

Received: 6 October 2025, Accepted: 14 July 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26529/cepsj.2335>

Psychosocial Distress and Community Support: Students' Perspectives and the Role of Social Pedagogy

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Psychosocial distress is a significant challenge for students transitioning to adulthood. The present study explores students' perspectives on psychosocial distress and the community's response to it. Using an arts-based research methodology (photovoice), social pedagogy students visually documented representations of distress in their daily lives and community responses to it. The collected images and narratives were qualitatively analysed through thematic analysis to identify generative themes. The findings highlight the diverse ways in which students experience and interpret distress, revealing the emotional, social and structural factors that influence their wellbeing. A critical aspect of the research is recognising both the importance and challenges of non-formal support systems in mitigating distress. In order to foster meaningful dialogue with youth, social pedagogy should integrate concepts from the pedagogy of the oppressed and the pedagogy of liberation, addressing the individualisation of psychosocial distress and advocating for collective, community-based solutions. This approach is particularly relevant in the context of societal crises and growing uncertainty during the transition to adulthood. The study highlights the potential of arts-based participatory research methods to facilitate dialogue, co-create knowledge and foster intersubjectivity, including within higher education. By amplifying students' voices, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of distress and advocates for community responses that go beyond individualised solutions.

Keywords: arts-based research, non-formal support networks, photovoice, psychosocial distress, students as emerging adults

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Psihosocialne stiske in skupnostna podpora: perspektive študentk in socialnopedagoški razmisleki

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❧ Psihosocialne stiske predstavljajo pomemben izziv za študentke in študente na prehodu v odraslost. Izsledki te raziskave predstavljajo perspektive študentk o psihosocialnih stiskah in odzivu skupnosti nanje. Z uporabo na umetnosti temelječe raziskovalne metodologije (fotoglas) so študentke socialne pedagogike vizualno dokumentirale reprezentacije stiske v njihovem vsakdanjem življenju in odzive skupnosti nanje. Zbrane fotografije in pripovedi so bile kvalitativno analizirane s tematsko analizo z namenom prepoznavanja generativnih tem. Ugotovitve prikazujejo, kako študentke doživljajo in interpretirajo stiske, ter razkrivajo čustvene, socialne in strukturne dejavnike, ki vplivajo na njihovo dobro počutje. Raziskava kritično prepozna pomen in tudi izzive neformalnih podpornih sistemov pri blaženju stisk. Za grajenje pristnega dialoga z mladimi mora socialna pedagogika vključevati koncepte pedagogike zatiranih in pedagogike osvoboditve, izvajati individualizacijo psihosocialne stiske in zagovarjati kolektivne, na skupnosti temelječe rešitve. Tak pristop je še posebej pomemben v kontekstu družbenih kriz in naraščajoče negotovosti mladih na prehodu v odraslost. Raziskava poudarja potencial participativnih, na umetnosti temelječih raziskovalnih metod za grajenje dialoga, soustvarjanje znanja in za krepitev intersubjektivnosti, tudi znotraj visokošolskega izobraževanja. Z osredinjanjem na perspektivo študentk prispeva k poglobljenemu razumevanju njihovega doživetja stiske in zagovarja odzive skupnosti, ki presegajo individualizirane rešitve.

Ključne besede: na umetnosti temelječe raziskovanje, neformalne podporne mreže, fotoglas, psihosocialna stiska, študentke in študenti na prehodu v odraslost

Introduction

Psychosocial Distress and Young Adults

Mikuš-Kos (2017) refers to psychosocial distress as difficulties caused by an adverse social environment, such as recurring stress, traumatic experiences, dysfunctional family circumstances, peer violence, poor relationships or negative life experiences. Mental health and mental disorders lie on a continuum that includes transient emotional struggles and crises (e.g., bereavement, romantic disappointments, academic failure), which are a normal part of life. Such emotional distress and crises usually subside once the reasons for emotional imbalance disappear. Distress is experienced subjectively as emotional, behavioural and cognitive deviances primarily resulting from the individual's interaction with their social environment.

