

SOCIAL TIME AS THE BASIS OF GENERATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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Abstract. The article addresses the interdependence of personal and social time. Certain social events at certain age create specific forms of social identity which defines itself through these social developments. The focus of this article is theorizing how this identity – in other words, generational consciousness – can be triggered by social processes. In particular, specific interest will be on the age group born in Estonia in the 1970s, a cohort reaching maturity at the time broad social changes took place after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Generational consciousness forms when personal and social transitions coincide among those who are young at the time of social transitions. However, historical change does not necessarily articulate in a generational consciousness in all circumstances. Hence, analysing qualitative interview data against a backdrop of quantitative data, the article attempts to reveal the reflexive generational consciousness of this cohort and its core features. The paper also seeks to discover whether the subjective borders stated by the respondents to their social identity coincide with the (objective) social and demographic conditions of this cohort.

Keywords: generation, memory, transition to adulthood, identity

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1. Introduction

Time is a multilayered phenomenon, which if measured by assorted mechanical time-pieces can be linear, but this is not how humans experience it (Mannheim 1993:28, Corsten 1999:256). Personal time is accompanied by social time, which is essentially a socially shared frame for the perception of social development, but can differ from one social group to another. One such group is generation. The concept of generation has many interpretations, yet its basic core links it with time and chronological consciousness (Lovell 2007:8).

This paper seeks to discover whether, by focusing on an age group born in the 1970s in Estonia, it is possible to construct a generation. A core issue is whether

and to what extent unstable social structures prevalent during their transition to adulthood (Williams et al. 2003) influence the self-reflexive generational portrait of a cohort. This particular age group is interesting, because its formative years coincided with the major societal transformation processes occurring in Estonia during regaining the independent state.¹ Based on Karl Mannheim's (1993) theory of generations, the structural conditions for the social maturation of this age group are compared with the self-reflexive generational construction of some of the representatives of this age group. The purpose of this kind of juxtaposition is to see whether the qualitative and quantitative data meet the requirements of constructing a generation. Complementing the statistical social portrait of this age group with the self-reflections of 23 people in the 'generation' (10 of whom participated in in-depth face-to-face interviews and 13 in four focus group interviews), enabled a sequence of research questions to be revealed. What constitutes a generation and can this age group be a generation? What are the parameters for a particular generation and how do social processes shape generations?

Intriguingly, the statistical data about the transition to adulthood and the qualitative self-portrait data of this cohort do not completely match. The statistical data indicated that this particular age group born in the 1970s is on the threshold of new social and demographic behaviour, yet the interviews indicated that the interviewees' reflexive practices lean towards feeling more connected to previous, rather than later, birth cohorts. In other words, subjectively sensed time becomes more important for reflexive generational consciousness than demographic biographical events. The latter are, however, often used for constructing 'objective' generational models. The inconsistency between the two types of dataset may also mean that this age group lies in an intermediate zone between generations. They distinguish themselves from the younger generation on the basis of discursive remembering and from the older on a structural basis.

2. Why is there a need for generations? Theoretical implications

People need a social identity for the feeling of belonging, or sameness (Misztal 2003:4) and a generation can provide this sort of identity (Corsten:264), along with other known concepts such as class, race, gender etc. Most of these concepts reflecting social identities are not solid and immovable entities. Thus, it is a matter of given social context and everyday situations, where identity becomes important for an individual.

Contemporary theorists imply that people tend to be more conscious about their generational identity than their belonging to other social groups (see Marada

¹ Henceforth, the time frame for the transformation process is seen wider than just the political re-establishment of the Estonian Republic in 1991. Transformation includes the processes starting with the unleashing of *perestroika* and continuing through the 1990 up to the beginning of the new century: a time period when the institutional structures in economy and politics were developed.

2004:152). The rise in generational consciousness may be caused by changes in society, which have reached a surprising pace and extent (Eisenstadt 1988:102, Misztal:85). Recent societal developments have left the borders of classes blurred, and eradicated the clearly traceable central conflicts, including opposing sides at global level, communism and capitalism (Corsten:249). This has resulted in a crisis in collective identities, where notions of cultural change such as class, religion, region or race have become exhausted (Giesen 2004:36, Weisbrod 2007:26). Cultural knowledge and values passed from generation to generation in stable societies in order to help young people in their socializing, have become useless in new social conditions (Edmunds and Turner 2002). This can create generational conflicts or even traumas, leaving new generations cut off from the past and separated from their present (Eisenstadt:91, Sztompka 2000, Edmunds and Turner:7). The emergence of new socializing patterns among youth has inspired researchers to generate numerous generational labels, which may coexist and overlap². The actual barriers between the generations tend to be levelled, and generational conflict is not always obvious (Giesen:38).

How then is a generation defined? Though the term dates back to an antique epoch (Misztal:83), the most influential theorist contributing to defining generations is Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) who was mostly inspired by social movements initiated by young people since the 18th century (Lovell:2). Sometimes the terms ‘generation’ and ‘youth’ have been used as synonyms, indicating that each socioeconomic period is identified via the young that lived during that era (Lovell:7, López 2002:111). Mannheim argues that generational identity is formed during the formative years of an individual’s life, i.e. youth (Mannheim:43–44). He states that a generation is a social entity, members of which have a certain ‘bond’ and ‘generational consciousness’, yet the connection between the members is not as tight as in groups which members depend on each other (Mannheim:33). In addition, members of this particular group must share a common place in history. This aspect limits them ‘to a specific range of potential experience, predisposing them to a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historically relevant action’ (generation as ‘location’) (Mannheim:36) and ‘participation in a common destiny’ (generation as ‘actuality’) (Mannheim:46). Within generations, there are ‘generational units’ – people who ‘work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways’ (Mannheim:47). Thus, a generation does not have to be a homogeneous substance, but can have multiple generational units, each with its own agenda (Edmunds and Turner:4). To sum up, according to Mannheim, there are three important characteristics to forming a generation: a) generation as a location; b) generation as an actuality and c) generational units (Mannheim:53).

