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Title	Conceptualising coping and resilience in the context of socio-political and economic change: Generational perspectives from Slovenia
Author(s)	Kovai, Tanja; Dolan, Pat
Publication Date	2020-06-09
Publication Information	Kovai, Tanja, & Dolan, Pat. (2020). Conceptualising Coping and Resilience in the Context of Socio-Political and Economic Change: Generational Perspectives From Slovenia. <i>Child Care in Practice</i> , 26(4), 445-461. doi:10.1080/13575279.2020.1758036
Publisher	Routledge
Link to publisher's version	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2020.1758036">https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2020.1758036</a>
Item record	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10379/16196">http://hdl.handle.net/10379/16196</a>
DOI	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2020.1758036">http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2020.1758036</a>

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**Conceptualising coping and resilience in the context of socio-political and economic change: Generational perspectives from Slovenia**

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# **Conceptualising coping and resilience in the context of socio-political and economic change: Generational perspectives from Slovenia**

## **Abstract**

The significance of a wider social context in building youth resilience has recently been recognised (Masten, 2007; Ungar, 2008; Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009; Masten & Wright, 2010; Pooley & Cohen, 2010). Bottrell (2009) suggests that resilience research requires a move from individual-level experience to wider social practices, discourses, and ideological positions. Relatively little research looks at the rapid ideological change in state institutions and structures, or the consequent implications this has for understanding protective mechanisms and coping strategies among young people.

Based on the socio-ecological approach to resilience, this article explores the meaning of youth resilience in the context of a sudden socio-political transformation in Slovenia. For this purpose, experiences with transitions to adulthood in 20 people growing up under socialism and post-socialism are compared. Narrative thematic analysis of the interviews shows two types of transitions to adulthood emerging: supported, and individualised. This article shows that the meaning of youth resilience changes through socio-political and economic transformation. It emphasises the role that social policies and state ideologies have in shaping social ecologies and consequently youth perceptions of risk and coping: from social processes under socialism to an individual process in post-socialism.

Key words: Youth resilience, social change, socialism, post-socialism, socio-ecological mode, ideologies, youth policies

## **1. Youth resilience and social change**

Resilience has been broadly understood as a personal trait or as a process arising out of individual-social interaction (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Canavan, 2008; Olsson *et al.*, 2015). Traditionally, it has been associated with human pathologies and as such it primarily refers to psychological aspects of individuals. Risk and coping strategies are two constitutive parts of resilience, however, their specific features remain unclear (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000;

Richman & Fraser, 2001). Risk is a concept that suffers from the lack of a standardised definition and universal measurement. Despite some ambitious attempts (*i.e.*, a normative approach to risk) to provide a consensual understanding of the meaning of risk, it has been established that its perceptions depend on diverse epistemological approaches stemming from individual or broader social definitions of significant threat. As with risk, the roots of coping also remain unclear. A reliance on personal characteristics and traits when facing a challenging situation has been widely researched (*i.e.* Kirby & Fraser, 1997; Bonanno & Mancini, 2008), while the connection between protective mechanisms and practices in a social context have been recognised only recently. Several studies have acknowledged the connection between wider social contexts, cultures, risk, and coping (Gunnestad, 2006; Ungar, 2008).

Resilience has gained popularity among policymakers and governments recently, as a “solution” for the vanishing welfare state. Marquis (2013) argues that resilience is a Western concept based on ideas of normative development derived from liberal-individualistic cultural norms and values. Its popularity has been considered to promote ideas of self-reliance, strength-based approaches, and individual capacity building. There is also an established belief that resilience fits within a neo-liberal discourse of moving states’ responsibilities onto individuals, families, and communities (Joseph, 2013; Neocleous, 2013; Evans & Reid, 2014). As Bourbeau argued (2018, p. 12), however, these critiques reject the concept of resilience itself, rather, engaging in the discussion of a particular (neo-liberal) take on resilience as promoted by state policies. They subsequently ignore research that focuses on social processes in building resilience<sup>1</sup>.

