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"How do I find myself, become successful, financially independent and experience the joys of youth?" Experiences of quarter-life crisis among Lithuanian students

SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

VILNIUS 2024

The dissertation was prepared between 2012 and 2023 at Vilnius University.

Academic supervisor – Prof. Dr. Arūnas Poviliūnas (Vilnius University, Social Sciences, Sociology – S 005).

This doctoral dissertation will be defended in a public/closed meeting of the Dissertation Defence Panel:

Chairman –**Prof. Dr. Boguslavas Gruževskis** (Vilnius University, Social Sciences, Sociology – S 005).
Members:
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Gabrielė Čičiurkaitė (Utah State University, Social Sciences, Sociology – S 005),
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sigita Kraniauskienė (Klaipėda University, Social Sciences, Sociology – S 005),
Prof. Dr. Paulius Skruibis (Vilnius University, Social Sciences, Psychology – S 006),
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rūta Žiliukaitė (Vilnius University, Social Sciences, Sociology – S 005).

The dissertation shall be defended at a public meeting of the Dissertation Defence Panel at 10:00 on 3 May 2024 in Room 201 of Vilnius University Faculty of Philosophy.
Address: Universiteto 9/1, Vilnius, Lithuania
Tel. +370 5 2667616; e-mail: info@fsf.vu.lt

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„Kaip atrasti save, tapti sėkmingu, finansiškai nepriklausomu ir patirti jaunystę?"
Lietuvos studentų amžiaus ketvirčio krizės patirtys

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Mokslinis vadovas – **prof. dr. Arūnas Poviliūnas** (Vilniaus universitetas, socialiniai mokslai, sociologija – S 005)

Gynimo taryba:

Pirmininkas – **prof. dr. Boguslavas Gruževskis** (Vilniaus universitetas, socialiniai mokslai, sociologija – S 005).

Nariai:

Doc. Dr. Gabrielė Čičiurkaitė (Utah State University, socialiniai mokslai, sociologija – S 005),

Doc. Dr. Sigita Kraniauskienė (Klaipėdos universitetas, socialiniai mokslai, sociologija – S 005),

Prof. Dr. Paulius Skruibis (Vilniaus universitetas, socialiniai mokslai, psichologija – S 006),

Doc. Dr. Rūta Žiliukaitė (Vilniaus universitetas, socialiniai mokslai, sociologija – S 005).

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TURINYS

ABSTRACT

1. PROBLEM, RELEVANCE, AND THEORETICAL APPROACHES OF THE STUDY

The rapid changes in the economy, labour market, education system, and other areas in industrialized and post-industrial countries during the second half of the 20th century led to pronounced new trends in becoming an adult, which social science researchers associate with completing education, leaving parental homes, entering the labour market, and starting families. It has been observed that people spend more time in the education system, marry and have children later, undergo longer and more problematic identity searches, live with their parents for longer and are financially dependent on them, enter stable employment later, and exhibit "yo-yo transitions" or "boomerang" tendencies in their life trajectories (Arnett 2004; 2006; 2007; Bradley and Devadason 2008; Côté 2000, 2006; Furlong 2009; Kraniauskienė 2011; Robinson 2015; Žukauskienė 2016; Walther 2006).

Sociologists and psychologists develop analytical tools to reflect and explain youth experiences, linking personal experiences and psychological factors with social context and structural factors. Jeffrey Arnett presented one attempt to conceptualize and contemplate contemporary young people's life trends two decades ago. It is the theory of emerging adulthood, which offered a new perspective on the life stage between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett 2000, 2004, 2007, 2007b). Considering the rapidly changing trends in youth life regarding identity searches, completing education, leaving parental homes, entering the labour market, and starting families, Arnett saw the need to analytically distinguish a new, qualitatively separate period and named it the *emerging adulthood* period. He describes it as a period for individuals aged approximately 18-29 in industrialized and post-industrial countries, whose characteristics differ not only from other age groups but also generally from any representatives of this

age group in history (Arnett et al. 2011: 4). According to him, this period is the most intense time for identity exploration and experimentation, during which individuals are most focused on themselves, have the most freedom and opportunities to change the direction of their lives because they are already independent from their parents (or their control is not as strong as before), but have not yet taken on long-term and freedom-restricting adult commitments. Furthermore, it is also a period of significant insecurity and instability regarding place of residence, relationships, education, work, and financial situation (and this instability, according to Arnett, is often a consequence of the aforementioned search for one's self). This period can also be defined as specific demographically: people spend more time in the education system, more frequently pursue higher education, change jobs, leave parental homes later, marry and have children later, more often opt for cohabitation, and remain at least partially dependent on their parents for longer. According to the youth researcher, the delayed completion of education, marriage, and parenthood age in the population (usually these events occur at the end of the third decade of life or later), as well as the prevalence of cohabitation (encouraged by the liberalization of sexual behaviour norms, where society does not condemn and practices sexual life outside of marriage), allow us to assume the existence of emerging adulthood in the country (Arnett 2004: 21). In summary, this period is characterized by dynamism, flux, pace, demographic diversity, and unpredictability (Arnett 2000: 471-477). It is the period between two more stable life stages: between the stability provided by the structure of adolescent life, parental care, and participation in the secondary education system, and the stability provided by adult commitments. Therefore, this age group among its members exhibits the greatest heterogeneity – in life choices and statuses. In this stage, there is more independence, responsibility, and autonomy than in adolescence, but less than in later stages of life.

Over the past two decades, the concept of emerging adulthood has taken a significant place in academic discourse, with various studies conducted worldwide based on its ideas. In order to unite representatives of different disciplines, the international organization "*The Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood*" was founded in 2008. The rapid institutionalization of the theory is also evidenced by the launch in 2013 of the interdisciplinary journal "*Emerging Adulthood*" and the international conference dedicated to this topic that is organised every few years. In 2015, at this conference, Oliver Robinson, a proponent of the theory of emerging adulthood, who is exploring crisis experiences in the third decade of life or in other words, the "dark" side of emerging adulthood, presented the concept of the quarter-life crisis (Robinson 2015b). Collins English Dictionary defines the phenomenon of the quarter-life crisis as anxiety about the direction and quality of one's life when in one's mid-twenties (Collins English Dictionary 2018). This concept began to spread in public discourse and also in popular culture around 2000, began to be articulated in the academic field about eight years later, and has not yet been examined in Lithuania. One of the most active authors in the academic discourse investigating the quarter-life crisis is the aforementioned Robinson, who, based on in-depth interviews with 22–40-year-old residents of the United Kingdom, developed a model of the quarter-life crisis comprising two types – "locked-out" and "locked-in" models (Robinson 2015a; 2018). The crisis of the first type is characteristic of young people aged 21-25 who fail or struggle to take on roles and responsibilities associated with social maturity that satisfy them. In attempting to become independent individuals and experiencing repeated failures, they feel disconnected from the adult world. The second type is typical of individuals aged 25-35 who have already acquired certain attributes of social maturity, and established a relatively clear and stable life structure, but find their current life situation unsatisfactory, feeling trapped in it – as if "locked" into previously assumed adult commitments. Both types of crisis are characterized by intense questioning of oneself, one's life, societal

norms, and standards, or as Robinson and Smith (2010a) termed it, "stormy search for self." In summary, the concept of the quarter-life crisis speaks about various tensions, difficulties, and challenges young people face in trying to find their place in the adult world and become independent individuals.

