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AGE AS ORIGINAL SOCIOCULTURAL CONSTRUCT IN TRADITION, MODERN AND POSTMODERN SOCIETIES: WHAT DOES MEAN TO BE A YOUNG PERSON?

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The sociocultural construction of age with objective and subjective meanings has been changing along with the development of society. Traditional, modern, and postmodern societies all have their own challenges related to the life course of the individual. The individual finds themselves in transition from the institutionalization and standardization of the course of life to deinstitutionalization, individualization, and de-standardization. For this reason, age as a sociocultural construct can be analyzed as a dynamic and reflexive phenomenon. Analysis of the perception of age is important in the social sciences, as it has the potential to reveal various issues in our society. In particular, this is important in discussions about youth and adulthood – in contemporary society, age is not exactly the main variable defining the group of society an individual belongs to. The aim of this paper is to analyse changes relating to age as a sociocultural construct in order to reveal what it means to be a young person with respect to tradition, both modern and postmodern. The construction of age has been analysed with recourse to T. Parsons's structural functionalism theory, A. Giddens' structuration theory as well as Beck's approach to modern and postmodern society, life cycle theory.

Keywords: age, traditional society, modern society, postmodern society, Giddens, Beck, Parsons, young person, youth

INTRODUCTION: AGE AS A SOCIOCULTURAL CONSTRUCT

In contemporary society age is viewed as both an objective and a subjective phenomenon. The objective indicator of age becomes evident in rights and privileges, in medicine and politics by leveraging the chronological indicator of age. The importance of the objectivity of age is reflected in social studies, where people can be grouped by age to describe differences between different age groups[1]. Age as a subjective phenomenon could be revealed through spiritual, social and physiological perception of age as well as by experience-based individual and culturally determined criteria[2]. Although the latter aspects of age have largely been discussed and examined by studies on the ageing of society, increasingly more attention is being paid to the situation of youth, namely the transition of youth to maturity as well as volatile semantics of youth and social maturity. The concept of age applied in the mentioned investigations is generally linked to man's status, i.e. his institu-

[1] S. Aapola, *Exploring Dimensions of Age in Young People's Lives. A discourse analytical approach*, "Time & Society" 2002, Vol. 11, No. 2/3, p. 295–314.
[2] *Ibid.*

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tional role, that serves as an indicator of the place the actor of the social process takes within a social structure[3].

According to Elder[4], every society has an established schedule in terms of the course of social life within its sociocultural context, in which a set of certain roles has developed based on a particular age group an individual belongs to. Being the key source of data about an individual, age allows individuals to be placed into consistent patterns of social roles and possibilities. These patterns manifest themselves in the person's individual biographical history, which demonstrates the behavior and role assumed by the individual and attributed to it by institutionalized and regulative requirements defined by the particular stage of age, and transition from one age to another[5]. For example, political and legislative documents in any society define such aspects as compulsory education, the acquisition of a driver's license, alcohol consumption, marriage as well as adulthood and retirement. Limitations and privileges related to chronological age imply the transition from one stage of growth to another, but changes occurring in society throughout the last century have mitigated the importance of a strict life schedule.

The transitional period from adolescence to social maturity is one of the most significant developmental stages in a person's life. This stage is marked by various sub-stages of transition from one status to another, where a young person has to make one of the most important decisions that will determine their future life prospects. Several decades ago, this transition from adolescence to social maturity in Lithuania and other former Soviet regime countries used to be associated with such milestones as graduation from school, leaving the parents' home, permanent employment, marriage and the birth of a first child [6]. A young person acquired the status of a "working, married-with-children" individual, and this achievement was universally understood and determined by an established regulatory model as well as a linear course of life which featured clear, specific steps and sequences.

During the second half of the XX century attributes that were not characteristic of this linear life course started to be seen, such as a reduction in the number of marriages, older parenthood or even childlessness by choice, an increase in the number of children born out of wedlock, and an increasing number of single people[7]. According to data provided by the Lithuanian Department of Statistics, the

[3] S. Kraniauskienė, *Tapatybės konstravimas biografijose (kartos ir lyties identitetas XX a. Lietuvių autobiografijose)*, PhD thesis, social sciences, 2003, p. 156.

[4] G. Elder, *Age differentiation and the life course*, "Annual Review of Sociology" 1975, No. 1, p. 65–190.

[5] S. Kraniauskienė, *Tapatybės konstravimas biografijose…*, p. 156.

[6] E. D. Hutchison, *A Life Course Perspective*, [in:] E. D. Hutchison, *Dimensions of Human Behavior: The Changing Life Course,* Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, Calif. 2008, p. 539; M. Elchardus, W. Smits, *The Persistence of the Standardized Life Cycle*, "Time Society" 2006, No. 15, p. 303–326.