Psychosocial distress in young people is a wide public health concern. Findings from a Slovenian nationwide youth survey (Lavrič et al., 2021) indicate a notable decline in subjective health and life satisfaction among young people aged 15–29. Over the course of the previous decade, the proportion of young people self-reporting as mostly or very satisfied with their health decreased from approximately 80% to 70%. Overall life satisfaction also fell markedly, despite concurrent improvements in certain dimensions of health and living standards. Reports of loneliness increased by 76% over the same period, while the proportion of young people experiencing stress on some or most days of the week rose by 110%. According to the World Health Organization (2022), the pandemic precipitated a global increase of 28% in major depressive disorders and 26% in anxiety disorders in the year 2020 alone.

Authors and studies emphasise the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on emerging adults, as this is a period in which young people explore different options, gain autonomy and explore identity. Various studies have reported an increase in loneliness in young and emerging adults as a result of a lack of close and deep friendships and meaningful connections. The pandemic influenced the decrease of the support system of friendship and the possibilities of building new relationships (Akgül, 2023; Lippke et al., 2021; Rapuš Pavel et al., 2022). Akgül (2023) emphasises that it significantly hindered key aspects of emerging adulthood, particularly opportunities to explore, meet new people and engage in active daily life.

In their research, Molloy-Vickers et al. (2024) highlight that support from peers was the most important protective factor in maintaining long-term mental health in adolescents during the pandemic. Other community support

– school support, community and family connections – and other factors were important at the beginning of the pandemic, but not later on.

Beyond the pandemic, other broader socioeconomic structures shape young people's psychosocial wellbeing. Scholars have pointed to the effects of neoliberal capitalism (Hari, 2019; Harvey, 2012; U'ren, 1997; Zeira, 2022) and widening social inequalities (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2012, 2017) as significant contributors to distress. The transition to adulthood is marked by societal expectations and risks, as theorised by Beck's (2009) concept of the risk society and individualisation. In the post-socialist context, processes associated with postmodernity, such as those identified by Beck (2009), were later to emerge, and societies like Slovenia have only grappled with their full impact in the past two decades (Bogdan Zupančič, 2020). In the 1990s, neoconservatism and neo-liberalism began to dismantle the solidarity institutions in society that are not based on the logic of profit. For young people, individual success and career were established as the basic standards for self-realisation (Ule, 2002).

The pandemic amplified the rates of social disconnection and loneliness that had already been on the rise (Birrell et al., 2025). It also amplified social inequalities and deepened the gap between the “winners” and “losers” of the pandemic (Razpotnik & Zorc Maver, 2022). Thus, the pandemic did not bring radically new changes, but instead amplified, deepened and accelerated the social processes and problems that were already present.

Community Responses to Distress

Several international studies (Martel et al., 2021; Renwick et al., 2022) emphasise the importance of community-based approaches and informal support networks for individuals experiencing psychosocial distress. The key principles of such approaches include strengthening and sustaining informal support networks, encouraging solidarity within the living environment and fostering self-organisation within communities (Rapoša Tajnšek, 1993). Slovenian studies (Dekleva et al., 2018) have also noted the significance of informal support for young people, particularly within neighbourhoods and peer communities. Even when not explicitly addressed in the research design, young people themselves frequently raised this issue, identifying informal support as either a crucial resource or, conversely, a major absence during periods of distress. The findings point to a lack of community approaches, services and forms of support for young people in psychosocial distress, approaches that would function as broader socially integrative mechanisms rather than merely as specialist responses to individual problems. This can be linked to an ecological systems perspective

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Neal & Neal, 2013), which situates the understanding of psychosocial distress within the wider context of environment, social systems and relationships, factors that mutually influence one another. Other international research strongly advocates “fostering positive social connections and focus on social networks of young people” (Birrell et al., 2025, p. 1).

In a Slovenian study, Ule (2024) identifies a shift in the socialisation of children and adolescents: as peer support and solidarity decline, young people grow increasingly dependent on family and school. However, the relationship between these two institutions has become more conflictual and competitive, and less collaborative and supportive.