Both the concept of emerging adulthood and the quarter-life crisis are constructive analytical tools that allow for the depiction of contemporary third-decade-of-life issues, reflecting on the experiences and tensions of this age group, addressing the most relevant dilemmas, and raising new questions not only about youth but about the existence of people of any age in the modern world. It is important to emphasize that the experiences associated with emerging adulthood and the quarter-life crisis reflect not only changing priorities of youth but also fundamentally altered conditions of collective existence and new structural constraints. These are reflections of new economic realities, the spread of precarious forms of employment, the lack of support from state institutions, youth-unfriendly social policies, high costs of living, or, in summary, the consequences of "precarious youth" (Côté 2000, 2014; Côté; Henderson 2019; Parameswaran 2020). The term precariousness describes a multi-layered state of vulnerability of individuals of any age arising from conditions created by neoliberal policies, under which people lose social and economic support, experience powerlessness in controlling important areas of their lives and planning their futures, undergo frequent crises, emotional instability, and anxiety (Dryžaitė 2021). The concept of precariousness is often used in discussions about employment characterized by high social and economic insecurity, instability, low or fluctuating incomes, part-time, short-term, project-based jobs, or overwork, multi-job holding (when several jobs are held simultaneously), and multitasking (when several tasks are performed simultaneously), decreasing social support and security, limited opportunities for professional and labour rights representation (Dryžaitė 2021: 8-9).

Similar ideas can also be articulated using the concept of social suffering. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, the concept of social suffering can be defined as various individual or collective "hardships" experienced by people in their everyday lives: sufferings, difficulties, pain, and disappointments, prompted by economic, political, and social factors (Bourdieu 1999). These "hardships" are not only related to economic deprivation, and poverty, but also to psychological, spiritual, and moral sufferings, various failures, misfortunes, disappointments, and unfulfilled expectations. Bourdieu's concept of "hardship" describes not only situations where individuals lack material things but also situations where individuals feel alienated from society, powerless, unnecessary, and vulnerable, and where their hopes and plans are crushed or very difficult to realize due to the dominant social system (Tereškinas and Dryžaitė 2009). Using this concept, the experience associated with the quarter-life crisis could be interpreted as a form of social suffering specific to the third decade of life. As will be revealed in this dissertation, the quarter-life crisis is strongly associated with the sense of insecurity, doubts, and disillusionment young people experience concerning their careers, the job and housing market, the education system, and their financial situation. The crisis experience is driven not by age itself but by the obstacles individuals face in trying to meet the societal expectations associated with their age group or scenarios that contradict these expectations (and in some cases, it seems impossible to fulfil neither their own visions nor society's ideals). This is felt as dissatisfaction with the current quality of life and hopelessness about seeing prospects for change.

In summary, the experience of the quarter-life crisis could be seen, on the one hand, as specific manifestations of social suffering or "precarious youth" characteristic of the third decade of one's life. However, it is important to note that some forms of social suffering experienced in this period or manifestations of precarity may occur at

any age due to the overall socio-economic, political, and institutional context that promotes certain daily hardships, creates various causes for suffering, which affect not only young people but young people especially, as they have less experience and undergo a critical period of psychosocial development, life changes, identity formation, during which the risk of psychological difficulties, anxiety, high levels of stress, depression, burnout, and the like increases (Yung et al. 2020; Palačionytė et al. 2023). Since the subject of this work is the experiences of the third decade of life, the quarter-life crisis was chosen as a primary concept because this concept reflects precisely the challenges of this age group.

Another thing is that the idea of the quarter-life crisis has become increasingly popular in public discourse over the past decade; it is more and more often used in marketing narratives of employers, universities, popular psychology, goods, and services, which accordingly shape the perception of young people (and society) of what and why that is happening to them. And not infrequently, this crisis is perceived as a "natural" phenomenon of young people's psychosocial development. For example, on the website of Sampoerna University in Indonesia[1], there is an introduction to the quarter-life crisis, and one of the ways to solve it is suggested to approach it as a "normal condition" because many people are facing similar experiences: "There are many people out there who have been or are in a similar phase. Think of it as a phase of life that everyone will experience." It is also stated that the crisis can be "overcome" or alleviated by various auxiliary means. One of them is to acquire the "best education for a bright future", which is precisely what the above-mentioned university offers. The "best education" is one that " aspires and fosters future leaders who have strong moral character and

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[1] Source: https://www.sampoernauniversity.ac.id/understanding-quarter-life-crisis-its-causes-and-ways-to-overcome-it/

international competitive skills so as to enable our graduates to actively participate in building a more prosperous, fair, respected, and globally competitive Indonesia." In advertising messages, self-discovery motives are often highlighted, and the main promise (by choosing the offered subject) is self-discovery and self-realization through meaningful and beloved activity. This is what a portion (especially those from middle-class families) of young people long for (Farrugia 2022; Robbins and Wilner 2001). They suffer when they cannot fulfill this desire.

In 2017, on the initiative of the world's most popular professional social network "LinkedIn", a survey was conducted involving over 6,000 respondents aged 25-33 from the United States, the United Kingdom, India, and Australia (Heitmann 2017). 75 per cent of respondents (the majority of whom have or are pursuing higher education) indicated that they had experienced or were experiencing the quarter-life crisis, mostly related to feeling lost in their career paths. The biggest concern for survey participants appeared to be finding a specific job or career path that they would be passionate about and enthusiastic about. 36 per cent of survey participants reported having already changed careers in life – they switched to another sector of the job market or took on a new type of work, some decided to become freelancers, committing only to temporary projects. The organizers of the survey noticed that among registered users, there is an increasing number of career changers every year, whose behaviour is related not only to self-search and the desire for change, new experiences, and challenges but also to adapting to the changing job market, and the increasing supply of temporary jobs. 23 per cent of young professionals took a career break to rethink what they would like to do next. A quarter of the survey participants indicated that they knew what their dream job could be but did not know how to achieve it.

It is important to understand that identity studies, which last longer than those of previous generations (considered a distinctive feature of emerging adulthood), are often portrayed as "natural" and desirable, arising from increased opportunities and freedom to use them (due to diminishing traditional constraints). However, this confusion also reflects the lack of adequate paths to becoming independent and the realization of one's goals. Some authors note that the popularization of emerging adulthood or quarter-life crisis ideas without a sociological perspective is even dangerous and misleading phenomenon for society, especially for young people (Côté 2014; Parameswaran 2020). Gowri Parameswaran emphasizes that by psychologizing and individualizing the experiences and states of young people as a "normal stage of youth", problems that are often structural and independent of the individual characteristics of young people are neutralized (Parameswaran 2020). Even among psychologists and psychiatrists, there is an increasing emphasis on the important influence of the conditions of co-existence on human mental health and a call for specialists in this field to pay more attention to a sociological perspective, which seeks to find a connection between an individual's life, their inner world, suffering, and societal structures, a broader context of life (Aaron 2016; Frantzen 2019; Neilson 2015; Roberts 2020; Smail 2005; Verhaeghe 2014). A person's psychological state is shaped in the network of relationships between sociocultural, economic, political, biological, and personal-psychological factors. By psychologizing, individualizing, and medicalizing mental states, the deep causes and context of them are ignored, and all responsibility for one's mental health lies with the individual, not systemic phenomena: social inequality, poverty, unemployment, low wages, a sense of insecurity, inaccessibility of education, racism, sexism, lack of social care, materialism, individualism, alienation, competition, narratives of happiness and success, and other reasons that are social, economic, political in their origin.

