

Differences of Personal Agency Between the Cohorts in Lithuania: Relating Gender, Period and Attitudes Towards the Breaking of Public Norms

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The article is aimed at showing how the perception of personal agency is interlinked with the attitudes towards keeping up or breaking the public norms among different age groups in Lithuania. The article proposes the general thesis that this link may be determined by the different experience and socialisation of generations. The article employs the quantitative representative data (collected in 2020) from the survey of the Lithuanian population aged 18–52, which is analysed using bivariate and multivariate methods by comparing two distinctive generations. The data analysis reveals the pattern – the middle-aged cohort has a weaker sense of agency and is more likely to justify breaking of certain public norms than younger adults. Additionally, the age cohort factor or generational categories are an important factor in explaining how the disapproval of breaking of certain public norms is correlated with higher levels of personal agency. The latter finding supports the conceptual thesis that socialisation in the Soviet system may be an important factor in determining differences in personal agency and the attitudes of public norm breaking in Lithuania.

Keywords: generations, agency, socialisation, self-efficacy, breaking public norms

INTRODUCTION

The interest of social science in the conception of personal agency (Giddens 1976, 1979, 1984; Beck 1994; Bauman 1996; Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 2008; Badura 2000, 2006; Archer 2000, 2003; Cole 2021) and various related cognitive concepts (*effectiveness, efficacy, self-regulation, self-efficacy, self-esteem*, etc.) could be defined by Z. Bauman's description about the individual freedom of modern societies. He argues that 'individual freedom, once a liability and a problem (perhaps *the* problem) for all order-builders, became the major asset and resource in the perpetual self-creation of the human universe' (Bauman 1997: 3). The necessity of modern societies to keep a certain balance between the individual freedom and the social order, which could guaranty the individual sense of security, is at the same time directly related to the restriction and promotion of greater personal agency. Particularly the safeguard of this balance is relevant to the societies of late modernity, as the personal agency becomes an important

core of the successful functionality of modern institutions. For example, the student-centric approach in education or the patient-centric one in health care systems means that the participants become more independent, autonomic, and could take more responsibility for the successful results of institutions and affect greater institutional changes. At the same time, it is important to find some balance between the individuals' commitment to the public norms for contemporary society, i.e. to keep the certain level of social order. This paper is interested in conceptual questions: could the personal attitudes of public norms be independent variables related to the personal agency, and could the socialisation of normative (public) rules be related with the personal agency and self-efficacy?

Looking contextually at the evolution of Lithuania society, a sudden structural transformation of modern society has induced new systemic conditions on different age cohorts to have a certain level of self-determination and experience the insecurities. The contemporary Lithuanian age cohorts were socialised under different political, social and economic systems. Older cohorts were socialised in the Soviet totalitarian system and couldn't freely declare their ideas, criticise the government or on one's own participate in the public life of society. Younger age cohorts were socialised under the independent Lithuanian period (i.e. private-market and democratic state conditions), and they were allowed to express more freely and critically their civil rights and notion what is appropriate in the society. Hence, generally assessing these assumptions, the following testable assumption can be proposed: the different level of the external control of individuals by two different society types (i.e. totalitarian or democratic systems) determined and affected differently their possibilities to take part and change social life and trust in the public norms.

The goal of the article is to analyse how the attitudes towards the breaking of public norms are linked with the personal agency and if there are empirically measurable differences of personal agency between different age cohorts in Lithuania. The paper proposes the main hypothesis: there should be some differences in the perception of the breaking of public norms and personal agencies between 18–25 cohorts in 1990's (at the end of the totalitarian regime) and the 2020 cohort (after 30 years of the independence). Another assumption tested in this paper is based on the inverse correlation: the increasing support for public norms breaking is related to the decreasing degree of personal agency and vice versa.

