

Please refer to the original publication:

Kaisa Vehkalahti, Päivi Armila, Ari Sivenius: Emerging Adulthood in the Time of Pandemic: The COVID-19 Crisis in the Lives of Rural Young Adults in Finland. *Young – Nordic Journal of Youth Research*. First Published July 12, 2021 (ahead of print)

The article is openly accessible in: <https://doi.org/10.1177/11033088211026502>

Kaisa Vehkalahti, Päivi Armila & Ari Sivenius:

Emerging Adulthood in the Time of Pandemic:

The COVID-19 Crisis in the Lives of Rural Young Adults in Finland.

Abstract

This article discusses changes introduced into the everyday life and lifecourse dispositions of young adults in two sparsely populated regions in Finland during the COVID-19 lockdown period of spring 2020. By the age of 20, many of them had already spent some years living independently during their school years. Due to the pandemic, many had to move back to their rural home regions. This article shows that the sudden advent of the pandemic as a global risk and the restriction measures that followed affected these young, emerging adults in many ways, even though there were no infections in their immediate environments. Special attention is paid to their relationships with their remote home regions, which suddenly gained new, positive meanings in comparison to the global and national COVID-19 hotspots. The analysis is based on interviews conducted with 30 young adults in May 2020 and pre-existing longitudinal data from the same participants.

Keywords: Pandemic, COVID-19, emerging adulthood, rural youth, global risk, social and geographic distance, longitudinal studies

Introduction

Die Risikogesellschaft ist eine katastrophale Gesellschaft. In ihr droht der Ausnahmezustand zum Normalzustand zu werden. (Beck, 1986, p. 31)¹

In March 2020, our world closed in the face of a virus that spread like no other: COVID-19. The pandemic has hit different regions and populations differently. However, the preventative measures that have followed in the wake of the pandemic, such as social distancing, travel restrictions and lockdowns, as well as the sudden economic recession, have affected even regions where the number of infections has remained low. One age group that is in a particularly fragile position in relation to the societal changes is young people on the verge of adulthood. The weak socio-economic position of young adults who are just entering the labour market makes them especially vulnerable to the economic fallout of the crisis (ILO, 2020). Beyond the risk of getting infected, many young adults

have faced educational and employment challenges; their social life has been restrained; and stress and worries over family members and friends, together with prolonged orders for social distancing, have challenged their mental well-being (e.g., Banks & Xu, 2020; Shanahan et al., 2020). Many feel like their life has been placed on hold.

In this article, we analyse this sudden change in the everyday life and lifecourse dispositions of young people stepping into adulthood in sparsely populated rural regions in Finland during the spring 2020 lockdown period. The remote communities that constitute the geographical location of our article are located far from the COVID-19 hotspots. However, the crisis was otherwise vividly present as a result of media coverage and national preventative measures. Compared to other European countries, Finland had one of lowest infection rates in spring 2020, but it acted early with drastic preventative measures. On 16 March, the government, in cooperation with the president of the Republic, declared a state of emergency in Finland. People's movement in public spaces was restricted, and many hobbies, sports and cultural happenings were cancelled. All institutions of education, including the primary schools, were closed down, and contact teaching was suspended. Whereas primary schools reopened in mid-May, vocational schools and institutions of higher education continued with distance education until the end of the spring term. Even the most drastic measures were implemented with little opposition or debate (Milne, 2020; Press Release, 2020).

Hence, in the lives of the young adults discussed in this article, COVID-19 appeared as something distant yet at the same time very present. The article is based on a qualitative longitudinal study involving 30 young adults born in 2000. We have followed their life paths for the last 5 years, since their last grade (9th) of compulsory schooling. In spring 2020, some of them were finishing their secondary education, and others had just begun higher education or were taking their first steps into the labour market as it suddenly closed down. A considerable share of them were in military service. Consequently, they were undergoing an intense period of life that could be conceptualized as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Arnett et al., 2011). This phase of life is typically filled with significant life events. Young people are expected to take on adult-like responsibilities, to obtain the ability to take care of themselves both materially and mentally, and to gain concrete, symbolic and emotional distance from their childhood environments. Lifecourse theories locate this stage of normative maturing in late, and sometimes even prolonged, years of youth (Wood et al., 2018.).

Notably, the young people discussed in this study had faced the demands of adulthood earlier than their urban peers. Because their home regions offered only limited educational opportunities, many of them moved away from their childhood homes and communities at the age of 15 or 16 in order to pursue vocational or upper secondary school studies. By the age of 20, some of them had lived more or less independently for 3–4 years of their schooling (c.f. Farrugia, 2016.) During the months of the pandemic, many of them moved back to their home communities—either voluntarily or because circumstances forced them to do so. These life historical movements make them a particularly interesting group from the perspective of emerging adulthood.

This article contributes to the research on emerging adulthood by further elaborating it in the context of the global pandemic. We show how this challenging time is experienced and dealt with by young adults living in the Finnish rural periphery. We ask how the sudden advent of the pandemic affected these emerging adults and how they have coped with it. Our analysis is framed by the Beckian conceptualization of risk society (1992). The analysis is based on semi-structured online interviews focusing on COVID-19 experiences that were conducted in May 2020. These interviews are analysed against prior longitudinal interviews with the same young people (2015–2019).

The Framing: Emerging Adulthood Within a Global Risk Society

The social theories of late modernity have discussed both reflexivities and risks (Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 1995). 'Reflexive modernity' refers, among many other issues, to a zeitgeist in which the society both aims at governing the possibility of risks and calls for reflexive individuals who are capable of shaping their lives in times of danger and insecurity. In youth, normative and transition-based demands of life-shaping are more prominent than in other phases of life (e.g., Vanhalakka-Ruoho, 2007).

