

Editorial: Agency and human development in times of social change

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This selection of papers deals, broadly speaking, with the role of social change in human development. Put in other words, these papers investigate the impact of contextual dynamics on human adaptation, a prime topic of all life-span psychology. They were written by two psychologists and two sociologists—by training, we should add, as readers will easily find out that the approaches and methods taken are interdisciplinary in nature.

The papers are special in many regards. The foremost speciality probably pertains to the outcome variables studied—occupational, and sometimes more specifically economic, attainment and mobility. This is obviously a rather circumscribed domain of behaviour, but one of utmost importance in two respects. First, occupational attainment and mobility represent pivots of adult socialization that branch out to virtually all aspects of psychosocial development and are influenced by the contextual constraints people live with, such as the prosperity of the economic situation. The latter leads us directly to the second aspect: The phenomena of social change addressed in the papers are alike in that they have a profound effect on the economic opportunities available to individuals, which shape and reshape the trajectories of adult occupational achievements.

Social change as addressed here refers to relatively lasting transformations of societal features, such as social structures and institutions, norms, values, cultural products, and symbols (Calhoun, 1992). As this broad conceptualization already signifies, probably no single approach in

the social and behavioural sciences might ever be able to explain all kinds of changes on the individual level that result from changes on the societal level. For any progress towards explanation, a conceptual match between the two levels is needed.

In this regard the choice of occupational development is perfect for the social changes studied—the radical breakdown and ongoing transformation of formerly communist political systems with centrally planned economies to more democratic and capitalist systems that took place with a particular dynamic during the 1990s. Although, like everyone, scientists were not well-prepared for these events, these changes were foreshadowed by less rapid and more cumulative economic transformations in the West, although without the political and social turmoil associated with the communist downturn.

More specifically, the papers refer to the following contexts: Estonia, as one of the follower states of the former USSR, East and West Germany, and the United Kingdom. Concerning Estonia and eastern Germany, the 1990s are in focus and thus the transformation of the communist regimes, although under rather different circumstances. In the former USSR, for example, the evolution of a market capitalist system was organized “top-down” by the former Soviet bureaucracy and not accompanied by relevant democratic reforms and institution building. In contrast, Estonia and eastern Germany in particular experienced more “bottom-up” transformations where new legal institutions

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provided a framework for the development of the private sector. Furthermore, eastern Germany is special in that it was not only democratic institutions that were transferred from the West but also financial support. Concerning the UK, it was not political change that took place, but a radical economic shift in the 1980s from a prosperous situation with many job opportunities in the basic industries to one where unemployment rates rose and were only partially compensated by a growing service sector. The latter, however, foreshadowed many of the new challenges eastern Germans and Estonians had to face.

Populations in all four contexts experienced fundamental change that affected the basic mechanisms of social reproduction and resulted in discordant relationships between institutional requirements and individual predispositions. This situation is the starting point of challenge–response concatenations in which the aggregated effects of individuals’ reactions to changing institutional demands reshape institutional settings, which in turn create new challenges for individuals’ scope of action. Thereby the whole process is one of continual change in conditions for social action induced by social action (Best, 2004).

Methodologically, the papers utilize two different approaches. One is to compare different cohorts that faced different social-change related challenges. For instance, Schoon (2007, this issue) compares the educational and occupational development of young British people born in 1958 and 1970, respectively, and thereby elucidates the role of different societal and economic conditions for occupational attainment and mobility. The 12 years that separate the birth cohorts index the societal changes that took place. The other methodological approach relies on longitudinal samples, as demonstrated by Titma, Tuma, and Roots (2007, this issue), who studied people who experienced political and societal transformations as they grew up.

Both approaches are representative of many more recent studies on social change (see Silbereisen, 2005) and share a common feature. The degree to which a particular individual is affected by social change is mostly assessed indirectly by proxy variables; typically, the birth cohort or historical period. This is less of a problem than one might think, as events such as German unification or Estonian state building were established by a more or less clearly defined and timed blueprint of institutional and legal change. These changes applied almost universally, and in some studies it was even possible to identify

the actual mediators of their effects on individual behaviour (such as unification-related spells of unemployment on the timing of economic self-support; Silbereisen, Reitzle, & Juang, 2002). Certainly, a direct assessment of the extent to which single individuals actually face the burden of social change helps us to understand the interplay between social change and individual outcomes more fully. We (Silbereisen & Pinquart, 2004) have recently launched a study that focuses directly on how individuals cope with and adapt to social-change related challenges such as globalization or demographic change.

The papers in this issue do not assess individual differences in such challenges, but nevertheless offer important insights into how individuals shape their own development under conditions of social change. Here the concept “agency” comes into play, and the papers provide either conceptual clarifications (Evans, 2007, this issue) or give empirical data (Diewald, 2007; Schoon, 2007; Titma et al., 2007, all in this issue). Agency is a complex concept—actually so complex that most researchers limit themselves to the assessment of simple behavioural manifestations or other proxies. According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 963), agency can be described as “a temporally embedded process of social engagement informed by the past (...), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)”. This definition reveals the “action” nature of agency—ongoing social engagement guided by past experience and future goals adequately matched to contextual circumstances. Surveys, and all studies entailed here, for the most part, follow this methodological scheme, and in all likelihood will never more than tap into this construct. Nevertheless, we learn a lot about the role of agency in mastering social change. First, agency is always “bounded” (Evans, 2007, this issue) as constraints are always present that allow either more or fewer personal goals to be accomplished (or even to be formed). Second, although not tapping into the very core of the construct, all studies contribute something very specific.

