

# Responsibility as a social capital phenomenon in the eyes of young people. International perspective<sup>1</sup>

Beata KRZYWOSZ-RYNKIEWICZ

*Department of Psychology of Development and Education  
Social Science Faculty  
University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn  
ul. Oczapowskiego 2  
10-975 Olsztyn, Poland*

*In this article, we analyse the phenomenon of responsibility and its understanding among young people from Visegrad countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary). Using the AGA research method, 400 students of the last stages of economic faculties in capital and local universities were examined. The results indicate a personal rather than a social dimension of responsibility. We also found some patterns to depend on the country. Young Poles' responsibility is more related to the subjective dimension, Hungarians' to social, Czechs' to affective, and Slovaks' to moral one.*

**Key words:** *responsibility, young people, social capital.*

## Introduction

Young people are a good “point of reference” to what is going on in the whole society. In some way, they are a kind of a “lens” that concentrates various problems and tensions of a social system. So, why is it so important to understand the way young people see things? First of all, their perspective is a measure of changes that have taken place in societies, as well as the distance that is still to cover. Secondly, we cannot talk about young people without thinking about the future and think about the future without talking about young people (Młodzi 2011).

What is the current situation of youngsters and in what context do they live today? Recent years have seen a shift or even an explosion in post-communistic countries. According to Krystyna Szafraniec (Młodzi 2011), we can mention a pile of phenomena of different intensity and force we experience since 1989. Firstly, the system “exploded”, then we suddenly opened to the world and different cultures, we experienced a demographic and educational system growth, we adopted a digital revolution, became members of the European Union and finally all of a sudden we suffered from the global financial crisis, new of a kind, and on a scale that we couldn't have even thought of. This is the context in which young people live, the youth who are 20–30 years old now and start their professional life – finish university, are looking for a job, arrange the marriage. Sociologists mention that if we take into account that these shifts went together with the shortages in these new countries and their new economies, it seems clear that this social context has sent a specific message to young people. This message was *do it yourself* (Młodzi 2011). Moreover, with

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the postmodernistic social processes, three most important “support parties” have retreated from youth’s life. The state has given up various forms of support, educational institutions have given up the role of a “guide” to young people, and finally parents and teachers have given up their roles as mentors (Aviram, 2010). This, of course, has granted young people more freedom, but has also burdened them with the responsibility of the choices that they make. How do they use this “new” freedom? Are they responsible? Before answering, other questions should be posed: *What does responsibility mean in the eyes of young people? What categories or associations is it connected to?* Understanding this matter is important not only because of private, personal issues – careers, well-being, etc. It is crucial also in the social context. In this paper, we attempt to answer the question: *How young people understand responsibility and does it depend on different national circumstances?* In the first part of the paper, the theoretical background of the phenomenon is presented with the focus on the dimensions of responsibility as well as its relation to the social capital. Next, the methodological approach and research results are discussed.

### **Responsibility – different perspectives**

The concept of responsibility has become popular in philosophical discussions and public debates after World War II. Among many issues raised in the public discourse were the limits of responsibility, especially in the context of obedience and duty. However, it is a very complex phenomenon, and different disciplines mention its different aspects.

Philosophers stress the ambiguity of the concept and point out various situations pertaining to responsibility (Ingarden 1987). The first one is *bearing responsibility* – a passive form understood in categories of guilt. The second one, *calling to account for something*, pertains to formal sanctions and the legal understanding of the concept. The next situation is *taking responsibility*, which assumes the activity and intentionality of the subject. Finally, *responsible action* is the fullest and most mature dimension of responsibility, which is a conscious action taken with the full understanding of the situation that one is in, knowledge of one’s own motivation, needs and, simultaneously, control of the outcomes of one’s actions.

In psychology, there are three main approaches to responsibility. The first, attributional, approach concentrates on research into ascribing responsibility to oneself and others (Heider 1958; Wright, 1964; Fishbein, Ajzen 1973; Reykowski 1986; Daszkowski 1983). The results of the research indicate a variety of factors that can be taken into account while ascribing responsibility. The second approach is cognitive-developmental, in which responsibility is treated as a category of moral development and is an important factor delineating the borders of responsibility (Piaget 1967; Kohlberg 1984). The third is the personality approach connected to creating conceptions about oneself as a responsible person (Rogers 1969).