A socio-ecological view of resilience considers the influence of a wider social context on individual coping and resilience (Ungar, 2008; Theron & Donald, 2012; Theron *et al.*, 2014). Resilience is embedded in a specific historical, cultural and contextual framework, and is constantly being defined and redefined by those who have power over social discourses of health and wellness (Ungar, 2008). Economic and political systems create health care conditions and shape perceptions of health. Societies facilitate access to resources and support

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<sup>1</sup>Five stages of resilience research have been discussed elsewhere (Kovačič, 2015), and have shown how the development of the concept has shifted from an idea of understanding resilience as an individual trait to recognising the importance of wider societal, relational, and political processes in building resilience.

individuals and their families when exposed to life challenges. Risk factors, processes, and outcomes are constantly redefined according to the context in which they exist. At the same time, this view of resilience emphasises the need to look towards opportunities and resources that people can access over time. There have been several calls made for a wider sociological understanding of resilience focusing on the role of systemic inequalities and structural roots of risk and coping (VanderPlaat, 2016; Estêvão *et al.*, 2017). It is particularly important to examine this in connection with young people.

Studies of youth resilience have mostly focused on examining the coping skills and resilience of “at-risk” youth. These studies have applied predetermined ideas of risk and vulnerability to pre-designed quantitative models for measuring risk, focusing on youth growing up in poverty, amidst dysfunctional families, or with mental health problems (Howard *et al.*, 1999). These investigations have not considered the influence of opportunities and challenges deriving from wider social contexts on youth resilience processes (Bottrell, 2010). Labels, such as “at-risk” or “resilient youth” shift the gaze away from the structural solutions to young individuals (VanderPlaat, 2016). Furthermore, Furlong and Cartmel (1997) argue that changes connected with prolonged transitions to adulthood and individualisation influence young people’s subjective perceptions of risk and uncertainty.

In post-industrial societies, support for youth is mostly “privatised” or, more often, provided by family members and friends (Wallace & Kovacheva, 1998; Catan, 2004; Toguchi Swartz & Bengtson O’Brien, 2017). Biggart and Walther (2006) argue that reliance on private sources of support not only influences people’s autonomy, it also affects their possibilities for social inclusion. Social exclusion and narrowing space for youth to private and leisure time has been taken place across Europe. These processes have been, however, more prevalent in the countries which experienced transition from socialism to capitalism (Ule & Leskošek, 2018). It has also been established that difficulties arising from the transition from childhood to adulthood should not be considered as a misfortune suffered by individuals, but must be approached as a reality of the whole socio-cultural milieu of a young population (Rener, 2000, p. 95). In post-industrial society, economic resources largely determine an individual’s access to resources and opportunities from childhood through to adulthood (Catan, 2004). This means that rapid socio-economic changes and a shift from collectivism to structured

individualism can rapidly transform the living experiences and life chances of young people. Masten *et al.* (2004) argue that societies and cultures create conditions and strategies to support young people during transitions to adulthood. The level of influence that a transformation of social structures has on these “scaffolding practices” and their connection to youth coping and resilience, however, is under-researched.

This paper is a part of a wider study which developed around the following research question: How does socio-political transformation influence the provision of protective mechanisms and youth coping as aspects of resilience during transitions to adulthood? An innovative conceptual framework focused on the role of protective mechanisms (i.e. youth civic engagement and social support) in building youth resilience was developed. Based on Ungar’s (2008) socio-ecological definition of resilience, this research aimed to explore the meaning of youth resilience in socialist and post-socialist context in Slovenia. As argued by Ungar (2008: 225):

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, whether psychological, environmental, or both, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual’s family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in a culturally meaningful way.

This paper examines one of the objectives of the research. It aims to compare perceived differences in risk and coping with transitions to adulthood across three generations of young people (socialist, transitional and post-socialist) in Slovenia. Assuming a socio-ecological approach to resilience research, this paper considers the material, social and relational opportunities available to young people in changing times. We argue that there is the need for a sociological and political understanding of youth resilience that provides a greater insight into the link between individual and societal resilience.

## **2. Contextualising the study**

Slovenia gained independence after the break-up of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991. In the 1980s, the Yugoslav state faced economic, social and political problems. The socialist regime was losing legitimacy after the death of President Tito in 1980. The crisis resulted in the breakup of Yugoslavia. The dissolution of the State led to a socio-economic and political transformation, a so-called “transition to democracy”, which had a major impact on society and young people’s lives in particular.

