Conceptualising Adulthood in the Transition Society Context – the Case of Estonia

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the conception of adulthood in post-communist Estonia, a society that has undergone vast structural, institutional and cultural changes. To this end, 179 essays written by high school graduates in five Estonian schools are analyzed.[1] It is argued that the conceptualisation of adulthood is contextual and young people position and conceptualise themselves in the framework of these changes. Youth in Estonia, like their peers in Western Countries, stress intangible features (such as responsibility, mental maturity, social maturity, freedom) along with measurable transitions (employment, marriage, parenthood) when conceptualising adulthood. However, the meanings behind the concepts differ and are valued differently among respondents. This paper aims to provide a glance into what meanings are given to these perceptions. The most prevalent themes picked up by respondents were institutional transitions, responsibility and social maturity. Such prevalence is plausible, since these features in the transition to adulthood have changed the most in recent decades: the institutional context has changed and measurable transitions have prolonged; the level of individual responsibility in transitions has grown and the society has transformed.

Keywords: transition to adulthood, adulthood conceptualization, emerging adulthood, Estonia, post-communist cultural changes.

Introduction

For a long time, transition to adulthood has been conceptualised by researchers in a framework of social and biological role transitions, using measurable markers: transitions from school to work, from parent's home to independent household, from child to parent (see Cook & Furstenberg 2002, Katus *et al*. 2005). As these transitions have become more diverse and the process of completing the transitions less standardised and gradually prolonged, researchers have started to doubt if these markers are adequate to describe the transition to adulthood in full. Thus, another approach in recent youth research is to ask young people how they see adulthood and transitions themselves (Arnett 1998, Kugelberg 2000, Macek *et al*. 2007, Mayseless & Scharf 2003, Nelson *et al*. 2004, Plug *et al*. 2003, Thomson *et al*. 2002, Westberg 2004). These studies have confirmed suspicions that young people personally ascribe less importance to the aforementioned markers and stress more intangible concepts such as responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions and becoming financially independent (Arnett 2001, Arnett & Galambos 2003). As these traits are not connected straightforwardly to social and biological role transitions, young people in their early twenties may or may not be considered adults – depending on the context. Their own perception of adulthood gives them a feeling of being in-between the life stages of youth and adulthood (Arnett 2000).

The present paper tries to shed some light on how young people of ethnic Estonian origin in Estonia conceptualise transition to adulthood during (and after) a turbulent time. Estonian youth stresses perhaps also responsibility and independence more often than measurable transitions when conceptualising adulthood. Yet, considering the social context of vast changes during their lives, it

would be interesting to give a deeper view of the meanings these concepts may contain for young people in Estonia. This paper argues that the perception of adulthood is contextual and that intangible features ascribed to adulthood (such as independence, responsibility and freedom) are closely tied to tangible transitions such as numeric age or having an independent household, a steady job and a family (see also Horowitz&Boromnick 2007, Molgat 2007). Also, responsibility and independence might mean different things for the young in different cultures and/or social surroundings and are as vague concepts as adulthood itself. One hundred and seventy nine essays titled 'What happens when I become an Adult?' written in five Estonian high schools in 2005-2006 by high school graduates (born in 1984-1986) were analysed to reveal the meanings young people give to these concepts.

The article is divided into four sections. It starts off with a brief look at the theories surrounding the concept of adulthood in the literature as they relate to the topic of the article. Secondly, a general description of the Estonian social context is given, namely, how the demographic markers of transition to adulthood changed during and after the era of Soviet occupation. The profound changes in this transition may have also influenced the perception of the young people's conception of adulthood, since the society around them (their parents, media) talks about this change. The third section includes a description of the data and methods of the study. This is followed by the final section, where the analysis of the defining of adulthood is given and discussed. The analysis is outlined in six categories that emerged from the essays through which adulthood was defined (responsibility, ambiguity and boredom, mental maturity, freedom, social capacities, role transitions).

Adulthood – theoretical starting points

Adulthood as a term is not really very old and appeared in English dictionaries only one and a half centuries ago, around 1870 (Côté 2000). The term's conceptualisation has probably changed throughout its existence, but it is only recently that researchers have focused their interest on these changes (Arnett 2001, Blatterer 2007, Macek *et al.* 2007, Nelson *et al.* 2004). Even though there seems to be a common agreement on the fact that it has changed, there is not much data available about how adulthood was conceptualised in history, though there are some data available on how different age groups conceptualise adulthood (Arnett 2001, Macek *et al.* 2007, Nugin 2008).

Studies about adulthood conceptualisation concentrate mainly on youth to learn *how and when* one becomes an adult and which transitions the young consider crucial for reaching adulthood (*e.g.* Westberg 2004). Youth as a preceding life phase has been seen traditionally as a preparation period (or the time of transition) to adulthood (Wallace & Kovacheva 1998). However, with recent social processes in mind, many agree that transition has ceased to be the goal of youth as a life stage (Mørch 2003, Skelton 2002). Also, the two life stages are not necessarily always exclusive, rather, at a certain period of life, they may co-exist and adulthood is often confronted with childhood instead of youth.

In sociology, the transition to adulthood has been treated for a long time as the integration into social structures, to full membership of a society or a community (Côté 2000). In recent decades, the duration of the period of integration has extended and the alternatives for choices have widened, but at the same time the collective support for these transitions has decreased (Schwartz *et al.* 2005). Social role transitions (from student to employee, from parents' tenant to real estate owner, from single to partnership) have ceased to be easily comprehensible and linear (Holdsworth & Morgan 2005). In fact, young people's transitions have been described as bouncing back and forth like a yo-yo, establishing a term 'yo-yo transitions' (Pais 2000). Young people today are said to lead a life of 'choice biographies' and negotiate their transitions rather than complete them (Holdsworth & Morgan 2005). All this has led to an increasing level of individualisation (Beck 1992, Giddens 1991, Miles 2000, Rubin 2000, Schwartz *et al.* 2005). This individualisation, however, may have different faces and meanings for people in different social strata – individualism is socially situated: what can be freedom and possibilities for one, may be a burden for another (Côté & Bynner 2008, Furlong & Cartmel 1997, Roberts *et al.* 1994, Skeggs 2004).

The processes of adulthood extension have emerged in Western countries mostly since the 1970s. The reasons for these developments are, no doubt, complex and not easy to point out, but have been

connected to the spread of liberal market economy (i.e youth employment is not granted any more, the decline of industrial sector has caused the need for a more educated labour force and caused the spread of education) or birth control pills (i.e postponement of having children). Thus, young people negotiating their transition in these conditions have sometimes been called the post-1970s generation (Wyn & Woodman 2006). In post-communist countries, these changes have emerged after the fall of the Berlin Wall, at a very uneven pace and in complex conditions, differing from country to country, depending on previous institutional structures as well as political developments of the countries (Kovacheva 2001, Blossfeld *et al.* 2005, Robert & Bukodi 2005, Tomanović & Ignjatović 2006). Hence, in terms of patterns in demographic markers there is no unanimous model of post-communist countries (Kovacheva 2001). However, they all have been exposed to vast and abrupt changes and the discourse of post-communism. Thus, even though transition conditions differ among post-communist countries, the awareness of the change on the discourse level may be similar in those countries.

