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DO DEFINING MOMENTS
LEAVE THEIR MARK FOR LIFE?
THE CASE OF SWEDEN

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Abstract

According to the theory of “defining moments” dramatic events such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 and the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 make a deep impression especially on the minds of young people and eventually lead to the formation of cohorts bound by common values. Knowledge of such cohorts can be used for many purposes, such as marketing, staff management or political campaigns. This paper analyses the impact of dramatic events on people in different age groups in Sweden through a survey answered by nearly a thousand people – of which 40 percent are foreign-born – from the city of Malmö.

Key words: defining moments, coming of age, cohorts, values, Malmö

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DO DEFINING MOMENTS LEAVE THEIR MARK FOR LIFE? THE CASE OF SWEDEN

Can a lone, crazed murderer affect the values of entire generations around the world and in individual countries?¹ Yes, this is a hypothesis in line with the theory of “defining moments.” According to this theory, dramatic events such as the Kennedy and Palme assassinations, the fall of the Berlin Wall, or the release of Nelson Mandela engrave themselves in the minds of young people and help shape the values they hold for the rest of their lives. For example, the loss of hope for the future that came with Lee Harvey Oswald’s bullets left Americans coming of age in the Sixties with the value of activism that US baby boomers still value today. Somewhat similarly, the freeing of Mandela gave Africans a value of hope for the future.² We have tried testing this “coming of age” hypothesis by investigating the age, defining moments and values of residents in the city of Malmö, Sweden.

Theory on defining moments

There is extensive literature on the values of different generations or birth cohorts. One pioneer in this area was Ronald Inglehart, who, in a 1971 article, showed that a new value pattern was gaining ground among younger cohorts in the Western world. Since then, the mapping and naming of new cohorts has become something of an industry. A common perception in generational literature is that the values people carry with them, even if they change with advancing age and greater experience, are in a crucial sense shaped in their late teens and early twenties (Cutler 1977, Mannheim 1952, Markert 2004, Rogler 2002, Ryder 1985, Schuman and Scott 1989, Scott and Zak 1993).

The source of inspiration for this research study is a theory of defining moments or events, developed by Geoffrey Meredith and Charles Schewe in two books published in 2002: *Defining Markets, Defining Moments and Managing by Defining Moments*, both subtitled *America’s 7 Generational Cohorts, Their Shared Experiences and Why Business Should Care*.

1 This paper has been made possible with the support of MIM at Malmö University, the City of Malmö, EFL at the School of Economics and Management at Lund University, and the Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation. It was translated into English by Monica French. We are grateful for comments from Christian Fernández and participants at a seminar at the Department of Economic History at Lund University in the spring of 2010.

2 The case of Nelson Mandela will not play much of a role in this paper. However, Mandela will appear once more, in footnote 3.

The basic idea in these books is that events such as the Kennedy assassination in 1963 and the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on 11 September, 2001, make a deep impression on the minds of young people in their formative or “coming of age” years, roughly between 17 and 23. And this impression influences the values of these “coming of age” groups (referred to as cohorts) and which – as the book titles just mentioned give us to understand – can be used in marketing and organizational behavior management or, for that matter, in other contexts. Political campaigns can reflect such values and social causes can be emphasized with communication programs that incorporate a cohort’s unique values.

Meredith and Schewe found seven generational cohorts in the United States, marked by different defining events and courses of events: Those in the oldest cohort, formed during the Great Depression in the 1930s, are today in their nineties; they value security and risk aversion. Next comes a cohort formed during the Second World War (high in patriotism), and one during the postwar years (valuing stability, careers and family). After these there are two “baby boom” cohorts, the first one marked by the assassination of the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King and also by the Vietnam War in the 1960s, the other by Watergate, the oil crisis in the 1970s and its pursuant economic recession (these “Boomer II’s” value economic success). The youngest cohorts are Generation X, marked by such events as the Challenger spacecraft disaster and AIDS awareness in the 1980s and ’90s (valuing quality of life/living for the moment over materialism), and Generation N, marked by the advent of the Internet, the 9/11 attacks and the Iraq War in the first decade of the 21st century. This generation which today includes people up to their early thirties values ambition, teamwork and diversity in the American demographic landscape.

Aim of the study

If there exist generational cohorts of this kind, one should in all likelihood be able to divide them in terms of regions and countries, since what is experienced as a defining moment varies between different cultural environments. There have been attempts, inspired by the Meredith and Schewe approach, to study the appearance of cohorts in Brazil and Russia. In countries with extensive immigration, any cohort pattern should be less uniform, since these people carry different dramatic events with them through life. Sweden is such a country.

Meredith and Schewe have developed an approach for studying the connection between defining moments and generational cohorts' specific values. According to their methodology, one should proceed by trial and error in different exploratory ways – for example, using literature from the culture's different eras, conducting interviews with experts (scholars, journalists, historians) and consumers – to find a plausible generational pattern and, at the end of the process, test one's findings with the aid of more conclusive research, e.g. by doing a survey. The approach in this paper uses a different methodology. It starts with a survey to discern age patterns by giving people the opportunity to cite important events in their lives and provide their opinion to statements expressing different values. The aim is to see how far one can push a cohort analysis based on defining moments with the help of a survey.

In this paper, the first step is to determine whether the hypothesis of a connection between defining moments and formative years can be empirically verified; that is to say, whether the respondents refer to consequential events/defining moments which occurred in their formative years. The second step is to examine the value patterns in the different age groups. After this investigation, the paper will provide a speculative discussion of whether events and values can be considered related.

We will consider some methodological questions along the way. To start with, it might suffice to say that it is quite possible to determine whether the important events cited in the survey have occurred at the time of the respondents' coming of age. It is also possible to determine whether the value patterns differ between different age groups. What is really difficult – to be frank: hopeless – is establishing a cause and effect relationship between cohorts' events and their consequent values. We are using some statistical techniques in this paper but for the most part we are using our own judgement and common sense reasoning to navigate through the material.

Survey in Malmö

This research is based on a survey distributed to a randomly selected and stratified sample of residents in the city of Malmö in 2008. The stratification was based on country of birth (Sweden, Iran, Poland, other countries) and age, with an even distribution of ages between 25 and 75 years. The reason for the survey being directed in part at two groups of foreign-born respondents, Iranians and Poles, is as follows: in a country such as Sweden, where every seventh resident is born abroad, any national pattern

of events and values likely must become weaker. In an environment such as Malmö, where the proportion of foreign-born is roughly double the size of that of the country as a whole, this tendency can be expected to be even more prevalent. By focusing on two national groups, one can determine whether their responses show striking features which deviate from the Swedish pattern.

The study was carried out as a mail survey. To insure a sufficient number of responses, the survey was also distributed to a number of immigrants' associations (Iranian and Polish) as well as to two places of work (Malmö University and the Labour Exchange). Just over 400 people returned the mail survey, and just under 600 the survey distributed by hand. Table 1 shows information relating to selection and answers.

Table 1. Survey – selection and answers

Selection		Respondents		
Country of Birth	Number	Distribution (%)	Number	Distribution (%)
Sweden	1300	52	559	58.3
Poland	400	16	65	6.8
Iran	400	16	164	17.1
Other countries	400	16	171	17.8
Total	2500	100	959	100

Note: Out of a total of 973 people who answered the survey, details of country of birth are missing for 14 of these.