Let us begin with Titma et al. (2007, this issue). By calling them “agency factors,” the authors distinguish between abilities (GPA as a case in point), educational attainment (both measured before the breakdown of the USSR), and agency-manifesting actions after the breakdown and before the consolidation of the new economic

system. The last are indexed by extra work activities outside the main job. The results demonstrate that in 2004 (in contrast to the late 1990s), a time where the new economy and labour market conditions had settled in Estonia, education and GPA predicted a higher total income and upward mobility, but agentic behaviour was relevant as well, not only for the total income level but also as a buffer against unhappy stability at the bottom level. At an earlier period of change, characterized by more turmoil not only on the economic front, agentic behaviour was even more relevant for these outcomes. This result supports the plausible presumption that disorganized times in particular offer a “window of opportunity” for more agentic individuals.

Diewald (2007, this issue) studies control beliefs as indicators of agency in people up to middle adulthood in East Germany and also contrasts periods of differing opportunities—a more open and dynamic period rather soon after unification and one later in the process characterized by lower labour market flexibility. In both periods, downturn moves were not affected by control beliefs, but high internal and low external beliefs seemed to further upward mobility. The conclusion is that in eastern Germany the window of opportunity was not as open as one could have expected from the research by Titma et al. (2007, this issue). In addition, in order to fully understand the role of agency one also has to turn around the relationship and ask what occupational mobility does to agency. According to Diewald, the quick answer is—it does more. Put in other words, even high levels of agency in highly versatile times cannot beat the structuring and channelling forces inherent in the labour market. But of course, other conditions being equal, agency plays an important role most of the time.

Until now, how people master challenges had not been addressed, but Evans (2007, this issue) does so. In a series of quantitative and qualitative studies in England and Germany she first delineates four “transition behaviours,” that is, ways to navigate the school-to-work transition in different times and contexts. When comparing transition behaviours in England and Germany before unification, the impact of different structural conditions was less pronounced than expected. Young people in England, as well as in Germany, preferred a behaviour designated as “step by step,” rather than more passive and more active forms. In the late 1990s, however, when the situation in Germany, East and West, had worsened, “taking chances” and “wait and see” became more prevalent behaviours, the first

furthering upward mobility (if social support was available), the second leading to downward mobility. Evans shares the view that German unification, at least in the beginning, encouraged personal agency among those whose career paths were blocked by unification. And, indeed, active transition behaviours were beneficial for those endangered by setbacks.

Social change does not have uniform effects. Schoon (2007, this issue) addresses a basic issue in this regard—social inequality. In comparing the 1958 and 1970 groups of the British Cohort studies, she finds that educational expansion did not reduce but rather increased inequality in educational attainment. And there are further setbacks. The later-born cohort developed higher occupational aspirations, both children and parents, and this corresponded to higher adult status in general. However, in the 1958 cohort, those from disadvantaged backgrounds could realize their hopes relatively irrespective of grades and educational attainment, whereas in the 1970 cohort the latter was decisive. In sum, the changes in the labour market and within society, although much less dramatic than those observed in eastern Germany or Estonia, tended to increase the share of those “left out,” and higher levels of agency factors did not fully compensate for this.

At this point, the degree to which this picture can be generalized to other psychosocial outcomes needs to remain open, as we have to bear in mind the kind of social change addressed. Referring to the “challenge-response scheme” distinguishing four scenarios of social change (Best, 2004), the German and the post-USSR situation represent tremendous opportunities. In both cases the majority of the population was positive with regard to “a change.” However, the German political system had established clear expectations and rules, thereby canalizing changes and moderating individual risks (scenario 1), whereas particularly in Russia a high flexibility or actual chaos dominated, with a plethora of negative after-effects particularly for the weak (scenario 2). Nevertheless, this second constellation is actually more prone to innovative developments, with Estonia perhaps representing a model case. The British data, in contrast, refer (scenario 3) to a gradual not rapid societal change, with a high degree of flexibility (but certainly not chaos) and a relatively reluctant (but not openly opposing) population. The fourth scenario of a resistant people confronted with a rigid regime is not addressed in this Section.

What do we learn from these papers? Certainly this is where the two peer commentaries

by Stetsenko (2007) and Wieczorkowska, Wierzbinski, and Burnstein (2007, both in this issue) are important to read; and as editors we should not try to overturn this. In our view, the papers provide a full picture of “development as action in context” (Silbereisen, Eyferth, & Rudinger, 1986). The instances of social change studied have profound effects on social institutions and, thus, on opportunities for psychosocial development (Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2004). How people master such challenges is influenced itself by opportunities on one hand and resources on the other. In this regard, agency is “bounded”; bounded by the opportunities and constraints inherent to the societal transformations studied, and constrained by personal and social resources that sometimes date back to pre-transformation times. As a rule of thumb, agency effects are stronger in more versatile transition periods, but are never as strong as the influence of structural forces on human agency.

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