Risk society, then, according to Ulrich Beck (1992), is characterized by global technical-, ecological-, or health-related risks that cannot be controlled or eliminated by national politics. The current global pandemic of COVID-19 seems to embody one of the Beckian dystopias, in which news about, for example, mass deaths of infected victims obtrude into everyone's awareness. The actualization of this global risk obligates all to resolutions and actions; the Beckian global risk affects society at large and does not select its objects systematically because anyone is a potential victim. Mass media with their statistics and maps make the risk visible and bring it close to all. The pandemic has introduced new borders—physical, social and mental—because it has become customary to present the spread of the virus in the form of charts and maps coloured with different shades indicating regions considered risky and those regarded as safer (For Finland, see, e.g., Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020). People's home places quickly gained new meanings in this regard because borders were re-established not only between nation states but also between different regions, such as crowded urban areas and non-crowded rural areas; in Finland, the metropolitan Helsinki area and the surrounding province of Uusimaa were isolated temporarily (28 March–15 April 2020) in order to stop the spread of the virus to other provinces.

We draw on the concept of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2012), defined as a state of being 'in-between'—neither an adolescent nor an adult—in an age characterized by identity exploration, focus on the self and instability (Arnett et al., 2011). The concept has been anchored in prolonged institutional transitions of young people on one hand (e.g., transitions related to education, employment, or marriage), and in the centrality of identity exploration on the other (Hill et al., 2015; Wood et al., 2018). It has been debated whether emerging adulthood constitutes a new life stage, as originally suggested by Arnett (e.g., Arundel & Ronald, 2016; Côté, 2014), but there is a wide agreement that various social and economic developments have prolonged young people's transition into adulthood significantly in late modernity (Wood et al., 2018).

In this article, we pay attention to institutional transitions in the lives of rural young people (i.e., migration to new regions, independent living and employment), but also to emotional transitions. With emotional changes, we refer to commitment to new social relations, new identities and new social statuses. These transitions often have a normative basis: young people are expected to take these steps in order to follow the moral idea of 'normal biography'; for example, in the Finnish learning society, educational qualifications are necessary and job placements are crucial, and the sociocultural pressure to pursue independent living is high (Herranen & Harinen, 2008). Yo-yoing is another metaphor used by scholars of emerging adulthood to describe the back-and-forth movement involved in youth transitions in late modernity. Yo-yoing refers to situations in which efforts to start independent life are accompanied by circumstances that force young people to occasionally lean on their parents for various forms of support (Stauber & Walther, 2006; Tagliabue et al., 2016; for Finland, see, e.g., Jokinen, 2014). All the above-mentioned forms of transition necessitate some societal options (Shanahan & Elder, 2002). However, COVID-19 seems to restrict the options available for young adults and their abilities to reach these milestones.

Attention has also been paid at the gendered nature of emerging adulthood. Studies have pointed at gender differences, for example, regarding at which age young men and women start their independent lives, marry, or have children of their own (e.g., Dutra-Thomé et al., 2019). Attention has also been paid to gender differences in how emotions and instrumentality are highlighted in social contacts during emerging adulthood (Sneed et al., 2006). While gender was not the primary focus of this analysis, we have nevertheless given space to some gendered patterns arising from the data that cannot be overlooked, particularly in relation to the social and emotional aspects of emerging adulthood. Here, we approach gender as a socially constructed, performative category (Butler, 1999; Scott, 1999) by paying attention to young people's gendered ways of narrating the impact of COVID-19 crisis on their lives.

Research Localities, Data and Analysis

This article draws on qualitative longitudinal data from 30 young adults born in 2000. The participants were first contacted through their schools and interviewed at the age of 15 or 16, during their last grade of compulsory school. They were recruited through a qualitative longitudinal youth study, Youth in Time,² which involves the follow-up of about 100 Finnish young people from 5 geographically and socio-economically different locations. After comprehensive school, we have continued to meet with them regularly once or twice a year while they pursued their studies in upper secondary and vocational schools. This article involves participants from the rural regions of this follow-up, located in Central and Eastern Finland. We focus on those young adults who either lived in their rural home regions or returned to these regions temporarily during the lockdown period of spring 2020.

According to the urban–rural classification developed by the Finnish Environment Institute (2018), the regions chosen for this analysis can be classified in the category of sparsely populated rural areas. The Central Finnish research site is a municipality with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, located more than 100 km from a major provincial centre. Agriculture and forestry constitute a significant share (20%) of the local labour market. Although agriculture and forestry also play a role in our Eastern Finnish research site, this community is best described as a withering industrial village. With fewer than 1,500 inhabitants, the community is smaller than the Central Finnish research site, but it is situated closer to a major provincial centre. Both municipalities consist of several villages that are situated far from each other and have only a few young inhabitants. Educational options are limited; in the Central Finnish community, there is an upper secondary school but no vocational schools. In the Eastern Finnish community, there are no upper secondary or vocational schools. In this analysis, interviews from these regions are combined. It is not our intention to compare the regions, but rather to provide a rich account of experiences by emerging adults from different sparsely populated regions.

Longitudinal study design has the benefit of capturing the back-and-forth movement that characterizes youth transitions because it offers opportunities to observe how young people build their adult lives and selves gradually at different moments in time (cf. Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Holland, 2011; Saldaña, 2003). Our longitudinal gaze encompasses a period of 5 years, which has alerted us to the fluid and multidimensional nature of rural youth. Through a long-standing collaboration with the same young people, we have also constructed bonds of mutual trust, which have been reinforced

but also contested throughout the relationship (compare Saldaña, 2003, p. 27; Thomson & Holland, 2002).