[7] V. Stankūnienė, A. Jonkarytė, S. Mikulionienė, A. A. Mitrikas, A. Maslauskaitė, *Šeimos revoliucija? Išūkiai šeimos politikai*, Socialinių tyrimų institutas, Vilnius 2003, p. 387

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average age of people married for the first time has been increasing since the year 2000: in 2000, the average age of men entering into marriage for the first time was 25.7, women – 23.6, whereas in 2010, the average age of men entering into marriage for the first time was 28.7, women – 26.4[8]. Hence, women entered into marriage 2.8 years later, and men 3 years later on average compared to the year 2000. The Demographic Yearbook compiled by the Lithuanian Department of Statistics compares birth rate tendencies by generations of mothers: the birth rate for the 1969-1970 generation was highest in the age group 21-22, the birth rate for the 1974-1975 generation was lower among younger women, whereas in the generation of women born in the period from 1979 to 1980, the birth rate grew from the age of 20, and started slowing down onwards. In 2010, the average age of women giving birth for the first time was 26.6 years, i.e. 2.7 years older than in the year 2000[9]. The average age of women from older generations giving birth for the first time versus the average age of women giving birth for the first time in recent years suggests that the question of an addition to the family tends to be postponed to an increasingly later point in time.

Later family creation and addition thereto may be influenced by longer participation by youth in the education system, later entry into the labor market, merging participation in both the education system and the labor market, and postponing independent life (apart from parents) until later[10]. The interrelation of individual and social change that has manifested itself in modern society has given rise to the life course approach characterized as the sequence of a person's specific statuses over the course of time[11]. The life course paradigm has provided age with the meaning of a sociocultural construct: age has been linked to status and role as well as normative institutionalization. Nevertheless, sociologist Mayer[12] has suggested that life course appears to have been de-standardized during late modernity, because age as a social construct is dynamic and variable.

The research problem analyzed in this paper can be defined by the following questions: what does it mean to be a young person in traditional, modern and postmodern societies? How is age structured? How has age structuration been changing? How can age be analyzed? The aim of this paper is to analyze and disclose changes in age as a sociocultural construct in traditional, modern and postmodern

[8] *Moterys ir vyrai Lietuvoje 2010 (Women and Men in Lithuania 2010),* Lietuvos statistikos departamentas, Vilnius 2011, p. 97.

[9] *Demografijos metraštis 2010 (Demographic Yearbook 2010)*, Lietuvos statistikos departamentas, Vilnius 2011, p. 203.

[10] E. D. Hutchison, *A Life Course Perspective…*, p. 539; H. Vinken, *New life course dynamics?: Career orientations, work values and future perceptions of Dutch youth*, "Young" 2007, No. 15, p. 9–30; N. Serdedakis, G. Tsiolis, *Biographical trajectories and identity: Traditional overdetermination and individualisation*, "Young" 2000, No. 8–2, p. 2–23.

[11] J. Kok, *Principles and Prospects of the Life Course Paradigm*, "Annales de Demographie Historique" 2007, No. 1, p. 203–230.

[12] H. Vinken, *New life course dynamics…*, p. 9–30.

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societies by revealing changes in the notion of youth. The following research methods have been employed: comparative and systematic analysis of scientific literature.

TRANSITION FROM TRADITIONAL TO MODERN SOCIETY: STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM THEORY BY T. PARSONS, CULTURAL MODELS BY M. MEAD

Traditional society is defined as the common forms of social life that are characterized by activities such as agriculture, where social relations were based on caste hierarchy, and tradition forms the basis for regulation of social relations. There is no common consensus as to what should be considered the beginning and the end of traditional society: the beginning might be associated with emerging forms of activity, while the end could be associated with urbanization and socialization. However, in traditional societies, institutions and structures based on tradition model people's lives by providing them with symbols that indicate their meaning, place and goals within the society. People perceive themselves to be a part of "us" as opposed to the individual "Is" which is interconnected with other members of society. Among the main institutions and structures of a traditional society are the church, which shapes the main meaning and goal of life; the extended family, where "I" has been formed and embodied in an extended network of relations; and rural communities, where "I" has been placed into the terms of role and identity[13]. Hence, a young person becomes a part of the society and culture, although they do not have an identity characteristic for their age group, but rather have devoted themselves to the community and obeyed the traditions of older members from the community.

In traditional societies, age was strictly structured by extended family and rural community: the socialization process was strictly structured by using initiation rituals which mark the transition from one age to another. In particular, primitive tribes as well as ancient civilizations exercise initiation ceremonies to mark a person's growing up, when there is no way back to childhood[14]. In a tradition-based society there was no youth as a transitional period to move from childhood to adulthood, because the main duty of a grown-up man was to take over the burden of family support as quickly as possible. According to Giddens[15], the tradition fulfills its main role to "articulate activities and natural frameworks: tradition creates environment organizing the life, which is specifically accommodated to ontological

[13] U. Beck, *Risk society: Towards a New Modernity*, Sage Publications, London – Newbury Park 1992, p. 260.

[14] P. Bansal, *Youth in Contemporary India: Images of Identity and Social Change,* Springer, New Delhi – New York 2013, p. 275.

[15] A. Giddens, *Modernybė ir asmens tapatumas: asmuo ir visuomenė vėlyvosios modernybės amžiuje* (*Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*), Pradai, Vilnius 2000, p. 314.