Under socialism young people were recognised as important, collective social actors and considered as builders of the socialist future (Ule, 2012). Youth transitions to adulthood were smooth and fixed and provided young people with secure jobs, education and other incentives, such as accommodation, health and child care (Ule & Rener, 2000; Roberts, 2009). As argued by Azanjac (2012), policy-focus on transitions to adulthood were supportive, but also paternalistic in nature. As part of the Yugoslav self-management system, young people were encouraged to participate in communities and society. Youth activities were provided through youth organisations, such as the Alliance of Pioneers and the Alliance of Socialist Youth. The role of Alliance of Pioneers was mainly educational and patriotic; promoting socialist ideas of brotherhood and unity, humanism and internationalism for children between ages of 7 and 14 (Jere, 2003). All young people between ages of 14 and 27 became members of the Socialist Youth Alliance (Jere, 2003). The organisation operated on all societal levels, including schools, business enterprises and local communities. In the 1980s the organisation had an important role in building Slovenian civil society, and it associated itself with movements, such as punk, peace movement and LGBT (Vurnik, 2005).

The independence of the state corresponded with the transition to post-socialism which involved economic, social and political transformation of the socialist state into capitalist democracy. As argued by Dragoš and Leskošek (2003), this transformation involved processes of denationalisation and privatisation. As a result of the disappearance of a high social security net, people growing up during the 1990s, in former socialist societies in central and south-eastern Europe, experienced so-called “double transitions” to adulthood (Burrell, 2011). In these societies, young people’s transitions to adulthood coincided with rapid socio-

political and economic changes. While their childhood experiences in the socialist period were associated with a period of economic security, in which patterns of transitions were structured and supervised (Roberts, 2012), the post-socialist period witnessed the disappearance of a welfare security net. The changed relationship between young people and the state has been recognised as a result of the socio-political transformation (Ule, 2015; Ule & Leskošek, 2018). Under socialism young people were recognised as actors of social change, while their role has become obsolete under capitalism as youth have been considered as an ordinary age group.

### 3. A narrative approach to resilience research

The research reported on here used an interpretative, qualitative approach in order to research generational experiences of growing up in a context of social change. Twenty participants growing up in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s were recruited for the purposes of this study. Purposive sampling was used as a technique to select participants. The participants' selection criteria were based on nationality, age, gender, and geographical location. All participants grew up in the Karst region in Slovenia in the mentioned periods of time. Participants were of mixed gender, with a slight prevalence of female interviewees. "Snowball sampling" was used as a method for recruiting participants. Participants were recruited through local community, youth, student and educational organisations.

The concept of "generations" was applied to the differing age groups of people participating in this research. As shown in Table 1, the generations were defined according to participants' age and the formative period/time of their growing up.

<b>Generation</b>	<b>Age of participants at the time of interviewing</b>	<b>Time of Growing Up</b>	<b>Formative Period</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Socialist	40-52	1980s	Socialism	6



Transitional	30-39	1990s	Transition to liberal capitalism	7
Post-socialist	18-29	2000s	Post-socialism/ Capitalism	7

Table 1: Generations developed for research purposes

As argued by McLeod and Thompson (2009), researching people’s experiences within the context of social change retrospectively requires additional methodological considerations, as memory is always partial and constructed. Participants shared their perspectives of social change from different time periods: those growing up under socialism relied on their memories from 40 years ago, while some younger participants were still in the middle of transitions to adulthood. The process of remembering is highly selective and politicised, while the way in which we remember is rooted in a social context. Keightely (2010) argues, the act of remembering is individual, but also cultural and social. While the comparison of past and present can be challenging, narrative inquiry can help to identify common patterns in sequences of events in different periods of time (Haydu, 1998).

Narrative inquiry was applied “to understand more about individual and social change” (Andrews *et al.*, 2008, p. 2). As argued by Andrews (2007), “Stories are never told in a vacuum” (p. 3). Narratives are always undergoing a process of transformation as they are constructed and reconstructed by the researcher and research participants (Andrews *et al.*, 2008). A narrative approach was used in order to provide a structure that gave meaning to narrators’ experiences, while participants relied on memories to recall a sequence of events. As pointed out by Ellis and Bochner (in Gilbert, 2002), however, narratives are not “pure memory storage devices”, they are constructed and open to change (p. 225).

The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Slovenian, while the final research was written and presented in English. Language-related issues had to be considered throughout the research process. First aspects of translation emerged during the process of development of the interview guide when the main researcher of this paper realised that concepts, such as

resilience and youth civic engagement cannot be easily translated to the Slovenian context. Interview questions were informed by the guide developed by Ungar and Liebenberg (2011). However, there were concerns raised that participants may not be able to make sense of it when the guide was directly translated into Slovenian. An experience-centred approach to interviewing (Hollway & Jefferson, 2001; Squire, 2008) was used at the beginning of the interviews to elicit participants' stories. A narrative-inducing question – “I would like to invite you to share your experience with growing up in the Karst region”- was asked first. Three main themes revolving around participants' experiences with engagement in activities, social support, coping and resilience were further explored through a format of semi-structured interviews.

