

# Comparison of Stress Coping Strategies of Socially Vulnerable Young People in Lithuania and Latvia

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**Abstract.** The article addresses the issue of stress coping of socially vulnerable young people. Coping methods and strategies are analysed regarding the socio-cultural context. A quantitative study was conducted to reveal the coping methods and strategies of socially vulnerable young people aged 18–29 from Northern Lithuania and Southern Latvia. Vulnerable young people in the two Baltic States use different coping strategies and sets of coping strategies which may be related with socio-cultural reasons, different content of the social service package, availability and content of psychological and social support.

**Keywords:** Coping with stress, coping strategies, socially vulnerable young people, intercultural context, social support

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## Introduction

Psychological stress is defined as the relationship between an individual and the environment, in response to which the individual begins to deplete excess resources, which is perceived as a threat to his or her well-being (Spaderna & Hellwig, 2015). Folkman & Lazarus (1988) point out that stress has a twofold effect: it can lead to both social adjustment and social exclusion. The direction can be determined by the help and support of the social environment and the coping strategies used by the individual. If the individual perceives the environment as threatening and receives understanding, support and social help, he or she has the opportunity to change his or her perspective on the threatening conditions: to change his or her attitude, to re-evaluate the conditions, to acquire skills and thus to make a concerted effort to cope with the unfavourable conditions or circumstances. Otherwise, the perception of the environment as a threat becomes generalised. The person experiences insecurity, self-depreciation (Health and Behaviour, 2001), social exclusion may occur: the person does not have the strength to cope with the adverse environmental conditions, does not expect to receive support and social assistance, and does not expect anything to change in his/her life.

Folkman & Lazarus (1988) have identified several coping techniques used by individuals: *confrontive coping, distancing, self-controlling, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance, positive reappraisal, planful problem solving*. However, the use of a particular coping technique depends on the nature of the stress experienced (Christensen & Ehlers, 2002). The authors' experiment showed that the adaptive value of specific coping techniques depends on the extent to which they actually helped manage the stressful situation. Also, we can see a step-by-step stress management model (Palmer, 2007) being developed, that comprises a comprehensive and consistent understanding of the stressful situation, its causes (internal and external), the evaluation of personal (physical reactions, personality traits, values) and environmental (physical and social) resources, the process of stress management and coping, and the success and effectiveness of the strategies used. In case of success, the individual returns to a state of equilibrium, which facilitates his/her successful social inclusion. In case of failure, the individual experiences tension, which causes physical and mental exhaustion, somatic and mental illnesses, social inadaptation. According to the authors (Palmer, 2007; Weber, 2001), stress coping failures are likely to be managed with the help of counsellors, psychotherapists or other professionals.

Thus, theoretical research on stress is dominated by the identification of coping methods and the discovery of stress management mechanisms. Empirical stress research focusses on the diffusion of stress levels and coping methods in occupational and age group contexts. However, research on stress in socially excluded people is particularly sensitive and relevant.

According to Eurostat (Eurostat, 2022), 21.9% of the EU population will be in social exclusion in 2020, including 25.4% of young people aged 15–29. In Lithuania, according to Swedbank (2023), the most important stressor is financial (64%). Other stressors

such as work (57%), health (34%) and family (19%) are also important. Young people are more stressed compared to other age groups (Swedbank, 2023). It can be assumed that young people are making social and personal decisions for the first time without any social experience, a sufficient level of knowledge, or even without seeking help from professionals. Some of these young people, who at some point in their lives have not been able to cope with stressful situations, have not sought, received, or been helped by social support or professionals, and have therefore become socially excluded.

It is generally accepted that there are 5 social risk factors that can lead to social exclusion, social vulnerability and increased health problems (Health and Behavior, 2001): socio-economic status, social networks and social support, occupational factors, social inequalities and religious beliefs. These factors can reduce or increase social exclusion through different compositions of social conditions. The social environment influences human behaviour through social norms, social control, social assistance and support mechanisms. Young people experiencing social exclusion do not have the opportunity to participate in the social and political life of the community, to enjoy cultural and leisure activities, they suffer from poor living conditions due to poor health, emotional and psychological exclusion, isolation from the community or society, and to experience feelings of poverty and discrimination that can increase delinquent behaviour and delinquency (Paolini, 2013). Low social skills and education may not be conducive to finding well-paid work, while low wages may undermine self-confidence, career progression or competence and qualifications.

