

GENERATION ON THE DOORSTEP? HOW TO DEFINE AN AGE GROUP SHAPED BY THE CHANGES

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This presentation will have a look on some characteristics of the cohort born in 1970s. By presenting some quantitative and qualitative interview data about them it will pose a question about drawing a boundary between generations. It will ponder on the question if we can we talk about a generational phenomenon in the case of people born in the 1970s in Estonia. This paper examines the construction of a generation from two perspectives. Drawing on quantitative statistics, the structural differences between the 1970s cohort and its predecessor and successor cohorts are examined. Based on qualitative interviews, differences in the discursive self-identification of the cohort as a separate generation are examined. An analysis then evaluates whether people born in the 1970s constitute a separate generation or a cohort within some broader generation.

Structural features of coming of age

According to Karl Mannheim, a generation is formed when substantial societal changes emerge during the socialisation period of young people (Mannheim 1952). In other words, when turbulent changes appear during the process of coming of age of a particular cohort, there are high chances of a new generation to emerge. In the following, I will have a brief glance how coming of age changed structurally during the vast changes in the 1990s Estonia. Without indulging into the theoretical discussions of what social processes mark transition to adulthood and why (but being aware of these academic discussions), I will rely on the common markers known in sociology as signifiers of becoming an adult: transitions from school to work, and demographical transitions of becoming a spouse and parent.

In Estonia, the structural and institutional conditions relating to the transition from school to work changed substantially after the change of regime. During the Soviet period, the transitions were rather smooth, although institutionalised – jobs were allocated after graduation and unemployment was virtually non-existent. When this system collapsed, state-owned enterprises were privatised and sometimes abolished. Certain types of education and professionsⁱ that were appropriate for a socialist economy based on planning were no longer relevant. However, a new institutional system supporting young people's transitions was not yet established. Negotiating one's transition to adulthood under these new conditions needed some new answers, a new habitus, and new biographical paths.

One of the most remarkable changes in terms of the transition to adulthood is the expansion of tertiary education, also common in other post-socialist countries (Kogan & Unt 2005, 226). Not only did the state universities expand, enabling them to enrol those who could pay for their education, but also a number of new higher education institutions emerged. The number of higher education institutions rose until 2001,ⁱⁱ peaking at 80 tertiary schools, which is a rather high number considering the population of Estonia (1.3 million). The university market soon started to be regulated and standardised. Thus, the number of higher education institutions also started to fall in 2004. However, the number of students did not fall at a corresponding pace during this period. Therefore, rather than being closed, these schools merged with others.

During the Soviet period, the number of people who acquired higher education was approximately 20% of the cohorts (the numbers differ between males and females, see Katus et al 2008), with approximately 70% of enrolled graduating. This model started to change in the 1990s, starting with the sudden rise in the number of enrolled students. From 1990 to 2000, the annual number of students enrolling at universities grew by 223% in total, while the number of graduates did not change significantly (probably because many students worked simultaneously and postponed their

graduation). The growth in matriculation from 2000 to 2008 slowed to 12%. After 2008, the enrolment numbers started to decline, reaching the same level as in 2000 by the year 2012 (this had probably to do with the decline in cohort numbers of those born in 1990s as well). The overall number of graduates of tertiary education in proportion to the number of students enrolled was approximately 60% in 1990; 35% in 2000 and reached the 60% again in 2005.

The institutional structure for transitions from school to work changed remarkably during the social change of the 1990s. The claim of favourable employment conditions for the 1970s cohort is well exemplified in the data collected by Mari Toomse (2004), with which she explored the transition from school to work among young people. According to her data, the first jobs of 23% of young people leaving school between 1992 and 1994, and 19% of those leaving school between 1995 and 2002, were higher managerial and professional posts.