This article is based on semi-structured interviews concerning COVID-19 (length 30min–2 hours). The interviews included the following themes: description of an ordinary day during the lockdown; the significance of COVID-19-related preventative measures in the participants' lives; changes in relation to education, employment, access to services, impact on social relations, family relations, health, well-being etc.; and opinions about COVID-19 measures implemented in Finland. However, it is important to note that our discussions were also based on long-standing relationships with the participants. We returned to topics discussed in previous meetings, and the young people told us about other significant issues in their lives: joys, sorrows and worries unrelated to the pandemic. Whereas our previous interviews had been conducted in face-to-face meetings, this was the first time we conducted the interviews online, using either the Zoom video conferencing tool or ordinary cell phones. Some interviews were conducted with pairs of young people. We recognized some differences from face-to-face interaction in terms of communication and the intimacy of the atmosphere. In some cases, the interview was based on voice contact only, and most of the interviews were shorter than our previous meetings, which had often taken place, for example, over a cup of coffee. However, it is possible that our familiarity made it easier for the young adults to share private feelings and thoughts about an issue as sensitive as COVID-19 in online settings.

The interviews were analysed by means of conceptually informed qualitative content analysis (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Kvale, 1996; cf. Miles & Huberman, 1994), paying attention to how the young adults described the impact of COVID-19 crisis on their lives and their ways of coping with the changes it had introduced. Our epistemological approach could be described as an application of hermeneutic phenomenology: we regard our data as discussions about life as it was lived and experienced by our participants (e.g., Heller, 1984), but expressed in a narrative form (Bruner, 1990). At first, we traced narrations related to COVID-19 in our data. Subsequently, we thematized these narrations inductively but also by reflecting on the narrations against our conceptual frame of emerging adulthood. Based on a close reading of the interviews, two major themes related to emerging adulthood were constructed: (a) delays in institutional transitions (e.g., employment, education and residence) and (b) social and emotional challenges related to emerging adulthood. In the following, we discuss these themes in two analytical sections and by paying attention to what these changes introduced into the participants' relationships with their rural home localities.

Adulthood Placed on Hold: Stretching the Yo-Yo Transition

One of the most striking themes of our interviews with the young adults involved delays and challenges in relation to emerging adulthood. The global crisis manifested itself in the lives of the young adults most concretely in the form of rearranged education, work and housing conditions. As noted above, some of them had lived in urban settings for quite some time due to studies. Moving away from home at an unusually young age had been significant for these young people, and not only because of educational options. The young people's relationships with their home communities could be described as ambiguous. On one hand, they had previously described these communities in terms of familiarity, safety and close relationships. On the other, however, experiences of lacking opportunities, restrictive social norms and social emptiness had also been a part of their home-place-making processes and had pushed some of them away from rural communities that appeared as youth-culturally undesirable (Armila et al., 2018; Farrugia, 2014, 2016; cf. Harris & Wyn, 2009). For them, urban life had meant independence, freedom, employment opportunities and options for

a vibrant social life. All this was attainable for them until the pandemic changed their urban living circumstances and turned their sights back to their home regions.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, few young people included in our follow-up continued living in cities. A vast majority of those who had moved away, however, still had fairly close connections to their home communities. Their residence in urban settings often had a feeling of temporariness: it was connected to their studies, and many of them shared flats with friends or had short-term rental contracts. Students had regularly returned to their childhood homes during academic holidays. Those who had graduated from vocational schools were entering the labour market only through short-term jobs or were applying for further studies. Those who were in military service spent vacations in their rural home communities, while making plans for independent life after being discharged.³ Hence, their living arrangements had been characterized by multilocality (Weichhart, 2015).

When the society closed down, majority of these emerging adults made a personal yo-yo decision (Tagliabue et al., 2016) to return to their childhood homes to live with their families, at least for a while. For many, the return to home regions felt natural. As phrased by a young man, who had studied away from his rural home village for nearly 4 years, there was 'nothing dramatic about it'. He had returned home every summer for a long-standing summer job, and he had important social networks in his rural home community and the surrounding region.

For others, the return to childhood homes and communities felt like an unwelcome step back in time:

It feels a bit like returning back in time, like, I've kind of started to have these thoughts that like, this place symbolises childhood to me, it symbolises for example my time in the high school. Or like, since I was living in the city already during the upper secondary school, it feels a bit oppressive, or it feels like I should, or that I would like to grow up, to become independent, and then I've returned here, like returned back in time and [laughs] sort of turned backwards in my development so that I'm concretely dependent from my family again. So, it's thoughts like this that have risen [due to the pandemic].

This remark encapsulates the frustration and anxiety of the emerging adults whose independent lives and plans were suddenly placed on hold due to circumstances that could not be changed. Another young woman, who had also led a fairly independent urban life, expressed a feeling of shame over having to turn to her parents: 'I've been just thinking that, like, I'm supposed to be twenty and yet, here I am, just hanging around in the place of my parents'.

These interviews reflect the Finnish ideal of early independence. Compared to youth in many other European countries, Finnish young people transition into independent living at an early age. In general, 50% of Finnish young women move away from their childhood homes by the age of 20, and young men reach the same rate of independent living by the age of 21 (Arundel & Ronald, 2016, p. 895; Moisio et al., 2016, pp. 22–23). Living with parents in one's 20s is often interpreted as a sign of failure, if not marginalization. Moreover, in the context of rural youth, remaining in the rural region to live with one's parents is commonly associated with a stereotypical picture of lonely young men with low academic and social status (e.g., Juvonen & Romakkaniemi, 2019). Both of the young women quoted above had been pursuing something else entirely: higher education, new social

networks and wider horizons in general. In relation to their life history, returning home in the position of 'a child' dependent on her parents' support felt like a setback.