In 2017, the market research company "OnePoll" conducted a survey of the age group of 25-33-year-olds, with 2,000 British young people participating. 56 per cent of them reported experiencing the quarter-life crisis. The majority of survey participants indicated that their condition was mostly related to financial difficulties, dissatisfaction with their living circumstances (having to rent an apartment or live with parents), and romantic relationships (Robinson and First Direct 2017). In 2019, the public opinion research company "The Harris Poll" together with "TD Ameritrade" surveyed over a thousand Americans aged 15-21 and the same number of Americans aged 22-28. 42 percent of the former and 54 percent of the latter reported experiencing this crisis, which was most commonly associated with stress due to their financial situation, student loans, inability to save money, dependency on parents, as well as work-related stress – especially due to prevailing culture of overwork and high competition among employees (TD Ameritrade 2019). Shantenu Agarwal and his colleagues analysed as many as 130,000 public posts on the social network "Twitter" from 2011 to 2015, which mentioned the quarter-life crisis (Agarwal et al. 2020). Content analysis showed that among the authors – 1,300 users aged 18-30 from the United Kingdom and the United States – the crisis was most often discussed in the context of work and career. Robinson and Wright (2013) conducted a retrospective survey of 1,023 individuals living in the United Kingdom who were older than 24 years, regarding their crisis experiences throughout their lives. One-third of the participants in the 25-29 age group (out of a total of 101) reported experiencing or having experienced the quarter-life crisis. As many as 70 per cent of 30-39 year-old participants (out of a total of 196), experienced such crisis in the third decade of their life. The crisis was most commonly associated with dissatisfaction in work (where they no longer wanted to be but did not see opportunities to change the situation), work-related stress, and inadequate compensation, as well as difficulties in finding a job, financial situation, romantic relationships (unsatisfactory current relationships or past break-ups), and conflicts with parents.

2. EXPLORATION OF THE TOPIC IN LITHUANIA

There are no studies conducted in Lithuania specifically based on the concept of the quarter-life crisis. This dissertation is the first comprehensive scientific work in Lithuania examining the phenomenon of the quarter-life crisis. However, it is important to discuss research related to this issue. The quarter-life crisis is associated with the stage of emerging adulthood. Therefore, the first question that can be asked is whether the trends related to the stage of emerging adulthood are also characteristic of Lithuanian youth. In Lithuania, sociologists usually study the process of becoming an adult by using statistical information provided by large-scale surveys (or institutions collecting statistical data) about events related to social maturity, such as completing one's studies, first employment, leaving parental home, marriage, and the birth of the first child – their ages, sequence, etc. (Kraniauskienė 2011, 2021; Mikulioniene 2000; Stankūnienė and Maslauskaitė 2009). The most significant studies mentioned above analysed Lithuanian residents born between 1930 and 1984. Based on their analysis, it can be stated that Lithuanian youth exhibit similar trends to Western countries – increasing destandardization and individualization in the transition to adulthood, accompanied by significantly increased importance and duration of participation in the education system, postponement of the status of "working, married, and having children" to a later time or not achieving it, and also prolongation of the period of dependency on parents. The greatest heterogeneity of statuses related to traditional adult social markers in the youngest generation indicates the integration of various life choices into personal biographies and, at the same time, the normalization of such different social statuses in society. However, like in other former socialist countries, in Lithuania, educational and occupational decisions in the youngest generation have become more standardized, while family formation and the birth of the first child have undergone opposite changes.

The latest analysis of trends in becoming an adult in Lithuania, which focused on younger people than in the studies discussed earlier, was conducted by Rimantas Vosylis's dissertation "Psychological Aspects of Becoming an Adult among Youth Following Different Transitional Pathways to Social Adult Roles" (Vosylis 2017). Vosylis sought not only to reveal the main paths of adult social roles acquisition among Lithuanian youth and the diversity of combinations of statuses in the areas of housing, education-work, and partnership-family but also psychological aspects of becoming an adult, which were identified in Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood (he sought to evaluate the applicability of this theory to Lithuania). The analysis was based on a survey of 489 young people aged 23-27 (born from 1987 to 1992), selected by a quota sampling and was conducted in 2014–2015. The data collected by the author mostly confirmed rather than refuted the statements of Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood: the characteristics described in Arnett's theory are characteristic of Lithuanian youth, but some are more characteristic of some young people, and others are more characteristic of others (Vosylis 2017: 151).

It is important to note that there is a significant lack of comprehensive qualitative studies examining the experiences of people born after 1980, who experienced or are experiencing the process of becoming an adult already in Independent Lithuania. As Vosylis noted, a very important direction for future research is mixed-type studies in which the processes of becoming an adult and lifestyle peculiarities of young people would be examined not only by quantitative but also by qualitative methods (Vosylis 2017: 154). Statistical data have limited opportunities to reveal the diversity of life experiences in the third decade of life, as well as the circumstances that encourage young people to postpone or take on adult roles early, as well as face crisis experiences or other difficulties.

Currently, two major studies are underway, focusing on youth born after the 1980s (comprehensive research results were not yet published when finalizing this dissertation). The first one is a study conducted by researchers from Vilnius University and Klaipėda University, "Grown Up in Independent Lithuania: Life Course, Behavioural Strategies, and Contexts of those Born between 1980 and 2000" (2021–2024), during which 67 narrative interviews were collected. Preliminary results show that the paths of those born after 1980 are significantly more diverse than those of older people – young people make many non-standard decisions that were not typical for previous generations (Navickė and Žilinskienė 2022). However, the authors of the study note that in the face of social insecurity, some young people tend to choose safer, conservative life strategies. The second one is a project implemented by the team of the Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences "Socioeconomic Factors of Differentiation of Youth Life Opportunities in Lithuania" (2022–2024). The study analyses various economic and social indicators of the 18-35 age group, the role of family and community, as well as focuses on the individual experiences and attitudes of young people.

3. AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF DISSERTATION

The aim of the dissertation research is to reveal the experiences of Lithuanian students in the quarter-life crisis from the perspective of young people themselves. In analysing the subjective perspectives of young people, the goal was to understand what, in the words of Bourdieu (1999: 629), "makes life painful or even unlivable" for young people? What "weight of the world" darkens their everyday life? What does this everyday life look like? What experiences of twenty-something youths lead them to feel like an "*old pony in a young horse's body*", as one of the participants of this study expressed it? Are these experiences similar to those of young people in foreign countries? Do Lithuanian youths exhibit any particularities? What specific circumstances of our time might contribute to these experiences?

To achieve this goal, the following objectives were set:
2. Discuss the concept of emerging adulthood by Arnett, its formation context, and criticism.
3. Introduce the concept of the quarter-life crisis and discuss its criticism.
4. Review the research conducted in Lithuania to reveal trends and changes in becoming an adult in Lithuania. Thus, assess whether we can speak of the existence of emerging adulthood and the quarter-life crisis in the Lithuanian context.
5. Through the research, reveal the experiences of Lithuanian students in the quarter-life crisis and their formation context.
6. Consider sociology's therapeutic and consciousness development role revealed during the research.

4. NOVELTY, SIGNIFICANCE, AND METHODOLOGY OF THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation research stands out in several aspects. Firstly, it focuses on a little-researched age group (those born after 1990) of 18-25-year-olds in Lithuania, who, according to Arnett, "constitute the core of emerging adulthood" (Arnett 2016: 229). Additionally, it focuses on students, who are also considered the typical representatives of emerging adulthood. Secondly, the research relies on qualitative methodology. It analyses 127 autobiographical written narratives of students about the challenges, difficulties, tensions, dilemmas, and crisis experiences in their age group. Participants in the research were asked to share what personally mattered to them, what "hurt" them the most as young people, without being instructed specifically on what to talk about. The main focus was on the current stage of life (during their participation in the study), but the narratives of young people also revealed very important experiences from their earlier lives, especially their school experiences, that could influence the challenges in the current period. The main data were collected from 2015 to 2018, and contact was made with four research participants after 4-8 years (2022-2023), to inquire about how their lives had progressed (during these interviews, they were over 25 years old). The research does not represent the population of Lithuanian students; it reflects a rather "privileged" part of the youth—those who had opportunities and parental (at least moral) support to pursue higher education, as well as students in more social, humanitarian, and arts disciplines, i.e. representatives of creative industries.