Mossakowski & Zhang (2014), studying Asian Americans, suggest that social support and assistance can be a successful buffer against discrimination and stress. According to them, Asian Americans are often subjected to unfair treatment, but family members reduce or prevent psychological stress by providing emotional support.

In Lithuania, the situation of young adults (according to the Youth Policy Framework Law of the Republic of Lithuania 2003, <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.223790/asr>, they include young people aged 18–29) remains difficult. According to the Lithuanian Statistics Department, the share of young people in absolute poverty ranges from 9.7% to 17.5% in 2018–2022 (Official Statistics Portal, 2023). The poverty risk rate for young people (aged 20–29) in 2023 was 24.9% in Lithuania and 26.9% in Latvia, which is higher than the EU average 20.8%.<sup>1</sup>

Traditions of social support and assistance in Lithuanian families may differ from those in Asian American or other countries. A study of Japanese, US and Lithuanian students found that Lithuanian youth have a lower orientation towards collectivism on the vertical and horizontal dimensions of collectivism than Japanese youth (Kononov & Dallas, 2009). It may seem that the stress experienced by Japanese students should be lower based on other researchers' studies (Mossakowski & Zhang, 2014), but the opposite is true. According to a study (Kononov & Dallas, 2009), Japanese young people experi-

<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc\\_peps02n/default/table?lang=en&category=livcon.ilc.ilc\\_pe.ilc\\_peps](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_peps02n/default/table?lang=en&category=livcon.ilc.ilc_pe.ilc_peps)

ence more stress than Lithuanian young people. According to these authors, the variable that determines the strength of young people's stress coping is self-efficacy. Conflicting research evidence shows that stress coping is influenced not only by individual personal characteristics but also by culture and values (Gomez & Gudino, 2023), so that factors that act as a buffer against discrimination and stress in one culture will not necessarily serve the same function in another. Coping with stress is thus culturally conditioned.

Research on stress is not new in Lithuania, Latvia and other countries, but there is still a lack of research on young people's ability to cope with stressful situations (some studies (Kononov & Dallas, 2009) have focussed on subjective perceptions of stress among young students), and on the coping of young people at risk of social exclusion (socially vulnerable). Meanwhile, such research could serve as a basis for providing them with a package of social services, increasing their social inclusion and life satisfaction (Harrison, Loxton and Somhaba, 2021; Milas et al., 2021).

The problem of this study raises problematic questions that can be described as a relatively new area of research on stress coping: What are the most common coping strategies used by socially vulnerable young people? What are the cross-cultural differences in stress coping with the stress between socially vulnerable youth in Lithuania and Latvia? How cross-cultural differences could explain differences in coping strategies?

## Methodology

### *Participants*

The study was carried out in Northern Lithuania and Southern Latvia. The sample includes socially vulnerable young adults who were registered with an employment service during the survey period and who were receiving or have received (in the last year) social assistance and/or support. Although the age group of young people differs to a certain extent according to the laws of the two republics, the survey was carried out among persons aged between 18 and 29 years. (According to the Law on Youth Policy of the Republic of Lithuania, young people are defined as persons aged between 18 and 29 years old.<sup>2</sup> According to the Law on Youth of the Republic of Latvia, young people are persons aged 13–25.<sup>3</sup>)

700 socially vulnerable young people<sup>4</sup> (aged 18–29) in Latvia (LV),  $N=350$ , and in Lithuania (LT),  $N=350$ , participated in this study. Among LT respondents, female

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<sup>2</sup> <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.223790/asr>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.vestnesis.lv/ta/id/175920-jaunatnes-likums>

<sup>4</sup> People at social risk can be considered both socially excluded and socially vulnerable at the same time (Action Plan on Social Inclusion, 2020–2023). These terms are used identically in the Progress Programme for the Development Programme for Social Mobilisation (Solidarity) (2021–2030) of the Ministry of Social Security and Labour and in the descriptions of the programme's measures. The authors of the article tend to use the concept of socially vulnerable young people according to the selection criteria chosen. In these documents, socially vulnerable people are defined as individuals/families who are more vulnerable to social and economic challenges and risks and have fewer resources to cope with them successfully.