Photovoice as Arts-Based Dialogue and Participatory Research With Young Adults

An arts-based approach provides opportunities to explore a specific problem and examine participants’ perspectives in ways that circumvent the discomfort of verbal expression and the unconscious adherence to dominant discourses, thus allowing a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics and complexity of the issue. In terminological terms, arts-based research functions as an umbrella concept encompassing an eclectic range of methodological and epistemological orientations. What unifies these approaches is the integration of artistic forms or processes into the research endeavour, although considerable variation exists in how art is incorporated (Greenwood, 2019). Participative photography or photovoice is an artistic form of qualitative research used within the framework of the arts-based approach (Greenwood, 2019) as well as being a method of community-based participatory research (Wang, 2020).

In the process of photovoice, individuals photograph their everyday realities. The process actively encourages participants to use images to express their perceptions of life within the community, accompanied by written or oral narratives about the meaning of their photographs. It represents a bottom-up approach and is often used in community-based participatory research because it creates a process through which people can identify, present and propose changes within their communities. Such projects have been carried out with various (vulnerable) groups, enabling participants to explore and communicate important messages about their lives and communities (Wang, 2020). Images overcome the limits of language, which is important in cross-cultural contexts. They explain people’s social lives by giving a narrative to what is shown in photographs (Oh, 2012).

As a method of community-based participatory research, photovoice has two overlapping dimensions. The first dimension is photovoice as a

research method for gathering data. Rooted in Freire's work, photovoice uses photography to codify the lived experiences of the community, followed by the process of decodification, dialogue and the recognition of generative themes of the community (Freire, 1971).

The second dimension is a dialogue and participation research praxis that evokes change and empowerment in the process of research itself. Photovoice is used in various projects with marginalised groups in order to give them a voice and engage them in dialogue (Alam et al., 2018; Duran & Thacker Darrow, 2023; Glaw et al., 2017; Oh, 2012).

In the present study, photovoice is used as a participative arts-based method to gather data, and also as a critical pedagogy praxis to encourage dialogue and expand the study process of social pedagogy (Freire, 1971; Wang, 2020).

The research questions of this photovoice study are:

1. How does a group of social pedagogy students experience and interpret psychosocial distress?
2. How does a group of social pedagogy students perceive the importance and challenges of community support?

Method

Research Design

Framed as a case study of a group of social pedagogy students, the research design follows a qualitative, arts-based and participatory approach using the photovoice method. As a preliminary study for the doctoral research entitled *The Importance of Informal Support Networks of Youth in Psychosocial Distress*, the aim is to identify generative themes for further research in this field.

The study unfolded in four phases: (1) introduction of the photovoice assignment during the course, including ethical and methodological instructions; (2) a one-month period of data collection, during which the students independently captured photographs and wrote reflections; (3) submission of visual and narrative materials; and (4) coding and analysis.

Participants

The participants were recruited through convenience sampling, as all of the students enrolled in the course *Deviant Phenomena* were invited to participate in the research. The course covers mental health and community work, thus providing students with a broader and deeper understanding of the research topic. The participants were social pedagogy students at the University

of Ljubljana in 2023, most of whom were aged between 20 and 21 years, with one 22-year-old and one 24-year-old. A total of 27 students participated in the photovoice process, after which 24 students (23 females and 1 male) voluntarily agreed to participate in the research. The strong prevalence of female students is connected to the feminisation of the social pedagogy profession (Bogdan Župančič, 2021).

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using photovoice materials, i.e., photographs and accompanying written reflections. The students were given a task to make three or more photos from their daily life that symbolise the following topics: (1) Distress in my world: Where do I see and feel psychosocial distress in my world? How do I feel it myself, in my surroundings or as a support person? (2) Social madness: How do I feel or recognise social madness? What is “mad” for me in this society or what in this society is producing “madness”? (3) Community reactions to distress – reality and wishes. How is the community responding to psychosocial distress? How do I want the community to respond?

The students submitted their photos individually with written explanations and reflections. There was a short group process of sharing the photos and topics, but this was not included in the research. Due to a lack of time, and in view of the students participating, this process was guided towards reflection on the overall study course topics. The students did not express their personal narratives in the group.

Some photos were documentary photos capturing everyday situations, reflecting the participatory process introduced by Freire (1971). Others were symbolic, representing the students' feelings and experiences through arts-based expression (Greenwood, 2019). Both of these approaches were presented to the students as valid research practices commonly found in other photovoice studies (Duran & Thacker Darrow, 2023).