These social processes that have had an impact on the demographic markers of transition to adulthood have been so influential that the theories of life stages have been complemented with a new term for psychological development – 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett 2000, Schwartz *et al.* 2005, for discussion see also Côté & Bynner 2008, Bynner 2005). The term signifies the life stage at which demographically nothing normative happens and where the search for identity and mental maturation coincides with integration into social structures. Emerging adults feel 'in-between', in a kind of limbo-state, not yet adults but also not children any more. The delay in integration into social structures and the level of individualisation has arrived at such a level that psychological maturation depends on how individuals cope with these challenges (Côté 2000).

Hence, the researchers' interest has shifted from social maturity (integration) to psychological maturity. Adulthood is increasingly conceptualised as a psychological state rather than social status (Côté 2000). This shift corresponds with the data about the perceptions of adulthood by young people so that even though in different societies and cultures the definition of adulthood may vary, most young people seem to agree that the most important features of adulthood are accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent (Arnett 1998, Arnett & Galambos 2003, Arnett 2003, Mayseless & Scharf 2003, Nelson *et al.* 2004). Social role transitions as well as biological transitions are not generally seen as crucial (*ibid*). However, it seems that the role transitions may actually be closely intertwined with psychological traits such as responsibility, making independent decisions and becoming financially independent (Arnett 1998, Molgat 2007). This calls for a deeper glance into the meanings young people attach to these concepts.

Background to the Estonian case

Transition to adulthood, thus, consists of inclusion into social structures (work, housing, parenthood) as well as psychological maturation. Integration into social structures has changed throughout Europe, with the period of obtaining education getting longer, marriage age rising, cohabitation increasing at the expense of marriage, the age of giving birth rising and fertility rates dropping. Yet, even those trends emerge throughout Europe, the timing of these transitions varies across countries.[2] The following is an attempt at giving a brief glance into the changes that have happened to those social integration practices after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Firstly, the demographic pattern of becoming a parent and marrying has undergone a substantial change. At the end of the Soviet era (1991), the mean age of women giving birth to their first child was the lowest (22,6) since the formation of the European marriage pattern in Estonia in the 18th century (Katus *et al.* 2005). 35% of the women born in the cohort 1969-1973 had given birth to their first child by the age of 20. The age started to rise shortly after the regained independence and has risen to 26 by

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2 The different pace and extent of the transitions to adulthood has inspired researchers to suggest three types of transition regimes or clusters: Northern, Southern and Central-European (Vogel 2002, Walther 2006). In the Northern cluster, the support of the state for transitions is bigger and, thus, leaving home occurs earlier, but marriage and childbirth is postponed. In Nordic countries, cohabitation is very common. In the Southern cluster, young people live with their parents sometimes until their 30s, and move out of their parents home to marry and have children.

2009.[3] Marriage has been postponed as well, and co-habitation has become widely popular. In 2009, the ratio of children born to married couples had fallen to 40,8% compared to 72,8% in 1990. At the same time, the proportion of single mothers did not rise.

The mean age for leaving home had been relatively stable during Soviet times. For all cohorts born between 1950-1980 the mean age for leaving home was 19,8 years. By 2006, only 55,3% of the cohort of the respondent group (aged 22-24) had left their home, while 70% of those born 1970-1980 had left home by the age of 22 (European Social Survey 2006). This indicates that the age of leaving home has begun to rise.

One of the vital changes in the institutional background of social inclusion has been the sudden expansion of higher education. While during Soviet times around 20% graduated from higher educational establishments and the number remained virtually unchanged since the 1960s (Katus *et al*. 2005), enrolment into universities increased by 265% during 1990–2008. Today many of the young graduates of secondary education probably plan on pursuing university studies after they graduate from high school.[4]

Another important development in terms of the Estonian social context is the tempo of economic decline and development. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the GDP dropped fast (Keller & Vihalemm 2003). The expectations set for the new independent state in 1991 were too high and rather utopian, so the new lines of social stratification soon brought about overall feelings of disillusionment or disappointment (Aarelaid-Tart 2006, Macek *et al*. 2007, Saar 2008, Sztompka 2000, Vogt 2005). The decline was followed by a growth whose pace was almost as harsh. One illustration for this is the growth of monthly salaries, which rose during the first eight years of this century (2000-2008) from 4,907 EEK (gross) in 2000 to 9,407 in 2006 (with the inflation rate being 29% during the period of 2000-2006). These ruthless developments have resulted in vast social differentiation not only between different social groups (stratification), but also between different geographical locations. Today, around 51% of the GDP is produced in the capital city of Tallinn.[5] The differences between average monthly salaries in different counties can reach up to 40%. The Gini quotient indicating the extent of social stratification has risen during the past years and was 0,36 in 2006.

The situation of the job market for young people after the restoration of independence has not been very stable either. The unemployment rate for the age group of 15-24 was 11,4% in 1993 (overall unemployment for all age groups was 6.6%), but began to rise until 2000, reaching its peak at 23,8% (13,6% overall) and then starting to decline until in 2007, when the number was again 10% (4.7% overall). Now, the percentage has risen once again to 24% during the overall cooling of the economy. As for social mobility among young people, this was very high (both upwards and downwards) shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Toomse 2004). Often young people without the appropriate qualifications occupied influential positions in society (Kogan & Unt 2005). Considering the large number of enrolled individuals in the universities and the recent practice of high social mobility for the young, this may lead to a situation where an increasing number of young people are expecting more than the job market has to offer, since there are more higher education graduates than corresponding jobs (Kogan & Unt 2005).

To summarise, the cohort of young people being studied, born on the threshold of the new political era, have lived during a time of extremely fast change. The demographic patterns followed by their parents have changed significantly, and the period of transition to adulthood has been prolonged remarkably with transitions from school to work getting longer and becoming ruptured, since people work and study simultaneously, and return to studies several times. Economic conditions changed and this may create a feeling of uncertainty in society (at the time of writing the essays, the economic growth had reached its peak of 11,6% in 2006). The cohort under examination has seen scarce and more prosperous times, as well as witnessed young people gaining high social mobility and occupying important positions in society. In addition, most of their parents reached adulthood at the end of the Soviet empire and their socialisation experience has been filled with change as well, even though this was of a different character.

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3 Here and hereafter, the statistical data is derived from official website of Estonian Bureau of Statistics (www. stat.ee), if not stated otherwise.

4 At the time of this research in 2006, 66% of the age group 20-24 were enrolled as students in some higher educational institution. For comparison, in 1990 the number was only 25%.

5 If the surrounding county (Harjumaa) is included, this rises to 61%.

Hence, the cohort under consideration is on the one hand unique, growing up under social conditions that are not comparable to those of previous or next cohorts. On the other hand, it is always a matter of speculation, as to how much influence the processes of such vast change have on the conception of adulthood and to which of its aspects can we relate the impact of this change. Even though there are no clear and unified demographic patterns in the countries of the entire post-communist bloc, there are probably some commonalities (rather than similarities, see Stenning 2005) we can generalize to other post-communist countries. On the other hand, there are certainly some global processes influencing the coming of age of this particular youth group, which they share with their peers in Western welfare states (like internet usage, global culture, etc).

