused on the level of attention to detail and ways (simultaneous vs. sequential) of tasks performance. The mean score for the studied sample equaled $M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.59$. The MET10 scale has the following form.

Each item describes two strategies of behavior in a given situation. Respondents are asked to decide whether they behave/are: “like person A”, “rather like person A”, “rather like person B”, or “like person B”. They can also mark “?”, if they are not sure how to answer.

MET1. “Lack of paying attention to detail is characteristic of Person A’s actions. Person B likes when everything is worked out to the smallest detail.”
MET2. “Person A likes to know everything precisely. Person B doesn’t mind the lack of knowledge of details.”
MET3. “Person A doesn’t like tasks that require accuracy. Meticulousness is one of Person’s B strong points.”
MET4 “Person A is always looking for missing notes with some important information. Person B knows exactly where all such notes are.”
MET5 “Person A’s knowledge is broad, but not very precise. Person B’s knowledge is very precise and detailed.”
MET6. “Person A likes situations and tasks that allow for disregarding details. Person B likes problems that require attention to details.”
MET7. “Person A has a tendency to ignore details. Person B considers details very important.”
MET8. “Person A tries to achieve several objectives simultaneously (‘Kill many birds with one stone’). Person B prefers to pursue them one by one.”

MET9. "While working, Person A makes frequent switches between different tasks. Person B doesn't like multitasking."
MET10. "Person A has to finish one task, before starting another. Person B starts the second task, deciding to get back to the first one later on."

	MET 1	MET 2	MET 3	MET 4	MET 5	MET 6	MET 7	MET 8	MET 9	MET 10
Like Person A	7.5	6.4	7.9	16.8	15.2	15.6	9.0	19.7	20.5	9.1
Rather like Person A	15.5	19.1	18.9	28.8	34.3	33.1	22.9	28.1	32.0	31.9
"I don't know"	4.5	3.8	6.8	5.8	10.7	12.4	9.1	5.2	5.2	7.5
Rather like Person B	39.8	31.9	38.5	31.2	31.7	30.4	41.0	30.0	26.9	31.5
Like Person B	32.7	38.8	27.9	17.4	8.1	8.5	18.0	16.9	15.4	20.1

Gender ("1" – male, "2" – female)

Tab. 2. Frequency (% of N=1070) responses to 10 Meticulousness scale items

Dependent variables

Expectations of success – an index was created by summing answers to the following 3 items (a = 0.756; response scale from 1 – "Definitely no" to 5 – "Definitely yes"):

E1 "I believe that skills and knowledge I have so far gained during my education will enable me to achieve success in my future career."
E2 "I am convinced that my efforts and commitment are sufficient to achieve success in the labor market."
E3 "I'm certain that I will be successful in my future professional career."

Adaptability – an index created by averaging the following two items (r = 0.393; response scale from 1 – "Definitely No" to 5 – "Definitely yes"):

F1 "Would you be willing to undertake a job that's incompatible with your field of study?"
F2 "Would you be willing to undertake a job that's below the level of your education?"

	F1	F2	E1	E2	E3
Definitely no	7.1	19.6	2.0	3.6	1.5
No	16.8	26.1	8.2	13.0	9.7
Don't know	31.7	36.3	41.1	39.3	41.8
Yes	35.2	15.9	33.6	29.7	28.6
Definitely yes	9.2	2.1	15.0	14.4	18.4

Tab. 3. Frequency (% of N=1070) of responses to 2 Adaptability and 3 Expectancy of Success scale items

Negative emotions – measured with the 9 items ($\alpha = 0.829$) coming from neuroticisms subscale of the NEO Five Factor Inventory:

N1 “When I’m under a great deal of stress, sometimes I feel like I’m going to pieces.”
N2 “I often feel tense and jittery.”
N3 “Sometimes I feel completely worthless.”
N4 “I rarely feel fearful or anxious.” (reversed)
N5 “I often get angry at the way people treat me.”
N6 “Too often, when things go wrong, I get discouraged and feel like giving up.”
N7 “I often feel helpless and want someone else to solve my problems.”
N8 “Sometimes I’m so ashamed I want to hide.”
N9 “I often feel inferior to others.”

Response scale: strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree.

	N1	N2	N3	N4	N5	N6	N7	N8	N9
Strongly disagree	15.7	11.0	22.9	14.7	12.5	12.5	18.6	19.5	18.8
Disagree	25.5	27.0	30.9	27.9	30.9	28.6	35.0	29.3	30.4
Neither agree nor disagree	20.7	27.9	20.4	27.0	27.1	28.7	26.6	23.4	28.4
Agree	23.1	26.1	20.3	24.9	23.1	23.7	16.3	20.7	16.9
Strongly agree	15.0	8.0	5.5	5.6	6.5	6.4	3.6	7.1	5.5

Tab. 4. Frequency (% of $N=1070$) of responses to nine items of Negative Emotions scale

Results

The correlations between the studied variables were analyzed (Table 5).