Early statistics show that the economic recession related to COVID-19 has had a particularly strong effect on young women in Finland. The recession foreclosed a great number of opportunities in the service sector, including jobs in restaurants, cafés, retail shops and hotels, which are typically filled by young women (Suomen virallinen tilasto [SVT], 2020; ILO, 2020). Those rural young men included in our follow-up, who were engaged in construction and factory work, told that their main jobs and summer employment were not in danger. However, many who had previously worked in the service sector could not find jobs, which made them anxious.

Q: How does the future look like?

A1: Pretty bad, actually. I don't know if I'll get a job at all.

Q: No what? How will you spend the long summer if there's no work?

A1: You tell me.

A2: I don't know. The same, just play [computer games] and watch movies and ... [] there's not gonna be any festivals at least.

Lack of work emerged as a significant change in the lives of young adults who already had long working careers. Lack of work was a loss not only in economic terms but, perhaps more significantly, in terms of meaningfulness and independence. In our previous interviews, we had already noticed that work and employment were valued highly by rural young people. It was especially the young men who voiced a certain pride in qualifying as a worker and performing duties skilfully, but work was a high priority for the young women as well.

Students recounted difficulties related to distance education, which demanded more independence and was more time-consuming than what they were used to. In one case, graduation had been postponed due to missing courses. The lockdown period coincided with entrance exams in higher education. At the time of the interviews, some of the young adults still lacked information about how exactly their entrance exams were going to be organized, and some considered the situation unfair because they had prepared for months for exams that were now organized completely differently than in previous years.

The reasons for returning home in the middle of the school year varied. Some had financial troubles because of cancelled employment options, whereas others emphasized emotional and social elements:

First I was there [in the place of study] when the schools closed and everything was moved to distance education and so on. Our Easter break started then pretty soon. In the beginning I was just there at home, all alone. That sure wasn't very nice, to sit there alone and like that. But then my sister came to fetch me from [the neighbouring rural community], and now I've been here since then. Now I've a chance to be with other people here, we took my computer and everything so that I could continue studying.

This young woman described her loneliness in the face of new regulations for social distancing; she felt trapped in her small student apartment. When vocational schools and institutions of higher education closed face-to-face education in mid-March, the social networks that young people had been constructing in their places of study suddenly toned down. Likewise, another young woman narrated her return home as an opportunity to spend more time with her family. In addition, she referred to the lower risk of being infected in the rural settings:

Well, it's fairly unlikely to be infected here, which doesn't concern me so much, but maybe, maybe it concerns my family, like they would be more worried had I stayed there [in the provincial centre] or in Helsinki.

Here, the argument of the young woman takes part in a discourse that might be called the discourse of rural safety, which was very prominent in the Finnish media. When returning to their rural home communities, the young adults actually participated in a nationwide movement: spring 2020 witnessed a wave of retreat from cities to summer cabins in the countryside in search of more isolated and safe spaces, as well as recreational possibilities. When the Helsinki metropolitan area and the surrounding provinces were closed, confrontation of urban and rural Finland suddenly became a hot topic in the Finnish media (e.g., YLE, 2020; HS, 2020). In moralistic debates, urban residents were accused of spreading the virus to provinces where the healthcare infrastructure would collapse under pressure. Rural environments, previously discussed mainly in terms of depopulation, withdrawal of services and cultural backwardness in the Finnish media, suddenly gained new, positive meanings related to safety, distancing, health and purity (Cf. Björn & Pöllänen, 2020).

The pandemic made the rural young adults look at their remote home regions with new eyes: the attribute of safety became a prominent feature of those regions. When social distancing quickly became the new normal, the isolated way of living that had previously seemed different, if not strange, compared to hectic urban lifestyles, became something that was suggested for everyone. In the following interview, a young woman, who had returned to her rural community already before COVID-19 crises, after having finished her vocational studies, described her everyday life:

You know what, my life hasn't changed to any direction [laughs]. Here I live normally, the way I always do, I go to work and to the shops like I always do. I don't leave this place often anyways, so I'm beginning to think that I've always lived like I was in quarantine or something [laughingly].

The 'natural' safety and isolation of rural surroundings was equally recognized by those young adults who made the decision to return home due to the pandemic. While the pandemic meant a clear setback for these young adults in terms of gaining independence, supporting themselves and moving forward with their academic plans, the rural surroundings seemed to offer extra tools for coping with the hindrances. Spacious rooms and easy access to nature were underlined in some interviews. A student, who spent long days tied to her laptop, noted that she found it difficult to distinguish

between studying and free time, and that she sometimes needed to get out in nature before her 'head exploded'. Doing so was easier in rural surroundings than in the city. Therefore, she preferred living at home village and keeping in contact with her class through WhatsApp and online gatherings. As noted elsewhere (e.g., Tuuva-Hongisto, 2018), nature, tranquillity and silence are among the things that Finnish rural young people appreciate most about their home regions. Even those young people whose future was strongly oriented towards urban environments, and who were critical of small rural communities, often mentioned that they missed the tranquillity of their rural home environments.

Emotional Challenges and Rearrangement of Social Relations

In this chapter, we turn to the social and emotional dimensions of emerging adulthood in the time of pandemic. In our data, these dimensions became visible in emerging adults' deliberations concerning their social relations—particularly intimate relationships and their hierarchies—as well as in ponderings of their status as 'home-returners'. The pandemic forced the young adults to reorganize their everyday lives and social relations. Safety was sought by consciously staying away from environments crowded with strangers and potential virus carriers. It was also sought by refusing many intimate contacts with, for example, grandparents, friends and romantic partners. This withdrawal was presented in terms of responsibility and care for the others, as voiced by the following young woman:

If I was alone, I'd like to live in town and be more free, I'm not afraid of getting the infection [...] but at least I've followed the formal recommendations, I think it's good for all people. I've been extremely careful because of my own family, taken no risk, really.