Sample and methods

The data includes one hundred and seventy nine essays written by young people in their final year between 2004 and 2006 in five Estonian schools. The defining point of graduating from secondary school is chosen because it follows the way individual life is organised institutionally. One of the most important factors shaping the transition to adulthood today is the educational system (Aapola 2002, Mørch 2003, Wallace & Kovacheva 1998). At least 80% of young people in Estonia receive secondary education, which is completed approximately at the age of 19. A person becomes legally an adult at the age of 18. At the time they finish secondary education, young people are facing choices that will influence their future life paths. This is the time when the institutional coming of age and the psychological search for one's identity coincide (Corsten 1999, Erikson 1968).

The essays were written in the classroom and were titled 'What happens when I become adult?' ['*Mis juhtub, kui saan täiskasvanuks*?']. Teachers encouraged the students to write whatever came to mind and there was no grade given (except for the grammar in two schools). Essays written in class on a teacher's request are inclined to give data about social constructs, since school essays require a certain structure, form and argument.[6] The main idea of the school essay is to position one's argument in relation to other opinions in society and convincingly persuade the audience of the authors' opinion. Thus, they contain socially shared opinions that are constantly constructed and reconstructed in social space, reflecting literal conventions or social constructs in the surroundings of the respondent and revealing what James W. Wertsch (2002) has called 'narrative templates.' The unit of analysis here is a text, a 'mediated action' which is a symbiosis of active agents, opinion and cultural tools (Wertsch 2002). The cultural tools may differ in different schools, reflecting the influences of specific teachers or the class (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990).

The aim of the sampling was to include urban as well as rural schools, as well as schools from a varied class background. The sample included five schools in Estonia, two of them located in Tallinn (400,000 inhabitants), a third in another average town (100 000 inhabitants), a fourth in a small borough (3900 inhabitants) in the neighbourhood of an urban settlement, and the fifth in a tiny town in the southern part of Estonia (with approximately 1,400 inhabitants). The schools differ not only by their geographical location, but also by the social background of the students. One of the schools in Tallinn (TLN1) is referred to in the public media as an 'elite' school in that it has an admission examination for the first grade (seven-year olds) with tough competition for places (more than four children running for each position). The other Tallinn school (TLN 2) is municipal, in one of the block-house regions with no admission examinations, its students from a mixed social background. The other urban school (U) is also one with admission examinations and tough competition for entry, situated in an elite region of town and mainly with middle-class students. The school near the urban settlement (SG) is a state-financed science-biased gymnasium with students drawn from all over Estonia living in a dormitory near the school. It has only high school level classes and there are admission examinations for pupils who have completed ninth grade. Most of the pupils come from rural areas. The fifth school

6 There are several requirements for school essay required in Estonian high schools: you need to define the problem and its importance, position your argument in the backdrop of existing knowledge, expose your reasoning skills. There are several instructions published about how to write a good essay in class. As some schools gave a grade for the grammar, these guidelines were followed. Even in classes where a grade was not given, pupils tended to stick to the official structure and form of the essay.

is rural (R) and a regular municipal school with its students coming from the local borough (total 2,800 inhabitants). For a more detailed description, see table (Appendix 1).

In terms of gender balance, females are a bit over represented among the sample. The exact numbers of boys and girls participating are not available for all schools, since the essays were written anonymously. However, some schools revealed the numbers of the gender balance of the classes that participated in the research. This may not be representative because as some students were absent, not everyone wrote the essay. The reasons for this gender imbalance are manifold, one of the possible reasons for girls outnumbering boys being that school dropouts tend to be male. Additionally, some of the classes involved in research have humanitarian bias (languages, literature), which traditionally attracts more female students. Without a doubt, there can be a number of other reasons for this gender balance composition, however, in terms of the argument of this paper they may not be so significant.

The sample consists of schools for ethnic Estonians. However, out of 1,3 million inhabitants in the country, there are only approximately 900,000 ethnic Estonians with around 400,000 people in the country comprising a significant Russian-speaking minority.[7] The Russian-speaking community is left out of this study because it differs a lot both by its culture and value-orientations, forming a different cultural unit within Estonia (Vihalemm, Kalmus 2008). Even though the Russian youth has been exposed to the same changes in social structures, the meanings they ascribe to them, may be profoundly different. Thus, studies including Russian-speaking youngsters may be a challenging subject for further research. The aim of this present study is firstly to find out the subjective picture for ethnic Estonians.

The essays were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000).[8] During the process, the text of the essays was reduced to meaningful sentences each representing the central thought of the passage, a group of sentences or the entire essay. The sentences worked as inductive categories, creating different meanings for the concept of adulthood. The meaningful sentences were grouped into categories reflecting the main themes they carried. The categories were then further grouped into six entities, each reflecting the general theme of the categories (*i.e.* adulthood as responsibility; confusion/boredom; possibilities; social and mental maturity and institutions). Each of the six entities (or categories) has subcategories, reflecting the different meanings behind those entities. As a result, a chart of categories was formed and tested against the material one more time (see Appendix 2). Testing involved analysing each essay once more, sentence by sentence, on the backdrop of the chart to see if there were sentences whose core ideas did not match any of the developed categories. The emergence of each subcategory or meaning was counted to get the general idea about the proportions of frequency – how often one or the other category comes up (the numbers are indicated in the chart). It is noteworthy, however, that compared to large-n surveys with pre-defined categories, it is far more complicated to measure the percentage of the emergence of the categories in the essays, since the concepts (subcategories) are very closely intertwined with other categories and themes detected in the essays are sometimes defined by each other. For instance, when talking about responsibility, respondents mention other themes, like being capable of forming a family or getting a steady job. In this case, all subcategories that emerged are counted as described above. Hence, one essay can mention numerous subcategories/themes, and quite often even those contradicting each other (for instance it can be stated that adulthood can depend on age and that it does not depend on it, in the same essay).

Analysis. Defining adulthood in contemporary Estonia

Responsibility and independence

The most common concept tied to adulthood is responsibility, which is mentioned one way or another in most of the essays. The prevalence of responsibility is perhaps no surprise, since the transition

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7 The Russian-speaking minority consists mostly of ethnic Russians (approx 300,000), the rest are Belorussians, Ukrainians, Tatars etc.
8 The process of analysing and coding tokk place in Estonian (except for one essay written in English).

routes have individualised and individual responsibility has gradually gained importance in young people's transitions to adulthood (Schwartz *et al.* 2005). In a transition society, the institutional system supporting transitions (youth organisations, stipends for students) collapsed after the fall of the Soviet Union and the new system was rebuilt along with restructuring of the society. Those starting their transition shortly after the political turn occasionally faced institutional chaos and a lack of role models. Thus, they had to negotiate their transitions during the overall restructuring of the society and participate in that restructuring at the same time. The fact that a large proportion managed to pull through these changes with high social mobility has contributed a lot to the perception of individual agency in transitions. This perception is strongly prevalent in the Estonian media and probably also in the respondents' homes (as the parents had to rebuild their lives in a newly built social space).