Lithuania is identified as one of the countries with the highest risk of youth mortality due to suicide, accounting for over 20 per cent of all

deaths among individuals aged 15-29[2]. One of the oldest non-governmental organizations in Lithuania and one of the largest providers of free emotional support via phone and internet, the "Youth Line", receives around 50,000 contacts from young people experiencing emotional difficulties each year[3]. Psychological state surveys conducted by the Lithuanian Student Union (in 2018, as many as 2,072 students were surveyed, and in 2021-2112 people) showed that the majority of respondents had experienced significant anxiety (2018: 82 per cent; 2021: 79 percent), fear (66 percent and 77 per cent), intense stress (both 76 per cent), insomnia or other sleep disorders (68 per cent and 70 per cent), apathy (51 per cent and 64 per cent), prolonged periods of low mood (66 percent and 64 percent), depression (36 percent and 48 percent), eating disorders (42 percent and 45 percent), panic attacks (n/d and 30 percent) (LSS 2018, 2021). This dissertation will uncover the experiences "hidden" behind these statistics, helping to better understand the reality of young people through their own perspective. The uniqueness of the dissertation's research was accurately described by Arūnas Pocius, researcher of the project "Socioeconomic Factors of Differentiation of Youth Life Opportunities in Lithuania". Commenting on the presentation by the author during a youth researchers' conference[4] where part of the research results was presented, he said, "We focus more on macro trends, numbers, while you poured out the hearts of young people, showing what was happening behind those numbers."[5] During the research, very detailed and candid narratives about their lives were collected from young people.

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[2] Main youth mortality causes: https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=a721ae58-8d16-4242-a446-329529744046#/

[3] Youth Line annual activity reports: https://jaunimolinija.lt/lt/apie-mus/ataskaitos/

[4] Conference "Young people's Year in Lithuania: visible and invisible youth" (2022). Conference programme: https://jra.lt/naujienos/140

[5] An approximate quote from memory.

The results of the research have already served and will continue to serve both young people and their parents, teachers, professors, employers, representatives of social policy, mental health specialists, and youth researchers. This is important not only on a micro-level when individuals make life decisions but also on mezzo and macro-levels, as the youth situation is related to important aspects of societal functioning: labour and housing markets, education, social and family policies, demographic trends, and public mental health, etc. The analysed period of life is a time full of *critical moments*, during which individual decisions typically have significant consequences for one's aspirations, future life, and overall personal life (Giddens 2000). Research shows that unresolved dilemmas faced during the transition to adulthood can be "carried over" into later stages of life and lead to dissatisfaction with life, and various issues in career and family formation areas (Vandewater and Stewart 2006). Within the crisis management process lies a tremendous—destructive or constructive—potential both for one's personal growth and for how well one assumes important roles for society, such as an active labour market participant, father or mother (Erikson 1968; Maunder and Crafter 2012; Robinson and Wright 2013; Robinson and Smith 2010).

Finally, the uniqueness of this study can be attributed to the choice of research method. Feedback on the research method was received from students' reflections, revealing that participation in the study had a therapeutic effect for some students. Furthermore, their narratives revealed the significant role of sociology (and other social and humanitarian sciences) in the lives of young people. This aspect is considered by the author as particularly important added value of this study. The work also discusses the prospects of sociological therapeutical and consciousness development.

5. STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

The first chapter, "Theory of Emerging Adulthood", provides a comprehensive introduction to the theory of emerging adulthood, its formation context, discusses criticism of this theory, and its applicability to young people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. It also introduces a review of the research conducted in Lithuania on trends and changes in becoming an adult, evaluating whether we can speak of the existence of emerging adulthood in the Lithuanian context. The second chapter, "Quarter-Life Crisis as the 'Dark Side' of Emerging Adulthood", introduces the concept of the quarter-life crisis, discusses its criticism, and its applicability to young people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The third chapter, "Research on the Quarter-Life Crisis Experiences of Lithuanian Youth", introduces the methodology of the research on the experiences of Lithuanian students in the quarter-life crisis, discusses the advantages and disadvantages of the research method and grip, and presents the research results.

6. RESEARCH RESULTS

The most prominent challenges revealed in the reflections of the study participants were related to the main goal of discovering oneself and living authentically. Being oneself often meant realizing oneself through activities they enjoyed (such as studies or work). The absence of such activities and unsuccessful searches for them (and therefore for themselves), persistent doubts, wavering between potential alternatives, and inability to make decisions were among the most common experiences reflected by young people in their narratives. Not knowing what they wanted, feeling stuck in unsatisfying studies or jobs, and unsuccessful attempts to find one's self significantly affected the daily lives of young individuals, as if it prevented them from "*starting their lives*," causing anxiety about the future. The possibility of never truly finding oneself, not discovering what activity would bring satisfaction, allow self-realization, and be "*truly theirs*" raised feelings of hopelessness: to many, it seemed that such a situation doomed them to never experiencing what it means to live a fulfilling and happy life. These results strongly correlate with the findings of American and Irish studies by Robbins and Wilner and Farrugia, which revealed the exceptional significance of work among young professionals pursuing or already having higher education and the specific expectations placed on work (Farrugia 2022; Robbins and Wilner 2001). Work emerged as a fundamental basis for self-defining (identity) for many young people in these groups: they believed that what they engage in life should reflect who they are. Many young individuals found it difficult to imagine a fulfilling life without constant self-realization, which, in turn, was inseparable from their career path. The pursuit of "getting paid for who you are and what you love to do" was one of the most important life goals, and the passion for what you do in life was the essential driving force, which often was even more important than monetary compensation. Therefore, not knowing what this activity could be resulted in feelings of frustration and hopelessness.

Lithuanian students paid much attention to contemplating what might have led to both their own and their peers' prolonged and problematic searches for one's self, and where the "I don't know what I really want" suffering came from. They argued that difficulties were caused not only by the abundance of choices, which greatly increased after the restoration of Independence (choices their parents and especially grandparents did not have), fear of choosing incorrectly and losing better alternatives once chosen, but also by certain peculiarities of the Lithuanian secondary education system or prevailing norms in society: excessive focus solely on matriculation exams, overemphasis on the importance of higher education, narrowly defined career guidance, lack of social recognition for alternative career paths, a "study for the sake of studying" culture, lack of development of life skills and consciousness (using sociology, psychology, philosophy knowledge), different treatment of learning subjects, and so on.

Feeling lost among the variety of possibilities, doubts, constant annoying reconsideration of alternatives or decisions already made, inability to decide, fear of losing other "*multiuniverses*" with alternative life scenarios was typical for many of the studies examining the phenomenon of quarter-life crisis (Dinesen and Mardorf 2021; Duara et al. 2021; Macek et al. 2007; Mitra and Arnett 2021; Murphy 2011; Nugin 2008; Pole 2014; Rasmussen 2009; Perante et al. 2013; Robbins and Wilner 2001). Just like for some Lithuanian students, for some of the participants in the mentioned studies, the burden of decision-making seemed difficult to bear, and some even dreamed that someone else would decide for them or that the situation would somehow resolve itself. They believed it was better to "surrender" their freedom of decision-making so that someone would define their life direction and thus provide security and motivation to act. "Escaping" from troubling doubts, suspending serious decision-making for some of the lost souls was helped by studies at the university (even if they did not like them) or being in a

"safe job" (which did not bring satisfaction but provided income and was seen as attractive by others). Young people perceived such behaviour as socially acceptable, a safe way to "push through" the period of uncertainty.

It is important to note that none of the authors who analysed the experience of the quarter-life crisis discussed the possible influences of the secondary education system on the experiences of individuals in their third decade of life. Many researchers emphasized the challenges that arise when transitioning from the higher education system (being a student) to the job market or "real life" (or, as Robinson put it - transitioning from the emerging adult stage to adulthood). In this study, young people highlighted the significance, in their view, of the "prehistory" of the quarter-life crisis, which was associated with the period of completing school, especially when it was necessary to decide what to do next, as well as feeling stuck in unsatisfying studies that were very difficult to quit due to parental pressure not to do so (which was particularly painful when parents compared young people to "better" examples in their immediate environment). These differences may have been influenced by the fact that the majority of the studies discussed in the theoretical part were based on research on final-year students or graduates (so their school experiences were already fading). Also, the experience of Lithuanian youth can be related to the specifics of post-socialist countries.