The distribution of the respondents in terms of age groups is shown in Table 2. As is seen, several answers came from people who fell outside the bracketed age group (25 to 75 years). Gender distribution is fairly even: 54 percent women and 46 percent men.

Table 2. Distribution of respondents in terms of gender and age

Age groups	Percentage distribution		
	Women	Men	Combined
Under 25 years	1.4	2.1	1.7
25-29	11.8	11.1	11.5
30-34	10.3	11.6	10.9
35-39	9.7	11.8	10.7
40-44	10.3	11.6	10.9
45-49	9.7	11.1	10.4
50-54	12.6	9.3	11.1
55-59	11.5	10.4	11.0
60-64	10.1	9.5	9.8
65-69	6.0	6.3	6.1
70-75	5.6	2.8	4.3
Over 75 years	1.0	2.3	1.6
Total	515	431	946

Note: Out of a total of 973 people who answered the survey, details of age and/or gender are missing for 27 of these.

Defining moments

The questionnaire included a question focusing on which events had made a big impression on the respondent. It was worded as follows:

Which events or courses of events at global or national level (not at personal level, such as marriage, moving house, death etc) have made a big impression on you in your life? These might be political events, war, revolution, coups, technological breakthroughs, social reforms, economic upheaval, cultural events, murder, accidents, natural disasters etc. Give examples of three such events, and explain in brief why these have made an impression on you.

This question was answered by just over 750 people. They did not all provide three examples of events; rather, the average was 2.6 events per person. In total, 234 different events featured in their answers. For our purposes, only events which can be dated with reasonable precision are of interest. Approximately 150 events were of this kind. In certain cases,

these can be dated to the actual day. In other cases, the course of events is drawn out and the defining moment harder to date.

The events cited are often of a very dramatic nature. They concern war, murder, revolution, terrorist attacks, natural disasters and accidents. It is striking how few “positive” events are given. The most predominant positive events are the collapse of (East European) communism (which must for most if not all have been a pleasant surprise) and the IT revolution. Most events can be dated exactly but others are played out over a longer period. We have not excluded the latter kind of events as long as they can be reasonably well dated.

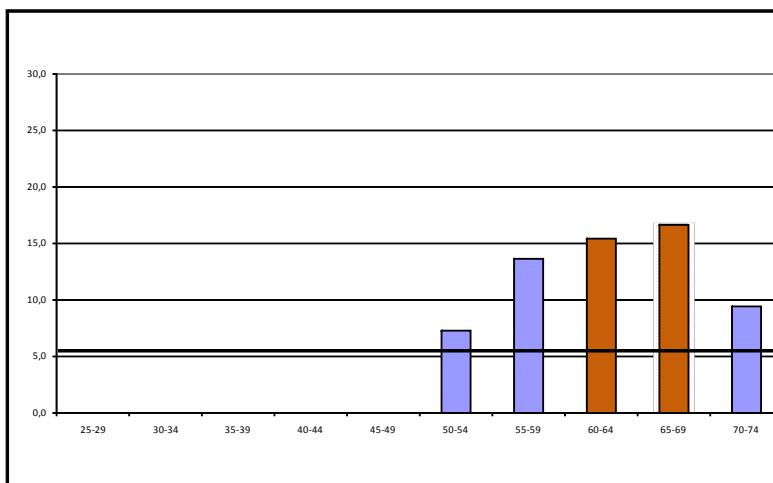
Ten defining events have been selected for analysis. Those events given most mention are, in order, the 9/11 attacks, Olof Palme’s assassination, the tsunami disaster and the collapse of communism, all of which were mentioned more than a hundred times. The Second World War was mentioned fairly many (56) times but is of no interest from our point of view, since those who came of age during the war are not included in the survey. They are over 80 years of age today. Interestingly, the Vietnam War falls outside the “top of the charts,” despite it often being claimed to have shaped the values of an entire generation. The ten events are, in chronological order shown in table 3.

Table 3. Defining moments according to time and the respondents’ year of birth and age in 2008

Event	Year of Event	Year of Birth	Age in 2008	No of Mentions
The Kennedy assassination	1963	1939-45	63-69	42
The Iran Revolution	1978-79	1954-61	47-54	83
The Iran-Iraq War	1980-88	1956-70	38-52	65
The Palme assassination	1986	1962-68	40-56	169
The collapse of communism	1987-91	1963-73	35-45	109
The IT revolution	1990-2008	1966-90	18-42	97
The Estonia disaster	1994	1970-76	32-38	37
The 9/11 attacks	2001	1977-83	25-31	260
Anna Lindh’s assassination	2003	1979-85	23-29	49
The tsunami disaster	2004	1980-86	22-28	166

The data was analyzed to see whether these events are mentioned to a greater extent by people who came of age at the time the events took place. The series of figures given below shows how great was the proportion of the respondents in the different age groups (of five year intervals) who mentioned each event. The columns in the figures for those age groups who came of age around the time of the event are marked in a darker color. The total average is marked in a thicker horizontal line. We have ourselves designed these figures which make it possible to observe whether there is a correspondence between events and coming of age. We are thus using our own eyes and judgement to decide whether there is a reasonable correspondence.

The Kennedy assassination



*Figure 1. Defining moments according to different age groups:
the Kennedy assassination*

The Iran Revolution

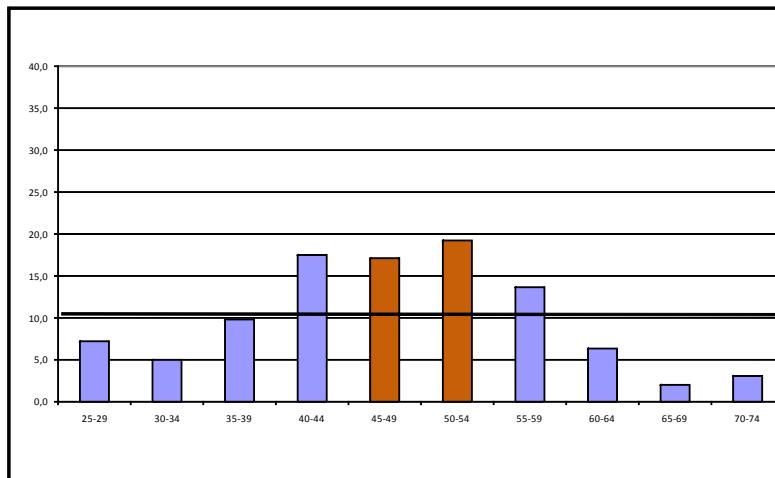


Figure 2. Defining moments according to different age groups: the Iran Revolution