The recent spread of the generation concept has been accompanied by a degree of confusion. Interpretations of Mannheim’s theory compete, complement and

² For example ‘Generation X, C or Y’, ‘The Digital generation’, ‘The Computer Generation’, ‘Generation Me’ etc. (Giesen:37–38, Bruns 2006, Wyn and Woodman 2006:496, Siibak 2009:10, Twenge 2006)

contradict each other. Some authors focus their attention to what Mannheim might have thought when talking about ‘generational consciousness’. Michael Corsten argues that it is crucial for generations to form shared ‘discursive practices’, creating a certain semantic order by which time is organized and forms a mutual ‘generalized other’ (Corsten:258–260, see also Weisbrod:21).

For other authors, ‘generation as location and actuality’ is the focus. Though stressing the need for a generation to have a mutual cultural identity, they concentrate on social circumstances that favour some generations in comparison to subsequent age cohorts. Brian S. Turner calls those who have favourable social conditions, ‘**strategic** generations’, which means that social change is brought about by generational cohorts who have strategic advantages which are consolidated with moral or hegemonic leadership (Turner 2002:13–14). The ‘strategic generations’ are reluctant to give up the structural opportunities and advantages they have achieved and therefore create a lag in social opportunity (Turner:14). In Turner’s view, the members of strategic generations are ‘active generations’ who are followed by ‘passive generations’ (Turner:18).

This is a simplification, but there are two distinct approaches to conceptualization of generation. The first concentrates on intangible features that carry the generational consciousness (studies in memory, biographies, discourse etc: Corsten, Misztal, Marada, Jõesalu 2005, Weisbrod, Kõresaar 2008, Grünberg 2009). The second concentrates on social and demographical structures while constructing generations (studies in demographical behaviour, on career opportunities structures, income, social transitions etc: Titma 1999, Turner, Katus et al. 2005, Chauvel 2006, Thane 2007). The following article tries to construct a single generation from both perspectives – first, by presenting the structural conditions of the birth cohort’s socialization and then by asking the representatives of the cohort about their intangible sense of belonging.

3. Socializing years – background for structural conditions of a ‘generation’

Mannheim states that a prerequisite for a generation to emerge is that the members were born within the same structural and social conditions (Mannheim:36). According to him, new generations form during severe social changes. The young are the first to experience and negotiate the new social conditions during their socialization years (Corsten:250, Chauvel:2). After sudden and traumatic changes, young people have to search for their places in society in a new context. In the process of adjusting and developing their *habitus*, they live through common social experiences, which differ from previous cohorts and give them their own shared perspective of time and events that happened during their socialization (Eyerman and Turner 1998, Misztal:89–90).

Yet, not every generational location becomes actuality or creates collective impulses, as generation formation depends on social and cultural factors (Mannheim:51, 53) and as Eisenstadt argues (91), the circumstances for a generation to

emerge must be exceptional. The social changes that Estonia experienced after the collapse of the Soviet Union were exceptional because the restructuring of society was overarching and excluded almost no one. But sometimes even under exceptional changes cohorts fail to form a coherent identity. For example in Germany, according to Weisbrod (21), the changes of neither 1949 nor 1989 created any generational identity among the nation's youth.

Nevertheless, an examination of the socialization experience this age group had to survive during the time of societal restructuring is beneficial.³ Generational theorists use the terms 'formation years' and 'socializing experience' to mean transition to adulthood. Particular transitions are considered crucial in young people's maturation to adulthood, such as: into employment; to an independent household; into a partnership and to becoming a parent (Cook and Furstenberg 2002, Katus et al.). These are biographical events during an individual's life course, yet social surroundings and structures have a significant effect on these demographical markers. Throughout Western civilization, the period of these transitions has been extended. Instead of normative and linear transitions, young people are described as negotiating their transitions rather than completing them, bouncing back and forth between various choices (Holdsworth and Morgan 2005; 'yo-yo transitions' – Pais 2000). Age ranges for these transitions vary from country to country. One of the processes causing the extension of the transition period is the increase in access to higher education and the practice of simultaneous work and study. Postponement of parenthood and having a steady partnership is also common, as well as the widespread increase in cohabitation at the expense of marriage. These changes started in Western societies around the 1970s and therefore, young people who have come of age since then are called the 'post-1970 generation' (Wyn and Woodman 2006). The reasons behind these societal developments are complex and source for endless debates. Most of the processes have been taking place parallel to the liberalization of national economies.

Similar processes started to take shape in Estonia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Unlike the calm slow pace of the post-1970s societal development and change that occurred in the West, the pace in Estonia after the fall of the Berlin Wall was turbulent and frenetic. During the Soviet time, transition into work was a smooth but institutionalized process; jobs were allocated after graduating from an educational institution and unemployment was virtually nonexistent. When the Soviet Union collapsed, so too did the institutionalized systems. State owned enterprises were rapidly privatized and sometimes abolished along with certain type of professions;⁴ and an educational system that trained people for a socialist planned economy proved out to be ineffective in the liberal market economy. The rapidity of the change to a liberal economy was not matched by the

³ The Estonian Bureau of Statistics is the source of data used throughout the article, unless otherwise stated. The data is derived from their website <http://www.stat.ee>.

⁴ For example, instructors of political marxist education, and many other jobs concerning communication between ministries and local authorities proved to be unnecessary due to the inherent inefficiency of the system of the planned economy.

development of a new institutional system supporting young people's transitions into work. Consequently, unemployment rates rose and the GDP fell at an unexpected pace. Individual transitions into adulthood in the chaotic environment of the early 1990s needed new development paths.

The 1970s birth cohort witnessed the increase in access to higher education, with the number of matriculated students, 1990–2000, increasing by 223%.⁵ Giving birth aged 20–22 years was fairly normal in the 1990s,⁶ but the birth cohorts born in the second half of the 1970s postponed having children to their late 20s (see Figure 1). Marriage was also postponed as cohabitation became a regular practice. Whereas 73% of babies in 1990 were born to married couples, this rate had fallen to 42% in 2008.⁷ Yet, despite initiating the trends of postponing activities pertinent to having a family; this cohort did not postpone leaving home like their counterparts in Western Europe, but left home at the same age (19.8) as all the cohorts during Soviet time (cohorts born 1950–1980).⁸

Although the age group came of age during a time of extreme economic hardships, the members witnessed the euphoric restructuring of society with widespread economic opportunities. So, while parents had less resources to support the education of their children, the children suddenly had many opportunities to start their own 'businesses' or go to work (see Nugin and Onken 2010). Statistically, the cohort was fairly successful in the labour market with 26% of ethnic Estonians gaining higher managerial and professional occupations (despite their occasional lack of professional qualifications), as their first job after school during 1992–2002 (Toomse 2004:21). During 2003–2007, the 25–34 year age group had the biggest income number per family member, which had also increased proportionally the most, compared to other age groups.⁹

Chauvel (5) notes that if young people are integrated into society during a period of economic growth, their positions in job market tend to be, and remain, better compared to those making their transitions under an economic recession.