In the narratives of some Lithuanian students, tensions arising from constant confrontation with conflicting norms and different expectations and ideals coming from the environment became apparent. On the one hand, part of society, for example, inspiring individuals followed on social media from around the world (or people met in person, especially foreigners), listening to podcasts, watching YouTube channels, etc., constantly reminded them how important it is to be oneself, search for oneself, create an authentic life, pursue dreams, not succumb to societal pressure and expectations, take

25

advantage of the opportunities of an open world, not be afraid to take risks, and step out of the "comfort zone." The players in the daily information space of young people encourage them to become that *something* that amid informational noise and abundance of choices could be particularly difficult to clarify, and under the current socio-economic conditions might be impossible or possible only in exceptional cases (although in that space, a message is often sent that everything is achievable and it depends solely on the individual). Some research participants were particularly fascinated by people who dared to give up attributes valued in society (well-paid jobs, advancing careers, social status, material wealth) and pursue their dreams (for example, traveling the world and engaging in their beloved activities, etc.). On the other hand, part of society, such as teachers, parents, and grandparents, encouraged following the traditional career and adulthood path, choosing life decisions that ensure greater security, and success was valued through those things that were no longer considered significant by the people followed in their social networks (a diploma, a prestigious job, money, etc.). Although the narratives presented by the first sources seemed "right" and worthy of following to many young people, and the latter ones were seen as those that needed to be resisted because they reflected "old-fashioned thinking" for many research participants, the uncertainty and insecurity about the future prevented them from experimenting with alternative possibilities. Obtaining a diploma (even in an unpopular field) seemed to them to be one of the basic guarantees of security (although they themselves criticized such an attitude).

These results are related to studies that indicate that the youth of post-socialist countries still engage and exit the education system in a quite standardized way, participate in the labour market, i.e., young people practice less, and society is less tolerant of non-standard career decisions, breaks after finishing school, interruption of chosen studies, frequent job changes, etc. (Kovacheva 2001; Kraniauskienė 2011; Macek et al. 2007; Nugin 2008; Ozolinčiūtė 2015; Pivoriūtė 2011). In

post-socialist countries people born after 1990 make life decisions in a completely different context than their parents and especially their grandparents. However, although Lithuania has benefited from all the advantages and opportunities of the "modern world" after the restoration of independence, the economic situation, compared to Northern or Western European countries, has remained worse, so parents do not always support their children's desire to experiment and choose riskier non-traditional lifestyle choices, and in turn, children get angry and feel misunderstood when parents apply standards that are no longer suitable for the current world. Thus, parents encourage choosing safer life strategies, and their children are more eager to experience the lifestyle associated with emerging adulthood. Such a situation leads to similar tensions between parents and children, which were reflected in the lives of young people pursuing or having higher education in collectivist cultures (and families with low income) (Duara et al. 2021; Mitra and Arnett 2021; Perante et al. 2013; Pole 2014). As already discussed in the theoretical part, for some young people from these groups, "western" individualistic values seemed more attractive, they wanted to live differently than their parents or grandparents did, but the pressure to meet traditional expectations was very high.

For Lithuanian students, constant anxiety was not only caused by not knowing "who I am and what I want," the fear of never finding one's self, and the constant confrontation with conflicting norms and different expectations and ideals from their surroundings, but also by doubts about whether they would be able to reconcile being themselves with another important goal of the third decade of their life – becoming financially independent individuals. Some study participants realistically assessed the possibilities of realizing their life visions in the current Lithuanian socioeconomic context. Young people feared that the opportunities to make a living in Lithuania from activities they enjoy and find subjectively meaningful seemed very limited. They were frightened by the scenario in which they would

engage in desired activities but could only meet their basic needs, and in order to live better, they would have to juggle multiple jobs, constantly overwork, have no quality leisure time, or simply emigrate. Another frightening option was to undertake better-paying but uninspiring and, in their view, meaningless "*soul-crushing*" jobs – and give up their dreams and ideals (for example, contributing to solving social problems, creating non-commercial art, etc.). Both options evoked feelings of hopelessness and injustice, raising the question as to why activities that are highly necessary for society (such as being a teacher, social worker, scientist, or artist) are not fairly compensated. However, the third option, which seemed the most realistic prospect to some, working in an unenjoyable, poorly paid, with no prospects for improvement, but time-consuming and demanding job, caused "*horror*." Anxiety about their future work and financial situation particularly affected those study participants whose parents could not afford to provide financial assistance during their studies, so they had to work at least part-time (just to make ends meet), carefully consider the necessity of every purchase, save, and live in unsatisfactory housing conditions. The frightening prospects discussed earlier were not just scenarios that might await them in the future but were already experienced realities in the present.

These research results are related to many other studies on the quarter-life crisis (even in economically stronger countries like the USA, New Zealand, and the UK), where one of the biggest disappointments for young people arose from the gap between the career expectations they should have and the actual possibilities of realizing them (Dinesen and Mardorf 2021; Duara et al. 2021; Mitra and Arnett 2021; Murphy 2011; Rasmussen 2009; Perante et al. 2013; Pole 2014; Robbins and Wilner 2001). As mentioned earlier, young people desired a meaningful career in which they would feel passionate, fulfilled, and have opportunities for growth. However, the frustration was caused not only by not knowing which specific job or career path could provide that but also by anxiety about whether they could realize their

plans in a "cold, economically prioritized society." In the mentioned studies, young specialists who already had work experience or were looking for work began to realize that it would be difficult to become financially independent from activities they enjoyed and found meaningful. This led to disillusionment with the job market, dissatisfaction with life prospects, questioning of decisions already made, doubts, and an overall sense of anxiety about their existence. In all the reviewed studies on the quarter-life crisis, some young people struggled to find jobs related to their hobbies, interests, education, competencies, and financial reward expectations, so (sometimes after prolonged searches) they settled for "whatever" jobs. Later, the young people felt "stuck" in those "whatever" jobs, which seemed necessary to maintain even minimal financial independence. In the study of Lithuanian students, a larger proportion of young people did not yet have work experience related to their field of study, so their anxiety was more related to future prospects, and understanding what opportunities and challenges awaited them.

However, several participants in the study had several years of experience in well-paid and, in their view, prestigious but unfulfilling jobs during their studies. They felt "stuck" in them and were constantly experiencing the dilemma of what to do: whether to try to choose a career that they loved and found meaningful, but financially riskier or to stay in a job that provides financial security and ensures the status of a successful person. Since this dilemma is revealed as highly relevant to young high education-seeking or already educated professionals in many studies, after 4-8 years since writing reflections, I tried to find out how the lives of these research participants unfolded, and how the mentioned dilemma was resolved. Also, other two research participants were interviewed, one of whom had already decided during the reflection period (despite strong parental opposition) to choose a field close to his heart but with fewer financial prospects. How did his career path develop further? Another research participant was interviewed because, at the time of writing of

reflections, she felt dissatisfied with many aspects of her life, and thinking about the future, she saw neither appealing nor well-paid job prospects. The examples of these research participants revealed that for some young people, the experiences of the quarter-life crisis became an incentive to seek compromises, strategies on how to create a subjectively more meaningful, more satisfying life in today's circumstances of societal conditions, "unwelcoming" economy, labour, and housing markets. Some of the decisions include reducing their material needs and expectations, postponing starting a family, and engaging in activities that they enjoy but offer less financial return. Also, working in jobs that provide financial security "just for the money", and compensating for the emptiness of such work with a higher level of comfort, meaningful leisure activities, travel, self-improvement, and wellness practices, etc. Another solution was to acquire a "more practical" profession, find a job that requires fewer physical and psychological resources, which would provide the opportunity to satisfy essential needs and live a peaceful life.