The Iran-Iraq War

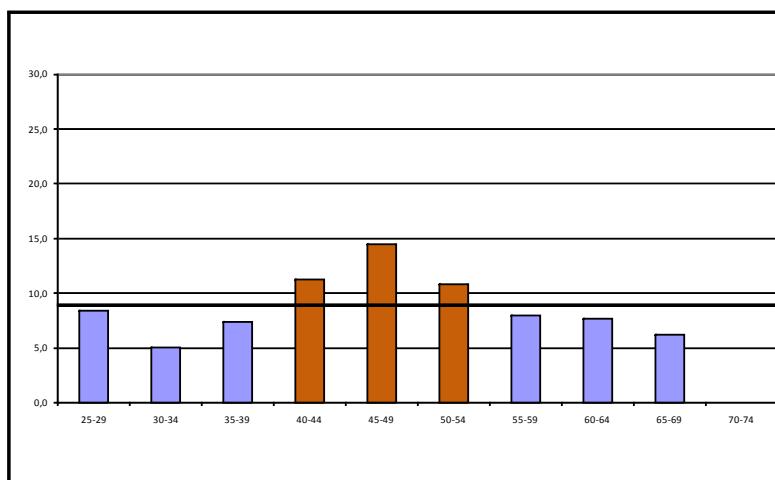


Figure 3. Defining moments according to different age groups: the Iran-Iraq War

The Palme assassination

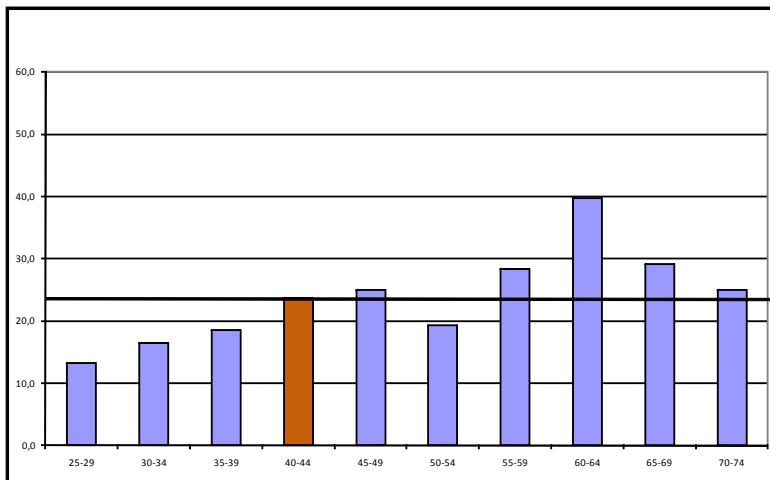


Figure 4. Defining moments according to different age groups: the Palme assassination

The collapse of communism

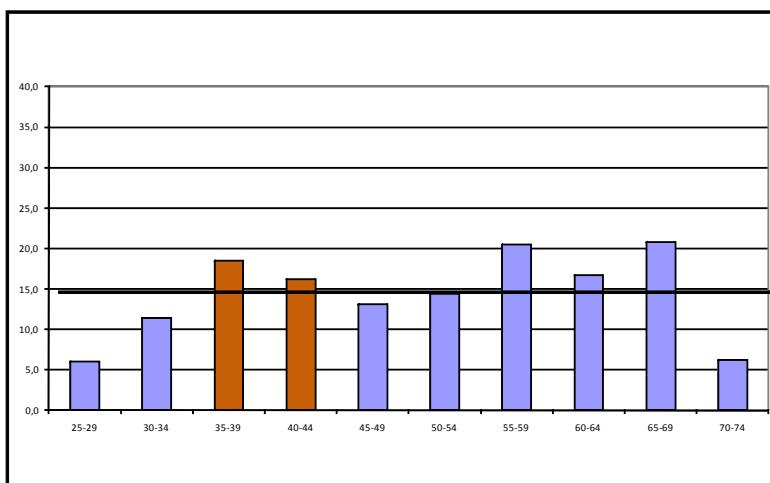


Figure 5. Defining moments according to different age groups: the collapse of communism

The IT revolution

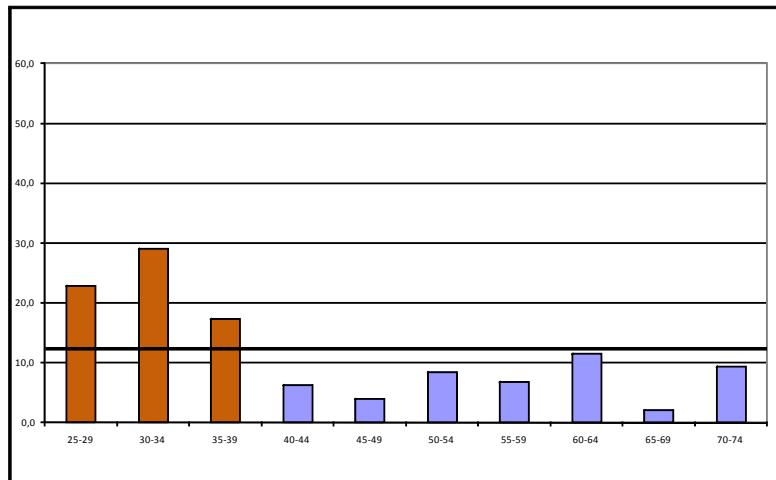


Figure 6. Defining moments according to different age groups: the IT revolution

The Estonia disaster

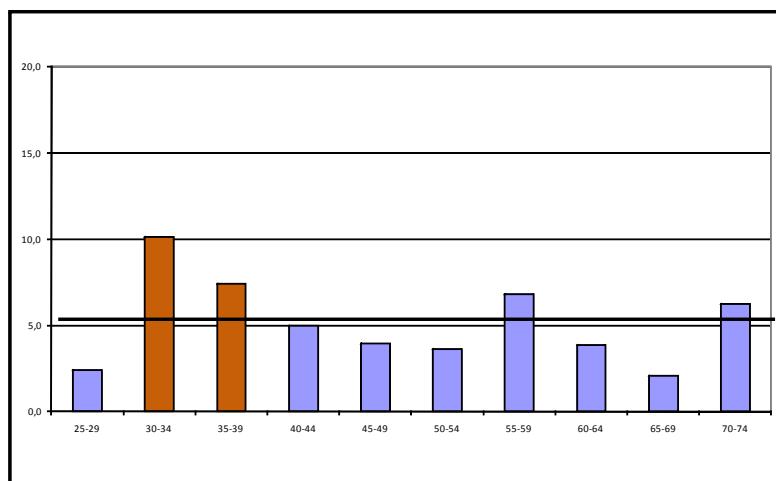


Figure 7. Defining moments according to different age groups: the Estonia disaster