This kind of orientation resembles in some significant ways an orientation that has been conceptualized by gender theorists in terms of the feminine rationality of responsibility (e.g., Näre, 1992). In our data, this orientation towards common responsibility does in fact seem to be gendered. It was more common among young women who seemed more conscientious regarding state regulations and recommendations. In women's narratives, the pondering of responsible behaviour, hygiene practices, social distancing, as well as of worries related to older relatives and high-risk groups, was more clearly articulated than in the interviews of young men. At the time of our interviews, primary schools were being reopened. Some of the young women voiced their concern about whether this was necessary because they saw protection of risk groups and the elderly more important. As a concretization of the rationality of responsibility, social withdrawal can be interpreted as an emotional duty to protect loved ones within a certain protection order and preference. While this responsibility was associated with adulthood and maturity by the young women (cf. Sneed et al., 2006), it sometimes led them to decisions that meant a step 'backwards' in their transition to independent life, as in the case of the following young woman:

A lot of pressure, stress, my boyfriend asked me to come to the town with him, to meet him, but I was stressed, I don't want to take any risks, especially when I aim at coming back here [to home village]. The biggest stress is that if I bring the virus to my family. Of course this harms

us both, we had a quarrel. Otherwise it has been peaceful even though we haven't met in two months.

If we take a look at young men's everyday experiences during the lockdown, we find less talk about self-sacrifice and withdrawal and more about aspirations to arrange social events with their local peers. The national regulations of social distancing reached even the remotest regions, closing down many of the already scarce places available for gatherings in the rural communities: bars, youth clubs and indoor places for sports and hobbies. Some gathered for outdoor activities (like disc golf) that were possible despite the closure of gyms and sports centres. Many gathered regularly with their friends in private apartments and summer cottages. For many of those young men who returned home from urban settings, the move meant a return to their local 'boyish' teenage ways of having fun. Some re-created a culture of motoring in which the heart of joined action is to sit in the same car and just drive around (cf. Dunkley, 2004, p. 567; Laegran, 2002, p. 161). For them, the car used to mean a shared space for hanging around and a frame for local youth cultural memberships, an opportunity to move around and to escape immobility and loneliness (cf. Skelton, 2013). If they did not have their joint motor gatherings, their days would have been totally uneventful.

In this re-creation, the significance of peer relations surpassed the fear of infection. This was supported by a certain kind of carelessness—or rather peer trust—an orientation that we do not find in the interviews of young women. In the next quotation, a young man expresses that he is aware of restrictive recommendations—but he interprets them situationally:

Q: So, you can sit in the same car [when driving together all around, without any actual destination]?

A: Yep. I don't know... how it... everyone takes a stance, is it good or bad, but if it's okay for all, why to deny it or so. Yes, but it's a twofold issue, of course.

These kinds of differences can also be noted in young adults' reflections concerning how their everyday life was different from what it had been a few months ago. Whereas a young woman told us that 'my everyday life is so totally different now, because you don't have to go nowhere, or you are not allowed to go anywhere', a young man stated that 'it [the pandemic] does not bother me a lot, it's, however, possible to be with friends, during weekdays, it's not a problem'.

It is important to note that just as in the lives of other young people and adults, the pandemic increased the importance of digital communication in the lives of our informants as means of coping with recommendations for social distancing. In the following quote, a young man who had been accustomed to using various online applications already before the pandemic explains how this familiarity made it easier to overcome the distance to friends living in other parts of Finland. Here, we can also see the pattern of resorting to practices developed during the teenage years in a sparsely populated region:

A: Well, now that all these [things related to his important hobby and part-time job] and all education is online, we have used Discord quite a lot with my buddies, as a platform for chatting. There is usually always someone there, or, like we all have our mics open here all

day, so that if there is someone there, you just come here to chat, so that, there sure is quite enough of social interaction.

Q: So you don't feel like it would be so different to maintain contacts with your friends from a distance?

A: No. There's nothing very special about it.

Q: Did you have the same Discord habit already before Corona times, or is it something new?

A: This has been for a long time already. With these old friends [from the rural home community] we used to sit here in Discord already during the high school years, when we used to play a lot so this is not something very new.

To understand the different approaches to the 'new normal', we have to note the traditionally gendered sociocultural landscape of the rural communities (Käyhkö, 2017). When the young men were younger, many of them spent a lot of time in the public areas of their communities. In the following, young men complain about the lack of meaningful things to do in public spaces of their communities when they were temporarily closed:

Q: How the pandemic appears here, in this village?

A: The local bar was closed. The biggest shock, probably.

Q: So where did the locals drink, then?

A: At home...

Q: What did you do when you had free time [from the army], at home?

A: Tipped at home [laughing].

Q: You booze in somebody's home? Do you visit the town?

A: No, now we haven't gone to the town, for long. It's harmful. Rock festivals, and others, they've been cancelled.

Many of the girls, by contrast, had spent little time in public rural spaces when they were younger, but had spent their free time at their own or their friends' homes (c.f. Käyhkö, 2017). This conjunction of place and gender was interestingly re-created through the different responses in relation to pandemic's social restrictions, now in the context of emerging adulthood. The interviews with women exhibited feminine ways of handling the new order and the social opportunities and restrictions it involved. Young women engaged in compensatory activities; the rationality of responsibility (Näre, 1992) was connected to learning new skills and to a spectrum of small-scale, nearby activities—an orientation that aimed not only at coping in the present but also reached towards the future in a rational way.

I've sewed clothes using mummy's sewing machine, then I've exercised a bit at home, because I lost my gym hobby now ... or I don't want to go there now.