Sociologists claim that the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a century of responsibility (Crozier 1996; Bauman 1995). The period of liquid modernity (Bauman 2007) which, by its affirmation of ambiguity and subjectivity, diversity and tolerance, makes people face dilemmas and problems connected to the constant need to make choices. Independent action and looking at the world ‘with one’s own eyes’ are important elements of the subjective responsibility of an individual.

The contemporary social change calls for responsibility as a competence which can be developed, a disposition letting one act effectively in the social world. Such understanding of responsibility has been proposed by Beata Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz (2007). In the next paragraph,

we will try to integrate the different perspectives indicating the dimensions of responsibility, essential in individual functioning.

### ***Responsibility as a moral dimension***

Traditionally, responsibility is connected to abiding norms set by law and other people (Picht 1981). According to philosophers, respect for these rules and values is the core of responsibility (Ingarden 1987). Social educators (Kwieciński, 1998) stress moral maturity as one of the factors important for the development of responsibility. This maturity is defined as an ability to consequently respect internalized moral norms – the readiness to enter into contracts with other people and to respect them (Kohlberg 1984). During their development, people learn to understand situations, to look at things from other perspectives, to understand the universal benefits coming from the rules and norms of conduct and to act according to them.

### ***Responsibility as a social dimension***

Responsibility is manifested in the interactions with the surrounding world. People are one of the elements of this world. Most of the decisions that are made do not pertain only to the ones making them, but also to others, not only the close ones. Responsibility must be thus preceded by a suspension of one's own interests and conforming to the norms indicating what should be and why (Wołoszyn 1998). In this sense, responsibility is of social character – it is responsibility for an idea or a social group. It is a type of social duty, which calls for a resignation, even if only partial, from one's own wishes. The social aspect of responsibility is stressed in different areas of life and is connected to acting for someone else's or common good. It can pertain to the local community, and also be treated as globally connected to the awareness of how one's actions, motivation, and sense of agency are related to acting in the interests of the world and people in general.

### ***Responsibility as an affective dimension***

Psychologists and educators, when discussing the issue of responsibility, stress the importance of kindness towards other people and eagerness to help. This approach to responsibility is promoted mainly by humanistic psychologists (Gordon 2000). They claim that sensitivity to others is an important element of a responsible attitude manifested in interactions with the world and others.

### ***Responsibility as a subjective category***

Philosophers stress that a responsible action is exclusively human and, apart from being regulated by the environment, it is regulated also by the subject. Karol Wojtyła (1985, 1992) has said that a human being is responsible mostly to oneself and to one's consciousness. He introduced the division between a general phenomenon of responsibility and subjective responsibility, by which he exposed the meaning of individual freedom and autonomy of responsibility. Psychologists stress that independence and maturity are important conditions of responsibility, which allow for the definition limits to influence and bear responsibility only for what can be controlled (Branden 1996). Works on responsibility more and more often stress the importance of responsibility for one's own life – for using one's chances and possibilities, investing in competences and knowledge, emphasizing the role of entrepreneurial attitudes and courage in the face of challenges (Branden 1996).

## Responsibility as an element of social capital

It is hard to find direct references to responsibility in the writings of classic social capital theorists (Putnam 2000; Fukuyama 1996; Coleman 1994; Bourdieu, Passeron, 2000). The core of social capital, however, is directly linked to the concept of responsibility because social capital pertains to social space – a space where people function according to their specific attributes. Their attitude towards this space is determined by culture, economics, and politics. It is of great importance in the modern society (called postmodernity or late modernity by sociologists) characterized by liquidity and ambiguity (Bauman 2007) and risk (Beck 1992). An interesting approach to the relationship between social spaces and individuals is expressed in Harvey's conception (1989); he stresses the complexity of people's current social situation in relations to this space from the historical perspective and allows them to realize the importance of responsibility. According to Harvey, time and space have always determined people's relationships with the community in which they live. For many decades, time and space decided who one was and what was the basis for entering or leaving a given community. This conception of belonging to a community was based on the duties the individual had towards time and place – caring for tradition and past culture in a given territory (Harvey 1989). Responsibility was thus expressed in duties towards community, which defined its expectations towards its members in a clear manner. What could have been expected from community members was not expected from others. Responsibility became subjective and stable: who one was at a given time in a given place determined his / her readiness to bear responsibility. According to the postmodern theory, people occupy different times and spaces at the same time. They are members of national, local, state, ethnic, global, and continental communities. The category of social belonging became internally contradictory and fragmented (Melosik 1998). The postmodern perspective takes note of pluralism by stressing emancipation from intellectual pressure and symbolic violence. People with different viewpoints, freedoms, and subjective perspectives should be free to function in one community. From the postmodern perspective, being a member of a social group is a result of a critical decision rather than automatic identification with, e.g., a clan, an ethnic group or a state (Sliwerski 2005). This evolution of the understanding of the relationship between an individual and society poses the question of the changes in people's responsibility for the social space, which is liquid and changing, and the role of individuals in it is often only superficial (e.g., virtual communities). Building social networks, creating relationships based on trust, readiness to cooperate or compete are based on individuals' *internal responsibility* for public spaces and one's place in it rather than on duties or rights. It is fundamentally important for the character of and relationships within a community, how people experience being able to influence it, how they understand the consequences of their actions and take others into consideration. It also influences the types of bonds in the community, reliability, and readiness for cooperation. *If I want to **trust** someone, if I want to **cooperate** with someone*, I must stake on his / her responsibility. *Responsibility* in the moral, affective, social, and subjective dimension is an internal, individual attribute which helps build trust and cooperation.