The 9/11 attacks

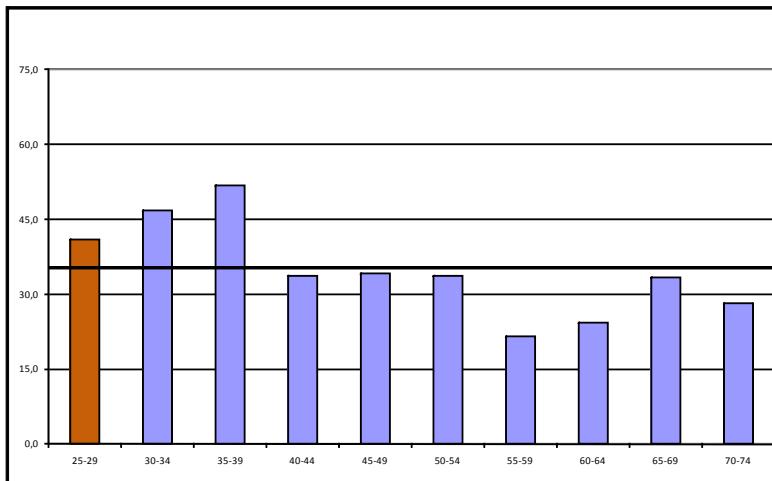


Figure 8. Defining moments according to different age groups: the 9/11 attacks

Anna Lindh's assassination

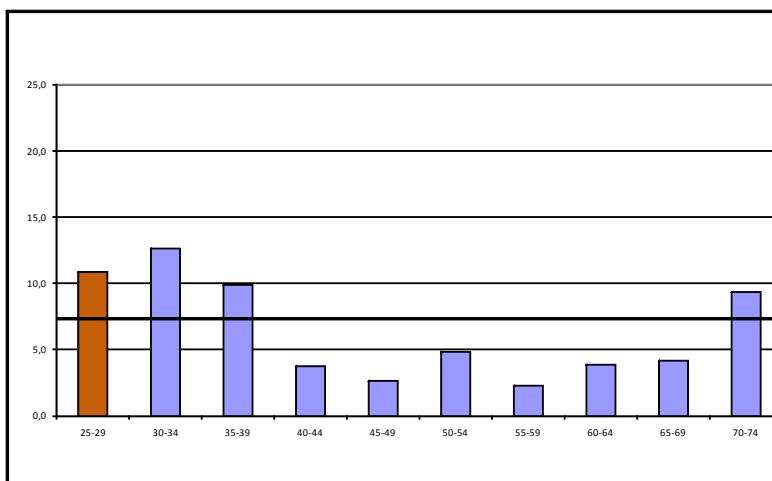


Figure 9. Defining moments according to different age groups: Anna Lindh's assassination

The tsunami disaster

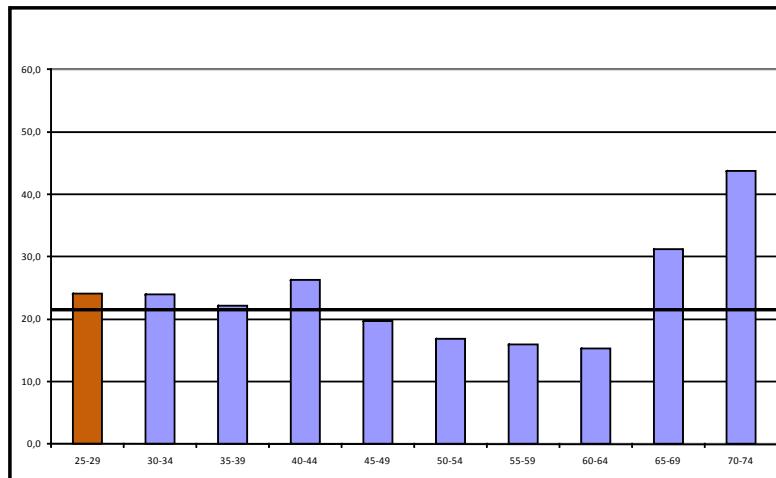


Figure 10. Defining moments according to different age groups: the tsunami disaster

The Kennedy assassination, the Iran Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War show patterns which are fairly consistent with the coming of age hypothesis. The Palme assassination contradicts the hypothesis, since it is mainly older people (aged 55-69) who mention the event. The explanation for this may be that these people came of age at the time of the student revolts in 1968, the time when Palme was beginning to dominate the political stage in Sweden; therefore, those who had been marked by the “Palme era” were most affected by his death. The collapse of communism is mentioned by all age groups, and to a somewhat greater extent by older people, which is not surprising, given that they lived in the shadow of communism for a long time.

The IT revolution shows a pattern consistent with the hypothesis. The Estonia disaster also shows a pattern fairly consistent with the hypothesis, even though the event is mentioned by a couple of other age groups as well.

The 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center feature prominently in all age groups, not least in the coming of age group, yet most strongly of all in the 35-39 age group – those who had passed their coming of age when the attacks took place. Anna Lindh’s assassination is mentioned highly by the young, yet most of all by those who had passed

their coming of age at that time. The tsunami disaster features most strongly in the older age groups, which may be interpreted as meaning that many older people were able to identify with those who had lost their children or grandchildren in the disaster, or else had themselves lost children or grandchildren in it.

To sum up, the hypothesis of the significance of defining moments in formative years has a degree of support from five events: the Kennedy assassination, the Iran Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, the IT revolution and the Estonia disaster. Three events directly contradict this hypothesis: the Palme assassination, the collapse of communism and the tsunami disaster. As regards Palme and communism, common to both would appear to be their making the greatest impression on people who felt that they brought to an end the era which they been shaped by or lived through. The event mentioned by most people – the 9/11 attacks – gives no clear indication either way, nor does the Lindh assassination. They are mentioned most strongly by those who had passed their coming of age when these events occurred. All in all, one must draw the conclusion that there is some, albeit not very strong, empirical support for the hypothesis claiming that defining moments make the greatest impression on people at their coming of age.

What does the fact that 42 percent of the respondents were foreign-born imply? That the Iran Revolution and Iran-Iraq War are included at all in the list of events is only due to the fact that nearly one fifth of the respondents were born in Iran. Out of the Iranians, nearly 70 percent mentioned the Iran Revolution and approximately 45 percent the Iran-Iraq War as being defining moments. The collapse of communism is an event with twice the impact among Poles and West Europeans (who, however, are few in number) as among native-born Swedes. We therefore find sharp differences between cohorts who grew up in Sweden, Iran and Poland as to which events made a great impression. These results are in line with what can be expected. Less predictable is the fact that the Palme assassination features more strongly among Poles than among Swedes.

As well as age and country of birth, gender plays a role in which events are mentioned. The 9/11 attacks show the same features for men and women, for sure. On the other hand, the tsunami, the Lindh and Kennedy assassinations and the Estonia disaster feature significantly more strongly among women than they do among men, while the opposite applies for the IT revolution, the fall of communism, the Iran Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. The events mentioned by women seem to be more emo-

tionally driven whereas those mentioned by men appear more associated with functional changes in society.³

Values

In the section on values in the questionnaire, the respondents had to rate 44 statements on a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 7 (very important). The statements are close to those used by Meredith and Schewe – even if somewhat adapted to a Swedish environment – to make future comparisons between the US and Sweden possible. No such comparisons are made in this paper, however. From the way these statements are designed one can expect a positive bias. These expectations were fulfilled. The average value profiles of three different age groups for those born in Sweden and abroad⁴ and for men and women are shown in figures 11-13.

3 There was also a question about individuals (“icons”) who have made a great impression on the respondents. These icons cannot be as clearly connected to coming of age, since they normally achieved fame over a lifetime. Almost 700 people answered this question and mentioned no less than 575 different individuals or organizations! If we stick to individuals, top of the list are Nelson Mandela with 107 mentions, followed by Martin Luther King (55), Mahatma Gandhi (51), Olof Palme (47), Astrid Lindgren (45) and the Dalai Lama (37), Mother Theresa (30), Zlatan Ibrahimovic (22), Pope John Paul (20), and Carolina Klüft (18). The mentions given to Mandela, King, Palme and the Dalai Lama show some degree of consistency with the time the respondents came of age, while in Lindgren’s case this is uncertain, and in Gandhi’s case it has nothing to do with the respondents’ entering adulthood. The answers show clear differences between native and foreign-born Swedes. Native-born are almost twice as likely to mention the icons given here. The only one of the six who is more popular among the foreign-born than native-born is Gandhi. Out of the 20 people who mention the Pope, as many as 17 are foreign-born. Certain gender differences can also be noted. Mandela and Gandhi are given mention by both camps, but women tend more towards King; Lindgren and the Dalai Lama, while men tend more towards Palme.