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principles. Primary, tradition arranges time in such a way in order to be limited by the guidelines of the contractual future. In all cultures including most traditional people can separate future, present and past times by valuating their alternatives in respects of their supposed future". For example, M. Mead[16] has distinguished three individual models of culture: "postfigurative, cofigurative, prefigurative. In the postfigurative culture model, children learn from their ancestors and parents; such cultures are oriented towards the past, as they emphasize the transfer of traditions and values from generation to generation; hence, the life of culture is developed and nurtured by several generations. In this culture model, elders are considered by the youth to be the resources of values, wisdom and authority".

In the latter culture model, family line, social status, gender and other attributes inherent to internecine attributes were relatively permanent: transition between life stages was determined by institution-governed processes, where the role of an individual, in particular, of a young person, was only passive. This passive role was replaced by an active role at an older age, as a grown person performed rituals and initiation, i.e. transition to a higher role, by themselves. The individual did not exist as such in traditional cultures; and individuality as such was not preferred – people's daily individual lives were organized according to tradition, under relatively consistent principles, "which had reflected obligations and regulations of their relevant behavior" [17], and proper balance in a traditional society was achieved by following tradition. According to Parsons[18], balance is a prerequisite for the existence of the social system, and each social system must be structured (to cohere with other systems), satisfy the needs of the majority of its actors and allow for their adequate participation, and, if needed, control a conflict and behavior that could destroy the system. Support from other systems and language as a guarantee of survival are also important functional parts of the social system. One of the most important elements of this system is the status-role complex. Status is related to structural position in the social system, while role relates to the content of the position. An individual becomes familiar with this complex in the course of socialization, where people start perceiving that they are supposed to act under a model of expected standardized behavior[19]. Most important in structural functionalism theory are relations between actors and social structures (e.g. a young person and the system of education) and how norms and values are transferred[20]. Various rituals of traditional culture marking transition to the stage of adulthood were the key factors that supported the system.

[16] M. Mead, *Culture and Commitment*: *a study of the generation gap.*, Natural History Press/ Doubleday & Company, Garden City – New York 1970, p. 91.

[17] U. Beck, *Risk society…*, p. 260.

[18] V. Leonavičius, Z. Norkus, A. Tereškinas, *Sociologijos teorijos*, Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, Kaunas 2005, p. 391.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] V. Leonavičius, Z. Norkus, A. Tereškinas, *Sociologijos teorijos…*, p. 391.

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Traditional forms of life changed with industrialization, urbanization and the ideas of personal freedom and autonomy. Personality became the center of life, and common public traditional life previously understood as "we" within the context of traditional institutions was shifted to the new place of "I", which should be analyzed as part of the reflexive process, during which personal transformations should be linked to social transformations[21]. Giddens[22] has called this period early modernity, where the church has lost its critical role, extended families have reoriented and transformed into small nuclear units; the notion of work and specific work division according to gender have been established, and, most importantly, the State has become the social form created by modernity[23]. The latter period could be linked to M. Mead's[24] "cofigurative culture model, where relations between generations have changed: the boundary in terms of the youngest and the oldest sons' ages vanishes, and the culture itself has become focused on the "here-and-now" context. M. Mead has associated this culture model with technological changes and achievements through the development of civilization. Cofigurative cultures were focused on the present, on information exchange between peers – there was no question of the elder's authority, and mutual learning from each other became more important. The latter cultures were of a transitional nature and rather short-term". Changes within the system of society also changed the processes of a person's socialization: the rituals that once used to be significant as a transition to another stage of life had lost their importance, and the processes of urbanization and industrialization extended age stages by introducing the youth stage between childhood and social maturity. "Latter social development progressively replaced non-differentiability of previous early changes, regulated relationship structures with new specialized social organizations, normative codes of order and institutionalization of law"[25].

The stable economic structure of a modern industrial society was supported by economics, politics, family, school as well as community and culture (education, mass-media and religion). It was each of these institutions that contributed to the adaptation of the system to an outer environment, the pursuit of the system's goals, control and motivational support. For example, the function of economics was production and distribution for adaptation to outer conditions, whereas the function of communities and cultural institutions aimed at social integration was to regulate relations between individuals and individual parts of society. However, the key element of the system was the status-role complex[26]. Status is related to structural position of the socialization system, while role – with the content of this position.

[21] A. Giddens, *Modernybė ir asmens tapatumas…,* p. 314.
[22] *Ibid.*
[23] U. Beck, *Risk society…*, p. 260.
[24] M. Mead, *Culture and Commitment…*, p. 91.
[25] T. Parsons, *The social systems*, Routledge, London 1997, p. 575.
[26] *Ibid.*