## AGA as a method for studying responsibility

Understanding the content of responsibility and comparing it among different groups is a real methodological challenge. It calls for a research method that would allow to make quantitative and qualitative analyses at the same time. The most promising method meeting both of these conditions is the AGA (Associative Group Analysis). It allows to understand the potential

dispositions connected to responsibility by analyzing free associations, without semantic or theoretical interference. The AGA was developed by the American sociologist Lorand Szalay in the 1960s (Szalay, Bernt 1967; Szalay, Bryson 1974; Szalay, Deese 1978). He has assumed that free associations generated around a particular phenomenon are a reflection of people's beliefs about it and that they are directly related to the readiness for particular actions in a given area. James Deese (1965), who has significantly contributed to this method, stressed that it is not only the associations, but also their sequence and a consequence of their availability, which is crucial. The associations generated first are most stable and constitute the semantic core of the studied phenomena, which is the aim of the AGA. The analysis is done on two levels: qualitative (the semantic content) and quantitative (quantification of meanings). The qualitative level is based on analyses done by competent judges who cluster the associations according to their meaning into categories. These categories may then be clustered into wider groups. This allows differentiating among various meanings that constitute the analysed notion. The quantitative analysis allows to compare the saturation of meaning among different groups of respondents (e.g. people of different age). In order to do that, the associations are weighted: the first associations get 6 points, the second get 5 points, and so on. The weight of each association was determined by Szalay in his research on the accuracy and reliability of the method (Szalay, Brent 1967; Szalay, Bryson 1974; Szalay, Lysne 1970; Szalay et al. 1972; Szalay et al. 1970). After calculating the weight for each category (expressed by the sum of points), the mean weight of each category is calculated, making it possible to compare the category's importance in comparison with other categories. Szalay recommends that the number of people in all groups should be identical. This allows comparing the mere sum of weights.

### ***Research procedure and participants***

The AGA procedure consists in generating associations by research participants. The stimulus is an ordinary word, a term designating the phenomenon. In our case, this was 'responsibility'. The instruction was formulated as follows:

*You have a sheet of paper in front of you. Within one minute, write everything that comes to mind when you hear RESPONSIBILITY.*

In our study, 400 students aged 19–21 took part. They came from four Visegrad countries (V4): Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland (see Table 1). The Visegrad name comes from the northern Hungarian town of Visegrád which hosted the royal summit of the Central European emperors in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In Visegrád, already in 1335, the Czech, Hungarian, and Polish kings met to discuss the regional cooperation among their kingdoms and agreed to cooperate closely in the fields of politics and commerce. The main reasons for the Visegrad cooperation stem not only from the geographical closeness, but also from their shared history and from the common interests in the future development of Central Europe within the EU. In addition, the V4 are all post-communist countries with a relatively new market economy. Their social, cultural, geographical, economic, and political context seems to be comparable. The more interesting is to explore whether the phenomenon of responsibility is understood in a similar way.

The study was conducted according to a standard procedure. After coding the data, weights were ascribed to each association, depending on their order. Competent judges clustered similar (in terms of meaning) associations into categories. The comparisons were made according to all included variables, but the biggest differences were detected for comparisons of age groups.