$n = 212$ , male  $n = 126$ , gender not specified  $n = 12$ . Among LV respondents, female  $n = 213$ , male  $n = 124$ , gender not specified  $n = 13$ . Some subjects did not indicate their age: among LT respondents, none; among LV respondents,  $n = 31$ . The mean age of LT respondents  $M = 23.64$  ( $SD = 3.39$ ), of LV respondents  $M = 21.5$  ( $SD = 3.33$ ). Data from respondents who did not report their gender and age were excluded from data analysis. Therefore, data from 669 respondents were used in the further analysis.

Comparing the age distributions of LT and LV respondents, they were not identical (*Kolmogorov–Smirnov*  $Z = 4.21$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), so *propensity score target weighting* (PSTW) was used to balance the age distributions. PSTW is a robust method when the subject samples are relatively similar in baseline characteristics and of sufficient size (Milcoch et al., 2019). The application of the PSTW method has resulted in a change in sample size. Data from 360 respondents (180 from each country) were used in the subsequent statistical analysis. No statistically significant differences were found between the stress coping indicators used in both the LT and LV samples with respect to gender (*t-test*,  $p > .05$ ). Therefore, for cross-country comparisons, the common stress coping indicators for each country's sample were used.

### **Research instrument**

*The Ways of Coping Questionnaire* (WCQ) was used to explore the ways in which socially vulnerable individuals cope with stress (*Copyright* © 1988 Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc.) (700 copies of the WCQ were obtained from Mind Garden<sup>5</sup>, Inc., June 28, 2017). The WCQ has been translated into 27 languages worldwide. The WCQ has been used in international studies by O'Connor & Shimizu (2002) and Senol-Durak, Durak & Elagöz (2011) to look for similarities and differences in cross-cultural ways of coping with stress. The permission to translate the questionnaire into Lithuanian and Latvian was obtained. The questionnaire was translated to and back to Lithuanian and Latvian by bilingual researchers. The questionnaire consists of 66 statements, each of which is rated on a Likert scale: 0 = not important or not used; 1 = somewhat used; 2 = quite used; 3 = often used. The statements are grouped into 8 subscales defining different ways of coping with stress: *confrontive coping* (*Cronbach's alpha* – 0.62), *distancing* (*Cronbach's alpha* – 0.60), *self-controlling* (*Cronbach's alpha* – 0.55), *seeking social support* (*Cronbach's alpha* – 0.73), *accepting responsibility* (*Cronbach's alpha* – 0.60), *escape-avoidance* (*Cronbach's alpha* – 0.66), *positive reappraisal* (*Cronbach's alpha* – 0.75), *planful problem solving* (*Cronbach's alpha* – 0.67). Overall WCQ *Cronbach's Alpha* – 0.9. So, these coefficients enabled to use the WCQ for investigations in groups (Vaitkevicius, Saudargiene, 2010). Other researchers (Folkman et al., 1986; Lundqvist & Ahlström, 2006; Senol-Durak, Durak & Elagöz, 2011) have obtained similar *Cronbach's alpha* coefficients for subscales.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.mindgarden.com/158-ways-of-coping-questionnaire#horizontalTab4>

These subscales, in turn, have been grouped into three clusters of stress coping strategies by the authors (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Kriukova, 2010) in order to further analyse the data obtained. The following six subscales are assigned to the group of stress coping strategies focussed on emotion regulation: *confrontation*, *distancing*, *self-controlling*, *accepting responsibility*, *positive reappraisal*, *escape-avoidance*. Meanwhile, the other two groups of coping strategies have one subscale each: *seeking social support* coping reflects the respondent's intention to deal with the stressful situation through action, whereas *planful problem solving* implies that the respondent should use more analysis of the problem situation, anticipate the steps of coping, and have a more planned perspective on coping. The estimates of the subscales clustered in this way were used for cluster data analysis.

The main variables in this research are the ways of coping stress. Additional variables are country, gender between countries.