Considerations regarding the future matter a great deal in the lives of young adults. Pedagogical discussions of emerging adulthood contain many references to life design and life-shaping (e.g., Vanhalakka-Ruoho, 2007) as well as to independent agency and its gradual strengthening within individual lifecourse processes. However, among our young informants, the many uncertainties arising from the global pandemic blurred the future reflections. At the time of our interviews, the restrictions related to COVID-19 had lasted for 2 months. There was no clear end in sight, and a sense of weariness over the uncertainty was clearly present in our interviews. Eventually, the young adults came to feel that they were at the mercy of something uncontrollable. This uncontrollability could be interpreted as a constriction of their life-shaping agency (Vanhalakka-Ruoho, 2007; also Elder et al., 2003), as it had made them at least slightly as strangers in their own lives. Even though the virus was spreading elsewhere, the stagnant existential insecurity was sometimes experienced very concretely in the lives of our informants.

Discussion

In this article, we have taken an analytical look at the lives of emerging adults in the rural margins of the global COVID-19 map: in sparsely populated Finnish countryside. Our analysis was framed by Beck's (1992) conceptualization of risk society, characterized by global technical-, ecological-, or health-related risks. The pandemic can be seen as an embodiment of a Beckian dystopia. The present study shows that in a global risk society, even the margins cannot escape the global threat or the measures aimed at managing it: the pandemic intruded into the lives of the emerging adults, who lived far from actual COVID-19 hot spots, and interfered with their lives in a myriad of ways. The article has demonstrated that the pandemic as an actualization of a global risk enforced new borders in the lives of the emerging adults: physical borders (crowded, dangerous urban areas vs. spacious, safe rural territories), social borders (relationships included in the everyday contacts vs. relationships overruled by social distancing) and also mental contradictions (desire to lead independent lives vs. dependency on preventative regulations and parental support).

This article contributes to the growing research on emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Arnett et al., 2011) by further elaborating it in the context of the global pandemic and in relation to young people, who have faced the challenges of adulthood, such as moving away from childhood homes, at an early age due to the remoteness of their home regions. The concept of emerging adulthood was originally introduced to address the historical change that has taken place in the industrialized societies, most notably the expansion of postsecondary education and the delaying of marriage and parenthood, hence leading to the birth of a new 'life stage' between youth and adulthood, ranging from the late teens through mid-20s (Arnett, 2012; Wood et al., 2018). The present study supports the relevance of the term, and particularly those previous studies that have emphasized the gendered nature (e.g., Sneed et al., 2006) and diversity of experiences related to emerging adulthood (e.g., Arundel & Ronald, 2016; Hill et al., 2015).

However, instead of viewing emerging adulthood as a universal concept, the present study highlights the complexity of youth transitions and the importance of social and cultural contexts in shaping them. While previous research has focused on structural and institutional changes on one hand, and on identity explorations on the other (e.g., Wood et al., 2018), this article has highlighted the

contingency of emerging adulthood in a global risk society. We focused on the sudden and inescapable changes caused by the pandemic that complicate the expected processes related to emerging adulthood. Following Beck's theorization, we suggest that young people's reflexive life-shaping abilities (Beck et al., 1995) are weakened when a global crisis intrudes on both their mental and material worlds and upends many crucial societal structures. We argue that the space for individual agency has diminished in many respects during the pandemic because young adults have been forced to either change or delay their life plans and to restructure their everyday lives in unexpected ways. Hence, the pandemic has reinforced the yo-yo movement typical for emerging adulthood (e.g., Walther, 2006; Walther et al., 2006), and given it new meanings.

To conclude, our analysis shows that the pandemic has reinforced 'yo-yo-ization' in two ways: first, the young adults of this study described loss of employment opportunities, delays and challenges in education, and difficulties in leading independent lives. Second, they described social and emotional challenges related to the reorganization of everyday life due to COVID-19 restrictions. Further, the institutional, social and emotional challenges were intertwined in the lives of emerging adults.

The young people sought safety in a place where they felt secure and distant from the COVID-19 hotspots: their rural home regions. However, those who had chosen to move back to rural regions from urban environments awaited a new opportunity to leave in order to continue their transitional path towards independent life. Although the remote home regions offered safety, care and familial relationships, they did not represent a desirable future for most of our informants. For those young people who lived in the rural regions on a more permanent basis, spring 2020 was also about changing perceptions concerning rural environments and lifestyles. Their previous interviews had sometimes reflected common assumptions concerning the preferences of urban youth for outgoing lifestyles and lively social lives, a norm from which their rural lives seemed to depart (cf. Farrugia, 2014; Sørensen & Pless, 2017). The new mandates for social distancing and the closure of urban activities made their secluded lifestyles seem like something that was suggested for all as a new norm.

Further, the global pandemic shows the strength of normative cultural expectations of adulthood transitions when making them hard to reach. Emotionally, many described the yo-yo changes in their lives—such as inability to lead independent life and being forced to rely on parents—in terms of stepping backwards in time. The pandemic caused stress and conflicting emotions also by introducing a need to prioritize relationships with significant others. Some of the young adults were forced to decide who were the most important people to protect. The young adults were less concerned about being infected themselves than about the safety of their family members. This was reflected particularly in the interviews by young women whose responses reflected feminine rationality of responsibility (Näre, 1992).

One can only plan or imagine a future that is somehow possible (Jokinen, 2008, pp. 248–249). The global pandemic, however, has blurred the 'possible' for the young adults. The global crisis is now intertwined with their years of emerging adulthood, and it has dropped a veil between them and their future. In this sense, the unpredictability of the lifecourse can be seen as an implicitly shared experience among them (cf. Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Funding

The research received funding from the Finnish Academy projects 'Rural Generations on the Move. Cultural History of Rural Youth, 1950–2020' (Vehkalahti, no. 323105) and 'Capturing Digital Social Inequality: Young digi-natives' asymmetrical agencies within socio-technical imperatives and imaginaries' (Armila, no. 330573).