The analysis focused solely on individual submissions. All of the materials were anonymised. The motives of the photos were not analysed independently but in terms of their contextualisation in the narrative. The analysis involved personal lived-experience narratives; generalised statements or opinions about other groups were excluded.

The written narratives were analysed qualitatively with the method of thematic analysis using an inductive coding approach. After a process of free coding, the codes were organised to identify thematic areas and generative themes. Initial coding was carried out manually, followed by coding with Delve software (without the AI feature).

Results

The results represent the generative themes from a group of transitioning young adults: university students of social pedagogy (96% female). At the time of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2021), most of the students were transitioning from high school to university.

The subjects of the photographs were diverse. The students' written reflections and interpretations of their images were crucial for the processes of understanding, coding and identifying generative themes.

In analysing the research question *How does a group of social pedagogy students experience and interpret psychosocial distress?* two thematic areas were identified: (1) factors contributing to distress, and (2) the dynamics and processes through which distress is experienced.

Factors of Distress

A diverse range of factors of distress were mentioned by the students. A group of distress factors were identified connected to the (*internalised*) *pressure of social norms and expectations* faced by young people transitioning to adulthood (present in 25% of the narratives): pressure and individual responsibility for life choices and paths; pressure and expectations regarding behaviour, appearance and career choices; pressure towards perfection; fear of the future and prioritising work over relationships; pressure to achieve results and developmental milestones; competing with deadlines and obligations; fear of failure; feeling guilty when not being productive; pressure not to show emotional distress (“don’t feel sorry for yourself”, “young people are overly sensitive and fragile”).

Another prevalent factor of distress is *loneliness* (present in 17% of the narratives).

The factors of distress mentioned in two narratives include financial distress, loss (the death of a close person or other stressful life events) and discomfort or distress in new situations or unfamiliar groups.

Other representations of distress mentioned by individual students relate to social relationships characterised by a lack of emotional connection (e.g., financial gifts replacing emotional closeness: “buying love with money”), disrespect and patriarchal family relationships; taking on the distress of others; forced hospitalisation of a close person; anxiety in crowds; experiencing and feeling emotions in extremes (e.g., manic–depressive cycles); undifferentiated anxiety; feelings of loss of control; and preoccupation with one’s body image.

The Dynamics and Process of Experiencing Distress

The most prevalent theme in relation to the dynamics of experiencing distress is *concealing distress* (present in 38% of the narratives). The students were inclined to hide even significant distress from others and try to process it independently.

The reasons mentioned for concealing distress are connected to *social judgement and exclusion*, including fear of being judged or excluded, wanting to appear like everyone else and worrying about what others might think. Student AR-AK explains:

When someone asks you [how you are], most of the time you don't tell the truth at all. You say that you're fine because you don't want to discuss it and you're afraid of what the person will think of you. You feel this discomfort and there's no longer a quiet sense of support and trust. We're all under this phone with a light, waiting for you to do something wrong, but it doesn't offer even a hint of help. (Student AR-AK)