Pupils talk about responsibility very contextually – tying it with role transitions or social transitions (being able to vote), or even freedom (only the ones capable of taking responsibility for their actions can do it). It was often used together with the concept of independence: sometimes the words were used as synonyms, as responsibility was frequently talked about in connection with independence from parents or other institutions. The concept altogether seems to be rather broad:[9]

> *I should take responsibility and keep myself alive on my own, I should take care of the social order and morality. This is probably something I would try to do. Try to be an adult.* (TLN1, 39)

Therefore, responsibility was conceptualised mainly as coping on one's own, standing on one's own feet, managing without help, and seeing and supporting others in society. However, responsibility acts pretty much as an umbrella term embracing a variety of other meanings related to adulthood (family formation, age, financial independence). Hence, it is only natural that in large-n surveys, it emerges more often as a defining feature for adulthood since it seems to be tied to most of the other variables too:

> *Yet, at the moment I consider myself an adult who is responsible for her actions. I can be a bit childish and more than a bit moody, but I think I am capable of having my own home and taking care of a family.* (TLN1, 36)

Responsibility as a part of adulthood may be valued quite differently, starting from euphoric greetings to absolute fear of what it may bring. Mostly, it was mentioned as something that just is an inevitable part of adulthood without giving it any strong evaluation or, attaching any positive value to it (appeared in 40%, 72 essays):

> *Actually I consider myself to be an adult already now. I may be a beginner, but still... The most important change between childhood and the adult age is probably the fact that one thing becomes clearer and clearer – all you do, you do for yourself. Adult status is accompanied by big responsibility, but also the freedom to shape your life in the direction you want. It is good to know that I could become anyone I wish and accomplish something special, which is useful first and foremost for myself. Only you have to educate yourself, work hard and not give up.* (TLN2, 15)

However, there were voices saying that responsibility is something that is hard to deal with or even can ruin the taste of a full life. I have distinguished the difference between two separate groups of themes among those describing responsibility as something hard. In the first case (as emerged in 23 %, 41 essays), the hardship of responsibility is mentioned as something that is just a part of life that has to be accepted. Some respondents mention hardships and tough periods of life that can come along (*e.g.* puberty, TLN1 14) stating that there are others there who support and help them get through this. On other occasions, graduates say that adulthood entails responsibility which may not be so 'pleasant' (TLN2 16) or that adulthood is not a 'piece of cake' (TLN1 18), and that one likes to be 'taken care of' (TLN1 37). One respondent states that as a child, you have more support from the state, such as free dental care and child allowances (SG 44), one of them ponders that it is harder to live under the Estonian liberal economy compared to that of Scandinavia or Germany (U 4); another says

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9 cf. Arnett's questionnaire, where responsibility is seen only as accepting consequences of one's own actions.

that as a child and living at home, one always has something good to eat (R 20). In other words, most of those respondents categorised under this subcategory ('responsibility is hard') admit that life as an adult is not easy, but it is something you just have to cope with

Yet, there is another group of essays expressing some serious concern about the responsibilities that lay ahead (17%, 30 essays). These essays reflect a message that adulthood is not worth aspiring to, since the responsibility that is required may diminish the joy of life. As expected, the extent of gloominess in this message may vary among the group mentioning it. Some say that adulthood can not be anything good since it has 'allegedly' too much responsibility in it (TLN1 8), yet without pondering deeper about what bad may come out of it. Many respondents take up the theme of paying the bills and taxes and, therefore, being forced to work daily and fall into a routine, which is feared:

> As an adult, I would have to start to pay taxes. Whereby I understand virtually nothing about filling out the tax declaration. Too bad, I could easily go to jail for that. (SG, 48)

> Becoming adult means independence, owning a home, family to take care of, but all these things could enrich life – or at least they should. I think that the main reason why people don't enjoy them is because they are taken as responsibilities and they let life become routine. Routine, however, is a biggest problem that can emerge. It kills a person's will to do something impulsively. Routine may be secure, but security is not always the best solution. (U, 13)

Some have even deeper worries, stating that most of the adults are constantly depressed (U 4, TLN2 13), that during adulthood 'happy days are replaced by workdays' (R 10), and that it is not easy to be able to 'bring home the bacon'(R 37). The reason for expressing adulthood in dark shades may also be a part of social construction in the surroundings of the respondents. The fear of not being able to earn enough money to support one's family can be different from the fear of routine in general. The first conception can stem probably from a strong impact of the respondent's social surroundings. He or she can see adults struggling to find a job or make ends meet. In short, adulthood conception is strongly influenced by social background and available resources (Côté 2007, Plug *et al*. 2003, Skeggs 2004, Threadgold & Nilan 2009)

It is evident that the tendency to ponder on the question of bills is more frequent among rural pupils (41% of them picked up the theme of responsibility being hard). Positioning this in a broader Estonian context, it makes sense, since the stratification between urban and rural areas is great: average income in particular county per household member is nearly half of what it is in Tallinn. The tendency of rural areas to lag in structural development is something that has emerged after the collapse of planned economy. Therefore, the discourse about it may be tied to the discourse of change in general and may be common in the social surroundings of these young people more often compared to the others. However, the problem of worrying about unemployment altogether is something that has come up only shortly after the birth of the respondents in all other schools too. Therefore, the topic may have come up in their families or social circles in the context that this is something you have to worry about under the new political order: liberal economy.

The other reason for the negative perception of responsibility is closely connected to the next category, where adulthood is seen as boredom and bitterness, and the reasons for this will be discussed more thoroughly in the next section. It has less to do with economic hardships but with the character of late modern society and its prevailing individualism, with the perception of youth as freedom and adulthood as prison (Nugin 2008).

One of the themes that repeatedly emerged in essays is the topic of independence from parents (28%, 51 essays). Here, the respondents mentioned themes also commonly used in large-n questionnaires (see Arnett & Galambos 2003): to establish a relationship with parents as an equal adult, to become financially independent from parents, to no longer live in the parent's household, to not be deeply tied to parents emotionally, and to decide on your personal beliefs/values independently of parents or other influences. One of the most frequently expressed thoughts under this category seems to be financial independence from parents. As with other themes, independence can be greeted (TLN 1, 9) or condemned:

It is not cool at all to become an adult, you have to do it all yourself, parents don't help you or support you as much as when you were young. But the coolest thing to be is to be young, when we don't have a clue about things. When you become an adult, you don't have parents anymore to guide you on the right track, because then we have to face life. (R, 28)

Independence in a broader sense was also mentioned in many essays (8.4%, 15 essays), yet mostly independence was mentioned in connection to parents.

Adulthood as confusion, ambiguity and boredom

As many researchers have pointed out, the conceptualising of adulthood is getting ambiguous and contextual (Aapola 2002, Kugelberg 2000, Plug *et al.* 2003). Even a brief glance at the essays under study would confirm that Estonian youth is not an exception in this respect, as the theme of adulthood's hazy nature was being picked up in 13,4% (24) essays.