4 We have not performed separate value patterns for immigrants from Iran and Poland. Such patterns might be the objects of a future, more detailed analysis.

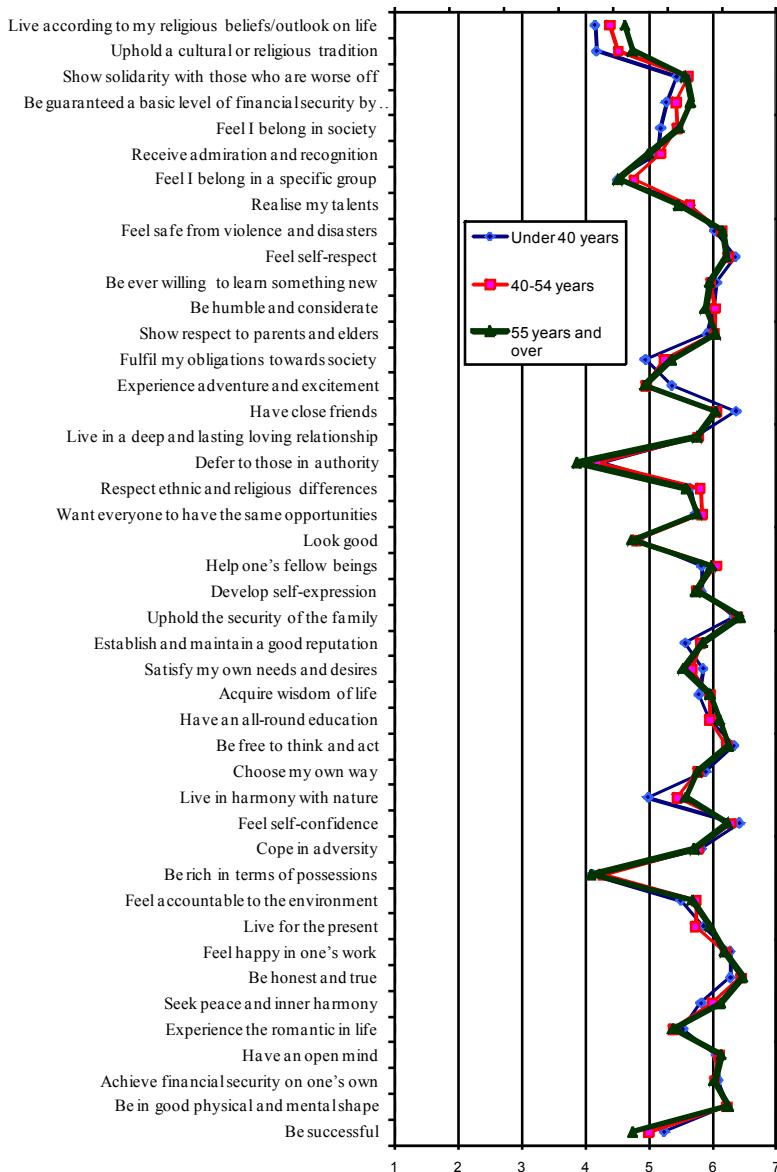


Figure 11. Value pattern according to age; average values for the 44 choices within the three major age groups of “under 40 years,” “40-54 years” and “55 years and older.”

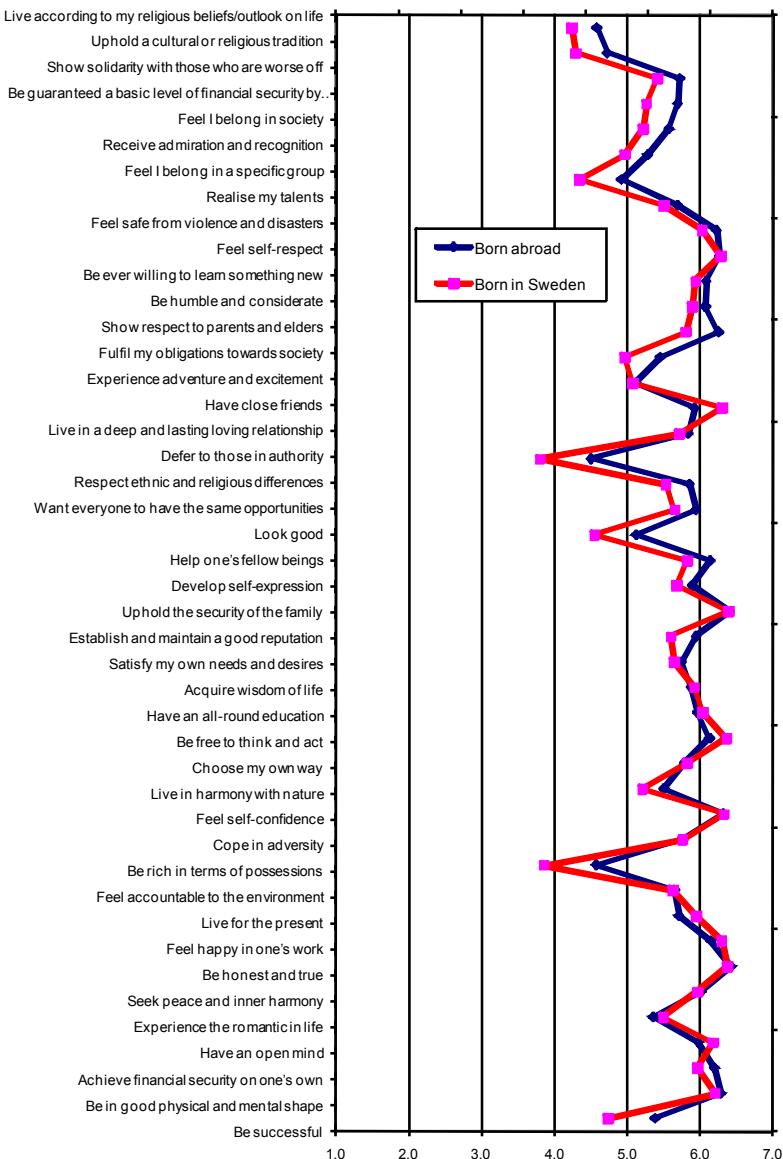


Figure 12. Value pattern according to country of birth; average values for the 44 choices