### ***Data analysis methods***

SPSS 24.0 software was used for data analysis. The distribution of all coping with the stress variables is approximately normal, with *Skewness* and *Kurtosis* values between -1 and +1. (Hair et al., 2022, p. 66). Therefore, a parametric *t-criterion* was used for independent samples for the empirical data analysis focussing on coping with stress strategies of socially vulnerable young people regarding country, gender issues. *Cohen's d* used to indicate the standardised difference between two means: small – 0.2, moderate – 0.5, large – 0.8 (Cohen, 1988). *K-Means* cluster analysis was used to group respondents according to their choice of coping strategies. *Chi-squared test* was applied to identify the statistically significant differences in the distribution of LV and LT young people in the distinguished groups.

### ***Features of the survey***

The survey asked respondents to answer a paper-based questionnaire to recall a specific stressful situation. Respondents were asked to take a few moments to think of the most disturbing situation they had experienced in *the last week*. A stressful situation was defined as a difficult or distressing situation because the person felt uncomfortable about what had happened or had to make a considerable effort to resolve it. The situation could be related to family, work, friends or anything else that was important to the person. Respondents had to consider the details of this stressful situation, such as where it took place, who was involved, how they behaved and why they cared.

## Research ethics

Permission to carry out the study was obtained from the administrations of the social service institutions in both Latvia and Lithuania. Respondents participated in the study on a voluntary basis. The administrations of the social service providers ensured the confidentiality of the subjects. Personal data (names and dates of birth) were not recorded anywhere during the survey when filling in the paper questionnaires. Only the anonymous questionnaires completed by the subjects were handed over to the researchers by the staff of the social service providers. Thus, confidentiality of the respondents and anonymity of the data were ensured.

## Findings

Comparing of the stress coping indicators of both countries revealed that LT respondents were more characterised by *confrontational coping* ( $p < 0.01$ ), *distancing* ( $p < 0.001$ ), *seeking social support* ( $p < 0.05$ ), *accepting responsibility* ( $p < 0.01$ ), and *escaping* ( $p < 0.001$ ), while *positive reappraisal* ( $p < 0.01$ ) was more typical of the LV respondents than the LT respondents (Table 1). Differences between groups are small, *Cohen's d* < 0.5. Socially vulnerable young people in LV have significantly higher *escape-avoidance* stress coping indicators than representatives of LT (*Cohen's d* = 0.43).

Table 1. Comparison of stress coping indicators for LT and LV youth

Coping scale	Lithuanian youth (LT)		Latvian youth (LV)		<i>t</i> ( <i>df</i> =358)	<i>p</i>	<i>Cohen's d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
<i>Confrontive coping</i>	1.48	0.47	1.32	0.53	2.983	0.003	0.32
<i>Distancing</i>	1.44	0.51	1.25	0.56	3.426	0.001	0.35
<i>Self-controlling</i>	1.54	0.47	1.46	0.52	1.411	0.159	0.16
<i>Seeking social support</i>	1.55	0.57	1.42	0.64	2.120	0.035	0.21
<i>Accepting responsibility</i>	1.64	0.57	1.45	0.69	2.858	0.005	0.30
<i>Escape-avoidance</i>	1.35	0.46	1.12	0.59	4.121	0.001	0.43
<i>Planful problem solving</i>	1.56	0.56	1.54	0.52	0.253	0.800	0.04
<i>Positive reappraisal</i>	1.28	0.57	1.46	0.59	-3.023	0.003	-0.31



Analysing the stress coping indicators by country and gender, statistically significant differences were found between the coping methods used by young people from LV and LT in stressful situations: the *escape-avoidance* coping method is more common in LT males ( $p<0.01$ ), while the *positive reappraisal* coping method is more common in LV males ( $p<0.05$ ). The differences between the groups in the *escape-avoidance* strategy are moderate ( $d=0.56$ ) and in the *positive reappraisal strategy* are small ( $d=0.37$ ). Meanwhile, no statistically significant differences were found between the other coping strategies in the LV and LT male samples (Table 2). Further, Cohen's effect size value suggested very small difference for *confrontive coping* ( $d=0.27$ ) and *planful problem solving* ( $d=-0.26$ ).