⁵ During 2000–2008 this rate of increase had declined to 12%.

⁶ 35% of the women born 1969–1973 had their first child by the age of 20. This cohort was the youngest to begin parenthood since the formation of the European marriage pattern in Estonia in the 18th century (Katus et al. 2005).

⁷ At the same time, the proportion of single mothers has not significantly risen compared to the Soviet era.

⁸ The pattern is not common to all post-communist countries. The postponement of leaving home can be linked to a depressed economy, as in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, where 75% of those born in 1970–1976 lived with their parents or parents-in-law in their 30s (Roberts and Pollock 2009). By comparison, 70% of this cohort in Estonia had left home by the age of 22.

⁹ The 25–34 year age group in 2003–2007 consists of individuals born 1969–1982, i.e. including the 1970s birth cohort. Income refers to mean income per family member and not owned economic capital. Most of the owners of accumulated economic capital would be expected to be in older age groups. The term 'winners generation' (in economic sense) was derived from Mikk Titma's conducted longitudinal research which dealt with birth cohort born around 1965 (Titma 1999).

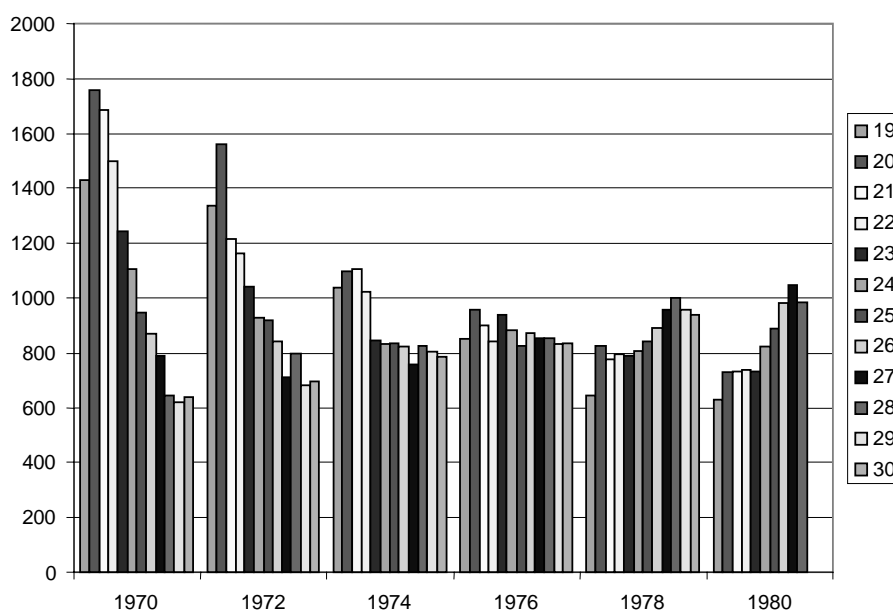


Figure 1. The number of women who give birth by their birth year and their age.¹⁰

Negative social conditions that young people find themselves in usually accumulate and a ‘scarring effect’ emerges (Chauvel:7). Occupying strategic positions at the start of economic growth, the 1970s birth cohort may be a ‘strategic generation’ (Turner:13–14) as the members were young enough to make use of the opportunities society had to offer (Helemäe et al. 2000:38, Tallo and Terk 1998:15).¹²

In summary, it is not easy to detect through the statistical data whether the 1970s birth cohort shared the same experiences as either preceding or following birth cohorts (1960s or 1980s). This uncertainty is partly the result of the arbitrary aspect of where a generational line is drawn – how big should any change in

¹⁰ These numbers are approximate and are derived from the statistics of the Estonian Bureau of Statistics. The original version of the chart gives the age women have children in certain years and not their birth date. However, the chart shows the approximate trends although the data corresponds to women’s ages for having any child not when they had their first child.

¹¹ The 25–34 year age group in 2003–2007 consists of individuals born 1969–1982, i.e. including the 1970s birth cohort. Income refers to mean income per family member and not owned economic capital. Most of the owners of accumulated economic capital would be expected to be in older age groups. The term ‘winners generation’ (in economic sense) was derived from Mikk Titma’s conducted longitudinal research which dealt with birth cohort born around 1965 (Titma 1999).

¹² The transition to the labour market for this birth cohort has not been so smooth in other post-communist countries. For instance in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia almost 37% of this age group has been unemployed for the majority of their lives after leaving school (Roberts and Pollock 2009).

demographical behaviour be and what demographical pointers should be chosen to mark the change (rise in education or leaving parental home etc.). In many respects, the members of the 1970s birth cohort were first to 'invent' new socializing patterns: they were among the first to participate in the increase of access to higher education; to postpone marriage and having children, they preferred co-habitation to marriage etc. Their formative years occurred during the Soviet era and they were, therefore, old enough to both participate in the restructuring of the economy and social institutions throughout the 1990s, and also to be among those who occupied influential positions in society. In a way, the 1970s birth cohort can be called a 'threshold generation' because they initiated the trends that are widely practiced by the next birth cohort (1980s). On the other hand, they were the 'tail' of the generations who made their transitions to adulthood during the Soviet time, because they share many experiences with the previous cohort (1960s). Thus the issue of how they reflect their own age group and whether they have a 'bond' necessary for generation formation is of great interest.

Qualitative data collection and methods of analysis

The aim of this research was to see whether structural conditions ('location') and reactions to them ('actuality') reflect the overall generational construction by the cohort themselves. A key issue is the strength of their generational consciousness or generational bond (Mannheim) or their generational discursive practice (Corsten). A secondary issue is whether the political change and the post-communist context have impacted on this generation (Lovell:14, Weisbrod:27, Nugin and Onken). While there are numerous approaches for researching these issues, there are no straightforward solutions. I have chosen the approach of asking people born in the 1970s about their generational identity, specifically if they feel as part of a generation, and if so, how they saw the borders of this generation distinguishing it from other generations. The interviews were structured by asking the respondents to construct the 'generalized other' (Mead and Morris 1943, Corsten:260, Weisbrod:21). The flaws inherent in qualitative interviews pertain to this approach, of which the interviewer influencing responses by posing questions in certain direction or being a member of a certain social or age group,¹³ are especially notable. Responses in an interview reflect a certain representation of the self in a particular social context. Also, questions made directly about a generation receive responses concerning a mental construct about a generation, which may not be consistent with the behavioural pattern of the respondent. Yet, the approach still gives us a notion about the grounds on which a generation is constructed at a subjective discourse level.