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An individual becomes familiar with this complex in the process of socialization, where people start perceiving that they are supposed to act under the expected model of standardized behavior[27]. When referring to the importance of the status-role, Parsons has identified expressive and instrumental roles. Instrumental role outlined the functions of a man as of a breadwinner, while expressive role defined the functions of a woman as a home and family carer[28]. These definitions of roles as well as the institutionalization of the educational system outlined clear biographical courses for women and men. The masculine social course was marked by active participation in economic and production processes as well as managerial positions, whereas women's functions were care within the family and work. This also clearly showed the separation of public sphere from the private, which gave even more solid legal grounds for the separation of work spheres by gender, clearly structuring jobs into masculine and feminine. Parsons` theory, the development of which coincided with the establishment of modern society, focused on the social structure which forms an actor's behavior as well as normative order, provided by socialization through the internalization of values and norms. All of this forms a standardized and linear life course: education, permanent participation in the labor market, family creation, and planning for the first child. The latter sequence of events is guaranteed by modern institutions established within society: the nation state, the nuclear family, the system of industrial relations and scientific knowledge[29]. According to Heinz and Kruger[30], the masculine model has become dominant – the family is pushed to the periphery, men and women are subject to defined models of what must be done after what, which obligations should be undertaken, whereas personal biographies become dependent on institutions (system of education and institutions created by a state striving for welfare). Therefore, during this period as well as in a traditional society, it is not the individual or their agency that affects social structures, but rather social structures that affect the individual.

The separation of traditional and modern societies is marked by the transition from a primitiveness-based social system to normative arrangements. In a traditional society, social structures were formed within the context of "we" relations, where people and common meaning were collective. Modern society is characterized by growing individualization, the autonomous "I", the clear division of economic structure, where common interests, demands and desires dominate. Although influenced by culture in both types of societies, age was structured in a dif-

[27] *Ibid.*; V. Leonavičius, Z. Norkus, A. Tereškinas, *Sociologijos teorijos…,* p. 391.
[28] V. Leonavičius, *Sociologija*, Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, Kaunas 2003, p. 287.
[29] U. Beck, C. Lau, *Second modernity as a research agenda: theoretical and empirical explorations in the meta-change" of modern society*, "The British Journal of Sociology" 2005, No. 56 (4), p. 525–557; J. Kok, *Principles and Prospects of the Life Course Paradigm*, "Annales de Demographie Historique" 2007, No. 1, p. 203–230.
[30] W. R. Heinz, H. Kruger, *Life Course: Innovations and Challenges for Social Research*, "Current Sociology" 2001, No. 49 (2), p. 29–45.

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ferent way: the rituals of traditional society marked transition from one stage to another, but the age construct of modern society was structured by the trajectory of the normative life, which was determined by social institutions. Social structures, both in traditional and modern societies, used to influence individual agency, i.e. individual agency was forced into the social structure and governed by it. Traditional and modern societies viewed youth as an age category, i.e. a person was ascribed with a certain role or they were introduced into a certain social status by social structures and social institutions based on their biological age and physical attributes. Legal and political documents also contribute to the designation of youth as an age category, as these documents decide the age (usually in late adolescence or youth) at which a person gains certain privileges: the right to drive, start a family, consume psychotropic substances, or gamble. Despite the privileges awarded on the basis of age, key political documents also define the age to be attributed to the period of youth. For example, the Law on Youth Policy Framework of the Republic of Lithuania[31] defines that youth are persons aged from 14 to 29, whereas the Statistical Book provided by Eurostat[32] defines youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 29. It must be noted however that there is no uniform consensus on what age period is characteristic of youth[33], and certain studies have concluded that the formal structuration of age has been losing its dominant position as it becomes more modern[34].

During the later period, when the idea of individualization started gaining stronger ground, social structure lost its normative character and standardization, and tradition was replaced by risk, with full responsibility for their own life lying on the shoulders of the individual. Late modernity matched the prefigurative culture model defined by M. Mead[35], where youth became the "central axis. This culture model is focused on the future, i.e. on the creation of new history. According to M. Mead, prefigurative culture models originated in 1940, when young people started opposing the events of that period – the first youth protests were linked to the Woodstock Festival, i.e. youth culture aiming to create its own State started forming in the United States in 1950-1965". This was a youth culture that strived to make the world turn together along to their rhythm, which meant rejection of social norms of the former generation. But the youth did that in various ways: there were politically active youth who spoke out against war or for civil rights, but there were also culturally active youth, such as hippies, who rejected the comfort of society and dreamt of creating their own new world.

[31] The Law on Youth Policy Framework of the Republic of Lithuania, 2003 m. gruodžio 4 d. Nr. IX-1871, Vilnius. Changed 2005-11-22, Žin., 2005, Nr. 144-5238.

[32] *Youth in Europe: A Statistical Portrait*, EUROSTAT, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg 2009.

[33] J. J. Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood in Europe: A Response to Bynner*, "Journal of Youth Studies" 2006, Vol. 9, No. 1, p. 11–123.

[34] E. D. Hutchison, *A Life Course Perspective…,* p. 539.

[35] M. Mead, *Culture and Commitment…*, p. 91.