One of the indicators of this age group's economic status is the income data. If we look at the income statistics per household during the 2003–2011 period, we see that the 25–34 age group had the highest yearly income and the income that grew proportionally the most during the 2003–2008 period.ⁱⁱⁱ The statistical data also indicates that those born in the 1970s recovered quite quickly after the crisis. Research conducted in 2005 (Katus et al 2008) asked respondents about their satisfaction with their income. While among the cohorts born in 1959–1963 37.3% and in 1964–1968 43.3% claimed to be “very satisfied” with their income, among the 1969–1973 and 1974–1978 birth cohorts the numbers were 47.2% and 49.6%, respectively. Among the next cohort, born in the 1979–1983 period, the number was slightly smaller, 46.9%

As for marriage and having children, the 1970s age group initiated the pattern of postponing childbirth and favouring cohabitation over marriage. Despite the fact that in the 1990s the age of first intercourse started to decline, marriage and cohabitation patterns did not change so suddenly. For women, the age of getting married did not rise significantly in 1990. Rather the opposite: the majority of the 15–19 age group who married, did so in this decade. By 2000 the change is obvious: not only the number of marriages declined, but the age of marriage increased and continues to grow. The general direction is the same among both genders.

So far the numbers have indicated that in terms of demographic behaviour, the 1970s cohort is not homogeneous. The demographic changes are rarely sudden and although those born in the first half of the decade may show some new patterns, in other respects they tend to follow the same trends of those born in the 1960s. This claim is especially relevant with reference to giving birth. During the Soviet era the age of giving birth decreased continually. 25% of the women born in the 1969–1973 cohort had given birth to their first child by the age of 20, thereby making them the youngest parents since European marriage patterns were adopted in Estonia in the 18th century (Katus et al 2005). Yet this demographic behaviour has shifted at a pace that can be characteristic only to periods of vast social change. If we look at the age at childbirth among those born in the 1970–1980 period a trend is apparent – giving birth is postponed and those born in the second half of the decade are more likely to have children later.

To sum up, many turning points in the demographic behaviour of contemporary Estonia can be traced back to the 1970s cohort. However, the demographic shifts are rarely sudden. In addition, not all developments are followed by subsequent cohorts (as in the case of teenage motherhood) and perhaps reflect the experimental means by which new cultural patterns are sought. Nevertheless, these numbers reveal visible trends that have occurred during the coming of age of this cohort.

Qualitative data

The interview data discussed herein was collected throughout a period of ten years involving six stages and 47 respondents.^{iv} All of the stages had somewhat different agendas or focuses, but all the

interviews concentrated on retrospectively talking about respondents' plans after secondary school and their coming of age during the turbulent times of the 1990s. Except the first ten interviews, all the interviewees were also directly asked about their opinions about generational identity (in the first ten, these topics might have been touched upon indirectly).

The interview data allows us to believe that lines between generations are not only highly subjective, but also subjectively contextual. They depend on the life phase as well as on specific everyday situations, the angle of a particular line of thinking, or questions asked. People do not often think about the markers in generational conceptualisation; however, when starting to discuss different life situations they come up with clear borders to distinguish their generation. In the following I will endeavour to show how my respondents construct their generation and on what basis. Somewhat arbitrarily I have distinguished their type of reasoning, dividing it into markers based on (a) structural and social network features; (b) features based on discursive patterns (stories, understanding things); and (c) features based on value-orientations. This categorisation is by no means conclusive as all of the aforementioned features are interdependent and it is always difficult to decide which feature is the most critical in a specific case.

Structural features. As pointed out before, when social change coincides with a cohort's coming of age, it can become crucial in forming a generational consciousness. Therefore the changes that took place shortly before and during the 1990s are expected to result in the formation of generational identity (i.e. the feeling of belonging to a generation). Many of my respondents confirmed that this is the case. The age group born in the 1970s form an interesting example of being in between: partly socialised during the Soviet era, partly in the period of transition. This in-between feeling can become for some a defining feature of their generation and many brought this out in their interviews.

Several respondents stated that (what many defined as) the chaotic 1990s defined the 1970s generation as creative and flexible enough to adjust to new social contexts. In contrast, the younger generations were said to be prone to take things for granted, leading an organised life path and have the tendency to be more passive with less initiative and ability to plan ahead. Toomas (b. 1975) recalled that during the transitional period it was easy to establish a company and "do just about anything" if only one had the initiative. In his view, people are today more apt to choose structurally established routes by finishing university, studying abroad, and coming back to paid jobs while, "during our time it was like... be yourself, be proactive, and then you can achieve... like... just about anything". The socially structured markers of the available opportunities were very common features on which to base one's generational construction. Society was opening, and alternative choices that never existed before emerged, and thus the age group that was born in the 1970s was exposed to many possibilities that were unavailable to previous age cohorts. Yet, even if more opportunities were available for the younger generations, many respondents claimed that the latter do not know how to appreciate this.