FINDING THE DEFINITION OF 'PERSONAL AGENCY' IN LATE MODERN SOCIETY

As S. Gallagher (2000: 15) notes, personal agency is the sense of the person that he/she is causing or generating an action. A sense of personal agency means that the person perceives himself/herself as the subject who is able to determine his/her actions and can change their living conditions (Bandura 2006). From the sociological point, the sense of personal capacities depends upon the social structure that determines or provides the means to express or limit agent's sense of agency and later activities (through behaviour patterns). Additionally, the individual change or reproduction of the social structure also depends on individual's capacity to change the structure.

As Giddens (1984: 15) states, '*...[the] agency refers to the ability to act or perform an action or refer to those things that agents are actually doing or their capability of doing things. Action or the ability to act by the agency is always interacting with power. The agency is the fundamental element to create any sort of change. Change can be thought of as simple as movement through space to interact with a new environment changing the routine of society. Through the decision to act, either consciously or not, creates changes within the agency and to the structure that one has influence on.*' Therefore, a social

structure could be defined in terms of a set of rules and resources that engage human action. According to the British sociologist who emphasises the specificity of late modern society, the reflexive project of the self is the essential difference between traditional and modern societies. The individuals of traditional society must follow the conventional rules of kinship, family, community and society along with the prescribed statuses and roles, whereas in modern society and particularly in late modernity persons are pressed to create their reflexive self-project. But as Giddens (1991: 9) suggests, *'the reflexive project of the self generates programmes of actualisation and mastery. But as long as these possibilities are understood largely as a matter of the extension of the control systems of modernity to the self, they lack moral meaning. "Authenticity" becomes both a pre-eminent value and framework for self-actualisation but represents a morally stunted process.'*

The totalitarian Soviet system (within certain reasoning) is typologically defined as modern society (Moore 1954; Huntington 1971; Parsons 1971; Arnason 1993, 2000; Ansari 1998). This consequently means that the extension of the social control systems of modernity on the individual self-project without moral meaning was beyond comparison huge. As Bandura (2009: 179) emphasises, *'among the mechanisms of personal agency none is more central or pervasive than people's beliefs in their capability to exercise control over their own functioning and over environmental events. Efficacy beliefs are the foundation of human agency. Unless people believe that they can produce desired results by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties. Meta-analyses, which combine the findings of numerous studies, attest to the influential role played by efficacy beliefs in human adaptation'* (Holden 1991; Holden et al. 1990; Multon et al. 1991; Stajkovic, Luthans 1998).

According to Zimmerman et al. (2006), personal agency is influenced by personal belief in his/her effectiveness to carry out different activities and define it as self-efficacy to reach the results, which he/she wishes to achieve. It is important to stress that self-efficacy indicates the personal subjective judgement about his/her capabilities to organise and perform the course of events to achieve the goals (Bandura 1977; 1997). So, various subjective perceptions about himself/herself, which are socially constructed (gender, age, prescribed role or identity, education, etc.), may determine the conception of self-efficacy or the subjective conception of personal capabilities.

The person's perception of control is related to his expectations that the results of activities and behaviours are controlled both internally and externally. This dualistic conception of control means that the internal control reinforces the self-directed behaviour, and the external control restrains *agentic abilities*. The results of this reinforcement of the expected behaviour depend partially on the perception of the reinforcement, which person has about his behaviour as either contingent or depending on person's efforts. From this point of view, the individuals differ according to their expectation of the internal or external locus of control (Rotter 1966). The helpless individual attaches himself/herself to and depends on the decrease of the inner locus of control of his/her behaviour. At the same time, the helplessness diminishes the congruity with the personal and organisational values and interests and commitment to the organisation (Fornes et al. 2008), and diminishes actions and productivity of persons (Kormanik, Rocco 2009).

This paper studies the 18–25 age cohort, which in the sociology field is defined as a younger adult category. The periodisation of personal growth depends on changing society and the transition into adulthood is not a clear-cut dividing line. But most sociologists recognise that the 18–25 period could be defined as the time of the greatest energy and abundance and of

the greatest contradiction and stress, and as the developmental bridge between pre-adulthood and early adulthood (Levinson 1986: 3–13; Sheehy 1996). *During this period, persons* must make crucially important choices regarding marriage, family, work and lifestyle and, as Erikson has argued that it is only now that what he calls the ‘ideological mind’ of adolescence gives way to ‘that ethical sense which is the mark of the adult’ (Erikson 1975).