Table 2. Comparison of stress coping in LT and LV men

Coping scale	Lithuanian youth (LT)		Latvian youth (LV)		<i>t</i> ( <i>df</i> =124)	<i>P</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	Men ( <i>n</i> =65)		Men ( <i>n</i> =61)				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
<i>Confrontive coping</i>	1.48	0.51	1.34	0.51	1.540	0.126	0.27
<i>Distancing</i>	1.40	0.53	1.31	0.60	0.852	0.396	0.16
<i>Self-controlling</i>	1.49	0.46	1.52	0.51	-0.343	0.732	-0.06
<i>Seeking social support</i>	1.48	0.62	1.35	0.68	1.020	0.310	0.20
<i>Accepting responsibility</i>	1.54	0.63	1.42	0.69	1.087	0.279	0.18
<i>Escape-avoidance</i>	1.37	0.47	1.06	0.62	3.070	0.003	0.56
<i>Planful problem solving</i>	1.49	0.57	1.63	0.51	-1.493	0.138	-0.26
<i>Positive reappraisal</i>	1.22	0.61	1.44	0.58	-2.008	0.047	-0.37

LV women and LT women are similarly likely to use the *planful problem solving* coping technique in stressful situations. Statistically significant differences were found between the use of other coping techniques in the samples of LT and LV women (Table 3): LT women are more likely to use *confrontive coping* ( $p<0.01$ ), *distancing* ( $p<0.001$ ), *self-controlling* ( $p<0.05$ ), *seeking social support* ( $p<0.05$ ), *accepting responsibility* ( $p<0.01$ ), *escape-avoidance* ( $p<0.01$ ) coping methods, while LV women are more likely to use *positive reappraisal* ( $p<0.05$ ). Differences between groups in the use of stress coping techniques are small, Cohen's  $d<0.5$ . The largest difference between LT and LV women is between LT and LV women using the *distancing* coping technique (moderate Cohen's  $d=0.48$ ).



Table 3. Comparison of stress coping indicators in LT and LV women

Coping scale	Lithuanian youth (LT)		Latvian youth (LV)		<i>t</i> ( <i>df</i> =222)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	Women ( <i>n</i> =109)		Women ( <i>n</i> =115)				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
<i>Confrontive coping</i>	1.48	0.49	1.32	0.55	2.382	0.018	0.31
<i>Distancing</i>	1.48	0.51	1.23	0.53	3.543	0.001	0.48
<i>Self-controlling</i>	1.57	0.47	1.44	0.53	1.976	0.049	0.26
<i>Seeking social support</i>	1.61	0.54	1.45	0.62	1.995	0.047	0.28
<i>Accepting responsibility</i>	1.69	0.52	1.48	0.67	2.594	0.010	0.35
<i>Escape-avoidance</i>	1.34	0.46	1.16	0.57	2.562	0.011	0.35
<i>Planful problem solving</i>	1.59	0.55	1.49	0.52	1.391	0.166	0.19
<i>Positive re-appraisal</i>	1.32	0.54	1.48	0.60	-2.190	0.030	-0.28

Table 4. Clusters of coping strategies

Title of the scale	1st cluster	2nd cluster	3rd cluster	4th cluster
	Values of cluster centres			
<i>Emotion-focussed coping</i>	1.36	1.40	0.93	2.14
<i>Planful problem solving</i>	1.36	1.80	0.91	2.12
<i>Seeking for social support</i>	1.67	1.09	0.78	1.81
<i>Distribution of respondents</i>	111 (31.0%)	75 (21.0%)	77 (21.1%)	96 (26,9%)
<i>Coping style</i>	Moderate use of strategies with the expressed seeking fo social support	Moderate use of strategies with the expressed style of planful problem solving	Low use of all the strategies	High use of all the strategies

The *k-means* approach was used to analyse the empirical data in a way that focussed on individual differences between respondents. It was applied by distinguishing groups of respondents according to three coping strategies: *emotion-focussed coping*, *planful problem solving*, *seeking for social support*. Four clusters were distinguished that could be interpreted in a meaningful way. The first cluster consists of respondents who use the *seeking social support* strategy more often than others, the second cluster consists of respondents who use the *planful problem solving* strategy more often and the *seeking*

*social support* strategy less often, the third cluster consists of young people who use all the coping strategies relatively rarely, and the fourth cluster consists of young people who use all three strategies more often. The first cluster has the highest proportion of respondents (31.0%), next third cluster has 26.9% of young people, while the second (21.0%) and the third (21.1%) clusters have the lowest proportion.