Table 1. *The number of participants in different groups – associative method*

Country	CAPITAL CITY	TOWN	Total
Poland	50	50	100
Czech Republic	50	50	100
Slovakia	50	50	100
Hungary	50	50	100
Total	200	200	<b>400</b>

## Results

The analysis of the association's content related to responsibility was done by grouping them according to similarities in meaning. Competent judges created 18 categories (Table 2). There is the name of the category expressing the contents of the associations in the first column. There are examples of associations ascribed to a given category in the second one.

Table 2. *Association categories created by competent judges (presented in alphabetical order)*

CATEGORY	EXAMPLES OF ASSOCIATIONS
CARE	<i>Care, help, support, thinking of others</i>
CITIZENSHIP	<i>Elections, voting</i>
CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS	<i>Friendship, partner, love</i>
COMPANY	<i>Well-organized company, strategy, earning money</i>
EDUCATION	<i>Education, marks</i>
EMPLOYEE	<i>Employees, subordinates</i>
FAMILY	<i>Children, family, parenting</i>
GOOD	<i>Values, sth good, importance, good senses</i>
GUILT	<i>Punishment, guilt</i>
INFLUENCE	<i>Everything upon me, for your own actions; independence, novelty</i>
LEADERSHIP	<i>Authority, leader, manager, managerial positions, taking lead of someone's life</i>
MATURIRY	<i>Adulthood, conscientiousness, consideration, honour, maturity, seriousness, wisdom</i>
MOTIVATION	<i>Acts, determination, prize</i>
PROBLEM	<i>Stress, risk, headache, burden</i>
RELATIONSHIP	<i>Appreciation of others, compromise with others, equality, respecting co-workers</i>
RELIABILITY AND HONESTY	<i>Reliability, punctuality, keeping one's word, honesty, facing consequences, conscience</i>
SOCIETY	<i>Common sense, common good</i>
WORK	<i>Planning, performance, having a task to do, effectiveness, doing one's duties, documents</i>

If we look at average weights ascribed to specific categories calculated basing on the points given to each association (Table 3), it is clear that responsibility is connected mostly to maturity, work, reliability, and honesty. Some associations are connected to difficulty; there are also those pertaining to close relationships with others (family and care).

*Table 3. Average weight for each category of associations according to country*

CATHEGORY	CZ	HU	PL	SK	Sum
CARE	25.92	15.93	22.14	7.83	71.82
CITIZENSHIP	0	19.98	2.97	0	22.95
CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS	4.32	1.89	1.35	0.81	8.37
COMPANY	9.72	10.26	4.59	9.99	34.56
EDUCATION	4.59	5.94	3.24	8.64	22.41
EMPLOYEE	1.62	3.24	1.08	2.7	8.64
FAMILY	18.09	26.19	21.33	13.77	79.38
GOOD	7.02	4.86	4.86	6.75	23.49
GUILT	4.86	8.64	3.24	2.43	19.17
INFLUENCE	3.24	4.59	3.51	4.32	15.66
LEADERSHIP	8.64	27.27	7.83	14.04	57.78
MATURITY	53.46	45.36	102.87	78.84	280.53
MOTIVATION	11.07	5.67	7.02	15.39	39.15
PROBLEM	37.8	27.81	14.58	17.82	98.01
RELATIONSHIPS	5.13	7.56	9.99	4.59	27.27
RELIABILITY AND HONESTY	25.38	21.06	26.19	49.14	121.77
SOCIETY	1.62	11.34	7.83	4.05	24.84
WORK	15.12	34.02	34.29	40.5	123.93

If the whole set of associations is equal to the saturation of 100 %, then two thirds of the responsibility concept are filled by six categories (Fig. 1): maturity, work, and values such as reliability and honesty constitute half of the concept of responsibility.

These analyses were conducted using data on the whole group. It is worth checking whether there are any patterns pertaining to the perspectives of specific countries. Next, an analysis according to the theoretical dimension of responsibility (moral, subjective, social, and affective) was done. Particular categories were ascribed by competent judges to four theoretical dimensions. Apart of them, categories related to professional life were collected into a separate dimension. The analysis of the results presented in Table 4 allows seeing the character of understanding responsibility by young people in various countries.