Thematic narrative analysis was applied to analyse the data. Approaching the data in various ways, including field notes, memos, transcriptions, translation of summaries and memos from Slovene to English, and thematic analysis, provided an opportunity to contrast the data during the whole research process. All interviews were first transcribed verbatim in Slovenian to work with the original data as closely as possible. The researcher simultaneously wrote memos and short summaries of the interviews in English by following the structure and the content of the original interviews. As a result, emerging themes (i.e. transitions to adulthood, engagement in available activities and support provided to young people) were recognised early in the process. However, this approach to translation is not unproblematic and as argued by Ross (2010) translation has political and ideological implications. Translations are constructed by the researcher and issues around (mis)interpretations and (un)intentional mistakes need to be considered as part of this process. At the same time, this process was not introduced to search for truth, but to construct meaning across languages and cultures.

Several researchers (Temple, 2008; Temple & Koterba, 2009; Brännlund, Kovačič & Lounasmaa, 2013) argue that narrative approach to analysis situates people's stories in a spatiotemporal context across the cultures and offers an opportunity for those stories to be compared and contrasted. Slovenian transcripts were coded in English and further developed in categories and themes. The Constant comparison of the stories inside and across generations resulted in the recognition of the main emerging themes. Bazeley (2009) approach to thematic analysis involves the following steps: to describe – compare – relate gathered data. This was used to explore emerging themes and concepts within and across the research

contexts. Data was reviewed, seeking common/contradictory themes and topics, through which the stories of the participants could be understood.

Examining what is told and not told and what is then narrated in a particular time has implications on issues such as recall and recollection of findings. Stories that are told through once off interviews can never be repeated, and the research has to consider the context in which the story was narrated. This study was conducted when Slovenia experienced financial and political crisis which may contribute to more positive views toward the Yugoslav socialism across generations, at a point in time. Participants' experiences and perceptions are not applicable outside of their personal context, however, the findings do contribute to "theoretical reasoning" (Patton, 2002) and can inform new theoretical considerations about the researched topic. In order to explore the research topic further, the life course and life events perspective could be applied to examine further trends in youth resilience. Current generations of young people could be included in the research to provide a complete picture of youth resilience in Slovenia.

Ethical issues connected with doing research in a small community where people know each other well were considered. Full anonymity was ensured by replacing participants' names with fictional ones. All shared information was kept confidential. Some information was not presented when the details about other people's lives were mentioned and it was obvious that other community members could recognise them. This included information, such as people's names, work details, and places of living.

#### **4. Generational Narratives on Resources, Risk, and Coping**

Smooth and linear transitions to adulthood, which were supported and planned by the socialist state, are discussed by the socialist generation. Similar to previous research (Ule & Renner, 2000; Roberts, 2009), their stories indicate that the state was orientating young people toward predetermined educational and work destinations. The findings in this study show that there is an established link between state-supported transitions to adulthood and youth perception of risk. When participants from the socialist generation are asked to recall any problems and

risks they faced while growing up, it was clear that most of them did not associate this stage of their life with any difficulties, and that they considered this period of time to have been “problem-free”. They linked pathways to adulthood with the wider social context and the benefits provided by the socialist state, based on a high state security net. The socialist state provided for youth social benefits, including internships, scholarships, and employment (Mandič, 1996; Wallace & Kovacheva, 1998; Roberts 2009), all of which were mentioned by the participants:

We had access to scholarships; already in the primary school they orientated us to the metallurgic school<sup>2</sup> which was based here in town, so it was necessary to recruit enough candidates to fill the posts. Everything - scholarships and jobs and other types of jobs - was widely available (Darko - socialist generation).

There were no problems finding a job. No problems [...] if you wanted to work. I had no problems. I started to work during the summer holidays in primary school. I worked as a forest ranger. And I helped in a factory (Filip – socialist generation).

Social practices, including youth social and political engagement, and wider societal care, shared and shaped human experiences, which means that they helped to forge relationships between young people. Teachers and other staff played crucial roles in supporting young people in their integration into the new environment, encouraging them to participate in social activities and events.