The qualitative data for this article was collected in two phases. The first, in 2005, consisted of 10 in-depth interviews (ID), in which the general focus was the

¹³ In this instance, I was interviewing people of the same age group and similar social background as mine.

experiences of transition to adulthood, adulthood conceptualization and generational identity. The second, in 2009, consisted of focus group interviews (4 focus groups (FG), 13 people)¹⁴ which concentrated on the conceptualization of a generation and Soviet memory. The ID and FG interviews were conducted in various places: cafés, offices, and respondents' homes. Even though the datasets differ by their design, the answers are strikingly similar – the saturation of new categories and themes was achieved. The time interval between two sets of interview did not significantly affect the outcome for two reasons. Firstly, generational consciousness develops mainly during an individual's socializing years (Mannheim) and had mostly finished developing for the respondents by 2005. Secondly, whereas the social environment in the 1990s had been developing rapidly and was inherently unstable, the period 2005–2009 was by contrast relatively stable and probably did not, therefore, have any significant influence on the already emerged generational consciousness. However, a sizeable time lag between collecting prime data may cause some differences. One is that the younger generation (born in the 1980s) was in their 30s by 2009 and, thus, was more active in the social scene. Despite this ageing, most focus groups still generationally differentiate themselves from those born in the 1980s.

I used the snowball method, recruiting respondents among the social circles of the other respondents, to find the sample of 23 born in 1970–1977. The key parameter was the respondent's birth year to ensure they were socialized during the era of political and socio-economic transformations in the 1990s. Although the social, economic and geographical backgrounds of the respondents during this period varied, they shared the common experience of financial scarcity, irrespective of parental social background, in their teen years. Many respondents were involved in upward social mobility compared to their parents.

Despite the variety of their parental backgrounds, all of the respondents are today among the socially advanced in Estonia. In order to avoid the term middle-class (as the discussion of classes in post-Soviet societies is still very lively, see e.g. Eyal et al. 1998, Lane 2005, 2006, Beliaeva 2007, Oleinik 2007), the sample group could be described as those who have succeeded in accumulating and mobilizing different sorts of capital: social, economic, symbolic and cultural (Bourdieu 1986). In other words, while they may not all be wealthy in economic terms, they have a social or cultural position that enables them to be influential in society.

I am well aware that by choosing a sample with a homogeneous social background, the results might not apply to the entire age group in society. In choosing the socially advanced group, I used the method of theoretical sampling formulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and had two considerations while making conclusions based on this sample. The first one was that if the sample had a homogeneous and mutual 'generational consciousness', they might form what Mannheim (1993) has called a 'generational unit', which may be one unit among many.

¹⁴ I shared the focus-group fieldwork and interviews with Kirsti Jõesalu.

The core of a generation is often formed by well-educated middle-class representatives who are culturally dominant and influence the working class (Marada:167). The second consideration was to cross-reference the criteria the respondents use for defining their generation against those that social scientists use when constructing generations. Also, my interest is how the criteria I personally used in the subchapter dealing with socialization practices are important in their self-reflexive view of a generation.¹⁵

Both ID and FG interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded according to Mayring's (2000) qualitative content analysis, concentrating on the different meanings given to the concept of a generation. In the subsequent analysis of the narrative data, I reduced the various paragraphs by paraphrasing passages and collating them together (cf. Flick 2002:190–92). The different meanings were generalized into categories they reflected, depending on the character of the description, for example, if conceptualization is based on structural and social (networking) conditions, discursive (cultural memory), or value categories. Under these categories, subcategories of meanings behind those principles were grouped.

4. Analysis of the qualitative data – reflexive generation construction

There is no clear definition of the length of a generation (Kelly 2007:172, Lovell:5, 7). Mannheim states that a generation can embrace 15–30 years (Mannheim:24), but these parameters are never strict – in any age cohort there may be forerunners of the next generation who are marginalized during their own time (Mannheim:50). Some theorists tend to count generations in coherence with reproduction cycles (Katus et al.), or reduce the interval between generations to only 10 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics; cited in Wyn and Woodman).

Subjective generational lines are problematic as they depend not only on time, but also on the age of respondents and their current life stage.¹⁶ I asked the interviewees to define the borders for their own generation and distinguish themselves from older and younger cohorts by pointing out the differences between them. Often, they spaced the borders only 5 years apart from themselves, forward and backward, without much thought. When explaining their answers, some shifted the borders further and others closer. In many cases, especially during the focus group interviews, the parameters kept shifting, depending on the context of reasoning.

¹⁵ For detailed description of the sample, see Appendix 1.

¹⁶ For instance, as some respondents pointed out, someone aged 26 who does not yet have children may see those who have children as being in the previous generation, and those still studying, as being in the next generation. Younger people, wanting to be treated as adults, may need to identify themselves with the older generation (with 'adults') who occupy strategic positions in society, while sometimes elder generations may prefer to be identified with younger, more active, generations.

The ID respondents provided clearer answers than the FG respondents. The difference in clarity was due to the format of the FGs, which as Bergnéhr (2007) suggests is the most suitable to generate a discussion amongst the group members. This format meant the parameters defining a generation varied according to the contexts of the interviewees' responses. Nevertheless the responses indicate two particular trends in defining the parameters for the younger and older generations. Whereas the absence of any memories of the collapse of communism and the adoption of democracy seem to be the marker for the younger generation (born approximately 1980–1985), the experience of being an adult in the Soviet period delineates the elder generation (born between 1965 and 1970). In other words, turbulent changes in society are the basis according to which these young people construct their reflexive generation. There were also exceptions to this pattern, especially in regard to the border defining the older generation.¹⁷ Similar to Grünberg's (3) findings, the distinction was clearer with younger generation than with the previous – 'older' generation. The distinctions made to other generations can be roughly based on 3 categories: structural, discursive and values.