### *Responsibility as a moral category*

Compared to other nations, the associations given by Slovaks placed the greatest weight on moral categories. There are twice as many of them in comparison with the associations given by Poles and Hungarians. Slovaks connect responsibility with reliability and honesty, and all that is associated with being good.

### *Responsibility as a subjective category*

Categories connected with the subjective dimension appeared in associations given by all participants. However, Poles were the ones stressing this dimension most: they named it more often than Hungarians by almost one third and more often than Slovaks and Czechs. Poles

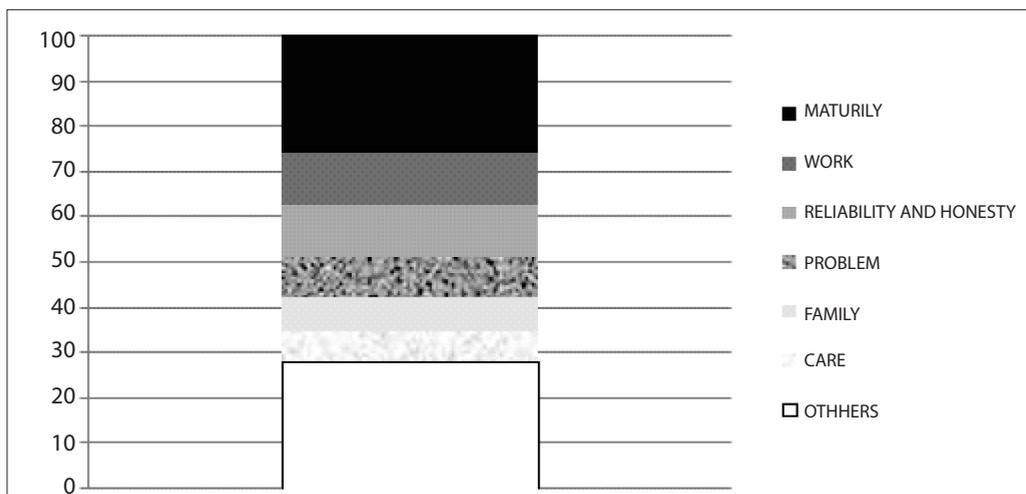


Fig. 1. The saturation of the concept of responsibility with the categories of meaning – results for the whole group

Table 4. Weight values of the association categories and their dimensions with respect to country

FACTOR/CATHEGORY	Country			
	CZ	HU	PL	SK
<b>PROFESSIONAL LIFE</b>	<b>39.69</b>	<b>80.73</b>	<b>51.03</b>	<b>75.87</b>
EDUCATION	4.59	5.94	3.24	8.64
COMPANY	9.72	10.26	4.59	9.99
EMPLOYEE	1.62	3.24	1.08	2.7
LEADERSHIP	8.64	27,27	7.83	14.04
WORK	15.12	34.02	34.29	40.5
<b>MORAL FACTOR</b>	<b>37.26</b>	<b>34.56</b>	<b>34.29</b>	<b>58.32</b>
RELIABILITY AND HONESTY	25.38	21.06	26.19	49,14
GUILT	4.86	8.64	3.24	2.43
GOOD	7.02	4.86	4.86	6.75
<b>SUBJECTIVE FACTOR</b>	<b>105.57</b>	<b>83.43</b>	<b>127.98</b>	<b>116.37</b>
MATURITY	53.46	45.36	102.87	78,84
INFLUENCE	3.24	4.59	3.51	4.32
PROBLEM	37.8	27.81	14.58	17,82
MOTIVATION	11.07	5.67	7.02	15.39
<b>SOCIAL FACTOR</b>	<b>6.75</b>	<b>38.88</b>	<b>20.79</b>	<b>8.64</b>
SOCIETY	1.62	11.34	7.83	4.05
RELATIONSHIP	5.13	7.56	9.99	4.59
CITIZENSHIP	0	19.98	2.97	0
<b>AFFECTIVE FACTOR</b>	<b>48.33</b>	<b>44.01</b>	<b>44.82</b>	<b>22.41</b>
CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS	4.32	1.89	1,35	0.81
CARE	25.92	15.93	22.14	7.83
FAMILY	18.09	26.19	21.33	13.77

understand responsibility mostly as maturity – awareness of one’s actions and wisdom (Table 4). They do not see it in terms of a “problem” to such an extent as other nations. Slovaks present a similar profile of associations, although the weight of their associations is lower. Yet another pattern is to be found for associations done by Czechs: they see responsibility as maturity equal to difficulty, stress, risk, and burnout.