They really strived to help, to push further especially those students who were weaker, who had learning difficulties. They made an agreement with us who were educationally stronger to help to the weaker students. There was an intergenerational conflict, but also solidarity (David – socialist generation).

According to Milojka, young people had the chance to express their ideas, and, with the support of adults, to realise them. Teachers and community leaders provided everything – from a physical space to material support, and advice to support youth engagement.

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<sup>2</sup> Metallurgic school was a vocational school focused on the development of practical skills leading to work in the metallurgic industry.

There were enough opportunities [when growing up]—if you were the type of person who was able to find them. And there was support available, too. [...] We always showed our own initiative, always. (Milojka - socialist generation).

Most participants associated their opportunities for youth engagement with participation in the organisation of the Socialist Youth Alliance of Slovenia. They mentioned that this organisation was not only political, but it enabled young people to get involved with various social activities. By participating in this organisation, young people were able to explore new ideas and to socialise:

There were some people who were politically active, but usually they were only a few who would be really interested in politics. And then it was us, people who joined, who always raised their hands (laughter). We liked to travel, to socialise and were always interested in something new. But we were not...I was not politically active in anyway, but I joined them. (Milojka - socialist generation)

The personal story of David illustrates how transitions from primary to secondary school were supported by schools and communities. David moved to another town during his secondary schooling and the new educational setting exposed him to a strict daily routine revolving around attending school classes, writing home work, and dormitory life. Although the new routine brought changes into his life, he did not seem to be disturbed by them. He explains that relationships with schoolmates, which were nurtured by the school and the dormitory, helped him to adapt to the new context, and to develop a high level of solidarity with his peers:

We always helped to each other. We developed a high level of solidarity, or we just wouldn't make it. We had that mutual feeling, to always help to each other. We also met up at each other's homes, in the dormitory or elsewhere so we could study together. We studied together and we helped each other to be able to move on. (David - socialist generation).

David compared his growing up experience with the youth of today, believing that socio-political and economic changes had a huge impact on the socialisation of young people. As David explained, youth development was holistic and pedagogical under socialism, while today's socialisation approaches focused on the development of skills.

Young people, who are social beings, are treated as a psychological phenomenon today. Everything they do is based on a specific task, exercise, or performance. There are no connections, no ties, especially in urban areas. It is only focused on specific exercises: two hours of this [exercise], one hour of another [exercise] and that's it (David - socialist generation).

Participants' comparative accounts indicated that the role of young people in society was altered by radical social change. Participants from the socialist generation considered individualism and the commercialisation process to have influenced young people's access to resources, while the withdrawal of state support further affected social conditions and opportunities. Matej argued that the lack of opportunities for contemporary youth was a result of the changing relationship between individuals and the state:

Today we rush into capitalism more and more, which was, in one way or another, considered rotten in the past, and it most probably really brought social differentiation. There is no cooperation among people anymore; everything is individualised. Everyone takes care of themselves. In the past, the state took care of things, while today one has to find the way oneself; [for example,] how to get a job or accommodation. Individuals are more exposed. In the past, the state, the society took care of this, while today this doesn't exist anymore. (Matej - socialist generation).

Transitional and post-socialist youth narratives of transitions to adulthood were more diverse, with a noticeable absence of reference to state-provided support in their stories. Both transitional and post-socialist youth, however, discussed the access to resources within a similar framework to that of their socialist predecessors. They linked opportunities and resources connected with youth development to job opportunities, available housing, and social welfare. Their stories, however, must be read within a post-socialist context, considering new socio-economic regime characterised by neoliberal policies (Ule & Leskošek, 2018). This is recognised through a lack of data on the provision of scholarships, internships, and other supportive mechanisms, such as jobs and accommodation. Previous practices of state support were replaced with mechanisms of the market economy. Findings show that young people experienced precarious conditions in employment, a lack of permanent jobs and, on occasion, bad working conditions. As argued within the literature (Mandič, 1996; Ule & Renner, 2000; Hlebec *et al.*, 2010), these changes have resulted in

insecurities and precariousness within individual lives, and have also limited youth access to housing.

Gregor, a participant in the transitional generation, described the struggle of getting a mortgage as being a result of unstable employment conditions. Despite being a highly qualified professor of maths, he had a temporary teaching position in one of the local schools. His mother had to financially support him and act as a guarantee when he decided to buy a flat.