METHODOLOGY

A theoretical model that links the interdependency of public ethical norms with an age cohort and their agency was examined by using the collected data of the representative data from Lithuania. The target population of the cross-sectional survey was the 18–52-year-old population living in Lithuania.¹ The survey data was collected by applying the face-to-face data collection method (PAPI) in 2020. The net sample of 3,000 individuals was collected out of the 4,634 gross sample (with a response rate of 65%, which is slightly above the national average). Multistage probability sampling was applied to draw sample units, which cover Lithuania, and the representativeness of the sample was guaranteed by using the stratification of national population parameters according to the gender, age (target 18–52-year-old group), urban-rural and administrative divisions rates.

The target sample is split into two age cohorts – the so-called ‘younger age cohort’, who were 18–25 old age individuals, and the ‘middle-aged cohort’, who were 37–52 old individuals at the time of study data collection. The middle-aged cohort is the most active age group in the political, cultural and economic areas of the contemporary Lithuanian society. Additionally, this middle-aged age cohort experienced their socialisation as younger adults before 1990’s, i.e. endured the Soviet period system during their younger adult’s lifetime. Conceptually speaking, both defined cohorts were socialised under different historical conditions and economic circumstances, and they are to a certain degree the product of two different frameworks of the modern society. It is important in the context of Lithuania, since the individuals of the middle-aged cohort were born and socialised at the time of the Soviet period with prevalence of economic limitations and deficit economy, and the Lithuanians who compromise the younger age cohort in the further data analysis have grown up under different societal preconditions of liberal market economy.

Briefly mapping out the data analysis, the empirical data is analysed using bivariate and multivariate statistical methods: the first methods are used to compare differences of personal agency (and social factor as an additional factor illustrating another layer of differences of social norms) for two age cohorts, and the latter one (binary logistic regression) is used to detect if the personal agency could be explained by two factors – an age cohort and support for public norms in the society. Therefore, as a set of independent variables four attitudinal 3-point rating scales² (about how it is acceptable to break certain public norms, ranging from ‘never’, ‘seldom’ to ‘always’) are used, while the personal agency assessment is measured at a 10-point rating scale (on how much freedom of choice and control over their lives, 1 indicating the lowest level of personal control, and 10 the highest agency level). The latter variable

¹ ‘Experiences of (In)Security across Generations in Lithuania: Motives and Opportunities to Choose Life Trajectories’ (Research Council of Lithuania, Grant No. S-MIP-19-21).

² All four scales of public norms were adopted as standardised tools to measure them from the European Value Study (EVS, 2020).

is later recoded into a binary dependent variable for regression analysis. Additionally, gender as a factor is used in regression analysis more as a factor for which control is required (rather than an important independent explanatory variable).

Postulating from the theoretical background, age can be a significant factor which could explain differentiated levels of personal agency and support for social public norms. Paper proposes the general hypothesis that the lower levels of personal agency should be found among the middle-aged cohort (37–52-year-old adults) compared with the current younger cohort (18–25-year-old adults). Another thesis will be empirically tested if lower personal agency levels are associated with greater support for the breaking of public norms.

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES OF PERSONAL AGENCY AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE BREAKING OF PUBLIC NORMS IN LITHUANIA

The respondents were asked a series of questions on how it is acceptable to justify certain anti-public norms (see Fig. 1), like cheating on taxes, claiming state benefits when they do not belong to an individual, throwing away litter in public space, and accepting and taking bribes. The general tendency is that most Lithuanians (at least more than 70% for each indicator) overwhelmingly do not justify any breaking of these public norms regardless of age cohort. Significant differences have been identified for three situations of differences in breaking of anti-public norms between the middle-aged and younger age cohorts: claiming state benefits when there is no reason for the entitlement individuals ($\chi^2(2) = 6.39, p < .05$), throwing away