	Gender	Number of majors	Meticulousness	Negative emotions	Adaptability
Number of majors (ONE vs. TWO degree goal)	<i>r</i>	-0.079	1		
	<i>p</i>	0.010			
Meticulousness* (interval vs. point style)	<i>r</i>	0.075	-0.369	1	
	<i>p</i>	0.014	< 0.001		
Negative emotions	<i>r</i>	0.136	-0.207	0.150	1
	<i>p</i>	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	
Adaptability	<i>r</i>	0.030	-0.304	0.219	0.241
	<i>p</i>	0.328	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001
Expectations of success	<i>r</i>	-0.030	0.285	-0.208	-0.413
	<i>p</i>	0.332	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001

[*] The **higher the score** for the meticulousness scale, the stronger the tendency to use **POINT style (being precise and act in sequential way)**. The lower the MET score, the stronger the tendency to use Interval style.

Tab. 5. Correlation matrix for studied variables ($N = 1070$)

Expected success

It was also checked whether meticulousness and the number of chosen majors predict the expectation of success on the job market. It appeared (Table 6) that the higher the preference for interval strategies, the higher the expected success. Higher expectancy of success was also related to choosing more than one major of study. A significant interaction term (Figure 2) indicated that, just as for the previous dependent variables, the number of majors was related to expected success only for those preferring interval strategies of action (low MET). For these participants, choosing more than one major was related to a higher expectancy of success than pursuing only one major of study.

The regression model was significant and explained 14% of the variability in expected success, $F(4,1039) = 42.576, p < 0.001$.

	<i>B</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>
Intercept	10.861			
MET (high – pointists)	-0.180	0.091	-0.064	1.987*
# of majors	0.430	0.075	0.183	5.731***
MET x # of majors	-0.500	0.067	-0.236	7.512***
Gender	-0.029	0.139	-0.006	-0.210

Note: * $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$

Tab. 6. Summary of multiple regression analysis for DV: expectation of professional success

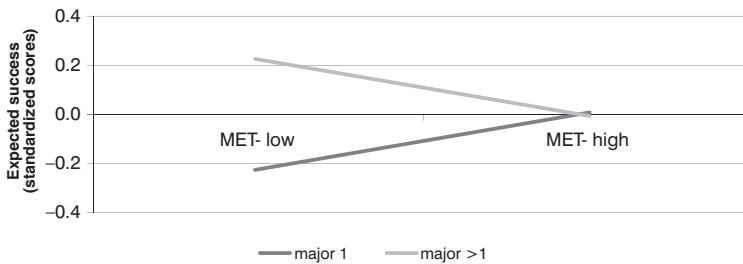


Fig. 2. Interactional effect of MET (LOW values for intervalists, HIGH for pointists) and # of majors on expectation of professional success

Adaptability

In the next step, a multiple regression analysis was performed to check whether adaptability (accepting jobs below/different than one's qualifications) can be predicted by a person's activity style (MET) and the number of majors a person chooses (see Table 7). Adaptability was predicted with

meticulousness (the higher the preference for point strategies, the more adaptability), the number of majors a person chose (choice of more than one major was related to lower adaptability).

As previously, adaptability was predicted by an interaction between the number of majors and meticulousness (see Figure 3). The impact of # of majors was bigger for intervalists (LOW meticulousness) than pointists (HIGH meticulousness). Intervalists aiming at one major only show more adaptability than those with more than one major.

The regression model was significant and explained 17% of the variability in adaptability, $F(4,1039) = 52.509, p < 0.001$.

	<i>B</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>
Intercept	2.727			
MET (high - pointists)	0.069	0.033	0.065	2.074*
# of majors	-0.174	0.028	-0.199	-6.336***
MET x # of majors	0.207	0.024	0.262	8.462***
Gender	0.010	0.051	0.006	0.195

Note: * $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$

Tab. 7. Summary of multiple regression analysis for DV: adaptability

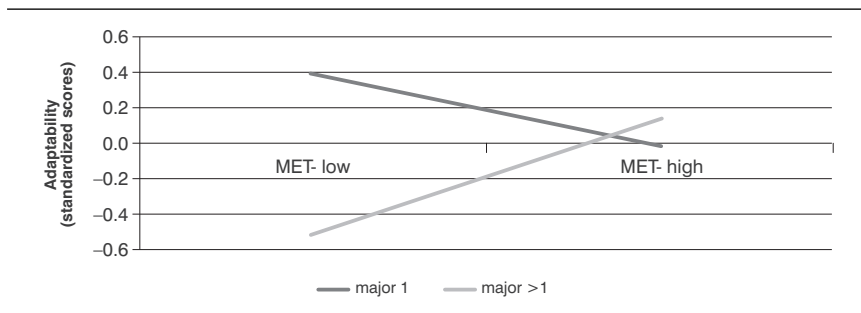


Fig. 3. Interactional effect of MET (LOW values for intervalists, HIGH for pointists) and # of majors on the level of adaptability

Negative emotions

A multiple regression analysis was performed in order to check whether negative emotions can be predicted by a person's preference for using point strategies (MET), as well the number of majors (one or more) a person chooses. The analysis revealed (Table 8) that negative emotions could be predicted with the number of majors a person chose (choosing two or more majors was associated with a lower level of negative emo-

tions) and gender (women more likely than men to declare more negative emotions).