Figure 1

Photograph by student AR-AK



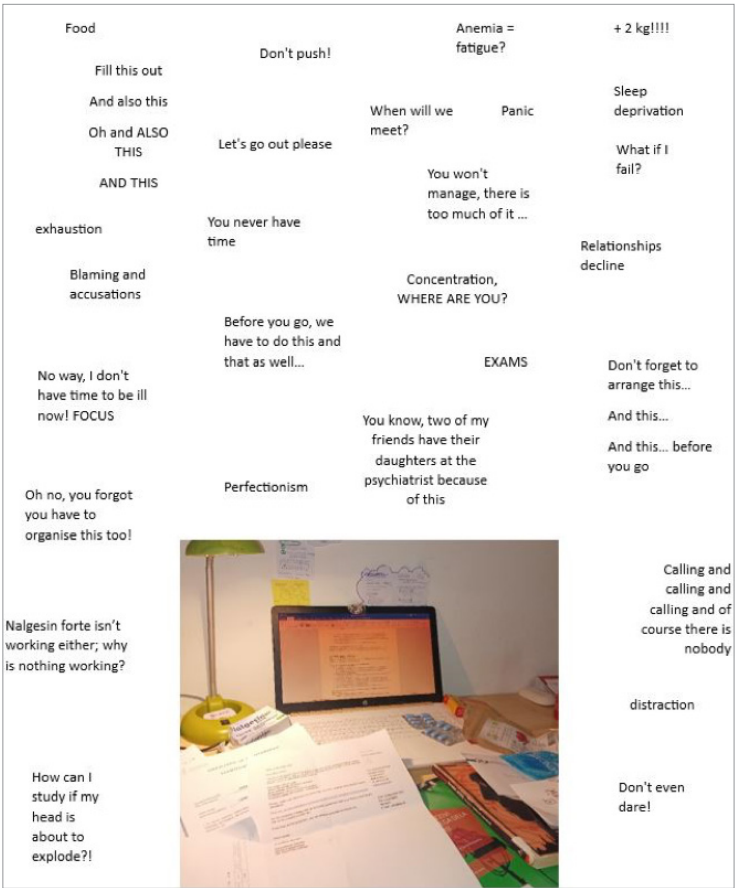
Other reasons are linked to an *inner pressure to stay productive and strong*, such as perceiving oneself as the person others rely on, not wanting to be a burden and maintaining focus on achieving personal goals. Further reasons relate to *feelings of guilt and the minimisation of distress*, including a belief that others have greater problems, that one has no right to feel distressed, or that worse things are happening in the world. Some of the students also described *internal blockages*, referring to a sense of being unable to overcome an inner barrier in order to share distress with others.

Most of the students emphasised that being in distress is “normal”; the problem they experience arises from the *accumulation* of multiple sources of distress (mentioned in 17% of the narratives). Distress in an area of life can affect other areas, leading to a build-up of distress. This accumulation can also occur when different forms of distress follow one another across various aspects of life.

There appears to be a continuum in the experience of distress: at one end, distress is perceived as a *transient state* that also reflects resilience and the capacity to cope; at the other end of this continuum lies the theme of the *immutability of distress*, or the feeling of being trapped within it (mentioned in 13% of the narratives).

Figure 2

Photograph with mind map representing the accumulation of distress of student Io-Ao



The Importance and Challenges of Community Support

When the students describe what is important to them, when they need support and what kind of community response they would like, the most frequently recurring theme is *acceptance* (mentioned in 29% of the narratives). This notion of acceptance refers both to recognising and valuing a person for who they are and what they feel (without judgement), and to accepting a period of distress as it is, without immediately attempting to change or resolve it. As student Io-Ao expressed:

People tell you that it'll be fine and that everything will work out. And yes, I know it will, BUT RIGHT NOW IT JUST ISN'T FINE. Why is it so difficult to accept that sometimes a person doesn't feel okay and just needs time and peace? Everyone wants to convince you otherwise, and then you feel even worse because you feel the way you do, even if you don't often feel that way. That doesn't help at all; if anything, it makes the situation even worse. (Student Io-Ao)

The theme of acceptance also appears in relation to the ability to express oneself freely, without judgement, and to feel understood, valued and sincere, i.e., to be able to exist authentically. As student Vo-Jo described:

Sometimes I have the feeling that in some spaces I always have to feel good or smile and be positive. In such moments, I like to return to my room, where I can cry and feel miserable. This is a kind of space where I don't get a reaction, which is fine for me. I don't need to regulate my reactions according to what the environment communicates to me. I need more of this in society: people who care but don't dig into you; spaces where you know that you can rely on others, but they also give you peace and space, so that you can express yourself and simply be. (Student Vo-Jo)

Several narratives also thematise the experience of being a support person. Some of the students describe a high level of sensitivity towards the distress of others, which can be situated along a continuum ranging from a sense of satisfaction, connection and purpose to feelings of being overwhelmed with expectations, pressure and responsibility, resulting in feelings of constriction and distress.

The study also revealed several challenges associated with non-formal support systems: the need for emotional intelligence and self-awareness in providing support; the recognition of personal capacity limitations and the

potential withdrawal of the support person, which may leave the individual without alternative support; uncertainty or lack of confidence in how to respond appropriately; and the dispersion and inconsistency of supportive persons, leading to varied levels of support and reliability.