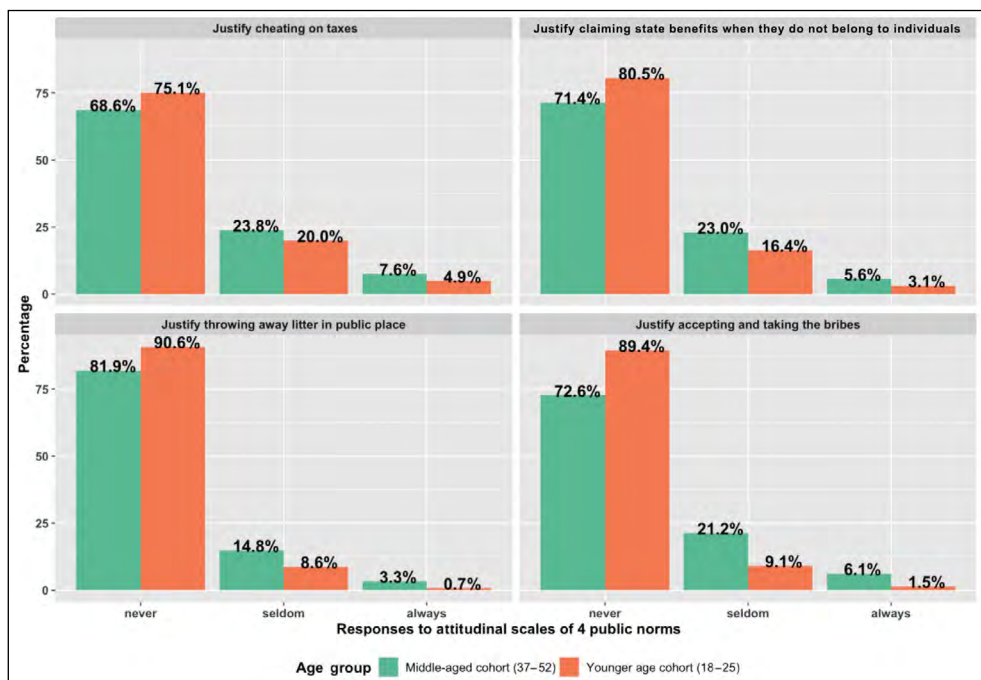


Fig. 1. Attitudes towards breaking public norms among two age cohorts in Lithuania, $n = 3000$

litter in public space ($\chi^2(2) = 13.05, p < .001$), and accepting and taking bribes ($\chi^2(2) = 31.58, p < .001$), while there was no significant difference found in assessing the behaviour of cheating on taxes ($\chi^2(2) = .19, p > .05$). Additionally, we can identify that the age cohort as a factor had the smallest effect on the justification of claiming state benefits ($V = .097, p < .05$), then public littering ($V = .133, p < .001$), and lastly the largest age effect was found on accepting and taking the bribes ($V = .210, p < .001$). The general tendency was found that the younger age cohort individuals were leaning to never justify (respectively, 80.5, 90.6 and 89.4%) the mentioned behaviours compared to the middle-aged cohort (71.4, 81.9 and 72.6%).

Another important indicator for further analysis is the level of personal agency, therefore, it is important to understand if there are any age cohort differences, as well. Figure 2 shows visually that the younger age cohort value more their personal agency compared to the middle-aged cohort in Lithuania. Personal agency differences among both age cohorts are significantly different ($U = 42808, p < .01$), as, on an average, adults belonging to the middle-aged cohort ($M = 7.25, SD = 1.98, Md = 7$), rate themselves at the lower levels of personal freedom and agency than the younger age cohort ($M = 7.67, SD = 1.91, Md = 8$). The density of personal agency scores distributions among the age cohorts is significantly different according to the Fisher–Pitman permutation test ($z = -2.527, p < 0.05, 10,000$ permutations), and the biggest score density differences are found within a higher range of 7–10 score values. The age factor has a moderate/medium effect on the difference in personal agency scores, based on the rank-biserial coefficient ($r_b = -0.199$).