One important factor for this indistinctness of conceptualisation is the form of the data, namely, the essay structure. It is normal to start an essay written in class by defining and specifying the title. Another reason for such ambiguity can be explained by the growing uncertainty of late modern society in general. The atmosphere of uncertainty in society has accompanied the young people throughout their lives, with the nature of the uncertainties changing constantly with time (Nugin 2008, Zinn 2005). The vast and quick changes in the processes of transition to adulthood in Estonia have contributed to the reconceptualisation of the life stage in general. The students are confused about their age identity, finding it difficult to define adulthood by certain indicators, or clearly identify themselves as adults, considering themselves neither adults nor children (see also Arnett 2000, Bynner 2005, Plug *et al.* 2003, Skelton 2002). There are several socially shared opinions about adult status surrounding the respondents and they have to negotiate their age-identity and status in the midst of these beliefs. It is natural that while negotiating this identity, they are contributing to the social construction of adulthood at the same time. Adulthood transition has been prolonged and, therefore, some aspects arrive earlier, some later, and young people feel as adults depending on the context:

*Even though in principle I am already an adult, **I don't feel like one**. 'Adult' as such is a very relative conception. For some, it means reaching the age of 18, for others, self-reliance and independent life.*
*There are as many different people as there are different views on life. I have often been told: 'You can do that when you are an adult,' 'You are not old enough for that,' etc. I personally believe that **I am an adult** in a mental sense, and actually was already years ago. I believe that maturity does not depend on age, and I have been acting accordingly. Sometimes even causing bewilderment in others.*
*The main thing, in which **I do not believe that I am an adult** and which is most important, is financial independence.[10]* (TLN1 11)

At times some of them question overall the division of life into the stages of childhood and adulthood:

Becoming an adult is one of the contemporary myths. Everything is supposed to change – rights, obligations, relation to the surroundings and primarily, thinking. ... Allegedly, life changes disparately. I don't believe that. (U, 5)

The notion of some people (or even anybody) never becoming adults is not rare in these essays. In 15,6 % (28) of the essays it was stated that the respondent or some people in society would never become adult. The tendency to question the existence of adulthood emerges in all schools, though one might speculate that the reasons for blurring the lines of life stages may differ.

In addition to questioning adulthood as a life stage or expressing an unwillingness to become an adult, many essays depicted the adult life period as something despicable. In 14% (25) of the essays, adults were described as cold or evil, disappointed in life, incapable of playing, being vital or sincere. In five essays, it was held that grownups were incapable of learning and developing. In other words,

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10 Author's formatting to bold.

adulthood was confronted with childhood. It is noteworthy that whenever something was opposed explicitly to adulthood, it was a matter belonging to 'childhood' – the one not acting like an adult, would be a 'boy', a 'girl' or a 'child'. Without implicitly being pointed out, adulthood and youth was not something that was necessarily depicted as opposite sides. All in all, the lines of childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age are all very vague and context-dependent in those essays.

The tendency to depict adulthood in depressing colours was already described above in the discussion of the meaning that some respondents attributed to responsibility. In my opinion, these two themes are somewhat connected. As mentioned, some of the reasons may manifest in the social background of the graduates.

However, there seems to be another reason for depicting adulthood gloomily Due to the rapid developments in the constantly changing late modern society, people who have flexible and fluid identities are coping best (Bauman 2005, Giddens 1991). Therefore, virtues traditionally attributed to youth – the ability to change, to learn, to develop, openness, playfulness, flexibility, – are valued (Nugin 2008). Adulthood, on the contrary, can mean standards, routine, being ready. Sometimes virtues opposite to youth are also attributed to it, including the inability to change, seriousness, etc. Additionally, the consumer society is promoting the idea of being forever young and leading a youthful lifestyle (Miles 2000). All this may have influenced the construction of the concept of adulthood as opposite to youthfulness, playfulness, merriness, etc:

> *I live in an adult world already a long time and I feel that I am one of them, but not fully. If I recognised that I belonged to that 'race of big people,' I would sit down for starters and ponder on life with a cup of tea. Then I would go out of the door, leaving my luxurious penthouse apartment behind in its solitude and rush to work with my sports car. Yes, exactly, to work. To an institution, whose floors I have presumably worn for years. The day when I lose all the remains of my childhood will be equal to a funeral – my own funeral. I would probably even have a wake to celebrate it, consuming lovely chocolate cake and watching soap operas with emptiness in my eyes.* (SG, 30)

As this extract shows, the border between the subcategory of 'responsibility as a burden' and 'grownups are incapable of play' is not easy to detect. This respondent also talks about responsibilities (going to work) as something that steals joy from one's life. Yet, I still think that the differentiation between the two subcategories is important. In the first case, young people blame responsibility as an inevitable part of adult life for boringness, routine and lack of joy in life. In the second case, however, the reasons for this boredom seem to be broader and point to a general symbolic and socially shared perception that youth is a period to be worshipped and confronted with adulthood.

Adulthood as mental maturity, as an outcome of psychological development

26% (47) of the essays depicted adulthood as some sort of mental maturity, being capable of solving every problem. Under this subcategory, several thoughts were expressed. Some respondents mentioned that being an adult means thinking like one and, therefore, coping with life, having a coherent world vision, a sober mind, being able to concentrate. Here also, many defined adulthood as the opposite of childhood, attributing to adulthood opposite virtues to those of childhood. If a child is naïve, an adult is capable of evaluating things objectively (TLN2 1), if a child is a fool, an adult is wise and makes right decisions (U 19, SG 16), if a child is unfocused, an adult is focused (TLN1 31) and can plan ahead (U 22). In this case, all the negative features of childhood are turned opposite in adulthood and adulthood is defined by a negation of childhood (but not youth).

Mental maturity can be just one aspect of adulthood, which is a complex concept formed by several components, many of them also influenced by how other people treat the person. In 19,5% (35) of the essays it was explicitly stressed that adulthood is an ongoing process of getting experiences and wisdom and depends on the individual. Again, becoming mentally mature through experiences means mainly that other aspects of social life contribute to mental development. While this group of respondents who stress psychological progress in becoming an adult see adulthood in one way or another as some shared norm (though it depends on the individual when this shared norm is achieved), there is a number of those who claim that reaching adulthood or defining adulthood is

a question of the individual's inner feeling (11%, 20 essays). In other words, the only judge to detect adulthood is the individual himself or herself:

> *You become an adult exactly when you feel it yourself. The fact that you are an adult by law does not mean you are mentally or physically ready for life.* (SG 47)

Another group of themes suggesting that the psychological part is more important than social roles can be called 'nothing really changes' (9%, 16 essays). In these, young people try to communicate two messages – first, that a person's core stays the same no matter what institutional changes happen; second, that since society is in constant change anyhow, the changes take place throughout your life course, regardless of whether you have made any institutional role transitions.