Some Lithuanian students experienced a sense of hopelessness also because the experiences of youth strongly differed from the expectations and imaginations of what a young person's life should be like. Some research participants in their twenties wanted to experience the "real life", travel the world, meet new people, experience adventures and the spirit of freedom, and simply enjoy life without thinking about adult concerns and responsibilities (this was referred to as a desire to experience youth). Many considered that up to the age of 30 is the best time, perhaps the only opportunity to do something brave, risky, contrary to established norms (for example, to try polyamorous relationships, live as a squatter abroad, travel the world for an unlimited time, etc.). At the same time, it's a time when one can "*legally be unproductive*", when society "allows" engaging in "restless things" – mostly referring to not having long-term, serious commitments to work or relationships. Youth in the reflections of students was associated with vitality, energy, mobility, an abundance

of experiences, adventures, and carefreeness; it was described as the "*peak of life*", "*the only good years in life*". In other words, young people wanted to experience the experiences associated with forming adulthood. However, some of the research participants in their youth encountered stiffness, monotony, uninspiring routine, apathy, fatigue, helplessness, lack of money, unpleasant living conditions, and various concerns - summarizing "*excessive gloominess of existence at too young an age*", some even felt as if they were "*dead inside*". The rhetorical questions of the research participant Lina - "IS THAT ALL?! Is this how it's going to be now? Just like this...?" - very accurately reflect this state of disillusionment. Even greater hopelessness was caused by examples of people enjoying life observed on social media, and in some cases, also earning from it, which also aroused feelings of envy.

Both young people who had financially supportive (but pressuring to study) parents and those who did not experience that but additional moments of concern emerged in the reflections of the latter. Several research participants speculated that if they chose a free and irresponsible way of life as young people, they would be hit by misfortune or other unforeseen circumstances (such as getting cancer or being in an accident), which would require financial resources, putting them in an unfortunate situation, and they would be solely themselves to blame for choosing to "*enjoy life*" and "*carefree tomorrow.*" The inner commitment to completing (even disliked) studies, maintaining (even disliked) work during studies, or planning to immediately find a permanent, stable income-generating job after studies gave them a sense of security that when necessary, there would be a higher chance of getting out of the situation without burdening their loved ones (who already found it difficult themselves). Therefore, the realization of the desire to experience youth required flexibility, not having long-term commitments, and detachment from a place, while the need to cope with and alleviate anxiety about the financial situation (the pursuit of security) required a settled way of

life, and commitment. Therefore, the presence or absence of parental financial support was an important factor that either facilitated or restricted the possibilities of fulfilling youthful ideals. One research participant contemplated not interrupting her studies and not embarking on travels precisely because she wanted to keep a reasonably comfortable rented apartment at an acceptable price. According to her, she managed to get such an option purely by chance, and she doubted whether something similar would happen a second time. Additionally, the disliked and energy-consuming studies and constant conflicts with her parents (about thoughts of quitting her studies) exhausted her so much that she simply did not have the moral resources to address potentially arising dilemmas (such as where to put her personal belongings while she was away), so she just goes with the flow and hopes that the situation will somehow change in the future ("*and it's not so bad at university when you think of it, even, I would say, it is quite good"*).

These results relate to other studies of the quarter-life crisis, in which the crisis of some research participants was based on the constant feeling that at a time when they were young and "supposed to" thrive in life, move forward, enjoy life, they were stagnating, wasting their youthful potential, and were stuck in a hopeless situation (Duara et al. 2021; Murphy 2011; Perante et al. 2013; Rasmussen 2009; Robbins and Wilner 2001). Young people were oppressed by an uninspiring routine, monotony, the feeling of stagnation, they lacked experiences, impressions, or activities that would give vitality to their lives. Instead, they did not want to get up in the morning, go to studies or work, they constantly lacked energy, motivation, and inspiration to engage in anything at all, and they seemed to wither away. For some young people from disadvantaged families, taking on commitments and responsibilities, especially if they were unwanted and taken on out of necessity (to take care of themselves) or to help others, greatly weighed on them. For young people from more favourable socio-economic backgrounds, stagnation, monotony, and routine were more

associated with a constant lack of new experiences, impressions, and boredom. The desire for freedom and constant novelty in the lives of young people went hand in hand with the desire for stability, security, and certainty (Nugin 2008; Rasmussen 2009).

The last tension revealed in the narratives of Lithuanian student research participants was related to the pursuit of social recognition, the desire to become a successful person, achieving a significant social status, or conversely - with the attempt to resist prevailing success narratives (the pressure to fulfil them) and confidently create their authentic life, regardless of the prospects of social recognition. Being successful in the reflections of young people was most often associated with career achievements, as well as with certain human qualities highly valued in our time: dedication to work, ambition, entrepreneurship, productivity, uniqueness, activeness, perfectionism, extraversion, enthusiasm, initiative, independence, high motivation, etc. All these qualities are related to individualistic and market-attracting traits that are also important for economic growth, some research participants aptly summarized them as "*capitalist values*" or a "*bouquet of attractiveness to the market*."

While most did not yet have significant career achievements, it was important to demonstrate "potential for success" through the previously mentioned qualities (either possessing them or cultivating them). Therefore, being active, participating in various extracurricular activities, finding employment in the early years of study, specific hobbies (such as sailing courses or exotic spider breeding), or even exhaustion, and lack of free time were valued as signs of potential success. It is important to note that constant fatigue, rejection of romantic relationships, lack of time to have lunch, etc., were considered by some young people as a necessary investment in the future to become attractive in the job market, popular among peers, and valued in society in general. The research participants did not consider studying at the university alone as significant or sufficient;

some felt they were doing nothing just by studying. Some research participants associated the crisis they experienced or had experienced with the belief that they did not exhibit enough "capitalist values", that compared to others, their "potential for success" seemed too low, that they wanted to try harder, do more, but it did not work out for them, and they felt tired. For others, the crisis was related to a feeling of injustice, anger, and disappointment with the society where prevailing images of success and measures of human worth prevailed (some "*weird believes*"). According to the perspective of some young people, prevailing norms were not healthy for the individual or society as a whole, so it is difficult to understand, as noted by research participant Ingrida, "*why do people willingly pursue things that destroy them? Why do they need it? Where will all this lead? Do we want to go there?*". It is important to note that even those young people who questioned the images of a successful person and the "capitalist values" necessary to achieve them, as well as the giving prominence to career and the devaluation of other areas of life, especially family, still tended to evaluate themselves by comparing themselves according to those values.

These success narratives were less prominent in other quarter-life crisis studies but are strongly related to the studies and insights discussed in section 2.4.2 "The Suffering of Privileged Youth and New Faces of Precariousness", which pointed out that with university education becoming a mass phenomenon, a higher education diploma is no longer valued as a sign of exclusivity by both employers and students. Therefore, to become attractive in the job market, it becomes important during the university years to engage in additional activities that would provide "added value" to the resume, and reveal some of your uniqueness. A person becomes like a "product," and in order to compete and "sell" oneself, to be noticed, one must constantly make efforts to stand out from others, express one's authenticity, and individuality, and create and manage a "personal brand". Due to the inflation of higher education diplomas, high competition,

individualism, uncertainty, and insecurity about the future, the existence of some higher education-aspiring or already educated specialists (especially in the creative sector) begins to revolve around constantly cultivating themselves as attractive participants in the job market. Young people are afraid of being "mediocre", so they try to do everything they can to at least appear strong, and successful, and do everything they can to win the "capitalist race", thrive in the "cold" reality based on economic principles, which requires a lot of physical and mental resources.