5. Structural and social network features

How did the uncertain social structures of the 1990s influence the self-reflexive generational portrait of this cohort? Many of the respondents did not perceive this instability in a negative manner but described the environment as 'fascinating', 'interesting' and 'fun'. All the interviewees mentioned the political turn as a defining force of their generation (see also Eisenstadt:91) and the source of distinction in one way or other with the other age cohorts. Many were aware that this 'inventory experience' (Mannheim:42–44, Misztal:85) was crucial in forming their social and generational identity, which mirrors Lovell's view:

For not only do generations make history, it is also the case that history makes generations. The very concept of generation implies chronological consciousness, a sense of one's own unique position in history. (Lovell:8)

An individual's personality becomes crystallized during their youth and the social circumstances of being incorporated into social structures are essential to this process (Eisenstadt:94).

¹⁷ Two ID respondents defined the older generation by demographic life cycles, placing the earlier year in their parents' generation. By contrast, two of the FGs constantly shifted the borderline between the elder generation, depending on the context of reasoning sometimes around 1965–1970, but other times around 1950–1969. One FG respondent, born in 1970, not only claimed to be part of the 1960s generation, but also felt that those born from 1973 onwards were the next generation.

5.1. Chaos as a base for creativity and structure as a restriction

Several respondents stated that the chaotic 1990s, defined the '1970s generation' as creative, adaptable to changes and adjustable to new social contexts. In contrast, the younger generations were said to be prone to take things for granted, leading an organized life path, tending to be more passive and having less initiative to plan ahead.

Toomas (ID; born 1975):¹⁸ *I remember when in Estonia... you could establish your own company with three hundred crowns [approximately 30 USD] and in principle, you could do just about anything.... it was very.... all you needed was initiative... or to be enterprising to... to achieve something. Today, the model of the old and... the kind of established world is like... different. Today even if you are active... but then you go to university... maybe even until your PhD... or at least until your MA. And... and then... maybe in some very good foreign university and... and then you come and settle at some highly paid job... like.... But during our time it was like... be yourself proactive and... and then you can achieve like... just about anything.*¹⁹

Interestingly, many respondents gave ambiguous constructions about the younger generation, who were depicted as being used to getting things easily and are therefore more passive and used to take things for granted (welfare society, certain living standards etc.). On the other hand, the respondents admit that the younger generation has fewer opportunities to achieve the success of their own generation because the situation in job market is tougher, unemployment is higher and there are fewer chances for upward social mobility. This, as many respondents believed, has also influenced the younger generation to be less inspired by work and more interested in leisure.

Kristjan (FG4, born 1973): *I might be romanticizing things, but I dare say that we do some things out of some inner calling or mission, that you... [...] there is one contrasting point [with the young], which is in a way justified... it is that everything is seen as some kind of a project, which has some technical start and end and which can be accomplished technically within the frame of some kind of rules. [...] But that the things have contexts, that some kinds of synergies exist in human relations, which also play and have to be considered when taking decisions and how things have been and... [they do not understand] [...]*

These extracts are also good illustrations of the construction of a generation on the principle of age. The young always seem to the older people to be shallower and less experienced in detecting the contexts. However, there seems to be more to it. Many of the respondents started their work life during the time of restructuring the institutions and markets and felt enthusiastic about the changes (see also Vogt 2005). Also, most of them 'happened' to achieve senior level positions right after the graduation or during their university years, which gave them the feeling of participation in restructuring the new society.

¹⁸ All the names used are pseudonyms.

¹⁹ All translations of interview transcripts are the responsibility of the author – RN.

5.2. Broad possibilities

In contrast to pointing out the restrictive structural features, some respondents stated that the younger generation has actually more opportunities during their youth compared to their own generation – to travel and to explore the possibilities life has to offer. Also, the structural conditions provided by technology were referred to (see also Siibak 2009) – young people have more information via Internet sources and are less likely to visit libraries or buy books and their social networks are based more on virtual networks compared to older age cohorts. Often the contradictory views of the younger generation were expressed within the same ID or FG interview – respondents claimed that younger people have in a sense more opportunities (or initiative) than they did in 1990s, but at other times said they had now less opportunities (and were more passive).

5.3. Strategic advantages

The older generation was, according to respondents, those who had rearranged society, fight for the regaining of independence and participated (more) in the restructuring of the economy:

Riina ID (born 1973): Those whose birth year starts with 6 [1960s], they are the other generation. These are older. These are the ones who could privatize something and were, say, like... I met the [new re-established] republic so that I didn't understand a thing, what comes now, what has happened, what private businesses and... But I feel that those whose year of birth starts with 6, they were in the business and they were arranging everything. Like [an example name] and those guys. Yes.

In a sense, they refer to the older age cohort as the ‘strategic’ generation by having structural chances to privatize Soviet enterprises and start businesses that did not exist before. A *leitmotif* mentioned often about the older group is the chance to attend university student working camps during summer (*EÜE*) and establish social capital there, which helped them in building social networks restructuring the economy during the 1990s.

5.4. The experience of functioning under Soviet system

The lack of experience of anarchy was also mentioned when talking about the older ones – their formation years fell within the strict framework of Soviet rule. “We haven’t functioned as adults during Soviet time,” as Kristi (ID, born 1974) pointed out. The experience of functioning as adults in the system enables the older generation to know the ‘true face’ of the Soviet regime. The experience of the Soviet time for those born in the 1970s is the one of a happy and playful childhood. They had never felt real fear, had not experienced repressions, nor had to worry about managing everyday food supplies or build up social networks in order to supply family with household essentials or get opportunity to have a vacation abroad. In contrast, the older generation had to deal with all the downsides of the occupational regime.

A dominant theme about structural conditions influencing the generation-formation was the Soviet army.

Peeter ID (born 1974) ... *the generational line is very clear. The generation before us... me... this I can say about boys... men... they were the ones who, for instance, struggled with [invitations to] Russian army. I didn't any more. I was called to army, but these invitations went straight to dustbin, you see.*²⁰

Here, the respondent hints at the repressive system that he no longer had to fear. Conscription into the Soviet Army was greatly feared and in order to avoid being 'called up', young men were prepared to fake illnesses or even insanity. In the 1980s, conscripts could be sent to life threatening environments like the war zones of Afghanistan or Nagorny Karabakh and Chernobyl to demolish the nuclear power station after the catastrophe. Hence, as some respondents concluded, the older generation regarded the new regime with different values and was, as a result of their Soviet experiences, even more patriotic.