Notes

1. Translation (Beck 1992, 24): Risk society is a catastrophic society. In it the exceptional condition threatens to become the norm.

2. Youth in Time is a collaborative follow-up by the Finnish Youth Research Society and Universities of Eastern Finland, Oulu and Helsinki. We wish to thank researchers Mari Käyhkö and Ville Pöysä who collaborated in the follow-up of the Eastern Finnish participants and have made some of the interviews included in this article.

3. Due to the scope of this article, urban-specific experiences as well as experiences concerning COVID-19 preventative measures in the military service have been omitted.

References

- Armila, P., Käyhkö, M., Pöysä, V. (2018). On the educational edges of a learning society: The Finnish hinterland as a framework of educational choices for young people. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 21(9), 1198–1215.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469–480.
- Arnett, J. J. (2012). New horizons in research on emerging and young adulthood. In Booth, A., Brown, S., Landale, N., Manning, W., McHale, S. (Eds.), *Early adulthood in a family context*. National Symposium on Family Issues, Vol. 2. Springer.
- Arnett, J. J., Kloep, M., Hendry, L. B., Tanner, J. (2011). *Debating emerging adulthood: Stage or process?* Oxford University Press.
- Arundel, R., Ronald, R. (2016). Parental co-residence, shared living and emerging adulthood in Europe: Semi-dependent housing across welfare regime and housing system contexts. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 19(7), 885–905.
- Banks, J., Xu, X. (2020). The mental health effects of the first two months of lockdown and social distancing during the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK (IFS Working Papers, No. W20/16). Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS).
- Beck, U. (1986). *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*. Suhrkamp.
- Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. SAGE Publications.
- Beck, U., Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002). *Individualization: Institutionalized individualization and its social and political consequences*. SAGE Publications.
- Beck, U., Giddens, A., Lash, S. (1995). *Nykyajan jäljillä: Refleksiivinen modernisaatio* [Reflexive modernization: Politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order, 1994]. Vastapaino.

- Björn, I., Pöllänen, P. (2020). Koronateeni ja maaseutu [Covid-19 and the rural regions]. *Maaseudun uusi aika—Finnish Journal of Rural Studies*, 28(2), 106–109.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Harvard University Press.
- Butler, J. (1999). *Gender trouble*. Routledge.
- Coffey, A., Atkinson, P. (1996). *Making sense of qualitative data: Complementary research strategies*. SAGE Publications.
- Côté, J. E. (2014). The dangerous myth of emerging adulthood: An evidence-based critique of a flawed developmental theory. *Applied Developmental Science*, 18(4), 177–188.
- Cuervo, H., Wyn, J. (2012). *Young people making it work: Continuity and change in rural places*. Melbourne University Publishing.
- Dunkley, C. M. (2004). Risky geographies: Teens, gender, and rural landscape in North America. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 11(4), 559–579.
- Dutra-Thomé, L., DeSousa, D., Koller, S. H. (2019). Promotive and risk factors for positive youth development among emerging adults in Brazil. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 48(2), 171–185.
- Elder, G. H., Johnson, M. K., Crosnoe, R. (2003). The emergence and development of life course theory. In Mortimer, J. T., Shanahan, M. J. (Eds.), *Handbook of the life course. Handbooks of sociology and social research* (pp. 3–19). Springer.
- Farrugia, D. (2014). Towards a spatialized youth sociology: The rural and the urban in times of change. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(3), 293–307.
- Farrugia, D. (2016). The mobility imperative for rural youth: The structural, symbolic and non-representational dimensions of rural youth mobilities. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 19(6), 836–851.
- Finnish Environment Institute. (2018). *Urban-rural classification*. https://www.ymparisto.fi/en-US/Living_environment_and_planning/Community_structure/Information_about_the_community_structure/Urbanrural_classification
- Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare. (2020). *Confirmed coronavirus cases (COVID-19) in Finland*. <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/92e9bb33fac744c9a084381fc35aa3c7>
- Harris, A., Wyn, J. (2009). Young people's politics and the micro-territories of the local. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 44(2), 327–344.
- Heller, A. (1984). *Everyday life*. Routledge & Keegan Paul.
- Herranen, J., Harinen, P. (2008). Kohti hyvää aikuisuutta: Omilleen asettumisen kulttuurinen kuva [Towards a normatively good adulthood: The cultural representation of independence]. *Aikuiskasvatus*, 28(1), 4–14.
- Hill, J. M., Lalji, M., van Rossum, G., van der Geest, V. R., Blokland, A. (2015). Experiencing emerging adulthood in the Netherlands. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 18(8), 1035–1056.
- Holland, J. (2011). Timescapes: Living a qualitative longitudinal study. *Qualitative Social Research*, 12(3), Art. 9. <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1729/3232>.
- HS. (2020). Poikkeusolot ovat repineet maaseudun ja kaupungin väliin sellaisen railon, että Vauva.fi:ssä uusmaalaisilta uhataan viedä oluet – tutkijan mukaan korona-vihan alkusyyt periytyvät vuosi-

kymmerten takaa [The state of emergency has torn a deep crack between cities and the countryside – according to a researcher reasons for the Covid-19 hatred originate from decades ago] (News May 5, 2020). <https://www.hs.fi/paivanlehti/09052020/art-2000006498675.html>

International Labor Organization (ILO). (2020, April 15). Young workers will be hit hard by COVID-19's economic fallout. <https://iloblog.org/2020/04/15/young-workers-will-be-hit-hard-by-covid-19s-economic-fallout/>

Jokinen, E. (2008). *Ohjattu, eletty elämä* [Managed, lived life]. *Janus*, 16(3), 245–249.