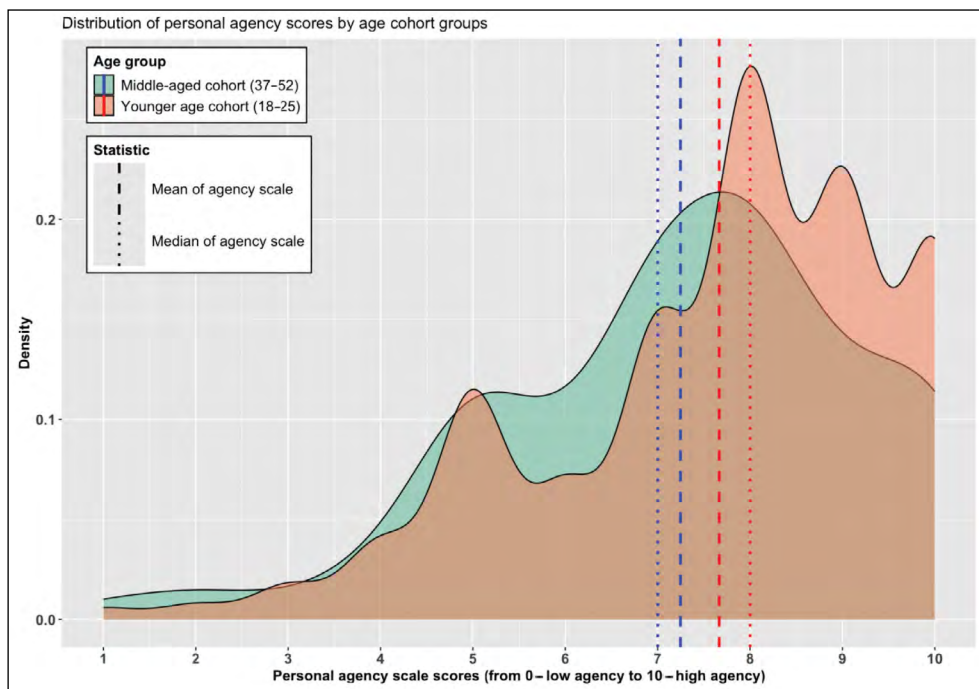


Fig. 2. Differences in the level of personal agency scores among two age cohorts in Lithuania, $n = 3000$

UNTANGLING THE LINK BETWEEN AGENCY AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE BREAKING OF PUBLIC NORMS AND GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Binary logistic regression (Table) was carried out to test if the personal agency scale is linked to the age factor and four justifications of (anti-)public norms. While the personal agency scale was originally rated by the respondents at a 10-point scale, this scale was recoded into a binary variable. The main reason for it was that four variables of public norms were factors and not interval-ratio variables. Essentially, the binary personal agency answers were converted as follows: if they think that they have little personal choice how to live (scores between 1–5), or they have total freedom to decide how to live a life (scores between 6–10). It is important to note that the distribution of agency scores is leaning towards the right side of the scale, i.e. on an average, respondents accept a personal responsibility that life is dependent on individual choices. Independent variables are gender (for statistical control purposes), age cohort, attitudes towards the breaking of public norms, and the interaction of age with public norms.

The presented results in the table show how personal agency depends on gender, time period (year of survey) and social order attitudes. The logistic regression shows that the model is statistically significant ($\chi^2(10) = 99.83, p < .001$), and the fit parameters for the model are sufficient and adequate ($\chi^2 \text{ H-L}(10) = 1.15, p > .05$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .482, -2LL = 134.38$). It is possible to conclude from the model that gender, age cohort, justification of taxes cheating along with the interactions between the period and the justification of taxes cheating and accepting the bribe are statistically significant predictors of personal agency. We can say that women are more than 3 times likely to value their personal agency compared to men ($\text{exp}(\beta) = 3.108, p < 0.05$). The difference in the sense of personal agency is observed even more comparing