Freedom, possibilities and the future

As indicated by most youth researchers, contemporary youth transitions are full of unexpected turns, uncertain developments and destandardised paths. The options are innumerable compared to previous times and young people can feel lost, uncertain or at risk (Beck 1992). Young people in this sample have lived through especially turbulent times. It still remains an open question as to how they, being children, sensed and experienced those changes. Some of these harsh changes may have gone unnoticed by them, since they lived behind the secure back of their parents. Yet, the construction of change by their parents and society (including the media) has left very strong traces in young people's conceptualisation of contemporary Estonia and its social change. Young people feel that the changed society has different expectations towards them, and it may scare them:

> *There is too much emphasis put on the future. Every day we encounter phrases in the media about what will happen to us in the future. This kind of thing scares us. We fear the future, inevitably. Estonian problems are not alcoholism and drugs, but young people's fear for the future. There is a huge amount of hope laid on us and there is no other option left for us than to strive for them on the edge of burning ourselves out.* (TLN2, 3)

The theme of the fear of uncertainty is pretty common in these essays (emerging in 19,5% of them, 35 essays). However, the character of fear may change. Some fear that they might not get a job that would be interesting enough for them (TLN1 32), some say the options are innumerable and that makes choices difficult (TLN1 9, U 4), young people from rural areas wish to go to live in urban areas but are scared of new surroundings and possibilities (R 15, 20), some are scared about the changing nature of human relationships and disappointments in intimate ones (U 23). In other words, the extent of fears may vary, some worry if they will manage at all, while others just state that making a choice is hard and success may not always arrive:

> *Often people worry too much. 'What if I don't find a good job?' 'What if I can't get into university?' Or then again, 'How should I behave as an adult?' Of course there are some dangers. Risks. I read recently in a graduate essay that young actors experience difficulties in projecting themselves into the distant future and understand that maybe they will not dazzle in front of the audience soon, because the producers' taste in actors has changed. The same thing can happen to all creative people, but not only them.* (TLN1, 28)

However, expectedly, young people are optimistic by nature (Arnett 2004, Miles 2000, Rubin 2000) and, therefore, full of hope for a better future. They tend to negotiate their transitions in a given social context, developing different values and attitudes towards this uncertainty in contemporary society (Wyn & White 2000). Thus, the essays expressing concerns towards too many options were outnumbered by those anticipating the future with positive feelings. Many essays brought up the theme of adulthood being a time when one could finally become one's own master (9.5%, 17 essays), pondered on optimistic life plans, hoping to become rich (mentally or financially) and successful (9.5%, 17 essays). Quite a few declared that the future is full of possibilities and that this is good (8.4%,

15 essays) and that adulthood is a time when you get a chance to change something in society (4%, 7 essays). Needless to say, all the essays taking up the theme of freedom and possibilities treated them in a specific social context, talking about role transitions. Many respondents picked up the theme of a 'moratorium' – of postponing the transition to adulthood and exploring the world and its opportunities before settling down (6.7%, 12 essays).

Interestingly, both trends – fear and optimism – seem to point to the same phenomenon in society: individualisation. The uncertainties of transition may frighten some of the young people, but the inevitable outcome of these processes has been a 'choice biography' and an individual approach to one's path in life. Individualism is socially situated and may cause fear as well as hope (Roberts *et al*. 2004). At the time of emerging adulthood, this 'taking responsibility for one's life' comes into the focus of one's everyday experience – it is the time of 'looking forward' (Arnett 2004). Young people are most independent and free during the period of emerging adulthood, when they have chances to explore the options life has for them, yet without taking irreversible decisions on life (Arnett 2004). During the last decades in Estonia, the options for exploration have widened at a very fast pace and these young are facing possibilities that their parents never dreamed of.

Adulthood as social maturity

Regardless of the fading socially shared norms (Giddens 1991, Beck 1992, Bauman 2005), the importance of society is still very strongly felt in conceptualising adulthood in the given essays. This is probably because adulthood is a social construction and not something one individually creates. Young people feel they have to respond to social expectations, as was expressed in 33,5% (60) of the essays. However, there are variations in the understanding and perceptions of what society expects or how adults should or do respond to social demands. One of the themes coming up under this subcategory was conforming to social norms. Some respondents see it as a strain for development:

> *Most important is not to lose oneself, at the same time not to expose. I will become part in the big machine work.* (TLN1, 14)

Meeting the norms of society can mean also different things. Mostly it was expressed that one has to act or behave 'like an adult'. In some cases, behaving according to social norms was considered to be the inevitable thing to do, something that you just have to accept (act according to your age, R 33). Others state that grown-ups pay too much attention to moral codes and norms of behaviour and fear too much what others think about them instead of doing what they wish (U 1, 13). However, there were also some who longed to fit into those norms, even by wearing clothing that was 'appropriately grown-up' (SG 22). Another group of themes under this subcategory talks about social responsibility, behaving in a way that is considerate to others and society: to understand and consider others around oneself (TLN1 3, TLN2 12). Also, there are voices who call for considering others in a broader sense, to give or contribute something to society instead of just taking (U 9).

The social side of adulthood was often expressed in the form of social critique. The respondents indicated that today as an adult you have to cope and get by in a society that is unjust (23,5%, 42 essays). Many essays refer to the social change that Estonia has witnessed during the recent decades, reflecting for example on demographic changes in the transition to adulthood: postponement of family formation in comparison with their parents' generation (SG 41, U 20). However, there are others that claim that adulthood is arriving earlier than it used to (R 31). Sometimes respondents refer to those only five to ten years younger than themselves as people who will lead a different life because of the social changes and, therefore, have a different pattern of maturation.

A number of respondents ponder on the unjust nature of the liberal economy model or the overwhelming emphasis on money or harsh competition (TLN2 19) and find it especially hard to become successful or rich today (TLN1 32, U 11). Some respondents were not content with the level of corruption and bureaucracy in Estonia (R 30) or stated that politics is dirty (TLN1 17). In all those essays, one can sense the critique of society against the backdrop of change. When talking about 'today', there is always a sensed 'yesterday', when things were not so complicated and being an 'adult' was easier. Many talk about the importance of money as something despicable and stress its rather recent entry on the social scene (U 1, TLN2 17):

Children today are altogether different, compared to old times. Our young people are arrogant and they feel that they are better than others. They want to feel superior especially because of fancy and expensive clothing or mobile phones. It didn't use to be like that, schools had uniforms and all kinds of phones were forbidden, or rather there were no phones back then. (R, 6)

Yet none of the respondents have (consciously) known any other economic order besides capitalism and only the pupils in the elite school in Tallinn (TLN 1) have any experience with school uniforms. Thus, the notion of change must be constructed by others who know the previous, egalitarian society. The emergence of these themes in the essays suggests that young people sense social change as something that changes people and their behaviour.