### ***Responsibility as a social category***

Responsibility is related to the social dimension to a lesser extent. Hungarians, however, are the ones naming most of the associations pertaining to this dimension – twice more often than Poles. Czechs and Slovaks associate responsibility with social categories four times less often than Hungarians to whom responsibility in the social dimension is related to citizenship – a category absent from associations done by Czechs and Slovaks and almost absent from those done by Poles. Similarly, associations pertaining to community – common good, sense of communion – appear most often among Hungarians, less often among Poles, and almost never among Czechs (Table 4).

### ***Responsibility as an affective category***

Categories related to the affective dimension are of great importance among young Poles and Hungarians, but they are of greatest importance for Czechs – twice as much as for their neighbours Slovaks. For Czechs, responsibility in the affective dimension is mostly connected to care – help, support, thinking about the other person, especially a close one – in reference to family, children, parents, and friends (Table 4). Associations pertaining to family are listed most often among Hungarians, but they are not saturated with the concept of care to such an extent. Slovaks relate responsibility to affective aspects (close ones or caring for others) least.

## **Summary**

Responsibility seems to be of great significance for the creation of social capital, especially in the context of changes specific to modern times named liquid modernity by sociologists. The instability and liquidity of the social structure call for an internal responsibility, for the individual building of structures and functioning therein. Building trust among the partners of social life, readiness to cooperate, but also to compete, is directly conditioned by the responsible attitude that individuals are ready to assume. Such attitudes facilitate the building of lasting bonds which comprise a social capital. One can ask whether modern people, especially the young ones entering the world of social, institutionalized life, are responsible. Before answering this question, we should define what responsibility means – what is the character of responsibility among people who are potential business partners. This is important, especially if they come from different countries and their mutual experience is scarce. As indicated by our research, responsibility is connected mostly with maturity – being an adult, aware of his / her actions, or being wise. In reference to the categories of responsibility present in the literature, we have assessed the saturation of the concept of responsibility with various groups of meaning: subjective, moral, social, and affective. We observed some interesting patterns. The subjective dimension is the most distinct one, and it saturates responsibility to the greatest extent. It seems to support the strategy “do it yourself – be responsible for yourself”. We can expect that in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century young people are more willing to be responsible for their own life, future, work. Nevertheless, the character

of responsibility is different in different countries. Young Poles understand responsibility in more subjective terms, their approach seems more personalistic and individualistic. For them, responsibility is connected to personal attributes and not to morality, emotions or (least of all) to personal relationships. Young Slovaks, as compared with other nations, see responsibility in terms of morality to the greatest extent – they associate it with reliability and honesty. Keeping one's word and promises and facing consequences of one's actions are specific to responsible people. For Hungarians, responsibility is of social character and is connected with citizenship and social participation (such as voting), common good and the sense of community. Responsibility according to Czechs is connected with relationships and emotions, i.e. it pertains to intimacy and caring for others.

Such understanding of responsibility sets a specific base to build the social capital. The saturation of the concept with social factors may serve as a starting point for creating broad social networks. The moral dimension of responsibility can help build mutual reliability for common enterprises. The affective dimension predisposes people to building trust among a small group of people – the close ones and the family, and concentrating on their needs. Perceiving responsibility as a personal attribute with little reference to other dimensions can facilitate an individualistic perspective – orientation towards achieving one's own goals, striving for personal development and success or experiencing the sense of influence on the environment.

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## JAUNIMO POŽIÜRIS Į ATSAKOMYBĘ KAIP Į SOCIALINĮ KAPITALĄ. TARPTAUTINĖ PERSPEKTYVA<sup>1</sup>

Beata Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje analizuojama, kaip jaunimas iš Vyšegrado šalių (Lenkijos, Čekijos, Slovakijos, Vengrijos) supranta atsakomybę. Naudojant AGA metodą buvo ištirta 400 skirtingų universitetų studentų, besimokančių paskutiniuose ekonomikos fakultetų kursuose. Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidė, kad atsakomybė labiau suvokiama asmeniniu, o ne socialiniu lygmeniu. Be to, egzistuoja skirtumai tarp šalių.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** atsakomybė, jaunimas, socialinis kapitalas.

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