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LATE MODERNITY, YOUTH CHARACTERISTICS: STRUCTURATION THEORY BY A.GIDDENS, AND LIFE CYCLE THEORY

In the last decade of the XX century, individualism became more profound in Western society: education became available to a large group of individuals, and the technological and informational revolution eliminated the need for an unqualified and uneducated labor force. Educated society was forming, and the individual had now become the center of attention as a primary unit of meaning[36]. Social models previously accepted as traditional started declining, and the active individual started dominating along with decision-making traditional institutions[37]. Risk, as well as life opportunities and an individual's power to form the world of prospective events became features of later modernity[38]. There is no single consensus as to the definition of this latter period – various descriptions of it can be met in literature, namely: post-industrial, post-modern[39], second modernity, reflexive modernity, or mature modernity[40].

In a reflexive and post-modern society, individuals act in their daily life by receiving and responding to feedback about the functions they perform and their deeds. According to Tomlinson[41], all this was based on people's reflexivity, which was characterized by Giddens[42] as the capability of individuals to act by perceiving themselves simply as an acting "I" and observing the situation at that moment. Social structure, agency and reflexivity become main axes of the structuration theory. In his structuration theory, Giddens[43] states that with their actions individuals recreate social practices and social institutes that establish rules and norms, setting limitations on an individual's freedom of action. Social structure as well as the actor, i.e. a person's capability of action, are interrelated with the resulting duality of structure, and its outcome is social practices located within time and space. The actor's agency re-creates and restores social structure and leads to social changes through the social acceptability of new values and norms[44]; however, at the same time social structure itself constructs individuals. The agent has capabilities of transformation powered by the capability of agency and reflexivity. Reflexivity is understood as a fundamental feature of human activity, while the actor's capability

[36] U. Beck, *Risk society…*, p. 260.
[37] V. Leonavičius, A. Rutkienė, *Aukštojo mokslo sociologija. Studijų pasirinkimas ir vertinimas*, Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, Kaunas 2010, p. 239.
[38] U. Beck, C. Lau, *Second modernity…*, p. 525–557.
[39] R. Bendit, *Youth Sociology and Comparative Analysis in the European Union Member States,* "Papers" 2006, No. 79, p. 49–76.
[40] A. Giddens, *Modernybė ir asmens tapatumas*, p. 314.
[41] J. Tomlinson, *Globalizacija ir kultūra*, Mintis, Vilnius 2002, p. 254.
[42] A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration,* Hutchison, London 1984, p. 392.
[43] V. Leonavičius, Z. Norkus, A. Tereškinas, *Sociologijos teorijos…*, p. 391.
[44] *Ibid.*

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has been reflexively placed within the social structure[45]. The actor's reflexive agency is the prerequisite for birth and development of reflexive modernity.

A person becomes a reflexive project in the context of post-modernity: according to Giddens[46], everything used to be ritualized in traditional cultures, meanwhile in modern society, "I" must be constructed as part of a reflexive process. "Internal formation of referential systems is the source of the reflexive "I" project." (p. 188). Concurrent social changes defining life expectancy as a trajectory separated from environment had a critical influence on the internal formation of these referential groups[47]:

Life expectancy as an individual segment of time was separated from the life circle of generations. Generation remains the background element of standardized time. Generation was highly important in traditional society, as it marked repetition of the traditions, norms, behavior, and lifestyle between the life of one generation and another. Nevertheless, in terms of mature modernity activity, this repeats among generations as long as it can be reflexively justified.

Life expectancy is separated from external circumstances of the place of residence. Place as a physical object loses its importance. According to Giddens[48], the place to live is a matter of choice primarily determined by the person's life plans.

Life expectancy is becoming more dependent on external factors coming from relations with other individuals and groups. Kinship, family heirloom and inheritance of the family home are features of the traditional society which are gradually losing their importance.

Life expectancy is structured according to stages of individual biography rather than a pre-established scheme of life stages. "Life course is in fact constructed with consideration to the predicted demand for resistance and overcoming of such critical periods, at least where the individual's reflexive consciousness has been well developed" [49].

Age is not the main criterion which defines the set of role-status an individual should use to represent themselves. The individual is given freedom regardless of their age as a way of correcting their life-course trajectory according to their own needs as well as the challenges set by society. According to life course theorists, life stages are socially constructed and have been changing for years, together with modernization and longevity, leading to more detailed segmentation into life stages and, eventually, a larger number of life stages[50]. According to certain life course theorists, modernization created pre-conditions for a more liberal structuration of

[45] *Ibid.*
[46] A. Giddens, *Modernybė ir asmens tapatuma*…, p. 314.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 188–191.
[48] *Ibid.*
[49] *Ibid.*, p. 191.
[50] E. D. Hutchison, *A Life Course Perspective*…, p. 539.

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the life course[51]. In order to overcome the process of expansion in modern institutions, an individual creates a trajectory that can become a consistent project if wider social environment is leveraged. Having submitted to reflexivity, a person is pushed into the wide outer world in unprecedented ways, i.e. the person is allowed to maneuver within their life trajectory without being tied to a strict standardized sequence of life events.