Besides those essays pointing to specific faults of the society, others criticised the general order of society, pointing to the fractured and fragmented nature of contemporary Estonia (R 27). Two respondents (R 26 and 34) describe their lives as adults as happy and versatile ones – the first one promises to start off as an 'office rat', continuing as a truck driver, then as a singer, followed by a career in politics and then (after embezzling some millions from the state) return to being a peaceful countryman. The second one promises to hold several jobs simultaneously – being a policeman, surgeon, bus driver and truck driver. He also plans to further his education in art history at a university. These essays are probably meant as mockery, however, the essays that contained some kind of ridicule are mainly conveying one message – society today is too fragmented, there is too much rush, people worry too much about money and have to work too much to get it. There is a longing to return to a more traditional society (or at least to the one before the transition), in which there would be less uncertainty, but also fewer possibilities.

One change in the transition to adulthood that was depicted in the essays (9%, 16 essays) was the changing nature of social relations. Some discussed the changing nature between their friends and predicted that over time different social circles will emerge, some pondered on the social relations in general – how other people would treat them once they became adults, since relationships between adults are different (SG 23), but also what would happen when one establishes a permanent partnership.

Three young people expressed their reluctance to accept social norms once they become adults and wrote about leading their lives according to their own norms (U 5, TLN1 24, TLN1 10): either by refusing to marry, to work regular office hours or by taking a ferret as a pet instead of a dog.

Role Transitions

As mentioned before, the data in numerous researches indicates that responsibility and independence are considered more important than role transitions (such as going to work instead of studying or becoming a parent). This research has a different design and was not aimed at measuring which features are dominant while conceptualising adulthood. However, it shows that the theme of institutional, social or role transition emerges overwhelmingly in most of the essays in one way or other (even if some essays declare that those transitions do not matter), with 73% (131) of the essays taking up the theme. Those claiming that the measurable transitions do not matter must still have some reasons to bring up the subject of institutional transitions: they feel the need to position their argument against the backdrop of some broader social construction.

The data of this research shows that measurable transitions are always contextualised and seen as closely tied to other features (independence, responsibility, mental or social maturity, possibilities, routine). The most frequent theme emerging in the essays when conceptualising adulthood was tying it with either having a steady job (earning money, transition to work), having one's own home (moving out of the parental home) or having a family/children (48%, 86 essays). All the essays mentioning either one or a combination of those things were counted.

Again, the meanings given to those transitions vary from essay to essay. Some essays portray particularly traditional picture of adulthood:

But what happened to me when I became an adult? I have already lived with my boyfriend for two years at weekends and I already know how to take care of a home and to cook dinner every evening. In short,

I am already like a housewife.
… When I turn 21, I would like to have a baby. Before having a baby, I would like to have my own home, where I live together with my fiancé. … Before having a baby, I would like to make some money. After graduating school, I will go to England and when I come back, I can establish my own home. (R 21)

One can speculate that this tendency to portray a standard family model (a spouse and 2 kids) is stronger in rural areas, since nearly half of the essays from the Southern Estonian county school (16 out of 37) expressed their longing for a traditional happy family. By comparison, only four from the Tallinn elite school expressed the same. This correlates with social research data that indicates that traditional demographic patterns are prevalent in rural areas throughout history (Katus *et al.* 2005).

A significant amount of the essays (24 %, 43 essays) brought up the theme of numeric age, stating that it is contextual and that a mere number does not influence maturity. Many of those stating that adulthood does not depend on a certain age agree that social and biological transitions still play a crucial role – those transitions just take place at different times for different people. However, mentioning the age factor as not being important indicates that there are others in society trying to impose this opinion and that young people are trying to argue against it. Somewhat surprisingly, many essays arguing about the contextual numeric age also admit in other places that sometimes age is important since it gives you some social rights that demand responsibility (as an adult):

Society has set certain norms. When I become 18, I can go out at night and go from one club to another to party. I can consume alcohol, etc. Therefore, my rights have grown. I am more responsible for myself than I was before. (SG 11)

The notion of social roles coming with a certain age emerges in 17,3% (31) of the essays. Young people admit that some rights that arrive with certain number may actually be important in becoming adult (having the right to vote, buy alcohol, drive a car, run for parliamentary elections, visit casinos), since it gives one the chance of acting responsibly.

In eight essays (4.5%), it was stated that neither of these roles or biological transitions matter in terms of becoming an adult.

Discussion and conclusions

The overwhelming social change after the collapse of the Soviet Union has also changed the context and processes of transition to adulthood in Estonia. The process of becoming an adult has prolonged and the perception of the age period has, therefore, probably changed as well. This research has confirmed the hypothesis of several researchers who have claimed that youth as a life phase has ceased to be merely preparation for adulthood (Mørch 2003, Skelton 2002). Young (ethnic) Estonians often express their reluctance to become adults at all and the lines of adulthood and youth are mostly blurred in their essays. It is not rare that youth is seen as a period of development or openness and adulthood, on the contrary, as one of closeness. Often young people expressed their feelings of being in-between, in a kind of state of limbo – in some respects they are adults, but not in others. This indicates that they are going through a life phase of emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000). Often, youngsters reveal their confusion about defining the age phase. This ambiguous perception of adulthood may be the product of contemporary 'yo-yo transition' (Pais 2000) routes, when adulthood is not a one-off transition, but a process where young people negotiate their transitions rather than complete them (Holdsworth & Morgan 2005).

Young Estonians confirm the results of previous research in this field and conceptualise adulthood via intangible features and as a kind of psychological state (Arnett 2004), yet often tying these features to social and biological role transitions (employment, parenthood, see also Molgat 2007). The meanings behind the concepts of adulthood are changing in social space and they differ in every given context. The Estonian context is specific because of the recent extensive changes in society. The influence of these changes on the demographic markers of transition to adulthood is indisputable. However, even though we can safely assume that this has also had its effect on the conceptualisation of adulthood, the ground for making conclusions about that is somewhat shaky, since we do not have similar data

that would enable us to find out what the perception of adulthood was before the social change. Yet, there are some indicators that allow one to speculate on the subject.

Relying on this data, two categories are prevalent among the Estonian youth – institutional transitions and responsibility. Considering the structural changes the society has gone through, it makes sense. The institutional transitions have transformed and may still be undergoing changes (*e.g.* the age of giving birth still shows a rising trend) and, thus, young people need to position their own transition on the backdrop of this change. The parents and teachers of the respondents went through a different transition pattern and are probably stressing this change too. Therefore, the importance of tangible social, biological and role transitions in adulthood conceptualisation is very clearly evident in the social surroundings of the respondents (even though it is tied to intangible features).

Young people's stress over responsibility expresses an important trait among contemporary youth – individualisation. They feel the need to take responsibility for their actions, search and find their way and explore the numerous options. In the Estonian context, individualisation as part of the adulthood transition process is rather new and closely connected to the restructuring of the society from a planned economy to a liberal one. This shift is perceived by respondents and this perception of change is traceable also when reading the essays. Perhaps the change in the level of responsibility of young people is one of the reasons why it is taken up so much in essays. Many fear responsibility (especially its material side) and long for institutional or parental support. The conceptualisation of responsibility is deeply tied to social context and has numerous facets (Skeggs 2004).