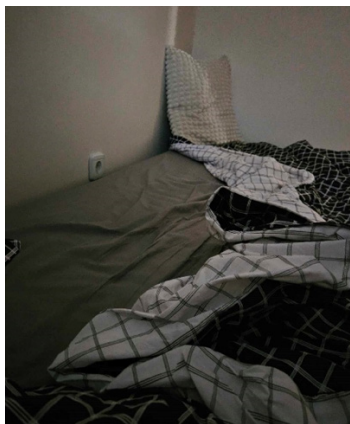
Time as a Generative Theme

A cross-cutting generative theme of *time* was identified, appearing in 33% of the narratives. Time emerges as an important aspect in the process of experiencing distress. In dealing with or experiencing distress, time is perceived either as part of a transient state, reflecting resilience and the capacity to let emotions pass, or as a marker of permanence, where distress is experienced as a state of being stuck. Some of the students described needing a long time to process and work through distress. Others associate distress with “wasted time”, referring to periods when one is not productive, resulting in an additional sense of guilt. As student Io-Ro expressed:

Guilt kicked in because I wasn't directing my time towards confronting distress and resolving it. The time spent in bed became lost time, similar to how people perceive time when... they are in institutions. Once I'd fallen into distress, into my bed, I suddenly became heavier and needed more and more effort to get up, while time kept passing. Why did I feel guilty for wanting to lie down with the pain for a while? I was driven to productivity when I should have been conserving and directing my energy towards stabilising my feelings. (Student Io-Ro)

Figure 3

Photograph of lost time by student Io-Ro



Time is also highlighted as a crucial factor in community support. The participating students noted that the constant rush of daily life, structured by timetables and competing obligations, makes it difficult for them to take time for relationships. It is important to take time for a person in distress: to wait, be present and provide undistracted attention. Time enables recovery and emotional processing. The students stressed the importance of the consistency of the support person, ensuring that they are also present after the acute distress has passed, so that the person can rely on them if distress reoccurs.

Student Io-Ao illustrates these dynamics particularly well:

I miss being able to take time for family and friends, and others too, more often and without feeling guilty, so that we can meet and talk in peace more often, without the pressure that after a certain time it's enough and we have to do something, because just sitting over a drink is not productive enough. If it even happens at all, since coordinating schedules is already science fiction, because there is always someone somewhere "on the way". And this is also illustrated below in the picture, showing how the chairs are empty because we don't have time to sit on them and calmly talk to each other. (Student Io-Ao)

Figure 4

Photograph by student Io-Ao



Discussion

The results show that young adults face significant (internalised) pressure from social norms and expectations, described in terms of individual responsibility, productivity and achievement. The findings reflect the distress arising from the individualisation of life trajectories (Beck, 2009). Young people often internalise the dominant rhetoric of individualism, which frames personal difficulties as the individual's responsibility. While relying on oneself may seem like an effective solution, it becomes fragile and concerning when it is not supported by a strong social and community safety net (Razpotnik et al., 2024).

The themes of the students' narratives are strongly connected to research findings reflecting the rising level of distress among youth. The process of growing up requires young people to develop increasing resilience to contradictory pressures. These pressures arise from the requirements for ever greater independence and creativity in shaping one's identity, as well as from the growing expectations and demands of contemporary society. The balance between what is required or expected of a young person and what they can provide or accomplish is conditional and exposed to numerous risks (Ule, 2024).

These contradictory expectations are mirrored in the experiences of the participants in the present study: trying to meet external demands while concealing inner distress. The tension between self-reliance and the fear of vulnerability often leads to silence and withdrawal, which reinforces feelings of isolation.

The societal experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic amplified the social processes of individualisation and inequality that were already present. The gap between "winners" and "losers" has become more visible and threatening (Razpotnik & Zorc Maver, 2022). As Ule (2022) notes, the threat of vulnerability is especially acute when young adults face the challenges of managing adult life, with all of its ambiguities, crises and instabilities, and the individual responsibility for navigating them.

Wilkinson and Pickett (2012, 2017) link the disintegration of traditional communities to an increased fear of social evaluation, which is found to be one of the strongest causes of stress. The primary sources of stress affecting health fall into three social categories: low social status, lack of friendships and stress experienced in childhood. The authors find that all three factors influence how we feel in relation to others, i.e., whether we feel relaxed and confident in social settings. It can therefore be argued that the pressure and stress of social evaluation are connected to an increased risk of vulnerability. Young adults may be concerned about finding themselves on "the side of the losers" and struggle to maintain or achieve social status.