5.5. Conclusion

Structural social conditions are critical in defining the respondents' subjective generational construction as well as the 'generalized others' (Corsten:260, Grünberg:3). The respondents acknowledged the importance of generation as 'locality' as well as 'actuality' (how they and the other generations have negotiated the new emerging structural conditions). However, several indicators measured and considered important by social scientists and youth researchers when constructing generation, were left unnoticed by this respondent group. They mentioned the situation in the job market and the upward social mobility, yet completely left out the demographic markers of marrying or having children. Only one respondent (Martin, FG4) mentioned the increased access to tertiary education, stating that his generation was actually the last to have received a 'non-mass' university education, which enabled a more individual approach to students. By this statement, Martin linked his generation to older cohorts rather than the younger ones. Martin also mentioned the change in family relations, saying that gender roles have been changing and the men in his generation are more apt to do domestic work traditionally ascribed to women. By this statement, Martin distinguished his generation from the older age cohorts and linked it to younger ones. Yet, no one else from the respondent group picked up the theme of education or gender roles.

6. Discursive features

6.1. Soviet experience and memory as a key

One of the crucial features determining the line separating generations is the understanding of time. To create a generation, the common experience in formative years alone may not be enough, the age group must also share a perspective of time

²⁰ The last conscripts of the Red Army were born in 1971-1972.

and share certain interpretive principles or ‘discursive practices’ (Corsten:258–259), which validate the mutual experience in discourses (Corsten:261, Misztal:62, Weisbrod:22).

Generational habitus, which is the foundation of generational memory, and therefore identity, can be seen as a system of practice-generating schemes rooted in the uniqueness of the socio-historical location of a particular generation. (Misztal:90).

Remembering is more than just a personal act (Misztal:5–6) as it takes place in a social context. Memory can guide our actions by creating organized cultural practices and enables us to understand the world by serving as a ‘meaning-making apparatus’ (Schwartz 2000:17, cited in Misztal:13). *Mnemonic communities* inform us as to what is sufficiently important to be remembered and how it should be remembered (Misztal:12–13).

The memory about Soviet time and about the political and social turnover is a powerful ‘meaning-making apparatus’ for the respondents. In most cases, remembering the Soviet time or the ‘singing revolution’²¹ were the first themes representing the defining of their generation. The clearest line between generations is with the younger generation.

Kristi ID (born 1974): *Mmmm... They have never worn a pioneer scarf [laughs]... and so on.... Look at you very naively...*

Kati FG2 (born 1970) – *In a way... in our Estonian-language environment it is important to understand the jokes about... that when after the death of Brezhnev all those andropovs and chernenkos started to rule and then you laughed that who are they going to put as a general secretary before they bury him...*²²

One general trend is to distinguish the younger generation as the one which does not remember, cannot (and would not) talk about or understand the Soviet period. The key to the generation is an understanding of the period and its structural order, which shaped the childhood and adolescence experience of the respondents and moreover, retroactive remembering and valuing this period (Kelly). In these cases, the Soviet era is seen in a fairly nostalgic way and as a cultural resource to create discursive practices (Corsten, Grünberg, Kõresaar:761). The 1970s cohort is sometimes referred to as the ‘Russian cartoon’ generation and they use their collectively understood childhood cultural codes to generate the ‘generalized others’ (Kelly, Grünberg). Indeed the leitmotifs the respondents used

²¹ The Singing Revolution refers to the events occurring between 1987 and 1990 that led to Estonia regaining independence from the Soviet Union. The phrase comes mainly from a series of events called the ‘Night Song Festival’ in 1988, when Estonians gathered at the Estonian Song Festival Grounds and sang patriotic songs.

²² Brezhnev was General Secretary of the Communist Party for 18 years (1964–1982) whereas his successor Andropov was in office for 17 months (November 1982–February 1984), and his successor, Chernenko for 13 months (February 1984–March 1985). These short term party leaders became sources of jokes, the bottom line of which was that the party leaders would die soon after they stepped into office.

to refer to their childhood were Russian cartoons, the 1980 Moscow Olympics and the successive deaths of the General Secretaries of the Communist Party.

Meelis FG1 (born 1973) [Talking about Romanian sport shoes that the others in the focus group remember, too] *Here you go, you see... this is a good example, that I mention a random thing, and everybody remembers the same thing. The choice was so small, that everybody had the same things. [...] It is much easier, there are certain keywords – and everybody understands.*

6.2. A complex memory of Soviet society enables individuals to value it adequately

The attitude of nostalgia, as reflected by Meelis, did not necessarily mean that the respondents valued the whole Soviet period positively. As Kõresaar (769) explains, in any group several nostalgias can be active simultaneously. The interviews emphasize that those who have lived through the Soviet time can tell the difference between the things to condemn and those to be nostalgic about. Lacking the Soviet context and experience, the younger generation tends to have a simplified version of the Soviet period, while the respondents of this research perceived themselves as owning the necessary intellectual and cultural capital to give appropriate evaluation to certain contexts (positive to cartoons, and negative to political opportunism).

6.3. Memories of the political change enable individuals to value events differently

Several respondents pointed out that living during the Soviet era provided a certain understanding of historical context and the need to accomplish and value things in the present, like joining NATO or understanding citizenship policy. A different attitude to history can influence the behaviour of the younger generation:

Liisa ID (born 1973): *Oh, I just remember one specific case this summer [2005] at an [archaeological] dig... that... it was this... re-... you know, the one in August. This Estonian... What the hell was it called? Re-Independence Day... Or whatever? Anyway, the day Estonian Independence was re-established [in 1991]. Well, the celebration of this day. That... There were quite a few older people, who had lived through this singing revolution. It hadn't even occurred to us, that we had to celebrate it somehow. That... This is something that is inside us. It doesn't have to be... We absolutely don't feel any need to exhibit this. But young people, they were sincere... Listened to the National Anthem in the morning... A national flag stood in the excavation and in the evening a cake was bought and a celebration took place. This is... terribly lovely and all... But I feel like... this is... this is like atheists celebrate Christmas. That there is a certain shift. They wouldn't understand why we, having lived during that time, don't celebrate it? And we don't understand, what the hell are they celebrating?*

6.4. 'They have stories we don't

The differentiation with the older generation in terms of discourse is more ambiguous. On the one hand, the 1970s birth cohort has a similar experience of

childhood contexts to older generations. The context of Russian cartoons can be traced back to the 1950s birth cohort (see Kelly). On the other hand, the distinction on the basis of discourse was still often made. Many respondents mentioned that the older generation had stories that the 1970s age group did not have or even understood. Among the themes mentioned were topics about student working camps, kolkhozes, and about the experiences how to cope with and cheat the Soviet regime. Again, one of the common leitmotifs that emerged were the stories about serving in the Soviet Army.