The reflections of Lithuanian students also revealed the very important role of social media. Both as a window to the world and as an important self-education tool, as the easiest escape from reality space, and also as another source of tension, social networks provide the opportunity to observe the lives of others and constantly compare oneself with them. Some research participants talked about specific people they observed in the media who, for example, lived in warm climates (or travel constantly), "enjoy life", and earn a living from their favourite activity - their hobby and creating content about this hobby on social networks. These examples aroused envy, some research participants wanted a similar occupation, but doubted whether they could achieve it. Other research participants simply seemed to want an easier life and thought that creating an "easier life" could be ensured by creating interesting content on social networks about their unique way of life, hobbies, travels, etc. It seemed that by creating such a lifestyle, a person could fulfil all the desires typical of young people.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In this work, using the concepts of emerging adulthood and the quarter-life crisis, as well as 128 autobiographical narratives and 4 interviews, the experiences of Lithuanian students' (studying mostly humanities and social sciences) quarter-life crisis have been analysed.

The analysis of quantitative studies conducted in Lithuania, which analysed the age, sequence, etc. of events related to social maturity of different cohorts, allows us to state that the tendencies associated with emerging adulthood exist in Lithuania as well, especially when speaking about experiences of individuals born after 1980. The life paths of these individuals reflect the influence of globalization, the development of information technologies, and the membership in the European Union, which, together with social and economic transformations, have shaped new trends in becoming adult, similar to the youth of other European countries. In Lithuania, there is a growing destandardization and individualization of the transition to adulthood, accompanied by a significantly increased importance and duration of participation in the education system, postponement of the status of "working, married, and having children" to a later time or its non-achievement, and prolongation of dependency on parents' period. The heterogeneity of the largest statuses associated with traditional adult social signs in the youngest generation indicates the integration of various life choices into the personal biography and at the same time the normalization of such different social statuses in society. However, as in other post-socialist countries, both education and career decisions have become more standardized in the youngest generation in Lithuania, while the formation of families and the birth of the first child have experienced opposite changes.

Based on 128 autobiographical narratives and 4 interviews, it can be argued that Lithuanian students participating in the study exhibited characteristics associated with emerging adulthood: intensive search

for identity, exploration of life opportunities, focusing primarily on oneself, and prioritizing studies, career achievements, or certain experiences specifically associated with youth rather than starting a family and undertaking other long-term commitments. However, the experiences of young people showed that the considerations of proponents of emerging adulthood, that " It tends to be an age of high hopes and great expectations, in part because few of their dreams have been tested in the fires of real life" are somewhat idealistic (Arnett and Tanner 2011: 37). Some of the research participants rather early encountered a reality that was not so friendly to fulfilling their expectations, where their dreams and future prospects get "stuck" in uncertainty, and where they have to make smaller or bigger compromises. Emerging adulthood is a complex period, where there can be a lot of mixed emotions, this is a time of high expectations, dreams, as well as great disappointments, and anxiety. The study revealed that some Lithuanian students experienced very similar experiences, which the authors discussed in this work as the quarter-life crisis or "precarious youth". For some of the research participants, everyday life was accompanied by anxiety, doubts, internal confusion, wandering, questioning oneself and one's life, questioning social standards and norms, stress, feeling of loss of control over their lives and being stuck, frustration, indecision, procrastination, ambivalence, fatigue, apathy, monotony, disappointment, anger, hopelessness, helplessness, insecurity, uncertainty, sense of meaninglessness, comparison with others, mood swings, and frequent emotional fluctuations. Mostly, these experiences were related to the search for one's self and life direction, career and (or) work issues, relationships with parents, financial situation, search for meaning, and future prospects.

The experiences of Lithuanian students' quarter-life crisis were extensively revealed through the four main objectives highlighted in their autobiographical narratives and interviews: to discover oneself, to become a successful, financially independent person, and to

experience youth. Trying to achieve these goals, especially reconciling them with each other, raised many contradictions, dilemmas, tensions, and required compromises. These goals reflect certain expectations and (or) beliefs held by young people that a) there is a "*true Self*" that can be found by searching and once found, it is very important to express and realize it (or that "*Self*" is revealed as if "by accident", just one needs to wait); b) having a job you love is an essential condition for being yourself, self-realization, and having a meaningful and happy life; c) productive participation in the economy, career achievements (and having or developing qualities that help achieve them) is one of the main ways to gain social recognition, to become a successful and valued person in society; d) certain practices, such as traveling, new experiences and abundance of various impressions, freedom, and adventures - are necessary experiences for a young person, which will no longer be possible to "collect" in other stages of life (and besides, they can help achieve the first two goals, so they are very important). It can be argued that having all these expectations and difficulties in trying to achieve them was the main source of young people's suffering (especially if they wanted to fulfil them all at once). Young people felt exhausted from both the "I don't know what I really want" suffering, trying to find the "true self", from being stuck in an unsatisfactory life situation, from the prevailing competition among peers and efforts to become attractive in the job market (or from disappointment in the prevailing images of a successful person in society), from the gnawing feeling that they do not live the "life of a young person", from the overall anxiety about the future, what kind of job they will be able to find and how they will be able to survive financially (disappointment with the economic situation, job, and housing market). The lack of psychological and (or) financial support from parents, constant engagement in social networks, and comparison with others, further intensified the difficult experiences.

Based on the analysis of studies conducted in other countries as well as the results of this study, it can be argued that the quarter-life crisis

can be summarized as dissatisfaction and anxiety about the direction and quality of life in one's twenties. This anxiety can arise both from ignorance, indecision about one's life direction, getting lost among numerous possibilities and greater freedom to use them (diminishing traditional social norms and authorities), and from despair when facing a reality where there are no opportunities to realize one's desired life scenario or, having chosen it, to secure financial means to survive. The mentioned freedom of choice (or rather the messages constantly appearing in the public space that nowadays you can become whatever you want) is merely an illusion for some young people, especially those in less favourable socio-economic situations, they feel a gap between their desired life, vision of themselves, goals, and the real possibilities to achieve them in the current socio-economic reality. Due to the experienced socio-economic insecurity, some young people, although they would prefer it differently, tend to choose safer life strategies (which are also encouraged by their parents).

The study of Lithuanian students confirmed Robinson's insights that the quarter-life crisis is associated with an intensive questioning of oneself, one's life, social norms, and standards (Robinson 2015a; 2018). It's like a conflict between, on the one hand, the freedom, independence, exploration of youth, and the obligations and sedentary lifestyle of an adult, and on the other hand, between the individual's desire to lead an authentic life and the prevailing norms and expectations of society. The time of the crisis is like a negotiation period where compromises need to be sought. However, it is important to mention that some students did not want to engage in specific self-searching or explore alternative life possibilities; they did not emphasize the role of work in life, and had no career ambitions. Some were already thinking about family and its creation more than other aspects of life. The traditional path to adulthood seemed attractive and desirable to them in the near future. However, their reasoning revealed that because of such priorities among peers, they felt "abnormal" and their tension was specifically related to the lack of social recognition

among peers, that their values and aspirations, often reflecting the traditional path to adulthood, are also valuable today.

During one of the discussions with students at a seminar on youth sociology, they were asked to raise their hand if they expected to live separately from their parents by the age of about 25-27, finish their studies, find a permanent job ensuring financial independence, get married, and have children. The majority [6] smiled (some laughed) shook their heads, started discussing among themselves, and did not raise their hands. When asked why this scenario seemed impossible to them, most argued that, on the one hand, until they finish their studies (the vast majority were thinking not only about a bachelor's degree but also about a master's), and gain work experience, a lot of time will pass. It is unclear how they will manage with their jobs, what their salary will be, etc., so accordingly, the haze extends to the prospects of creating a family, buying their own home (for some, just imagining that they will have their own home in the future raised "hopeless laughter" because at that time even renting a flat based on minimum requirements at an affordable price seemed hardly possible). On the other hand, for some students, the adulthood scenario associated with traditional social roles was not desirable (or rather, at that stage of life, thinking about the future did not seem desirable) life path: "Maybe I could, if I really wanted to and tried, but I don't want to. Besides, I don't really know what I'll do with my life, what I'll want when I'm twenty-five. Life doesn't unfold so neatly as if following a textbook.