Jokinen, K. (2014). Nykynuoret ja siirtymät aikuisuuteen [Young people's transitions into adulthood]. In Vehkalahti, K., Suurpää, L. (Eds.), *Nuoruuden sukupolvet. Monitieteisiä näkökulmia nuoruuteen eilen ja tänään* (pp. 250–270). Finnish Youth Research Society.

Juvonen, T., Romakkaniemi, M. (2019). Between mobility and belonging: The meanings of locality among youth in Lapland in the transition to adulthood. *Young*, 27(4), 321–335.

Käyhkö, M. (2017). "Vähän niinku metän keskellä ja silleen." Syrjäseutu, yläkouluikäiset tytöt ja tutuksi eletty paikka [Remote region, teen-aged girls, and a place lived as familiar]. *Sukupuolentutkimus*, 30(3), 7–23.

Kvale, S. (1996). *Interview views: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. SAGE Publications.

Laegran, A. S. (2002). The petrol station and the internet cafe: Rural technospaces for youth. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 18(2), 157–168.

Miles, M., Huberman, A. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Milne, R. (2020, September 24). How Finland kept Covid in check. <https://www.ft.com/content/61dccfaa-0871-48a2-80ac-dbe6d5b5b5f8>

Moisio, J., Gissler, M., Haapakorva, P., Myllyniemi, S. (2016). Lasten ja nuorten muuttoliike tilastoissa [Migration of children and young people in statistics]. In Kivijärvi, A., Peltola, M. (Eds.), *Lapset ja nuoret muuttoliikkeessä. Nuorten elinolot -vuosikirja 2016* (pp. 17–50). THL.

Näre, S. (1992). Liisa Älä! Älä! -maassa. Tyttöjen autonomian sääteley [Controlling girls' autonomy]. In Näre, S., Lähteenmaa, J. (Eds.), *Letit liehumaan. Tyttökulttuuri murroksessa* (pp. 25–36). Finnish Literature Society.

Press Release. (2020, March 16). Government, in cooperation with the President of the Republic, declares a state of emergency in Finland over coronavirus outbreak. <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/10616/hallitus-totesi-suomen-olevan-poikkeusoloissa-koronavirustilanteen-vuoksi>

Saldaña, J. (2003). *Longitudinal qualitative research. Analyzing change through time*. Altamira Press.

Scott, J. W. (1999) *Gender and the politics of history*. Columbia University Press.

Shanahan, M. J., Elder Jr., G. H. (2002). History, agency, and the life course. In Crockett, L. J. (Ed.), *Agency, motivation, and the life course* (pp. 145–185). University of Nebraska Press.

Shanahan, L., Steinhoff, A., Bechtiger, L., Murray, A. L., Nivette, A., Hepp, U., Ribeaud, D., Eisner, M. (2020). Emotional distress in young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence of risk and resilience from a longitudinal cohort study. *Psychological Medicine*, 2020, 1–10.

- Skelton, T. (2013). Young people's urban im/mobilities: Relationality and identity formation. *Urban Studies*, 50(3), 467–483.
- Sneed, J. R., Johnson, J. G., Cohen, P., Gilligan, C., Chen, H., Crawford, T. N., Kasen, S. (2006). Gender differences in the age-changing relationship between instrumentality and family contact in emerging adulthood. *Developmental Psychology*, 42(5), 787–797.
- Stauber, B., Walther, A. (2006). *De-standardised pathways to adulthood: European perspectives on informal learning in informal networks*. Papers, 79, 241–262.
- Sørensen, N. U., Pless, M. (2017). Living on the periphery of youth: Young people's narratives of youth life in rural areas. *Young*, 25(4), 1S–17S.
- Suomen virallinen tilasto (SVT) . (2020, October). Työvoimatutkimus [Statistics of Finland: Labor Force]. ISSN=1798-7830.
- Tagliabue, S., Crocetti, E., Lanz, M. (2016). Emerging adulthood features and criteria for adulthood: Variable- and person-centered approaches. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 19(3), 374–388.
- Thomson, R., Holland, J. (2002). Imagined adulthood: Resources, plans and contradictions. *Gender and Education*, 14(4), 337–350.
- Tuuva-Hongisto, S. (2018). Kotona, maalla, syrjässä: Syrjäkylänuorten haaveita kotiseudulle jäämisestä [Dreams of staying in home regions among rural young of remote villages]. *Nuorisotutkimus*, 36(3), 23–37.
- Vanhalakka-Ruoho, M. (2007). Nuorten elämäkulun suunnittelun relationaalisia aspekteja [The relational aspects of youth's life plans]. In Juutilainen, P.-K. (Ed.), *Suhteita ja suunnottoa: näkökulmia nuorten ohjaukseen* [Relations and Life-shaping: Perspectives to Youth Counselling] (pp. 9–32). University of Joensuu.
- Walther, A. (2006). Regimes of youth transitions: Choice, flexibility and security in young people's experiences across different European contexts. *Young—Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, 14(2), 119–139.
- Walther, A., du Bois-Reymond, M., Biggart, A. (Eds.) (2006) *Participation in transition: Motivation of young adults in Europe for learning and working*. Peter Lang.
- Weichhart, P. (2015). Residential multi-locality: In search of theoretical frameworks. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie—Journal of Economic and Social Geography*, 106(4), 378–391.
- Wood, D., Crapnell, T., Lau, L., Bennett, A., Lotstein, D., Ferris, M., Kuo, A. (2018). Emerging adulthood as a critical stage in the life course. In Halfon, N., Forrest, C., Lerner, R., Faustman, E. (Eds.), *Handbook of life course health development* (pp. 123–143). Springer.
- YLE . (2020). Mökkiläiset kertovat, miksi he pakenivat Uudeltamaalta: "Ihmisten pitäisi olla iloisia, että tulimme." [Cottagers tell why they escaped the province of Uusimaa: "The locals should be happy that we came here"]. <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11278757>