Table. The binary logistic regression model for the personal agency

Predictor	B	SE (B)	Wald's test	Odds ratio/ exp (β)
Gender (ref. male)	1.134	0.500	5.146	3.108*
Year (ref. middle-aged cohort)	11.092	2.657	17.425	65.034***
Justify claiming state benefits	-0.106	0.202	0.276	0.899
Justify cheating on tax	0.751	0.283	7.042	2.120**
Justify accepting a bribe	0.388	0.223	3.015	1.474
Justify throwing away litter in public place	-0.365	0.198	3.391	0.694
Justify claiming state benefits (ref. middle-aged cohort)	-0.763	0.421	3.282	0.466
Justify cheating on tax (ref. middle-aged cohort)	-1.020	0.439	5.394	0.361*
Justify accepting a bribe (ref. middle-aged cohort)	-1.040	0.425	5.987	0.353*
Justify throwing away litter in public place (ref. middle-aged cohort)	-0.047	0.337	0.019	0.954
Constant	-0.161	0.735	0.048	0.852
<i>-2 Log-likelihood</i>			134.38	
<i>Model χ^2 (df)</i>			99.83 (10) ***	
<i>Nagelkerke R^2</i>			0.482	
<i>Hosmer and Lemeshow test (df)</i>			1.15 (8)	
<i>Overall correct classification</i>			93.2%	

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < .05$.

two age groups: younger age cohort is 65 times more likely to self-assess as having a higher degree of personal agency compared to the middle-aged cohort ($\exp(\beta) = 65.034, p < .001$). The attitude to justify the tax avoidance situation increases the odds of personal agency ($\exp(\beta) = 2.210, p < .001$). It must be concluded that the justification of claiming state benefits, accepting the bribe, and littering public places as the single predictors is not statistically associated with the individual agency controlling for gender, age cohort and the interaction of age cohort with answers about the breaking of public norms. The further analysis of the interaction between the period/age cohort and ethical attitudes was done to look if there are any individual agency links depending on attitudes in different time-period among younger adults in Lithuania. The statistically significant results lead to the probable conclusion that younger age cohort adults (i.e. contemporary 18–25-year-olds) are more leaning to express their personal agency than middle-aged cohort individuals if the latter cohort does not justify cheating behaviour on tax ($\exp(\beta) = 0.361, p < .05$). Additionally, the contemporary younger age cohort will express more likely their personal agency than the middle-aged cohort if the middle-aged cohort does not justify accepting a bribe ($\exp(\beta) = 0.353, p < .05$).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We would assume that the greater agency found among individuals of the younger age cohort is a natural consequence of the development of modern society. Most sociologists recognise that younger generations possess a stronger personal agency and autonomy (Giddens 1990; Bauman 2006; Beck 1994), as current late modern societies function in more unstable institutional conditions than in the early modern period. At the same time, successful choices and implementations of individuals' life trajectories require a greater agency and taking a clearer personal responsibility in late modern societies, due to the reason of the greatest risk of real uncertainty at both the macro (e.g. economy) and micro (e.g. family) social levels in all life spheres. Clear and stable trajectories of a person's life gradually give a way to more radical interruptions and changes related not only to the dynamics of employment at the macro economy, technological change and lifelong learning, but also to the individual's more active search for the meaning of life, related to the same uncertainty.

The results of this paper could be explained by two related probable explanations or further hypothesis which could be tested. One explanation could be the claim that the rigidity of any other authoritarian society (brought by the strict institutional framework of the Soviet period) restricts the capacity of individual's agency expression, but also provokes anomie and a deviant inclination due to the conditions of constant scarcity and deficit (like consumer goods) in daily life. As Ramonaitė et al. (2015) argue, illegitimate ways of satisfying needs were widespread in the Soviet society. For example, the general scarcity of consumer goods and deficit in economy forced the society to be more lenient towards workers' theft in food and light industry. The concept of 'stealing' was not even used in this case, it was replaced by other expressions like 'to take away', 'to put together', 'to combine' and other colloquial expressions which did not have a negative connotation.