As can be seen from Table 5, the proportion of LT and LV young people in the clusters of coping strategies is not the same, the differences are statistically significant ( $\chi^2=4.73$ ;  $df=3$ ;  $p<0.05$ )

Table 5. Comparison of coping strategies of young people in LT and LV

Country		Cluster			
		1st cluster	2nd cluster	3rd cluster	4th cluster
LT	% within Cluster Number of Case	55.4%	48.0%	40.3%	53.1%
LV	% within Cluster Number of Case	44.6%	52.0%	59.7%	46.9%
<i>Coping style</i>		<i>Moderate use of strategies with the expressed seeking of social support</i>	<i>Moderate use of strategies with the expressed style of planful problem solving</i>	<i>Low use of all the strategies</i>	<i>High use of all the strategies</i>

More LT respondents fall into clusters of average use of stress coping strategies with stronger social support strategy (55.4%), and higher use of all strategies (53.1%), than LV respondents (respectively, 44.6% and 46.9%). Meanwhile, LV young people are more likely than LT ones to use moderately expressed stress coping strategies, with a predominance of planned problem solving (52%) and low use of all strategies (59.7%). LT youth use these strategies less (48% and 40.3%, respectively). This distribution of young people is statistically significant ( $\chi^2=4.73$ ;  $df=3$ ;  $p<0.05$ ).

## Discussion

All discussion and conclusions are done only regarding this sample and are not generalised to all young people. Statistical analysis of the survey data reveals some differences in coping with stressful situations among social vulnerably young people in Latvia and Lithuania, participants of this survey. The following coping methods are more typical for socially vulnerable young people in Northern Lithuania – *seeking social support*, *accepting responsibility*, *confrontational coping* (defined as aggressive attempts to change the situation to a risky and hostile one), *distancing*, and *escape-avoidance* at all times. Meanwhile, *positive reappraisal* is more characteristic of socially vulnerable young people in South Latvia. Thus, Lithuanian young people are more likely to seek social

support, confront or accept responsibility, while Latvian young people are more likely to cope with stress by positively re-evaluating situations.

Gender is a significant variable in the differences in the use of coping strategies: Lithuanian women in the study are more likely to use coping strategies attributed to the emotion-oriented strategy *confrontive coping, distancing, self-controlling, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance*, while LV women are more likely to use the *positive reappraisal*, which is more associated with cognitive activities. Lithuanian men in the study were also more likely to use *escape-avoidance*, an *emotion-focussed coping strategy*, while LV men, like women, were more likely to use *positive reappraisal*. This suggests that the socio-cultural factor is very important in the use of coping strategies and may indirectly account for the higher levels of stress among the Lithuanian young people who participated in the study.

Lithuanian and Latvian young people use different sets of coping strategies. The group of young people who use all strategies frequently has a higher proportion of LT young people, while the group who use all strategies moderately has a higher proportion of LV young people. The proportion of LT young people is higher in the group with a stronger *social support strategy*, while the proportion of LV young people is higher in the group with a stronger *planned problem solving strategy*. These differences could be explained by the socio-cultural dependence of mental phenomena and their different expressions and by the different experiences of social support services.

Data analysis focussed on individual differences between respondents revealed complexes/clusters of coping strategies. All coping strategies – *emotion-focussed coping, planned problem-solving* and *seeking social support* – have moderate scores for the majority of respondents. This means that a minority of respondents have both low and high scores for the coping strategies. On the one hand, it could be assumed that socially disadvantaged young people do not have sufficiently developed coping strategies because they do not need to use them as they are not stressed. On the other hand, the significant indicators might suggest that they do use them because they are under severe stress. Comparing these resulting clusters with the stress management model (Palmer, 2007), it can be assumed that the respondents are at different stages of stress management. The first cluster can be related to step 1, problem identification, where the person perceives that stress is occurring, but strategies are not yet being used because resources are not assessed and the goal is not understood. The second cluster can be associated with step 2, the choice of the goal, where the person assesses his/her ability to cope with the stressful event and whether he/she has the resources to cope with it. If the person has a goal and the strength to cope with the problem, he/she tries the most appropriate strategy. The third cluster would be related to step 5, decision-making, which is related to an ongoing process and long-term consequences. In essence, this cluster reveals that all coping strategies have brought disappointment. It is possible that respondents in this cluster are teetering on the brink of damage to their health, or have already developed a hostile and fatalistic worldview and are characterised by cynical behaviour (Health and Behaviour, 2001). The fourth cluster reveals that its members are actively seeking alternatives to