Transitions to adulthood are closely connected with social pressure, distress and loneliness. In a qualitative study exploring the perception of loneliness among young adults from deprived areas in London, Fardghassemi and Joffe (2022) observed similar experiences to those identified in the present photovoice study, although the two groups of young adults come from different social contexts. Young adults in the study associated loneliness with:

the feeling of being disconnected (65%; not being able to express myself, my feelings, or my issues; not feeling understood; and feeling that I do not matter); contemporary culture (54%; social media as fake portrayals of reality; changing one's identity or not being true to oneself, lack of face-to-face social interactions and care from people), pressure (52%; pressure to fit in or be accepted; pressure related to work, finding a career, earning a living, and money); social comparison (48%; general comparison; feeling stuck or behind while everyone else is progressing) and transitions between life stages (48%; relationship breakups, losses; transitory periods). (Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2022, p. 7).

These findings echo some of the central insights of the present study. Social pressure and expectations (career advancement, achieving milestones, being productive, etc.) and the concealment of distress (the feeling of being disconnected; not being able to express oneself, one's emotions or issues) can thus be understood as being related to loneliness. The more an individual is individualised in their life choices and trajectories, the more they are alone, and consequently lonely, in facing the pressures of individual responsibility.

Lippke et al. (2021) emphasise that in the emerging societal and ecological crisis, the need for real connection is even more crucial. Narratives from the present study indicate that students can perceive the community as a source of inflicting pressure, guilt and judgement. Within this framework, the generative theme of acceptance represents a call for community change and a deeper need to be recognised, understood and enabled in order to remain sincere and authentic. This implies acceptance of the individual as they are and as they feel, without judgement, and the provision of opportunities for free and open self-expression.

Some of the participating students referred to their own room, with its solitude, as the only place where they can be safe to feel and be who they are. If one's own room is the only place one feels totally accepted, shouldn't there be more spaces like this? Does this mean that loneliness is the only place of acceptance?

As emphasised by Freire (1971), acceptance constitutes a fundamental condition for genuine dialogue and is central to the principles of social

pedagogy, which begin from the position of acknowledging the person's current lived reality. At the community level, acceptance requires time and the capacity to remain with the individual in moments of uncertainty; it entails recognising and holding periods of distress as they unfold and sustaining dialogue even in the presence of ambiguity.

The recognition of distress as an acceptable state alleviates the perceived pressure of constant productivity, thus allowing the time necessary for recovery and emotional regulation. It requires the capacity to stay with the discomfort of pain and uncertainty while maintaining faith in the individual (Freire, 1971) rather than offering solutions aimed at removing the distress as soon as possible. This is connected to the basic social pedagogical principle of "not having fixed recipes" (Rothuizen & Harbo, 2017) and navigating together through life challenges (Müller, 2006). Additionally, approaching or holding uncertainty is a new emerging concept in the field of social pedagogy and social work (Afrouz, 2021; Powietrzynska et al., 2021).

Related to the findings of the present study, it can be recognised that acceptance calls not only for holding uncertainty but also for *holding time* itself: remaining still and present, creating a temporal space without pressure. Such an orientation opens the possibility for deeper forms of support, grounded in presence and trust in the individual's process.

Bennett and Burke (2018, p. 914) argue that "... time – the way it is lived, experienced, and (re)constructed through one's location, positionality, and experience – is gendered, classed, racialised, and tied to unequal power relations and socio-cultural differences". The conception of time is also central to social structures of community support. Time-management strategies assume that individuals have predictable and controllable time. Precarious employment, housing instability and caregiving responsibilities are often overlooked within an individualised, neoliberal framework dominated by self-help and self-management discourse. Rather than recognising diverse temporalities and needs, students who have to balance study with essential work or care obligations are problematised (Bennet & Burke, 2018).