[...] My mother helped me. I think I saved 10.000 Euro at the time and she maybe gave me extra 1000 Euro so that I had (enough to apply for a loan) (Gregor - transitional generation).

Precarious employment and the increasing number of temporary contracts have been prevalent particularly among young people (Ule & Leskošek, 2018). High expectations in relation to state provision of material resources and support are still recognised among younger interviewees. As Sonja explained, young people still think of their lives as developing around predictive stages, including going to university, getting a job, getting married and having a child. These views, however, are not compatible with the reality of prolonged and blurred transitions (Kuhar, 2009), and young people may in fact never achieve some of the aforementioned stages. Sonja further discussed the difficulty of gaining financial independence for contemporary youth by linking prolonged processes of education and staying at home.

It is actually not unusual [to live with one's parents] when one, for instance, finishes university at the age of 27. You cannot expect people to be able to have, or to earn, enough to buy their own flats. It is impossible. At the same time, there are expectations that when you are 30 or 32 you will do something, and people think you are weird if you live with your parents at that age (Sonja – post-socialist generation).

These changes resulted in intensified perceptions of social risk among young people, who were, according to Renner (2002), more frightened about life progress than necessary. Intensified perceptions of risk were recognised in the stories of transitional and post-socialist youth, who used words such as “horror”, “crisis” and “shock” when describing changes connected with transitions. Difficulties which they experienced during this period were strongly linked with the changes accompanying transitions (*i.e.* new environment and daily

routine, and a loss of friendships). Their accounts demonstrate that risk is linked to a fear of change and the unknown. Andreja's story indicated that the transition from one educational setting to another was hard. A change connected with the move from secondary level to third level of education was linked with huge expectations, but these expectations were not met due to a lack of support and guidance.

I most probably expected too much from a new environment. I think I expected too much. I was moved from that warm nest, where we were all feeling great, we all loved each other, to the place where it was not like that. Where there was still a need to arrange things or to adjust, and then when these things were not there, I was shocked, and I refused it (Andreja – transitional generation).

Several other participants said that educational transitions were difficult as schools and the wider society did not respond to their needs, and/or their talents and ambitions were not recognised:

Our problem was that we had no goals [...]. The educational system and society were not able to teach me that I can be whoever I want to be. And our generation, was not presented with this idea at all (Jaro - transitional generation).

This pattern of unsupported and hazardous transitions was recognised among participants of the post-socialist generation also. Nevenka's story about the transition from primary to secondary school revealed that the change was difficult due to a lack of support and to the individualised work imposed by the new school setting. She linked this period with the loss of contacts and strong friendships, which she had developed in her previous educational setting. Her new school routine was strict and focused on studies and homework. Nevenka explained that she responded negatively to these changes, as she was unable to verbalise her problems and to discuss them with other people.

I had big problems. Actually, puberty and growing up are hard periods as such, but the environment in the Gymnasium didn't help. I had even bigger problems because of it. That was the hardest time of my [life]. It was problematic for me because I was not able to accept this new style of working and socialising as it was set in this school [...] I was not able to externalise problems. I internalised them instead and I didn't respond to them positively. (Nevenka – post-socialist generation).



Findings show that most of participants from the transitional and post-socialist youth generations developed individualised coping strategies to respond to challenges of transitions within the newly formed social context. When they were asked about people or mechanisms which helped them to cope with the challenges, they mostly responded that they used “self-activation” mechanisms, or that they “relied on themselves”. Reliance on “individual resourcefulness” was a recognised theme in participants’ stories. Self-help and self-activation strategies when dealing with life’s challenges emerged as new tactics to be used by young people when dealing with life’s problems.

You realise that you must help to yourself. Even if you have a partner, parents or someone else, you are still alone. You must do something as no one else can do it instead of you (Simona – transitional generation).

However, as explained by some participants, this coping strategy was not always effective. As was evident in Simona’s story, young people who did not get support at school and/or home were not able to activate their coping strategies. Simona described her transition from primary to secondary school as a period of “getting lost”. Although she was not interested in education, she connected this attitude with the wider apathy towards young people. She linked this period to a lack of support in the school and community. Simona described it as a period during which society did not provide her with any opportunities, and then she did not express any interest in getting involved in things:

And from one point of view I blamed myself, how stupid I was. But I think that I didn’t have many (options). Okay, it was my fault, but I also think that my situation is the reflection of the society at the time, which did not offer me much, to be able to get engaged (Simona – transitional generation).