stress coping strategies (Guogis, 2012). This cluster would be associated with Step 3 of Palmer's (2007) model. Summarising all clusters, respondents from cluster 2 would be the most confident, self-assured, and distraction-free when faced with stressful circumstances (Palmer, 2007), employing the most appropriate coping strategy while conserving their resources. Furthermore, the youth surveyed in Lithuania and Latvia were found to be unevenly distributed in terms of their stress coping strategies. The majority of the Lithuanian young people surveyed are high users of all strategies and moderate users of all strategies with a predominant use of social support seeking, while the majority of the Latvian young people surveyed are low users of all coping strategies and complex coping with a predominant use of planned problem solving. Hence, it could be assumed that socio-cultural reasons and a different package of social services may be at the origin of these different complexes of coping strategies.

\* \* \*

When analysing statistical data on coping with stressful situations of socially vulnerable young people in Lithuania and Latvia, there are several discursive contexts that may highlight socio-cultural differences. These differences between the analysed countries may have an impact on stress and the choice of coping strategies.

It should be noted that this type of research is quite complex and controversial, and is often highly dependent on the political, economic and social processes taking place in a country (Blum, 1998; Matulionytė and Navickė, 2018).

Naturally, with the creation of various political and economic alliances and globalisation, the highlighting of ethnic differences becomes less acceptable in order to maintain ethnic correctness. This discussion also does not seek to engage in ethnic, social or ideological manipulation, but rather seeks to understand the psycho-social characteristics of disadvantaged young people from both nations, which may have a bearing on their choices. The young people interviewed in both countries are under considerable stress and try to cope with it in different ways: It is possible that humanistic personalism (taking responsibility, self-realisation), a rather frequent tendency to extremes, less flexibility in external organisation of activities and help (hence confrontation) are more characteristic of the Lithuanians in the survey, while the Latvians in this survey are more flexible, more involved in structured activities, and do not lack a sense of realism (*positive reappraisal*) (Girnius, 1991; Guogis, 2012). In general, it can be assumed that young people are more stressed compared to others, and due to the peculiarities of their developmental period and lack of social experience, young people simply avoid identifying stressful situations and the difficulties they cause, and most often avoid professional help (Sweedbank, 2023).

In this respect, the social policies, laws and the whole system of social support for people in situations of social exclusion in the European Union and the Baltic States can play an important role. The Baltic countries are among the countries with the most stringent social support systems in the EU context. It should be noted that the application of such a strict support system will increase poverty and social exclusion in society (La-

zutka, 2014; Matulionytė and Navickė, 2018). It is likely that coping strategies to deal with the stress of young people at social risk also depend on the social welfare models chosen by countries. Mixed and undefined features of social policies, which imply ineffective social protection and pronounced social exclusion, are typical of post-communist countries, including Lithuania and Latvia (Dužinskas and Svirbutaitė-Krutkienė, 2018; Guogis, 2012; Pop-Radu, 2014). This hinders the training of social professionals, the development of social psychological support infrastructure, and the timely provision of assistance, which is particularly important for vulnerable members of society in the countries analysed. These political-social transformations hinder the management and coping with a widespread phenomenon such as stress. This becomes evident when reconstructing the reality of the stress coping capacities of the Lithuanian research participants. Such a paternalistic approach often limits the individual's activity, autonomy, decision-making and restricts the process of successful social integration.