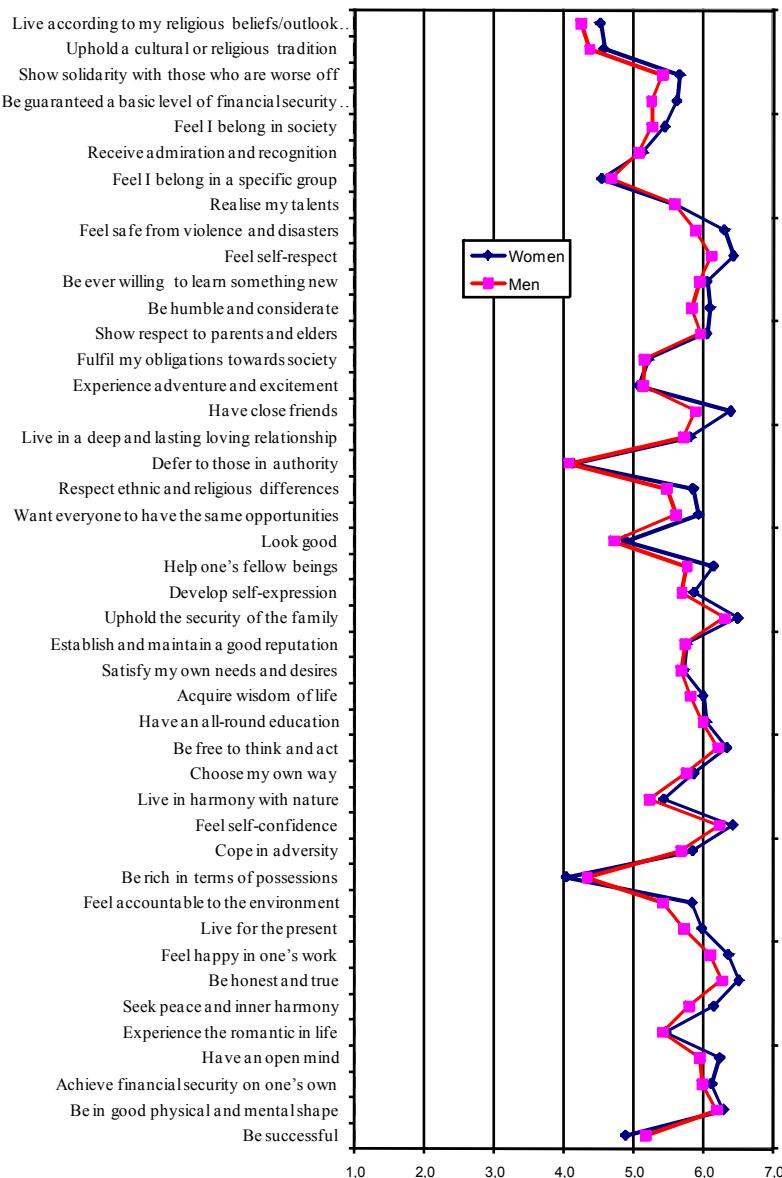


Figure 13. Value pattern for men and women; average values for the 44 choices

As is shown in figure 11, the differences between different age groups are small. Values with a connection to religion are higher among the older than among the young. The statements "live in harmony with nature" and "fulfill my obligations towards society" are given lower values among the younger respondents, who rate the statements "have close friends" and "experience adventure and excitement" higher than do the other groups.

According to figure 12, foreign-born Swedes give somewhat higher values on the whole than do native-born. The differences are most marked for the statements "feel I belong in a specific group," "show respect to parents and elders" and "defer to those in authority," yet are the same for "look good," "be rich in terms of possessions" and "be successful."

Figure 13 shows that the value pattern is similar for men and women. Women give somewhat higher values than do men, and in the odd instance – such as "have close friends" – give considerably higher values. Only in two cases – "be rich in terms of possessions" and "be successful" – is the men's average value higher than that of the women. Once again, women seem to put greater emphasis on emotional elements of their lives while men focus more on the functional.

One interesting question is whether the results for the 44 choices can be reduced to fewer plots which provide a better overall picture. This question can be answered by way of statistical factor analysis. The analysis is based on the correlation between all the statements, and is aimed at replacing the original statements with a reduced number of them which explain as large a part of the variance in the observation material as possible. The first stage – the reduction in number – is totally objective and based on strict mathematical calculations. The second stage – giving names to the factors – is more subjective. By carrying out what can in statistical jargon be called rotation according to the Varimax method, one gets eight factors as shown in tables 4A and 4B. (In order to facilitate reading, correlations below 0.35 have been suppressed.)

Table 4A. Factor structure after extraction and rotation according to the Varimax method

Value	Factor							
	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8
Show solidarity with those who are worse off	0.757							
Want everyone to have the same opportunities	0.751							
Respect ethnic and religious differences	0.654							
Feel accountable to the environment	0.632							
Help one's fellow beings	0.608							
Be guaranteed a basic level of financial security by society	0.596							
Feel I belong in society	0.591			0.403				
Fulfill my obligations towards society	0.538			0.366				
Live in harmony with nature	0.535				0.390			
Choose my own way		0.724						
Be free to think and act		0.710						
Develop self-expression		0.610						
Acquire wisdom of life		0.586						
Feel self-confidence		0.578						
Have an all-round education		0.575						
Feel self-respect		0.560						
Satisfy my own needs and desires		0.519		0.398				
Cope in adversity		0.451						
Achieve financial security on my own		0.432						
Realize my talents		0.420		0.373				

Table 4A. Cont.

Value	Factor							
	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8
Be rich in terms of possessions		0.754						
Look good		0.701						
Receive admiration and recognition		0.689						
Be successful		0.570						0.557
Defer to those in authority		0.534						
Feel I belong in a specific group		0.528					0.397	
Experience adventure and excitement	0.434	0.422						0.361

Table 4B. Factor structure after extraction and rotation according to the Varimax method

Value	Factor						
		F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6
Uphold the security of the family					0.702		
Show respect to parents and elders					0.626		
Establish and maintain a good reputation			0.408		0.557		
Feel safe from violence and disasters				0.545			
Be honest and true				0.478			
Be humble and considerate		0.441			0.451		
Feel happy in my work				0.382	0.364		
Experience the romantic in life					0.668		
Have close friends					0.618		
Live for the present					0.598		
Live in a deep and lasting loving relationship				0.406	0.538		
Seek peace and inner harmony					0.514		
Have an open mind					0.452		
Live according to my religious beliefs/ outlook on life						0.719	
Uphold a cultural or religious tradition						0.669	
Be in good physical and mental shape						0.561	
Be ever willing to learn something new							0.685

Some of the values are complex because they are strongly correlated with more than one factor. Two of the factors (F7 and F8) are strongly correlated with only one item (value) each, and in these cases there is no reason to replace the item with a factor name. The six factors with several items loading suggest the following names:

- Factor 1: Solidarity and social accountability (9 scores).
- Factor 2: Self-expression and self-fulfillment (11 scores).
- Factor 3: Image and group belonging (7 scores).
- Factor 4: Security and personal accountability (7 scores).
- Factor 5: Relationships and romance (6 scores).
- Factor 6: Religion and culture (2 scores).

Together with factors 7 and 8 (one value each), we thus have all 44 statements accounted for.

Figures 14-18 provide an understanding of how different age groups compare, and also within these how native and foreign-born Swedes and men and women do likewise within the six factors (i.e., deviate from the average score as regards factor points).

Deviations from the average value as regards factor points

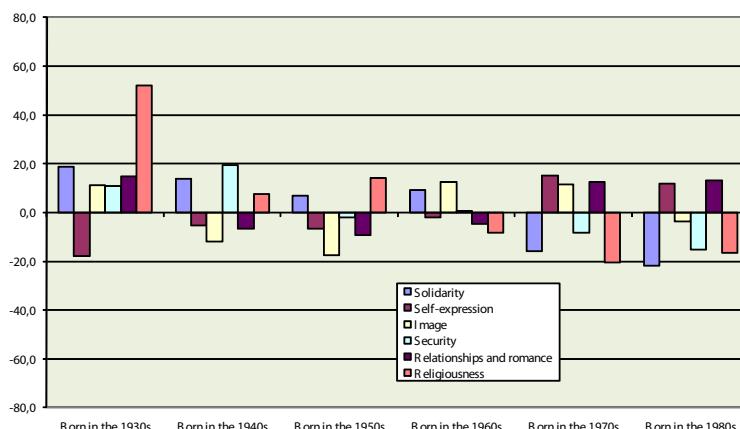


Figure 14. Score pattern for the six cohorts 1930-1990; deviation from the average