A vast majority of accounts of transitional and post-socialist generations reported about a lack of activities and/or opportunities for engagement during secondary school. Transition from primary to secondary school was by most participants depicted as a time of no incentive or events, as shown in the following examples:

Possibilities to get involved were lacking [...] And then we didn't do anything meaningful. In fact, we became part of a bigger group of people who didn't do anything meaningful. (Jaro – transitional generation).

I didn't study nor do anything else. I also didn't have any hobbies. There were not many opportunities (to get involved in activities). (Sonja – post-socialist generation).

Participants of transitional and younger generations did not report a holistic nurture of routine and relationships. New educational settings did not provide them with universal and collective access to resources and opportunities. Friends and peers thus became the most important sources of support in the young people's lives. Friends were presented as supportive pillars; they provided emotional support and were not judgmental:

When I told to my friend what happened to me, she didn't say: ' you are stupid '. Although I would probably have to hear that. She focused on me telling her what happened. To her it was never important what I am going to do, but she gave me a feeling that I can always come back [to her]. There were no doubts - I was able to rely on her, or to call her at any time (Polona – post-socialist generation).

In many cases educational transitions disturbed these relationships and young people found themselves distressed and lonely. Individuals' adaptation to a new context largely depended on their personal abilities and resources. Help was mostly derived from close relationships with family members and friends. Generational narratives showed that family support was especially important in the case of post-socialist youth who predominantly relied upon their parents when experiencing problems in life.

My mom, she is the most important to me as she is my main guidance. She explained everything that is important to me and she was able to teach me what is important and what not in life - to which areas I should invest my energy and which I should avoid. She was my guide (Anej – post-socialist generation).

Within the narratives of both transitional and post-socialist generations, it was recognised that social practices used to nurture transitions to adulthood under socialism were no longer applicable to the new socio-political context. These changes impacted both adults and young people, as they were not accustomed to more individualised and commercialised social practices. For example, Nevenka explained that her parents were not able to help her with her problems, since they had no experience with the scope of challenges she was facing. In this case, family support alone was not enough to help Nevenka to cope with her problems.

It is also probably important to mention that our parents lacked experience...They did not have or could not share a recipe how to deal with those problems. Mostly because they never experienced those things, they were not familiar with them (Nevenka – post-socialist generation).

## **5. Discussion**

Similar to Ungar's (2008) socio-ecological conceptualisation of resilience, this research shows that risk, coping and resilience need to be approached within their social and cultural contexts. It shows that for individuals to be resilient, we need to support young people during transitions to adulthood with the opportunities that are meaningful to them; employment, accommodation and education. Youth role in society, access to participatory and supportive activities, and distribution of resources through the state welfare system were recognised by participants as important during the transitions to adulthood.

The two types of transitions to adulthood seen here -- supported and individualised -- indicate the difference in youth experiences and responses to risk and coping. State supported transitions were developed under the strong presence of a social state where a security net provided for young people growing up (Azanjac *et al.*, 2012). Stories narrated by the socialist generation showed that available social and economic resources and opportunities, including full and secure employment and accommodation, resulted in non-risky transitions to adulthood. Protective mechanisms (i.e. societal care, social support and youth civic engagement) which enabled youth coping were ingrained in all societal systems. An interesting finding in this regard was that the socialist youth found these conditions crucial for their understanding of risk and coping. This type of transition resulted in limited perceptions of risk among youth. Predictable and non-risky stages equipped youth with a feeling of control over their life choices.

In contrast, transitional and post-socialist youth were exposed to individualised and hazardous transitions to adulthood. They experienced a lack of societal and state support when the crumbling institution of the welfare state has been replaced with neoliberal policies supporting individualistic ways of living (Ule & Leskovšek, 2018). As reported elsewhere

(Renner, 2002), young people in post-socialism are more frightened about the progress of life and experience an increased perception of risk. This is evident in the participants' stories which depicted transitions as moments when they "got lost" and "experienced major problems" in their lives. Lost connections with friends, a lack of adult support, and the absence of initiatives in a new social context exposed young individuals to feelings of isolation. In this context, transitional and post-socialist youth recognised individual capacities and resources as being crucial for coping with the challenges of transitions. Self-activation and self-dependence were two coping mechanisms recognised by participants (Roberts, 2009). However, reliance on individual resources made such transitions more uncertain for younger generations (Renner, 2000, Ule & Renner, 2000). Young people who coped well with challenges associated with transitions were mostly supported by their families and friends. However, as recounted by some participants, their parents did not have previous experiences with the ways of living in a new context - several young people explained that they could not rely on their families when facing the challenges posed by transitions.