During this period, an individual makes their own decisions as to the time and sequence of transition and other life events[52], and youth here can be defined as a certain notion of a transitional period, i.e. transition into social maturity, transition from the system of education into the labor market etc. However, certain features of late modernity have shown that transition from one status to another is not homogenous, as it acquires various forms and becomes heterogeneous: such life-course processes as de-institutionalization, differentiation and de-standardization become the main force. It becomes natural that students start working, working people combine the labor market with studying to gain qualifications which they have been lacking, the retired start working again, and young people create families before graduating from school or acquiring a degree. This "flexible tramping-along personal biography" is known as "*yo-yo-ization*"[53], or de-institutionalization. De-standardization marks the stages of the life, events and sequences of transitions that characterize only a small part of the population, whereas differentiation means the process of growth in the number of life positions and levels is increasing. For example, more levels of the educational system appear: pre-school, pre-primary, primary education etc[54]. This shows that the cycle of life as a sequence of transitions and stages reorganizes when affected by multiple circumstances that, at the same time, have become more available and can be skipped by individuals. Along with this process, a single person's biography becomes the main topic of life course trajectory. Traditional masculine and feminine biographical paths are vanishing: child planning and marriage are being postponed to a later time, both women and men are more reluctant to bond with their partners, and are not afraid of childlessness by choice, while the education system is losing its influence in terms of the standardization of the life course. Both the private and public spheres have merged, the division between masculine and feminine jobs is becoming less visible, while the conflict between generations has become more obvious. According to Silva[55], young people's lives compared to their parents are less determined by gender, morality

[51] H. Vinken, *New life course dynamics…*, p. 9–30.

[52] M. Elchardus, W. Smits, *The Persistence of the Standardized Life Cycle*, "Time Society" 2006, No. 15, p. 303–326.

[53] *Ibid.*; H. Vinken, *New life course dynamics…*, p. 9–30.

[54] H. Brukner, K. U. Mayer, *De-standardization of the Life Course: What it Might Mean? And if it Means Anything, Whether it Actually Took Place*, "Advanced in Life Course Research" 2005, No. 9, p. 27–53.

[55] J. M. Silva, *Constructing Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*, "American Sociological Review" 2012, No. 77(4), p. 505–522.

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and legal norms. Although they feel pressure to create families, they do not need to do this, and homosexual relations are becoming more pronounced and recognized, children are born out of wedlock, and divorce is turning into a socially acceptable phenomenon[56]. Youth is associated with greater freedom of action, and the definition of youth as a transitional stage could be extended to new sociological categories of youth. For example, Bendit[57]calls the stage after adolescence "post-adolescence"; whereas "young adulthood" is defined by the author as the period, when young people have paid jobs, i.e. are capable of supporting themselves financially, but are not fully autonomous and still live with parents. Arnett[58] has proposed the term "emerging adulthood" defining the life of a contemporary young person: enjoying freedom before assuming responsibility for their future family. The latter terms defining youth prove that youth still does not have a universal definition in XXI century, and what or which choices to make and when to make them are the key questions in a biographized life course model[59].The biographization of life course means people's attempts to explain their individual desires, needs and values prior to making any decision.

Changes in traditional, modern and post-modern societies, perception of a more dynamic trajectory of life courses leads to the society that is independent of age, to society, where age is not the determining factor of life style and personal life. A reflexive and audacious society has emancipated individuals from strictly institutionalized arrangements while subjecting young people to a complete set of challenges, such as risk, instability and uncertainty about the future. This leads to awareness that competitiveness, mobility and the ability to adapt to changing life situations are among the main rules of contemporary society. This also creates the possibility for considering age construct as a reflexive and dynamic element of the life of society and personal life.

YOUTH AS A DISTINCTIVE SOCIAL GROUP IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL CHALLENGES

Contemporary society forces young men and women to adapt to new roles and values offered by their society. Changing social structures and the shift from one type of society to another as well as heterogeneity of life events create new challenges for integrating a whole generation of youth into society. Contemporary society is characterized not only by new technologies facilitating communication, but also by the pluralization of values – the family institution is gradually declining, and staying single sometimes becomes the norm to follow.

[56] *Ibid.*
[57] R. Bendit, *Youth Sociology and Comparative Analysis…*, p. 49–76.
[58] J. J. Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood in Europe…*, p. 11–123.
[59] H. Vinken, *New life course dynamics…*, p. 9–30.

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Recent changes are doubtlessly related to the establishment of Western life. In 1988, Bar-Haim described the process of Westernization in Eastern Europe and suggested that Eastern Europe underwent such transformational changes as massive urbanization, sudden modernization, industrialization, the extinction of illiteracy, and the empowerment of mass-media. Such changes obviously had certain consequences in Eastern Europe: increasing social inequality, ethnic discrimination, and political authoritarianism. The model of Western society was viewed as ideal and to be followed, and youth had a special role in powering the process of Westernization and solving problems accompanied by the process of social change[60]. With the end of the Soviet era, the process of Westernization was becoming more pronounced in the form of growing consumption and individualism, greater risk taking as well as the notion of taking full responsibility for one's own life course. Eastern Europe has become a specific context of late modernism, with its past ties to Soviet ideology (which had spread throughout schools, communist youth associations, youth cultural centers, and the specialized communist press), and the present and future associated with Western culture as an ideal model. The processes of globalization and social change have also created a certain tension between generations in Eastern Europe: contemporary youth must be determined to overcome new challenges in life, as life in a post-communist state means life in the post-socialist welfare state model that is characterized by rapid development, shifts from one order to another, the formation of new political measures, and the young person's adaptation to rapid changes. However, despite rapid changes, youth face other problems as well: growing unemployment, remaining longer in the system of education, as integration into the labor market is becoming increasingly complex because of an ageing society and labor market competition, increasing numbers of young people who neither work nor study in the process. The latter tendencies are characteristic both within the context of Lithuania and the European Union.