Deviations from the average – those born in Sweden

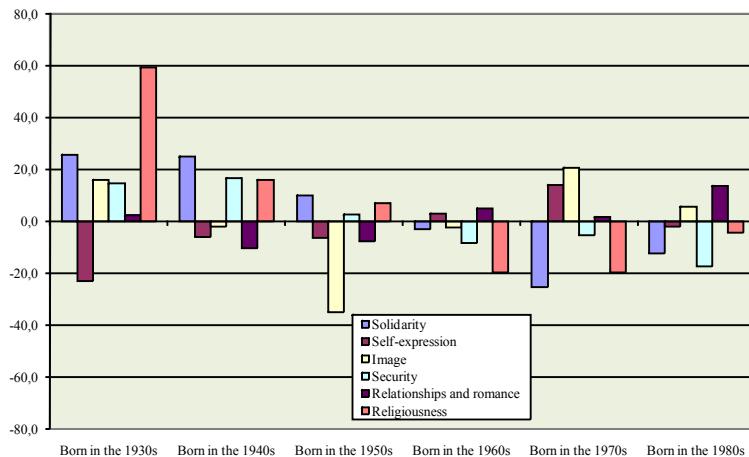


Figure 15. Score pattern for those born in Sweden in the six cohorts 1930-1990; deviation from the average

Deviations from the average – those born abroad

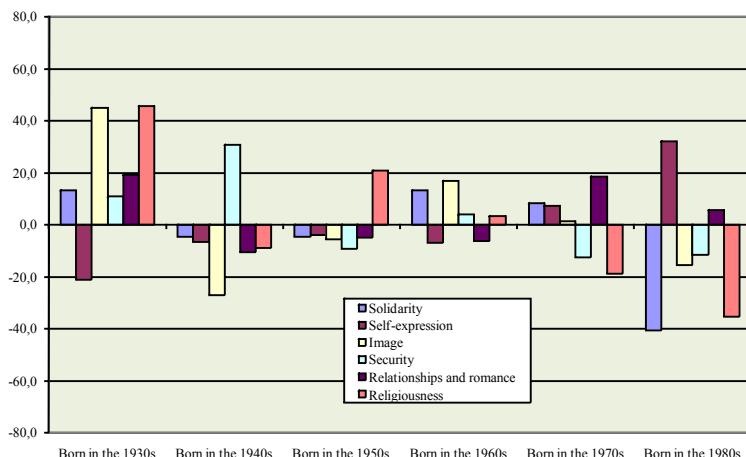


Figure 16. Score pattern for those born abroad in the six cohorts 1930-1990; deviation from the average

Deviations from the average – women

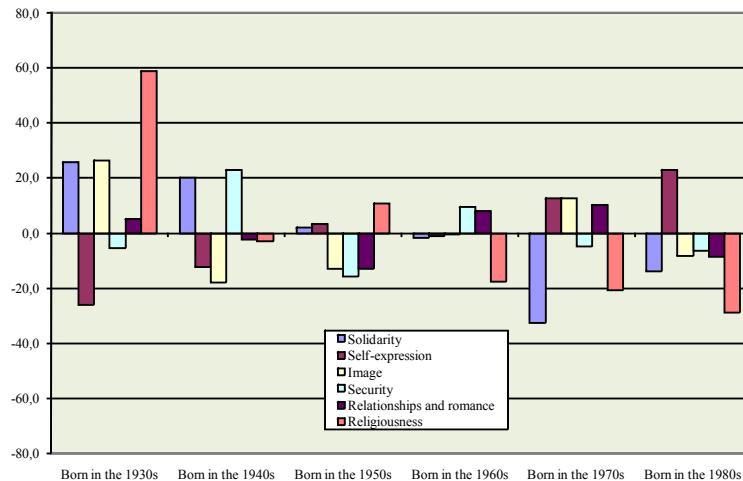


Figure 17. Score pattern for women in the six cohorts 1930-1990; deviation from the average

Deviations from the average - men

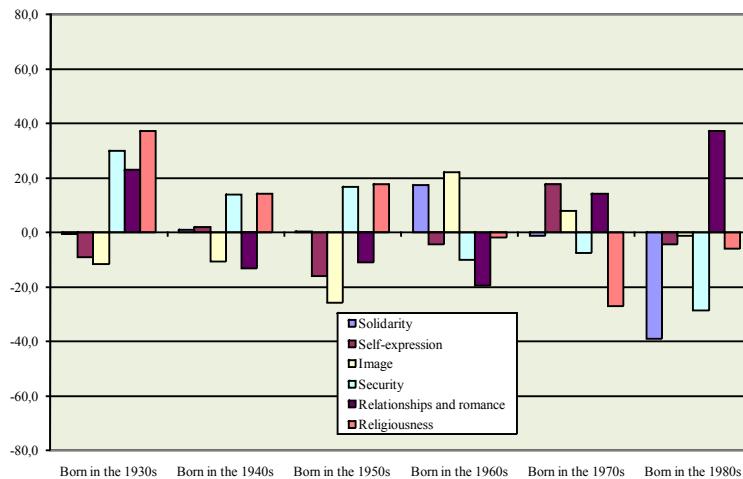


Figure 18. Score pattern for men in the six cohorts 1930-1990; deviation from the average

Figure 14 shows that the older cohorts (those born before 1960) have a strong but decreasing emphasis on solidarity, security and religiousness. Image is comparatively important for those born in the 60s and 70s, and self-expression and relationships for those born in the 70s and 80s, whereas self-expression is not so important – but relationships are – for those born in the 30s.

An examination of the cohorts divided into those born in Sweden and those born abroad (figures 15 and 16) shows that solidarity features more strongly among those born in Sweden in four of the cohorts and more weakly in two (those born in the 60s and 70s); that the differences in terms of self-expression are slight apart from among those born in the 80s, whereas it is strong among those born abroad, and that religion features more strongly among those born in Sweden in the 30s and 40s than among those born abroad, and features very weakly among the youngest born abroad.

If we examine the cohorts divided in terms of gender (figures 17 and 18), we find that solidarity features strongly among women born in the 30s and 40s, while it features weakly among women born in the 70s and men born in the 80s. Self-expression features most weakly among women born in the 30s and most strongly among women born in the 80s. Security features most strongly among men born in the 30s and mostly weakly among men born in the 80s; relationships would appear to be especially important for the latter. The diminished importance of religion over time is most clearly seen among the women, although the pattern among those born in the 80s is stronger among men than among women.

Interpretation of value patterns

Figure 14 shows a gradual value shift between older and younger cohorts: solidarity, security and religiousness decrease while self-expression and relationships gain in significance (although those born in the 30s are also “romantics”).

These shifts are in line with two predominant dimensions in the value structure of different countries which have appeared in international studies (Pettersson & Esmer 2005). One dimension constitutes traditional versus secular values. The traditional values can be summarized in brief as religion, family and native country, the secular as being that these big issues lose their importance. The other dimension constitutes the values of survival versus self-expression. Survival values relate to security and caution in committing oneself. Self-expression values can be expressed in the key words identity and relationships. Both these dimensions are robust – insensitive to variation in issues – and can be expressed in such a way

that people with a traditional approach allow themselves to be guided by authorities of a normative and religious type, while those with a free-minded approach lean rather towards social-liberal basic values.