More importantly, negative emotions were predicted by an interaction (Figure 4) between the number of majors and action style (meticulousness). The number of majors did not affect the level of negative emotions for pointists (highly meticulous students). With the increase in preference for interval style (low meticulousness), sticking to one major was associated with declaring more negative emotions than choosing more than one major (which is consistent with interval action style).

The regression model was significant and explained 10.2% of the variability in negative emotions, $F(4,1039) = 29.640$, $p < 0.001$.

	<i>B</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>
Intercept	2.372			
MET (high - pointists)	0.034	0.030	0.037	1.134
# of majors	-0.089	0.025	-0.117	-3.575***
MET x # of majors	0.143	0.022	0.209	6.5***
Gender	0.191	0.046	0.122	4.1457***

Note: *** $p < 0.001$

Tab. 8. Summary of multiple regression analysis for DV: negative emotions

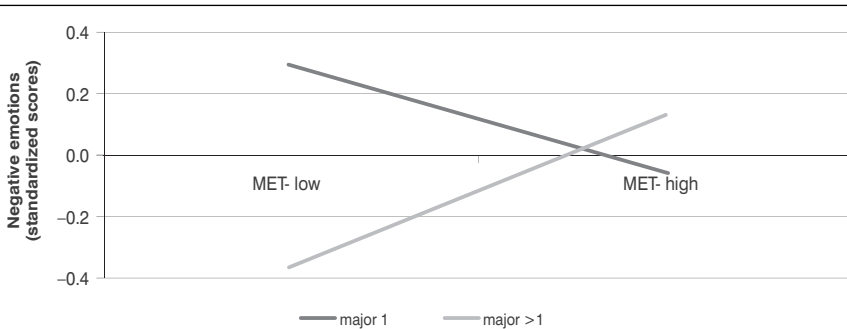


Fig. 4. Interactional effect of MET (LOW values for intervalists, HIGH for pointists) and # of majors on the level of negative emotions

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to investigate the role of individual differences in terms of suitability to pursue two or more degrees of study. Performed analyses confirmed that intervalists are more likely to choose double-degree goals than pointists (hypothesis 1). Intervalists tend to reject fewer options in a consideration set and are likely to form broad goal-

categories. In the context of education choices, intervalists are therefore less willing to narrow their opportunities to one degree only.

Students with a DOUBLE-degree goal, compared to those with a ONE-degree goal, declared higher expectations of professional success, experienced less negative affect, and showed a lower level of adaptability to less attractive offers (hypothesis 2). Students pursuing double-degree goals are likely to realize that their value on the job market is high and expect return on their investment of time and effort.

Hypothesis 3 regarding Goal-Activity Style congruence was confirmed for the intervalists only. It appeared that a one-degree goal had more negative effects for intervalists than a double-degree goal had for pointists. Intervalists with Goal-Activity Style incongruence (those who pursued one degree only) declared lower expectations of professional success, experienced more negative affect, and showed more adaptability to less attractive job offers than intervalists with Goal-Activity Style congruence. A similar pattern was visible for pointists only in terms of negative affect, which was a little stronger for pointists pursuing more than one degree. There was no difference for pointists in terms of the level of expected success and adaptability, regardless of the range of degree-goal.

Surprisingly, the relationship between meticulousness (interval vs. point action style) and adaptability was inconsistent with the theory. Intervalists should be more likely than pointists to accept less than ideal offers (adaptability) due to their wider areas of acceptance. The opposite was true for the analyzed data, if we look at the main effect of Activity Style only. Interaction term explains this surprising effect (Figure 3). Adaptability as the acceptance for a less attractive option is lower only for those intervalists who pursue a double-degree goal. Such individuals, who decided to invest a lot to gain educational resources and do so with accordance with their style of activity, know their value on the job market. Declarations of intervalists who decided to pursue a one-degree goal are consistent with theoretical expectations – they are more adaptable than pointists.

It is not clear why, in the analyzed sample, intervalists were more affected by GAS (Goal-Activity Style) Incongruence than were pointists. One of the reasons might relate to the characteristics of the sample. Since the correlation between meticulousness and the number of degree goals was quite large, and there were only 300 double-degree goal students (28%) in the whole sample, we may expect the number of double-degree pointists to be relatively small. What is more, we have no information on the disciplines chosen by the double-degree participants. It might be the case that pointists chose degrees that are closely related (hyper-specialization), while intervalists chose degrees in distant disciplines (hypo-specialization). In such a case, pointists would be challenging their action style to a lesser degree than intervalists, who pursued a one-degree goal. This interpretation would be worthy of investigation in further studies.

Endnote

- 1 When an intention to act appears, the ACCEPTANCE set is automatically converted into a GOAL-category.

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