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[6] Assessing the impression, I have asked approximately 250 students this question across all classes, and about 20 percent raised their hands. (This information is intended to form an impression and by no means represents all students.).

All this could take time[7] *, let's calculate, elementary mathematics: just finding a partner will take a long time, checking if it's the person you want to build a future with will take at least 5 years, and if it is not the right person, then everything starts again (laughs). Especially that last indicator – having a child by the age of twenty-five – seems like outer space," pondered a first-year student attending Sociology Introduction lectures*[8], whose reasoning sounds very similar to that of other young people interviewed by authors studying the emerging adulthood phase. However, another student who soon raised her hand to share her perspective began with: "*I may be boring, but I always knew what I wanted. <..> And with this picture, everything seems achievable to me, if both partners want it and take it seriously.*" When I asked why she said "*maybe boring*", she laughed and said, "since most people are trying to find themselves in all sorts of ways and don't know what they want, it seems even a little bit strange to seek this."

So, based on the research results, it cannot be claimed that the period between the ages of 18 and 25 (which is considered to be the core of emerging adulthood), as claimed by proponents of emerging adulthood, young people are free from societal expectations and have the freedom to experiment with life possibilities, easily changing the direction of their lives. As the study showed, young people subjectively felt constantly confronted with expectations and pressure coming from their environment. On the one hand, they experienced pressure to choose safer life strategies, to follow a more traditional

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[7] She is pointing towards a board hanging in the auditorium, depicting a supposedly traditional life path: "finishing education, entering the job market, leaving parents' home, marriage, having the first child."

[8] The approximate quote from a discussion about youth with social work students that took place during the autumn semester of 2016.

path to adulthood. On the other hand, they experienced pressure to live according to the behaviour standard typical of emerging adulthood, which "requires" unconventional decisions from young people, and emphasizes authenticity (however, this pressure is often not seen as an externally "imposed model"). Therefore, some young people suffer from pressure to fulfil the unattractive traditional model of adulthood (or want to fulfil it but encounter difficulties in doing so or do not see prospects), while others suffer from pressure to fulfil the standard of emerging adulthood (or want to fulfil it but do not have or do not see the opportunities).

In this study, drawing on the work of other researchers, it was important to emphasize that emerging adulthood, like the quarter-life crisis, is not a universal phenomenon, and experiences of the third decade of life depend both on the individual's socio-economic position and on the socio-economic, and cultural context of the country in which they live. Trends associated with emerging adulthood exist most prominently, on the one hand, in economically advanced countries where there is no need for young people to enter the labour market early, and which, normatively, not only "allow" but also encourage exploring various life alternatives, not "forcing" the youth to assume adult roles as early as possible. This is particularly characteristic of post-industrial countries where obtaining the most prestigious and highest-paid positions in the knowledge/information economy requires higher education, so people spend more time in the education system, enter the labour market later, and delay family formation. Thirdly, in specific social groups of those countries. Young people from these groups are usually from more favourable socio-economic status families. The socio-economic status of parents' families and the person's education are essential factors structuring lives and determining different experiences in this period. Young people in more favourable socio-economic positions have more opportunities to experience the "bright" side of emerging adulthood – freedom to explore life possibilities, engage in youth-related practices,

learn, engage in self-realization through their favourite activities, and so on. Socio-economic position also determines different experiences of the quarter-life crisis: for some, the crisis is more related to doubts about the direction of life, the inability to decide, choose from many alternatives, fear of not finding a favourite and self-realizing activity, whereas for others it is related to unsatisfactory quality of life, anxiety about both current and future financial situation. For still others, several or even all tensions associated with the quarter-life crisis intersect in their lives.

The study of Lithuanian students also showed that experiences, expectations, aspirations, opportunities, obstacles, and compromises in the third decade of life depend on individual socio-economic status, moral and financial support from close people, especially parents, societal norms, institutional context (for example, whether and how easily a higher education institution allows taking academic leave, interrupting studies, changing specialities, etc.), and socio-economic country-specific features (level of salaries, unequal pay for different occupations (and their prestige), support for students, housing market, etc.).

One of the main critical remarks to proponents of emerging adulthood and the quarter-life crisis (which applies to the author of this work as well) is that they often rely on research on students or young people with higher education. Therefore, one of the most important future research directions would be studies of those young people who grew up in less affluent families, did not pursue further education after school, are from social minorities, marginalized groups, and so on. Such studies would help to highlight social inequalities and reveal the diversity of youth experiences.

Finally, the received feedback reflections of the students about the research method revealed that writing about the challenges relevant to their stage of life had a therapeutic effect for some students. Participation in the study provided an opportunity to reflect on their

lives, current situation, concerns, express themselves, or even calm down. Moreover, their narratives revealed an important role of sociology (as well as other social and humanitarian sciences). This role can be identified as the cultivation of consciousness, which manifested in two ways: increasing awareness of the influence of social forces on human life and as an important part of "life knowledge" about people and the world. This prompted a discussion about the prospects of environmental and consciousness education in sociology and the role of social and humanitarian sciences in the education system.

The research results revealed, from the perspective of young people, the important role of secondary education in the experiences of the third decade of life and what the essential shortcomings of the current system are. According to the research participants, it seemed crucial for young people to get to know themselves and the world they will "enter" while still in school. Therefore, attention should be paid to activities that help acquire "life knowledge" about things related to "real life", and matters relevant to everyone's daily life. These matters, according to students, are strongly related to how well a person can not only answer various existential questions, including "who am I and what do I want", establish and maintain interpersonal relationships but also cope with the difficulties of everyday life. Research participants reasoned that as long as a young person does not have "life knowledge", is not acquainted with "real life", but most importantly - with themselves, they cannot adequately answer important questions about their life path and goals.

Finally, it is important to note the significant role of social media in the lives of young people highlighted during the research. As observed by Rasmussen (2009) studying the experience of the quarter-life crisis among New Zealand students, social media has become the most influential educator of modern young people, serving as a window to the wider world beyond the boundaries of their family, school,

university, or country/society and creating aspirational, unrealistic expectations. Reflections of Lithuanian students also revealed the crucial role of social media. Serving as a gateway to the world, an important self-education tool, the easiest escape from reality, and yet another source of tension, social networks provide the opportunity to observe the lives of others and constantly compare oneself to them. Therefore, developing youth consciousness regarding social media (which is one of the important topics in sociology) can also be seen as an important part of strengthening young people's psychological resilience.

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

Milda Pivoriūtė. 2021. „Kai ateina laikas išvykti, nors ir nėra aiškaus kelionės tikslo": jaunų žmonių tapatumo paieškos ir amžiaus ketvirčio krizė. Sociologija. Mintis ir veiksmas 46(1): 69–94. doi:10.15388/SocMintVei.2020.1.22.

Milda Pivoriūtė ir Karolina Poškauskaitė. 2019. Kai nebetenkina „per daug ir per kažkaip": egzistenciniai pokyčiai kintant gyvenimo ritmui. Sociologija. Mintis ir veiksmas 45(2): 39–67. doi:10.15388/SocMintVei.2019.2.15.

ABOUT THE DISSERTATION AUTHOR

Milda Pivoriūtė completed her bachelor and master's degree studies in Sociology at Vilnius University. Since 2013, she has been teaching sociology to students of various specialities (in 2017, she received the Rector's Award as the best lecturer at the Faculty of Philosophy of Vilnius University). As a lecturer and researcher, she collaborates with various institutions, giving lectures and conducting research, actively engaging in public sociology (she is the editor and author of the blog "Sociali sociologija" (*English: "Social Sociology"*)," creator and host of the LRT podcast "Savęs repeticijos" (*English: "Repetitions of Self"*), and is currently a board member of the "Youth Line".

Research interests: youth sociology (transition to adulthood, identity search), mental health of society (culture of overwork and productivity, quarter-life and midlife crises), sociology of time (fast and slow time, acceleration society).