The data show that the socialisation for the younger age cohort, who has been brought up during more open and late modernity society conditions (i.e. institutional framework after Soviet Lithuania and during the Independence time), leads to a greater level of disagreement with breaking societal public norms, but also to the expression of greater personal agency. The second explanation of the association between more favourable attitudes toward rule breaking and lower agency levels is more general, which is not necessarily related to

generational differences and a societal institutional framework type. The latter explanation postulates that the lower agency correlates with more favourable attitudes toward violations of public norms due to weaker confidence in one's ability to act in accepted ways, leading individuals to choose other measures that would not be legitimate (Merton 1968). According to Merton's sociological explanation (1968), most of the population could be classified as behaving as innovators, as they have adopted other means and rejected institutionalised means to satisfy their needs. As Norkus (2024) shows in his study, the Soviet system had a significant unfavourable effect on the development of Lithuanian society (i.e. induced negative outcomes from economy to health sphere). Stagnating development at that time in Lithuania and deficit economy have created a tension between the growing needs of society and the possibilities of meeting those needs. As a result of this context, the majority of the population opted for the use of certain illegal means in trying to satisfy their needs and participate in shadow or informal economy.

Hence, it is possible to link the personal agency with attitudes towards possible offenses or perceptions about the legitimate deviation from ethical rules or public norms. The data showed that the lower the agency, the greater inclination to break the rules, and this agency level is uneven and differentiated across different Lithuanian age cohorts. Attitudes toward the breaking of public norms are different between the younger (18–25-year-old) and middle-aged (37–52-year-old) age cohorts in Lithuania, as the younger age cohort views more negatively the breaking of public norms. It can be assumed that a larger part of the middle-aged cohort has been socialised during the Soviet period even though this cohort includes some of those who were only 3–4 years old in 1990's.³ In general, the middle-aged cohort has been subjected to the dual effects of the totalitarian regime and the total lack of satisfaction of basic needs during the Soviet period both in terms of the systematic suppression of their autonomous agency and in terms of the more lax attitudes towards most of the transgressions related to the satisfaction of needs.

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³ On the other hand, this younger section of the middle age cohort (which was established in the analysis) has experienced the hardships of the first decade of 'wild capitalism' in Independent Lithuania (Norkus 2008; Pučėta 2017).

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Asmens veiksnio skirtumai tarp amžiaus kohortų Lietuvoje: lyties, laiko ir požiūrio į viešųjų normų pažeidimus sąsajos

Santrauka

Straipsnyje analizuojamas skirtingų amžiaus kohortų asmenų veiksnio suvokimas ir jo santykis su asmenų nuostatomis vertinant galimus viešųjų normų pažeidimus Lietuvoje. Keliama hipotezė, kad galimai šis santykis yra nulemtas skirtingų socializacinių kartų patirčių. Straipsnyje naudojami reprezentatyvūs 2020 m. surinkti 18–52 m. Lietuvos gyventojų grupės anketinės apklausos duomenys, kurie nagrinėjami taikant dvimačius ir daugiamacių metodus, palyginant tarp išskirtų dviejų kartų. Atskleidžiama, kad vidutinio amžiaus suaugusiųjų kohorta turi silpniau išreikštą veiksnumą bei labiau pateisina tam tikrus viešųjų normų pažeidimus nei jaunesni asmenys, o amžiaus kohortos faktorius yra svarbus veiksnys, lemiantis, kad nepritarimas tam tikroms viešųjų normų pažeidimams susijęs su didesniu veiksnumu. Pastaroji išvada patvirtina konceptualią tezę, kad socializacija sovietinėje sistemoje galimai yra svarbus veiksnys, lemiantis veiksnio ir normų pažeidimo vertinimų skirtumus Lietuvoje.

Raktažodžiai: kartos, veiksnumas, socializacija, saviveiksmingumas, viešųjų normų pažeidimas