When talking about the older generation, my respondents tended to refer to them as the 'strategic' generation because they had structural chances to privatise Soviet enterprises and start businesses that did not exist before. The respondent group was still in their formative years as the system started to change, while the 1960s cohort was socialised under the Soviet regime. "We didn't function as adults during the Soviet period", as Kristi (b. 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 experiences of the Soviet period for those born in the 1970s are the one of a happy and playful childhood. They never felt real fear, nor experienced repressions, nor had to worry about managing everyday food supplies or build up social networks in order to supply the family with household essentials or create the opportunity to have a holiday abroad. In contrast, the older generation had to deal with all the downsides of the occupation regime.

Both structural and social network features are considered important in shaping the generations. The respondents felt that the changing social structures had an impact on their developments as adults, as the society that was reconstructed offered them specific opportunities (some of these were not available to the older cohorts in their youth, some were no longer available to the younger cohorts). But they also sensed that social networks and their character had changed. Social networks of the Soviet period were thematised in the interviews as vital in order to arrange adult lives (for example, getting access to certain commodities in times of scarcity), thus social networks were considered a feature that shaped the character of the older generation. The respondents stressed the importance of social networks during their transitional period from a different perspective: in terms of upward social mobility, as most of them advanced in their career rather by chance (a contact made at a sauna party, a person met in the street suggesting a business idea, etc.). This feature of social networks is used as a basis of their generation and the younger cohorts are judged against this background: the latter rely more on institutional development (education credentials) than on social networks. It is suggested that digital social networks are also shaping the younger generation to be different from previous generations.

However, several indicators measured and considered important by social scientists and youth researchers constructing the 1970s generation were left unnoticed by this respondent group. They mentioned the situation in the labour market and upward social mobility, yet completely left out the demographic markers of marriage or having children. Some interviewees mentioned the change in family relations, saying that gender roles have been changing and men are more apt to do domestic work traditionally ascribed to women. This observation links the 1970s cohort more closely to the younger ones.

Discursive patterns. Memories of the Soviet period, and of the subsequent political and social upheaval is a powerful meaning-making apparatus for the respondents. In most cases, remembering the Soviet period or the Singing Revolution^v were the first themes mentioned by interviewees that define them and their generation. A general trend of the 1970s cohort is to distinguish the younger generation as the one that does not remember, who cannot (and would not) talk about or understand the Soviet period. The respondents' understanding of the Soviet period and its structural order, which shaped their childhood and adolescence experiences and, moreover, the retroactive remembering and valuing of this period (Kelly 2007), are seen as the key characteristic distinguishing them from the following generation. To them, the Soviet era is seen in a fairly nostalgic way and as a cultural resource for discursive practices (Corsten 1999; Grünberg 2009; Kõresaar 2008, 761; Jõesalu & Nugin 2012). The leitmotifs the respondents used to refer to their childhoods were Russian cartoons, the 1980 Moscow Olympics, and the successive deaths of the General Secretaries of the Communist Party. Several noted that mutual understanding of certain things generates a bond.

A number of respondents pointed out that living during the Soviet era provided a certain understanding of the historical context and instilled the need to accomplish and value things in the present day, like joining NATO or the principles of citizenship policy. Liisa (b. 1974) pointed out that a different attitude to history influences the attitude of the younger generation towards the re-independence process, Kaido (b. 1970) indicated that the younger generation "don't ask questions".

The differentiation with the older generation in terms of discourse is more ambiguous. On the one hand, the 1970s birth cohort has a childhood context similar to that of older generations. The context of Russian cartoons can be traced back to the 1950s birth cohort (see Kelly 2007). On the other hand, distinctions on the basis of discourse were still often made. Many respondents mentioned that the older generation had stories that the 1970s age group did not have or even did not understand. Among the themes mentioned were summer student working camps, kolkhozes, and the experiences

of how to cope with and cheat the Soviet regime. Again, one of the common leitmotifs that emerged was serving in the Soviet Army.