A decline in the youth population has been registered in Europe and Lithuania. In the year 2011, there were 95.2 million young people aged 15-29 in the European Union, and a steady decline in this youth group has been noticed in the last 25 years[61]. In the period from 2012 to 2013, the number of young people in Lithuania reduced by almost 19%, with the resulting share of young people making up only 21% of the Lithuanian population in 2013[62]. Almost twice as many young people live in Lithuanian cities as rural areas, which demonstrates clear regional distribution of the Lithuanian youth and other rising issues related to them: the unemployment rate among young people aged 20-29 in rural areas reached 32%, while in

[60] G. Bar-Haim, *Eastern European Youth Culture: The Westernization of a Social Movement*, "The International Journal of Politics Culture and Society" 1988, No. 2 (1), p. 45–65.

[61] *Status of the Situation of Young People in the European Union***,** EU Youth Report, European Commission Staff Working Document, Brussels 2012.

[62] *Jaunimo statistinis portretas* (*Youth Statistical Portrait*), Vilnius 2013, p. 62.

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cities – 21%[63]. It has also been noted that a higher education degree does not protect young people against unemployment. This situation for youth in the system of education is related to the aim of acquiring as high a degree as possible, thus postponing entry into the labor market to a later time. A tendency has been noticed in Lithuania, according to which people with higher degrees return to establishments of vocational education to learn a craft or specific skills necessary for the labor market. Youth is also attributed to the generation of computer-and-information-technologies age – in the European Union, about 80% of people aged 16–24 used computers and internet on a daily basis[67], whereas as many as 90% of Lithuanian youth aged 16–24 used computers on a daily basis in 2012[68]. Other issues that allow viewing young people as a distinctive social group are related to emigration, drug and alcohol consumption, a greater risk of causing car accidents, crimes. For example, about 2% of young people on average commit crimes in Lithuania[68] (13, 968 young people aged 14–29 allegedly committed crimes in Lithuania in 2012). Young men are at a greater risk of violent outbursts, such as street crime, holding an illegal weapon, participation in street fights. Suicide among youth is another sore issue – the highest rate of suicides among men aged 15-24 in the European Union in 2009 was registered in the Baltic States, Ireland and Finland in 2009[67].

Youth-related statistics reveal that young people live with uncertainty, changes, and risk. A longer presence in the labor market, youth unemployment, youth migration, active computer and internet use, as well as a greater inclination towards suicide, alcohol and drug consumption unveil the discourse of youth at risk[64]. Kelly[65] suggests classifying the literature on youth at risk into two trends. The first manifests itself as concern over damage, danger, care and support for youth at risk. The second trend is focused on economic activities, i.e. identification of risk factors and mobilization of certain interventions. Both trends are closely interrelated and complement each other, although, according to Kelly[66], these trends compete for importance. On the other hand, both trends reveal and emphasize the importance of discourse of both youth at risk and youth as a distinctive social group. Discourse of youth at risk is related to modernity: growing uncertainty and insecurity (according to Beck and Giddens, the emergence of discourse of risk society and reflexive society), and governmentality, i.e. the created welfare state (Foucault's governmentality discourse). Being in a risk group is doubtlessly related to delinquency, deviancy, and lack[67].

The discourse of youth at risk shows that the youth group can be described as careless, irresponsible and without any obligations. On the other hand, young

[63] *Ibid.*
[64] P. Kelly, *Youth at Risk: Processes of Individualization and Responsibilasion in the Risk Society*, „Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education" 2001, Vol. 22, No. 1, p. 23–33.
[65] *Ibid.*
[66] *Ibid.*
[67] *Ibid.*

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people can respond to changes in modern and post-modern society by being creative, interesting and enthusiastic creators of "the future". Considering a longer period of stay at an educational institution and the acknowledgement of various statuses while still being a 25-year-old, youth as a distinctive social group still lacks a universal definition. According to Bansal[68], demographically, youth can be characterized by exceptionally high level of change and variety, given that a young person subject to changes in the labor market, the system of education, changes in personal relations and the awareness of their own identity. A young person is somewhere in between the inner balance, consistency, experience, confusion, extremism, and fragmentation; hence, youth as a social group could be associated with delinquency versus creativity, rebellion versus conformity, alienation versus energetic inclusion into social spirit[69]. The history of studies on youth has shown that in 1950-1960 youth were still viewed as a problem, criminal factors were emphasized; and only later youth started being viewed as a resource and potential holder of innovative ideas. Both the changing youth perspective in terms of history, and the absence of a homogenous group of youth as a distinctive social group demonstrate and support the idea that in XXI century youth can be defined as a distinctive social group characterized by adaptation to rapid social changes, the search for one's own identity and being an active agent for change.