It is likely that religious ethics become important in this aspect: most Lithuanians are Roman Catholics, a large part of Latvians are Lutherans, for whom renewal, rationality, critical thinking and personal responsibility are important, while Lithuanians are more conservative and expect more external, possibly mystical help (Kavolis, 1993; Žakaitis, 2011). The structure of emotion-oriented strategies is more characteristic of the socially vulnerable Lithuanian youth in the survey, while the Latvian youth in the survey are more likely to rationally cope with stress by adopting problem-solving-oriented strategies.

The stress coping strategies of the socially vulnerable young people in the survey may be due to reasons that are historiographically and culturally rooted in the Middle Ages. This divide in the two countries had already led to the formation of different historical and cultural areas in Western Europe (Latvia) and Central Europe (Lithuania) at that time. In the later stages of the development of the countries, this may have had implications for the more rapid development of urbanisation, jurisprudence, crafts, medicine, literacy and education in Latvia, and the more coherent development of ethnographic regions and agriculture in Lithuania (Girnius, 1991; Žakaitis, 2011).

We have discussed only some aspects of stress coping of socially vulnerable youth in Lithuania and Latvia, which may have been influenced by the socio-cultural, historical and socio-political context, which is, by the way, fragile and debatable from the methodological and empirical points of view. The discourse of opinions should be analysed and continued in further debates in this field.

### **Limitations of the study**

The study was carried out in the Northern and Southern regions of Lithuania and Latvia. This was in line with the requirements of the international Interreg project being implemented at the time under the Lithuania–Latvia Cross Border Cooperation Programme. The results of the study should not be applied to the whole population due to the choice of a purposive convenience sample. Therefore, the results of the study are interpreted only in the context of this study, in order to identify commonalities and differences and

to look for the best examples of social assistance and support and their implementation possibilities. These regions share a common feature: they are both distant from the countries' capital cities, where the countries' vast human and financial resources are concentrated, which can be perceived as reducing risk factors and social vulnerability.

It is very likely that socially vulnerable young people feel insecure, did not trust social workers and researchers during the data collection process, were reluctant to disclose their gender and age, were careless when filling in the questionnaire, and omitted estimates for the WCQ questionnaire statements. These behavioural characteristics observed *after the fact* allow the researchers to attribute to the limitations of the study the main characteristic of the sample – social vulnerability. Specifically, the responses of subjects who did not disclose their gender, age had to be removed from the data set, and omitted estimates of WCQ statements in the calculation of coping strategies were also removed, but this data treatment reduced the sample size and may have skewed the results for coping techniques and strategies.

## Conclusion

A comparison of the stress coping strategies used by socially vulnerable young people in Lithuania and Latvia shows that Lithuanian young people of this sample use emotion-focussed coping strategies (*confrontive coping, distancing, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance*) much more frequently than Latvian young people. Latvian young people are much more likely than Lithuanian young people to use one of the emotion-focussed strategies – *positive reappraisal*.

Rational stress coping – *planful problem solving* – oriented to problem solving is equally characteristic of both Latvian and Lithuanian men and women.

Lithuanian women are more likely than Latvian women to use *confrontive coping, distancing, self-controlling, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance*. Latvian women are significantly more likely than Lithuanian women to use *positive reappraisal*.

Lithuanian men use *escape-avoidance* to cope with stress significantly more than Latvian men. Latvian men are significantly more likely than Lithuanian men to use *positive reappraisal* stress management. No statistically significant differences were found when looking at stress coping techniques within each country by gender.

Differences in the combination of stress coping strategies used by socially vulnerable young people in Lithuania and Latvia have been revealed: a higher proportion of those using moderate emotion and social support-seeking, with a predominance of *planful problem solving* and a low proportion of those who used all possible stress coping strategies, are in the Latvian than in the Lithuanian young people who participated in the survey. Meanwhile, moderately expressed stress coping strategies with a predominance of social support seeking and a higher use of all strategies are significantly more frequently used by Lithuanian than Latvian young people. This could be explained by the difference in the severity index of the social support systems in Latvia and Lithuania.

It can be assumed that in the search for more effective ways of providing social support to young adults, it would be appropriate to focus on the selection of personalised social services according to the individual needs of the clients: to model a package of social services with different content, to increase the accessibility of psychological and social support, to differentiate the content of the support.

## Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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