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 these are simply childhood memories. In a similar vein, as the repressions were not part of their lives, the interviewees sometimes note that they do not *know* how different life was when lived in fear of (Stalinist) repressions. In these cases, they have much older cohorts in mind (not those born in the 1960s). As for those generations who did not directly confront fears that threatened their physical existence, the attitude towards them varies. Those individuals who did participate in the system as adults are occasionally condemned for being nostalgic about the Soviet period, as the younger generations view them as collaborators in the ideological regime that suppressed the Estonian national identity (see also Grünberg 2009, 6–7; Marada 2004, 165). In other words, the respondents tend to differentiate between those who collaborated because of a threat to their physical existence and those who collaborated for better material advantages. However, these dispositions are not always clear. The boundaries of the accusations are blurred and contextual. The same goes for judgements regarding resistance to the Soviet system. Marko (b. 1974) mentions that he does not always understand why stories about cheating and dishonesty are presented in the framework of heroic narratives. All this can be attributed to the privilege of their birth date: they were not old enough to take sides in these ideological battles.

Another difference with the older generation at the discursive level is the memories of being political dissidents in the Soviet system or participating in the Singing Revolution. A common theme in the interviews is being a bystander as events unfolded. Anna (b. 1977): “We watched the putsch on TV. The older ones were actually there.” Many of the respondents concluded that drawing a line between themselves and the older generation is more difficult than it is between themselves and the younger ones, since on the communicative level there seemed to be fewer misunderstandings.

Features based on values. Having experienced the hypocritical Soviet society, the 1970s birth cohort claim to have learned how to be critical of public discourse and ready-made truths and be capable of expressing irony towards whatever comes their way. They perceive the subsequent generations as each respectively less capable of critical thinking. Another value that is attributed to the younger generation is consumerism. Contemporary society, with its massive consumption habits, is sometimes seen in a negative light. As indicated before, the respondents often referred to the possibilities young people have and do not know how to value. One aspect here is the absence of commodities during the Soviet era. Paradoxically enough, this characteristic is seen as a resource in a contemporary world:

In other words, the absence of things as such has made these people value things differently from subsequent cohorts, who have been socialised in the world with access to material wealth. At the same time, they admit that longing for things and material goods was something that greatly shaped their lives. Merje (b. 1977) recalls that every single candy wrapping paper was sniffed, saved, and collected if it originated from a Western country, thus the relation to the material world was different. According to many respondents, this absence was more meaningful than the things themselves and it influenced them to value things accordingly (thus, consume more conservatively, as Merje (b. 1974) put it). However, strangely enough, often the same attitude among the older generation is looked upon and judged negatively. Urmo (b. 1977), for instance, described how elderly people are still hoarders due to their conviction that acquiring things is difficult. So they accumulate more things than they actually need.

One of the most often stated values, in the context of the older 1960s birth cohort, was that of pragmatism. This was grounded in the older generation’s formative years during the 1980s, when the Soviet system and people in it were cynical and ideology was a learned façade of a regime which

nobody really believed. People had acquired certain behavioural patterns to survive and had to distinguish their private lives from their public image. Hence they developed a playful attitude towards the system and were more apt to value pragmatic goals and more easily adapted rules or principles in order to achieve these goals. Kristjan (b. 1973) said that the attitudes of this older generation towards different kinds of rules could be summarised thus: we made these laws and rules and built this state, we have the right to be creative at times in remodelling them towards our purposes.

Conclusion

Looking at the statistical data, those born in the 1970s, indeed seem quite distinctive. Their socialisation experience and demographic transitions are quite different from those who were born in the 1960s. However, the question of how to draw the borderlines of the generations, is trickier. Quite probably it does not have a straightforward answer. The 1970s are a sort of transitional, in-between generation: they began new demographic patterns, although not all of these clearly belong only to those born in the 1970s. The group of people born in the 1970s form a heterogeneous cohort. It seems however that there is some kind of reflexive generational consciousness among them, although the borders keep shifting. One thing is quite clear – compared to the previous cohorts, the transitions considered crucial in becoming an adult were prolonged and the initiators of this trend were mainly born between 1970 and 1980. Yet, this involves a number of processes that have wider implications than just a line or a column on a chart would indicate. In fact, some statistical data are even contradictory: the growing number of enrolled students in the universities is not reflected in the charts of the highly educated among the cohort, although even this tendency is meaningful in a broader sense. Those enrolled at universities started the pattern of non-linear transitions: they worked simultaneously with their studies, and many among them were too busy to complete their studies so they jumped back and forth between education and employment. The increasingly widespread pattern of cohabitation was another trend that gave rise to what have been called the yo-yo transitions (Pais 2000) because cohabiting also means fewer commitments.