The third prevalent topic brought up by pupils was the social side of adulthood. Besides one third of the respondents who mention the social character of adulthood, almost a quarter of the respondents describe adulthood in a society that is (according to them) unjust or changed in one way or other. The change is sometimes depicted in the context of Soviet society – a society the young have not experienced themselves, which indicates again a strong influence of those who have lived through those hazy times. All these processes have influenced the young to reconstruct and negotiate their own perception in the midst of the other perceptions and probably contributed to the feeling that adulthood is ambiguous or nonexistent; perhaps even played part in some young people's loathing of adults.

Even though these traits are common also among the youth in the West, the context of their emergence is essentially different and, thus, the understanding of the age phase as such can also be different. A methodological conclusion of such research is perhaps that asking youngsters to rank the (predefined) features of adulthood (as many researchers have done, see Arnett & Galambos 2003, Macek et al. 2007, Nelson et al. 2004) may not be sufficient to grasp the meaning of the age concept in full. Many concepts that are separated in the questionnaire are actually perceived as one and vice versa (see also Molgat 2007). In order to find out how the young people perceive integration into social structures, it would be more useful to find out how many young people consider responsibility as a burden or how many fear the possibilities that adulthood has to offer. The question as to what responsibility as a term means for young people and if there are any essential differences in post-communist and Western countries is open to speculations or further research.

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Appendix 1. The description of schools and numbers of students participating in the study

The name of the school (abbreviation)	Location	Number of pupils who wrote the essay	Number of people in the class/year	Gender balance in the class/year[1]: Girls/boys	Number of pupils in the school
Tallinn elite school (TLN1)	Tallinn, old town	39	Not known	26/13	893
Tallinn municipal school (TLN2)	Tallinn, block house region	23	Not known	17/6	780
Urban school (U)	Urban, old elite living area	27	32	22/10	799
State Gymnasium near urban settlement (SG)	Borough near urban settlement	54	60	31/29	277
School of a borough in Southern Estonia(R)	Centre of a borough	36	52	26/27	286

1 In the case of classes for which numbers were unavailable, gender balance was derived from the essays.

Appendix 2. The categories and subcategories describing adulthood as derived from the data

Responsibility and individual responsibility (individualization), independence	Ambiguity / confusion / being boring/too serious vs childish	Mental maturity, a process	Freedom, possibilities, future
N=72 (40 %) One has to take responsibility for one's actions, cope in life on one's own making independent decisions (TLN1 16, R 14, TLN2 6, U 14, SG 22)	**N=28 (15.6 %)** One likes/some like to be child(ish) all one's/their life (TLN1 4, R 10, TLN2 2, U 9, SG 3)	**N=47 (26 %)** Be capable of solving every problem, mental maturity (TLN1 6, R 7, TLN2 4, U 14, SG 16)	**N=35 (19.5 %)** Too many possibilities makes future uncertain and unsecure (TLN1 10, R 3, TLN2 3, U 4); also uncertain relationships (TLN1 1, R 1, U 2); will i manage? 'I am scared' (R 9, TLN2 1, U 1)
N=51 (28 %) Independence from parents – financial and other (TLN1 8, R 7, TLN2 5, U 9, SG 22)	**N=25 (14 %)** Grownups are cold and evil, disappointed in life, are incapable of play, being vital and sincere (TLN1 5, R 6 TLN2 3, U 9, SG 3)	**N=35 (19.5 %)** Becoming an adult is an ongoing individual process, getting experiences (TLN1 10, R 3, TLN2 2, U 10, SG 10)	**N=17 (9.5 %)** Freedom to be one's own master (TLN1 4, R 2, TLN2 5, U 3, SG 3)
N=41 (23 %) Responsibility is hard (it is hard to accomplish something), one needs/ wants to be taken care of/let others decide for you (TLN1 9; R 15, TLN2 4, U 9, SG 4)	**N=24 (13.4%)** Ambiguity – what is, who knows? Confusion about one's own age identity (TLN1 8, R 5, TLN2 1, U 4, SG 6)	**N=20 (11 %)** Becoming an adult is the question of inner feeling, mental maturity (TLN1 5, R 3, U 8, SG 4)	**N=17 (9.5 %)** The will to become rich and/or successful: mentally and/or financially (TLN1 3, R 7, TLN2 4, U 1, SG 2)
N=30 (17 %) The obligation to be responsible (routine) takes away joy, and courage. Responsibility is a burden and consists of a bunch of obligations – taxes, work, bills (TLN1 3, R 6, TLN2 4, U 8, SG 9)	**N=5 (2.8 %)** Respondent wants to develop until he/ she dies=grownups are incapable of developing/ progress and are thus dull (TLN1 2, R 2; U 1)	**N=16 (9 %)** Nothing really happens or changes (TLN1 3, R 4, TLN2 2, U 4, SG 3)	**N=15 (8.4 %)** Life is full of possibilities and it is good (TLN1 5, R 2, TLN2 1, U 5, SG 2)
N=15 (8.4 %) Independence in a broader sense (TLN1 2, R 3, U 6, SG 4)			**N=12 (6.7 %)** After high school there is time to find oneself (a gap year TLN1 2, studying/travelling abroad and meeting a lot of people TLN1 2, R 4, TLN2 1, SG 1; have an interesting life TLN1 1; R 1)
			N=7 (4 %) A chance to change something in society (TLN1 2, R 1, TLN2 1, SG 3)

Appendix 2. (Continued)

Social capacity, social maturity, acceptance of norms, entrance to the unjust world	Institutions (family, place to live, steady work, social rights – role transitions)
N=60 (33.5%) One has to be disciplined, be part of a machine work, be considerate to others in society (TLN1 10, R 10, TLN2 7, U 12, SG 21)	**N=86 (48 %)** One or combination of these things: One day one has to start earning one's own money, have one's own home and form a family (TLN1 23, R 20, TLN2 11, U 8, SG 24)
N=42 (23.5 %) One has to cope in a society which is unjust (R 1, SG 1): dirty politics, corruption and bureaucracy (TLN1 1, R 1, SG 1); overemphasizing the role of a job (TLN1 1); too tough competition/hard to be successful or rich (TLN1 2, R 2, TLN2 3, U 5, SG 2); hard to find (an interesting) job (TLN1 1, R 2); fragmented society (TLN1 1, R 4); adulthood comes too early (R 2, TLN2 2, U 1, SG 1); adulthood is postponed (U 2, SG 1); young people are too arrogant (R 1); everything is too expensive (R 2, TLN2 1); in contemporary society its hard to tell who is an adult (R 1)	**N=43 (24 %)** The age is contextual, number does not matter (TLN1 8, R 4, TLN2 3, U 9, SG 19)
N=16 (9 %) Friends and relationships are important, but their character may change (TLN1 3, R 3, U 4, SG 6)	**N=31 (17.3 %)** Social role transitions. Social rights come with certain age (or institutionally, like graduating from high school) and are important (TLN1 3, R 5, TLN2 3, U 6, SG 14)
N=3 (1.7 %) Reluctance to live according to clichés (TLN1 2, U 1)	**N=8 (4.5 %)** Becoming an adult does not depend on graduating from school, becoming a full citizen or forming a family (TLN1 2, R 3, U 1, SG 2)