The differences between generations or cohorts seen in figure 14 show that, on the whole, the values among the Malmö population follow the same pattern as that characterizing different countries. Over time, traditional values (religion) and survival (security) become weaker, while secular values and those of self-expression (individualism, relations) become stronger.⁵

Thus, both the basic dimensions of the tradition/secular-rational and survival/self-expression values capture the essential features of a culture and the dimensional shifts between the generations can be seen as a sign of an ongoing culture change. Bearing in mind that the value structure of a national culture is relatively stable and changes slowly, it is likely that any room for external events of the “defining moments” type to influence culture is limited. Most of a generation’s socialization takes place during “primary micro-socialization” which external, global events can influence only to a lesser degree. How defining events are to be interpreted is determined not only by the formative generation but also by the entire established culture. There is a “centre” which interprets events and gives guidelines for the value change (the formulation privilege). At the same time, a generation of young people – during the drawn out “defining moment” when they leave the parental home and begin their adult life – have an opportunity to “break away” from the cultural hold on them and exploit defining events in order to interpret afresh and revise their pictures of the world and their attitudes.⁶

Sweden is extreme in its cultural positioning in relation to other countries, in that secularity and self-expression values are emphasized more strongly than in any other country (see www.worldvaluessurvey.org). The differences in relation to the other countries which are of determining importance in the survey – Iran and Poland – are fundamental, as is shown in table 5.

5 Another conceivable interpretation is that aging accounts for the value change. In this case, the values held by those born in the 80s will over time become like those of the generation born in the 30s. Such an interpretation means a status quo in terms of values. A third interpretation is that it is living conditions which change over time – and which are registered as value differences – and not basic values. We will refrain from pursuing these interpretations any further.

6 This line of reasoning is based upon Pettersson’s and Esmer’s (2005) interpretations of the world value survey.

Table 5. Value dimensions in Sweden, Iran and Poland

	Sweden	Iran	Poland
Proportion with traditional family values	18.7	71.0	52.6
Proportion with non-religious values	57.7	8.8	8.4
Proportion with survival values	10.6	n.a.	43.4
Proportion with self-expression values	74.5	3.8	12.7

Note: Table compiled in accordance with Pettersson & Esmer (2005). The figure for self-expression values in Iran is uncertain.

Those who emigrated from countries such as Iran and Poland to Sweden are influenced by the culture in their new native country, as can be seen in table 6. Religious practice among Iranians and Poles in Sweden is much lower compared with such practice in their native countries, allowing for the fact that there may, in the first instance, be fewer religious Iranians who have moved to Sweden. Such behaviors, including those connected to basic values of the religiousness type, would therefore seem to be relatively changeable. But what is the case with the actual values?

Table 6. Those practicing religion in Sweden, Iran and Poland

	Practicing religion in Sweden according to the survey	Practicing religion in one's native country according to the EVS/WVS
Sweden	15.4	9.3 – 41.3
Iran	16.2	46.4 – 91.2
Poland	45.5	78.2 – 91.6

Note: EVS stands for the European Values Survey and WVS for the World Values Survey. In the right hand column, the lower figure stands for the times devoted to religious practice per week or per month and the higher figure stands for activity on odd occasions or almost never.

Pettersson and Esmer (2005) discuss what happens in the case of emigration. They study Muslims who have migrated to Europe, and draw the conclusion that religious and family values are relatively stable. Their explanation is that these values are established at a very young age by way of primary socialization, and are therefore hard to change. However, survival and self-expression values change, and are adapted to the European pattern. The explanation given is that these values are shaped later in life during secondary socialization. However, Pettersson and Esmer also point out that analyses of the European Values Survey show that Muslims who have come as immigrants to Europe not only embrace self-expression values but also appear to shift from the traditional value dimension to a more secular one.

The theory about defining moments should, probably, be concerned chiefly with the secondary socialization of survival and self-expression values, which are strong in one's formative years. The values shaped then relate to money and work, identity and relationships to others outside of the family, society and democracy etc. There is no reason to doubt that defining moments could influence people in terms of such values. The Malmö survey points to religion also losing its significance in a new, more secularized native country. Whether this depends on many immigrants being refugees from religious dictatorships, or on a gradual undermining of the certainty of faith in a new environment, or on individual defining moments, is not easy to judge.

Conclusion: Defining moments and values

The defining moments which predominate in the answers to the survey relate to war, revolution, murder and disasters; that is to say, events which strongly reshape people's lives. It is hardly surprising if events which sweep away 'isms' and forms of government and also damage and break up families form the basis for a reorientation in one's life and values. Which changes in values follow on from such big events is impossible to say in general terms; each example probably comes with its own history and development.

This research found some, although not very strong, support for the hypothesis that defining moments engrave themselves on the minds most particularly of those coming of age at the time they occur. The events which fit in quite well with the hypothesis are the Kennedy assassination, the Iran Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War (two events which especially made an impression on those respondents born in Iran), the IT revolution and the Estonia disaster.

The idea that these events can be connected to different values within different age groups is somewhat doubtful, for the very fact that the value patterns in different age groups are remarkably similar. Moreover, the differences existing between age groups appear to be not the result of sudden shifts, but rather by slow change brought about by certain values (solidarity, security and religion) receding over time, while other values (self-expression and relationships) have gained ground. Therefore, this is more a case of a shift along the lines of traditional/secular-rational and survival/self-expression.

As we have frankly admitted at the beginning of this paper, we cannot establish any causal relationship between cohort's events and values. Let us, nevertheless, use a few events which produced the "correct" or hypothesized pattern in the study to speculate freely. The biggest difference in values between those born in the 30s and those in the 40s concerns the diminished importance of religion. Could this difference have anything to do with the assassination of President Kennedy? Possibly. However, worse things have happened in history which might have undermined faith in the Almighty. The biggest differences between those born abroad in the 40s and those born abroad in the 50s are that the latter place less importance on image and security and more on religion. A large proportion of those born abroad are from Iran. Could these differences be connected with the Iran Revolution? In that case, could a greater emphasis on image and less emphasis on religion among those born abroad in the 60s be connected with the Iran-Iraq War? Possibly. If there are any events which change values, these must be revolution and war. These examples clearly demonstrate the difficulties one gets into when attempting to speculate on relationships between events and values.

It would thus appear that the logical chain which the theory about defining moments attempts to use to join together events in the world, people in their formative years and values within cohorts consists of links which are fairly weak or impossible to discern through the lens of this study. Only certain events make a relatively strong impact on young people, and we cannot say how the impact of these could have influenced the value differences existing between different age groups. Moreover, the picture is made very complicated in a country such as Sweden, which is an extreme case as regards values associated with secularization and self-expression with native-born while at the same time it is a magnet for refugees from environments where values associated with tradition and survival often predominate.

However, this study investigated defining moments and at the same time a set of values pre-determined by the researchers, some of which may not be related to the events suggested in the first part of the questionnaire. Had the study been designed in two stages, some consideration of what values may be related to defining moments could have been generated after the actual events were known. This may have resulted in a discernible relationship between events and values.

Let us, by way of conclusion, return to the initial question. Yes, the action of a lone, crazed assassin can be branded in the consciousness of a generation of young people (Kennedy) or, for that matter, of several generations affected by the life of the assassin's victim (Palme). However, following the trail from the assassination itself to the value shifts of entire age groups would appear to require more than a Sherlock Holmes.

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