A further challenge emerging from the present study concerns the limited collective imagination regarding what community support could or should look like in practice. The students' responses predominantly reflected general aspirations for more acceptance, mutual care, solidarity and connectedness among people. However, these aspirations were seldom accompanied by concrete ideas or proposals for the structural and organisational forms that such support might take. In the absence of such collective envisioning, the discourse on community support tends to revert to an emphasis on individual

responsibility, i.e., the expectation that each person should demonstrate empathy, act supportively and develop the competencies required for care. Consequently, the notion of community is confined to one's immediate social circle of friends and family, rather than extending to a broader, shared social framework. This concern regarding how to expand the notion of collective care and the ethics of care beyond our close circle is also part of important feminist discussions (O'Brien, 2023; Hrženjak et al., 2018; Čičigoj, 2023).

This orientation risks reproducing the very processes of individualisation that community support seeks to overcome. The idea of being a "support person" for others, while valuable, remains insufficient when detached from collective structures of reciprocity and shared responsibility. Such an approach individualises care, placing emotional and practical burdens on isolated actors rather than distributing them across the community.

Care has been socially constructed as a feminine practice, shaped by intersecting inequalities of class, race and age. In both collective structures and individualised care, care is disproportionately undertaken by women (Hrženjak et al., 2018). The gender composition and study orientation of the present case study group reflects the broader gendered reality of the research topic. Further comparison to other studies or groups would be needed to determine whether, or how, gender has shaped the generative themes that emerged.

The findings suggest that a more sustainable model of community support would conceptualise care as a collective capacity rather than an individual role. In such a model, the challenges identified by the participating students – feelings of being overwhelmed, uncertainty about how to help and limited personal resources – would be recognised as shared responsibilities. By redistributing the practices of support and care across the community, the emotional and practical burden of helping could be mitigated, fostering a more resilient and equitable network of mutual support.

Conclusions

The generative themes that unfolded in the present photovoice study support the broader findings and theoretical discussion on the social changes among youth and emerging adults (Ule, 2024). They emphasise two main factors of distress: the (internalised) pressure of social norms and expectations, and loneliness. The study discusses how these two factors can be interconnected and influence each other. Within the dynamics and process of experiencing distress, the central theme is the concealing of distress. The accumulation of distress and the perceived continuum between the immutability of distress and

distress as a transient state, which also reveals resilience in coping, are problematised. In relation to community support, an important principle identified by the students is acceptance. Overall, a cross-cutting generative theme recognised is *time*.

The application of these conclusions in practice suggests a need to re-think the notion of time; the concept of *holding time* appears to be an important principle in creating dialogue and spaces for community support. By resisting pressures for efficiency and by valuing acceptance and longer time frames, communities can create environments that prioritise presence and relational trust over quick solutions, the minimisation of distress or individualised self-help and self-management.

One limitation of the study is that the photovoice process did not conclude with a community dialogue to foster further discussion. In this sense, the process, which was meant to be dialogical, reflected the same difficulties: a lack of time to gather together. Similarly, in the evaluation of the study courses, we recognise the students' avoidance of group conclusions, since they prioritise their time and preparation for exams (Razpotnik, personal communication, 5 June 2023). The phenomenon of "empty classrooms" has already been noted by Zaviršek (2018) as a form of absence, passivity and the relativisation of study in students' lives.

A more dialogical process, in the context of intersubjectivity, could have clarified certain topics or opened new ones. Within this process, there should have been more time and trust for students to share sincerely. The individual photographs and reflections served as a method to enable students to express their experiences honestly, without fear of judgement. In future studies, sufficient time and structure should be provided to foster genuine dialogue. This reflects the broader challenges of cultivating critical pedagogy and community voice. It is easier to complete an individual task, especially under the pressure of time and obligations, than to engage in an uncertain and transformative collective process.

Future lines of research could place greater emphasis on the community process and collective capacities for care in order to better understand and develop participatory strategies for community support concepts and praxis.

Ethical Statement

The research study was approved by the Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available to protect the anonymity of the small, specific sample, but they are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Disclosure Statement

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

When preparing this article, the author used ChatGPT in August 2025 for the purpose of language translation, formatting and grammar checking, with the prompts: “Translate the text in British English”, “Check the British English grammar”, “Suggest a shorter version of the text” and “Suggest academic writing style improvements”. The author subsequently reviewed and edited the output as necessary and accepts full responsibility for the content and integrity of the publication.

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