CONCLUSIONS

In traditional society, age as a social construct used to be associated with deep traditions and norms outlining standardized and strict life course of a person. Initiation rituals were particularly significant as they meant a change in one's status as well as a transition to another stage of life, and were an important part of society. In a traditional society, a person progressed into the stage of their social maturity, as it was important that they overtook the role of the breadwinner. Extended family and the notion of generation were important attributes of a traditional society that ensured the passing of knowledge and its functioning. A young person‘s role used to be passive, and the experience of authoritative elders was to be followed, to be learnt by the youth in order to take over the accumulated experience. The shift from traditional to modern society lead to definition of youth as of a certain age group. Age as an objective indicator used to draw certain boundaries that provided more powers to young people, introduced them into a certain status, and awarded them with more privileges.

Rituals in modern society survived only as part of private and personal life, but lost their importance within the life of the society. The nation state became the main object of life, and a completely new concept of the welfare state normalized

[68] P. Bansal, *Youth in Contemporary India…*, p. 275.
[69] *Ibid.*

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people's lives: graduation, the creation of family, a permanent job, and children. As a result of the processes of industrialization and urbanization of cities as well as the diminishing importance of local time and place, transitional stages of age became longer, as individuals had to gain more knowledge and experience; and the established welfare state constructed a person through the complex of their status-role. This dyad used to be acknowledged in the process of socialization, during which an individual learns appropriate norms and rules of behavior leading to an expected model of standardized behavior. Age became one of the most important indicators defining what behavior was expected from the person; such processes as standardization and industrialization were established and allowed to establish the transitional stage of youth. The latter stage was associated with the institutionalization of the educational system, and it was exactly this institutionalization that established the stage of youth in a life course. Having become conventional, institutionalization normalized men and women's life courses by ascribing functions and roles characteristic of their gender led to the gender division of labor and the separation of the public sphere from the private. At this stage, youth can be identified and perceived as a certain transitional stage, i.e. transition from status to status, from system to system.

The standardized life course starts losing its meaning in post-modernity or reflexive modernity, and *yo-yo-ization*, where a person's reflexive biography replaces their standardized life course, emerges. An individual's agency is capable of changing social structures, thus creating new social practices. The concept of youth has changed: youth is viewed as a distinctive culture that is more liberal, more individual, not afraid of taking risks and experimenting. The youth is no longer placed into a strict and structured life course; young people are inclined to search for their own path, introduce changes into their biographical path. A young person is no longer forced into strict behavior and role patterns defining what they must do and seek. The division between masculine and feminine labor has been diminishing both in the public and private spheres.

Discourse of young people at risk is becoming more pronounced: statistical data from the European Union and Lithuania show gradual decline in the youth population, growing unemployment, an increase in the numbers of young people who neither study nor work, as well as such social problems of youth as crime, suicide, and addiction to psychotropic substances. Hence, youth as a distinctive social category remains open for further discussion and a search for answers that would help develop a clear identification of this category.

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Zusammenfassung

Das Alter als sozial-kulturelle Ursprungskonstrukt in traditionellen, modernen und postmodernen Gesellschaften: Was heißt, ein junger Mensch zu sein?

Das sozial-kulturelle Konstrukt des Alters in seiner objektiven und subjektiven Bedeutung veränderte sich mit der sozialen Entwicklung. Das Ziel des Artikels ist die Analyse der Veränderungen in der Wahrnehmung des Alters als sozial-kulturelles Konstrukt, die zur Erkenntnis führt, was es heißt, ein junger Mensch zu sein. Diese Fragestellungen werden im Kontext der strukturalistisch-funktionalistischen Theorie von Parsons, der Theorie der Strukturierung von Giddens und der Theorie der Lebenszyklen von Beck untersucht.

Schlüsselworte: Alter, traditionelle Gesellschaft, moderne Gesellschaft, postmoderne Gesellschaft, Giddens, Beck, Parsons, junger Mensch

Streszczenie

Wiek jako źrodłowy, społeczno-kulturowy konstrukt w społeczeństwach tradycyjnych, nowoczesnych i ponowoczenych: co to znaczy być młodym?

Społeczno-kulturowy konstrukt wieku, w swym obiektywnym i subiektywnym znaczeniu, zmieniał się wraz z rozwojem społecznym. Celem artykułu jest analiza przemian w percepcji wieku jako konstruktu społeczno-kulturowego, zmierzająca do odkrycia tego, co to znaczy być młodą osobą. Zagadnienia te są analizowane w kontekście strukturalistyczno-funkcjonalistycznej teorii Parsonsa, teorii strukturacji formułowanej przez Giddensa, jak również w kontekście teorii cyklów życia autorstwa Becka.

Słowa kluczowe: wiek, społeczeństwo tradycyjne, społeczeństwo nowoczesne, społeczeństwo ponowoczesne, Giddens, Beck, Parsons, młoda osoba

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