All in all, the change was structural as much as it was cultural since the change in structural conditions forced the cohort to search for new routes during the period of transition to adulthood; however, the change in values initiated some structural developments as well. Structural change and changing values are thus interconnected. While the emergence of generations and generational consciousness depends mainly on structural changes in society, it seems that the reflexive generation construction in discursive fields is less concerned with the structural processes that many sociologists seem to be keen on. Therefore, although the change in social structures and socialisation practices may have created a basis for a new generational consciousness, the borderlines that are drawn when constructing one's own generation are often based on more intangible grounds. As for subjective generation markers in the case of researched individuals, the defining base for the generation seems to be their memories of the political changes and their feelings toward the Soviet period. In Western societies, where there have not been such remarkable political transformations for some time, politics has ceased to be a source of generational identity and has been replaced by social solidarity (Lovell 2007, 11). The 1970s age group, however, seems (and may well be the last) to relate their generational identity to political memory, which was also defined by Mannheim as the basis for "generational consciousness" (Mannheim 1993 [1952], 33). Even though the statistics show many traits in which the birth cohort of the 1970s could be considered closer to the 1980s birth cohort, in their subjective interpretation, the 1970s cohort feels closer to those born earlier, in the 1960s. Thus, their generation's shared subjective perspective on time seems to be more important than the structural conditions of socialising.

Generations are constructed contextually, using several discursive fields; these constructions may be subject to reconstruction later. Thus, one can interpret the data presented in this chapter in two possible ways. On the one hand, the 1970s constitute a separate generation, differing from the 1960s

by structural features and from the 1980s by discursive ones. On the other hand, it is possible to treat the 1970s cohort as an in-between generation, a sort of twilight zone between the generations of 1960s and 1980s. Generation borderlines are never strict or straightforward – thus, the buffer zone can reach up to 10 years, depending on the viewpoint one takes.

Rather than being used to identify a distinct generation, this chapter might be useful in posing questions about generational theorising instead. This study 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 to detect a generation would thus be to measure quantitative statistical data, the other by qualitative data on self-perception and generational consciousness. Neither of these methods is superior, although sometimes they might contradict each other (and at times, complement). Both approaches are equally viable depending on the aim of the research and how the concept of generation is operationalised 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 a society (how different age groups value each other), how crucial political and social events during a person's development years shape his or her identity, and whether (and how) certain age groups are potentially mobilised during the times of crisis (Nehring 2007, 58). According to some of the respondents, social networks often function on the basis of this type of generational identity. This research has shown that generational identity is dynamic and contextual. Thus, the generational characteristics of the age group in question may still be in the process of developing and perhaps it would be interesting to return to this question in a decade. The picture would be further complemented if similar research were to be conducted among older and younger age groups.

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ⁱTo name a few, one can mention political posts – many institutions had instructors of political Marxist education. In addition, the economy system was different and many jobs that dealt with communication with ministries and local authorities turned out to be unnecessary.

ⁱⁱThe statistical data given in this chapter are based on the data of Statistics Estonia, if not stated otherwise.

ⁱⁱⁱThe 25–34 age group was not solely those born in the 1970–1980 period. In fact, people reflected in these numbers were born roughly between 1969 and 1982.

^{iv}The first period of interview collection was December 2003–March 2004 (11 interviews), the second March–May 2005 (9 interviews), the third April 2008 (one biographical interview), the fourth November–December 2009 (four focus group interviews, 13 people; one focus group was conducted by Kirsti Jõesalu), the fifth July–August 2010 (6 respondents, 2 group interviews; the interviews were conducted together with Kirsti Jõesalu), and the sixth December 2012–August 2013 (8 interviews).

^vThe 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.