Even though this change has benefited some young people, it has left many behind, and there are recognised implications for youth resilience in general. This indicates that replacing mechanisms of the welfare state with neo-liberal policies has had detrimental results for youth as a group. The Slovenian capitalist state characterised by neoliberal economy does not recognise youth as a unique social group anymore. Young people are individualised and marginalised in the society, labour market and from "the origins of power" (Ule, 2015, p. 76). Consequently, their collective potential to negotiate resources is limited. This shift from collectivism to individualism; from state supported access to market-driven access to resources has had major implications for youth outcomes. Participants reported experiencing prolonged educational transitions, a lack of meaningful or permanent employment and in general limited opportunities to become independent.

Contextualising resilience within the same geographic and cultural space in different periods of time, however, shows how wider ideologies, policies and systems shape social ecologies (VanderPlaats, 2016) under two different socio-political and economic systems. Large-scale changes affect societies and their social structures, which results in a new constellation of power and distribution of resources (Estêvão et al., 2017). Political ideologies embedded in

wider social structures, youth policies, and wider social welfare regimes, influence young people's perceptions of risk and their responses to it. As argued by Evans and Reid (2014), the social state took care of individual lives in the past and was replaced with neoliberal economic policies which developed around the idea of individual resilience. This shift is clearly visible in this study; generational experiences with transitions to adulthood showed that young people's responses to challenges were significantly different when exposed to the care of a social state or neo-liberal policies in post-socialism. Schwarz (2018: 8) points out that resilience is not an ontological fact, but a construct which reflects moral social codes of a particular time. This is clearly shown in the case of Slovenia where a sudden socio-political transformation coincided with the changing values (i.e. a focus on individualism and consumerism). Adversaries or risks perceived by youth under post-socialism are systemic in nature, while individual responses to them depend on individual and family resources. This indicates that the conceptualisation of youth resilience needs to consider the role of wider social structures, competing ideologies, social policies and examine issues linked with social justice and equality of condition. Considering this, the sociological understanding of resilience needs to focus on the link between resilient societies/communities and resilient individuals.

The implications of these findings are that youth resilience can be nurtured as part of a wider social responsibility and discourse of care. Generational perspectives into youth understanding of risk and resilience provide a unique insight into practices and activities that can be used for scaffolding youth resilience. They partially depend on material resources, but most importantly, they largely depend on how young people relate with their families, schools and communities and with wide provision of opportunities to access activities and practices (i.e. youth engagement and support) available on the communal and societal level. The role of communities as enablers of resilience need to be particularly considered in this regard.

For young people to be resilient, resilient communities and societies are needed. We argue that communities can strengthen resilience in youth by promoting solidarity, mutual support, and social engagement. As shown on the example of the socialist generation, youth development can be embedded in all spheres of young people's lives, including families, schools and wider communities. This approach was described as holistic and pedagogical,

revolving around practices and activities, such as youth engagement, peer mentoring and support, and building positive relationships based on mutual care and solidarity. Beside family members, relationships between young individuals and adults (*i.e.* teachers and community members) were nurtured and as shown in this paper, had positive outcomes for youth. Schools in particular can work as enablers of resilience by following a student needs led approach and promoting strong and positive relationships among teachers and students.

## **6. Conclusion**

The discussion about resilience needs to consider wider social ecologies and the role of systems, structures and ideologies in shaping these social ecologies. Echoing VanderPlaat's view (2016), we suggest that there is a need to recognise risk and resilience as collective conditions which are socially constructed and defined from position of privilege and power. In light of the current focus on neo-liberal approach in the area of youth development, we recommend a radical shift away from those policies, re-considering the role of youth in society and provide them with collective support when transitioning to adulthood. The cross-generational comparison of youth experiences with growing up under socialism and post-socialism shows how youth understanding of resilience moved from communal/societal understanding of resilience to individualised resilience. This is particularly relevant for today when neo-liberal policies and the focus on individual responsibility prevail in promoting a certain type of resilience. However, as shown in this paper youth resilience can be embedded in wider social structures and nurtured through practices and activities such as social support and youth civic engagement. Ultimately, the role of the welfare system and the access to equal opportunities and resources in supporting youth transitions to adulthood is key. This task requires us to use not only sociological, but also political imagination.

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