6.5. Cheating (the Soviet system) as a heroic act

A critical issue is how generations value and interpret the stories of other generations. The childhood innocence of the 1970s birth cohort enables them to legitimately value some things positively, since they are simply childhood memories. Those individuals who did participate in the system as adults are occasionally condemned for being nostalgic about the Soviet time, as the younger generations view them as collaborators with the ideological regime which suppressed Estonian national identity (see also Grünberg:6–7, Marada:165). Marko (FG4, born 1974) mentions that he does not always understand why the stories of cheating and dishonesty are presented in the framework of heroic narratives. This suggests the 1970s cohort sees the older generation sometimes as morally corrupt adults. By contrast, the respondents' generation was described as sincere, trustworthy and incorruptible (see also Marada:165).

6.6. Experience of arranging a political change

Another difference in the discursive level with the older generation is their memories of being a political dissident in the Soviet system or participating in the 'Singing Revolution'. A common theme in the interviews is the aspect of being a bystander as events unfolded. Anna FG3 (born 1977): "We watched the putsch from TV. The older ones were actually there."

Many of the respondents concluded that it was harder to draw a line between themselves and the older generation than with the younger ones, as on the communicative level there seem to be fewer misunderstandings. By comparison, 58% of the 1970s birth cohort in a survey in Russia claimed there were no significant differences with their parents (Lovell:12).

7. Features based on value-orientations

The distinctions and constructing 'the other' based on value-orientations are inevitably closely correlated to both structural and discursive features described before. Value distinctions with older as well as with the younger generation are influenced by structural conditions of their formative years and discursive and mnemonic practices (what is remembered and how) are determined by those values.

7.1. Lack of critical thought leads to ultra-tolerance

Having the experience of hypocritical Soviet society, the 1970s birth cohort have learned how to be critical of the public discourse and ready-made truths and are capable of expressing irony towards whatever comes their way. Respectively, they perceive the younger generations as less capable of critical thinking:

Kaido FG3 (born 1970): *Society asked a lot of questions at that time [during the time of political change in the 1990s]. We may not have participated, but questions were asked. The difference between generations is that they [the younger ones] do not pose questions any more. [...] I sense that this generation [born in the second half of the 1980s] do not have any doubts if the independent state will stand, and do not fear that anyone might come to deport you [to Siberia]. They will sympathize with you that you have been born during the Soviet time.*

Their lack of critical thinking may also lead to lack of patriotic feelings and of valuing the independent statehood of the regained republic. This is accompanied by having little interest in politics and society, which leads to the observation that their value base is more fluid and tolerant.

Kristo FG1 (born 1973): *There is less critical attitude, I think. And maybe also less need for confrontation. They are so tolerant because they lack some value basis.*

Meelis FG1 (born 1973): *[...] Super tolerant, but this does not stem from the fact that they lack values, but that the values come and go very easily. [...] They clearly lack, what you could say is characteristic to us, generational values. [...] Maybe it's because today all those values change so quickly.*

Kristo FG1 (born 1973): *Maybe these are out there somewhere, we just don't see them. We have all sorted out.*

This is in a way concomitant with values attributed to young people in late modern society in West-European cultural context by sociologists. The youth of today are characterized as having flexible multiple identities and hedonistic values. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2009:33) contend there are emerging global generations that are united in 'increasing insecurity'. This new generation, suggest Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, cannot be constituted *politically*, but can instead be defined by '*cosmopolitan experiences and events*'. Compared to the older cohorts, the young are more individualistic: '*Then there was collective action, today there is individualistic reaction*' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim:34). Indeed several respondents mentioned some of these traits among the younger generation. The fluidity of their value base makes them a passive generation, which is not apt to actively question or change things. Their naivety, say the respondents, makes them absorb whatever values come their way. The respondent group attaches values that are typical of young people globally to the younger generation and links these values to specific social changes of Estonia.

The value differences with the older generation, as previously mentioned, are not seen as being so crucial and border with them was ill-defined. The borders of the previous generation were shifted during some interviews by up to almost

twenty years (from 1970 to 1950). The values attributed to the older generation thus also depended on where the border lay.

7.2. Pragmatism

One of the most often stated values, in the context of the older 1960s birth cohort was that of pragmatism. This was grounded with the older generation's formation years during the 1980s, when the Soviet system was cynical and ideology was a learned façade of a regime, which nobody took seriously. People had learned certain behavioural patterns to survive, and had to distinguish their private sphere from the public. Hence, they developed a playful attitude towards life, were more apt to value pragmatic goals and were more easily adjustable to rules or values in order to achieve these goals. Kristjan FG4 (born 1973) said that the attitudes of this older generation towards different kinds of rules could be summarized: we made these laws and rules and built this state, we have the right to be sometimes creative in remodelling them towards our purpose.

Conservatism. The three interviewees who shifted the border of the older generation to the 1950s did not mention either the political change or the Soviet regime as reasons for the value differences. Rather, they felt that the differences seemed to indicate the normal differences that emerge due to age, but also reflect the change in gender roles.

Merike ID (born 1974): *The generation prior to us is too conservative. [...] well, there are those rules how you can behave in certain social circles or how you can talk to certain people. For instance, it is beyond my understanding... well... [...] If we have a wine glass on the table, and my glass is empty, then naturally a man has to pour a new glass for me, I couldn't possibly do it myself... For me it is normal that I do it myself, I do not expect such support from men.*

Overall, most of the value distinctions were connected to either structural differences or mnemonic practices, yet those which were not, can be conditionally reduced to differences that emerge due to age.

8. Conclusions

The age group born in the 1970s is special in many ways. They were among the first to negotiate their transition to social structures in the process where those structures were under the process of change. As statistical data indicates, they were one of the first to develop several new transition patterns from school to work and demographic behaviour patterns that are followed also by the youth of today. As Mannheim states, a generation shares a common experience and historical practice (Mannheim:36), in this instance the practice is a transition pattern to adulthood. This is the concept of generation as 'locality' (Mannheim:46). This particular 'generational unit' of a (culturally defined) middle-class

respondent group also shared participation in a common destiny due to witnessing political change. They also partly participated (via upwards social mobility) in the restructuring of economy and society (generation as 'actuality', Mannheim:46). Yet, the statistical data also indicate that the 1970s birth cohort is not homogeneous in starting all the patterns. For example, postponing having a family is more closely linked to those born in the second half of the decade, and the pattern of leaving the parental home is similar to previous cohorts.

As for subjective generational markers, the defining base for the generation seems to be the political change and relationships to the Soviet regime. In Western societies, where there have not been such remarkable political transformations, politics has ceased to be a source of generational identity and has been replaced by social solidarity (Lovell:11). The 1970s age group, however, seems (and may well be the last) to relate their generational identity to political memory, which is the basis of Mannheim's 'generational consciousness' (Mannheim:33). Even though the statistics indicate that in certain ways the birth cohort of the 1970s should be closer to the cohort born in the 1980s, in their subjective interpretation they feel closer to those born earlier: in the 1960s. Their subjective time perspective seems to be more important than the structural conditions of socializing. The reason for this might also be that people may be inclined to identify with the older generation at this particular life stage (in their 30s), particularly because in Estonia, many of those born in the 1960s are the ones holding strategic positions in society. Interestingly, they also feel distinctive generational differences with the 1960s birth cohort.

There are several ways to interpret the data presented in the article. One could claim that the respondent group forms a distinctive generation within the approximate parameters of 1970-1980 (+/- 5 years). The group is distinguished from the younger group on a mnemonic basis and from the older by social inclusion patterns. There seem to be most of the features of a generation that generational theorists have implied: the 'feeling of sameness'; 'generational consciousness' (at least according to the respondent group, who may be interpreted to form one of Mannheim's conceptualized 'generational units'); mutual discursive and mnemonic practices; similar socialization experiences during the formative years which limits them to certain experiences; and participation in a common destiny (generation as 'location' and 'actuality'). The individuals of the 1970s birth cohort feel they have somehow participated in helping to reconstruct the social or institutional structures of the new state (though they tend to have the feeling they have not been active agents in the political turnover or economic reconstruction that preceded the more stable period of reconstruction). The 1970s birth cohort also has features of a 'strategic generation', having high social mobility and better income compared to previous and subsequent cohorts.

The other possible interpretation of this data, however, would be that this is an age group between two different generations, an intermediate zone, or sandwich

generation.²³ Interestingly they sense their position as being in between, having two faces like Janus, one face in the new social system, the other in the old (Alina FG2, born 1971). They seem to be the ones between the 'Soviet generation' and the generation of the new social order. The feeling of being caught in between may characterize all generations, which distinguish the borders between the preceding and following generations. Yet, it does seem that rapid changes in socialization patterns and memory makes the 1970s age cohort special because of the narrow timeframe, in which this generation positions the borders. This hypothetical model is also supported by the fact that the synchronicity of the statistical data and qualitative interview data do not match; subjective time and values react to social practices after an interval.

Either way, the cohort born in the 1970s is an interesting object for research of generations, as it vividly brings forth the issues of generational borders, of how to define the parameters of a generation lines; which aspects of statistically measured data are significant in detecting them, and how we should interpret subjective generational parameters. Do we, as researchers, have the capacity to label an age group as a twilight or intermediate generation, if the members of the birth cohort clearly feel they form a separate generation?

This research has explained that the formation and grouping of a generation can be achieved differently, depending on the questions asked and the methods used in research. One way is to detect generations by quantitative statistical data, the other by qualitative data about self-perception and generational consciousness. Yet neither of these methods is superior. Indeed both approaches are equally viable depending on the aim of the research and how the concept of a 'generation' is operationalized as an analytical tool. The quantitative approach is beneficial in understanding the social conditions of young people and developing adequate social policies. The subjective self-reflexive approach helps us to understand the cohesion of society (how different age groups value each other), but also how crucial political and social events during development years shape a young person's identity and whether (and how) certain age groups are potentially mobilized during times of crisis (Nehring 2007:58). According to some of the respondents, the social networks often function on the basis of this type of generational identity. This, however, is a hypothesis for a different research to prove.

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²³ The term 'sandwich generation' is traditionally used for those who provide long-term care for elderly parents while supporting their own children. The phrase, however, aptly encapsulates the situation of the 1970s birth cohort generation 'sandwiched' between old and new social environments.

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Appendix 1

The chart describing the sample/the interviewed subjects

Name	Year of birth	Geographical location of childhood/Place of residence today	Occupation
Kristi	1974	Tallinn/Tallinn	Journalist
Mart	1974	Tallinn/Tallinn	Salesman
Tarmo	1973	Tallinn/Tallinn	Local municipality official
Mihkel	1974	Leisi/Tallinn	Creative director in advertising agency
Liisa	1974	Tartu/Tartu	University lecturer
Merike	1974	Tartu/Tallinn	Bank official
Riina	1973	Tallinn/Tallinn	Owner of private company
Tiina	1973	Kuressaare/Viljandi	Local municipality official
Peeter	1974	Tallinn/Tallinn	Attorney/Lawyer
Toomas	1975	Tallinn/Tallinn	Owner of private company
Focus groups			
	Focus Group I		
Meelis	1973	Haapsalu/Tallinn	Real estate manager
Kristo	1973	Tallinn/Tallinn	Designer
Henri	1975	Tallinn/Tallinn	Owner of private company
	Focus Group II		
Alina	1971	A capital in former Soviet Union/Tallinn	University lecturer, researcher
Kati	1970	Tallinn/Tallinn	Research assistant in University
Tanel	1975	Tartu/Tallinn	Researcher in University
	Focus Group III		
Anna	1977	Tallinn/Tartu	Higher manager in museum
Kaido	1970	Viljandi/Tartu	Higher manager in museum
Kaisa	1975	Tartu/Tartu	Higher professional in museum
Tauno	1976	Tartu/Tartu	Project manager in private business
	Focus Group IV		
Kristjan	1973	Viljandi/Tallinn	Higher state official
Marko	1974	Haapsalu/Tallinn	Higher state official
Martin	1976	Small town in Western Estonia/Tallinn	Higher manager in media institution