Changing Contexts of Youth Development: An Overview of Recent Social Trends and a Psychological Model

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This is a preprint of an article published in New Directions for Youth Development, No. 135, Fall 2012. Special Issue: Youth Success and Adaptation in Times of Globalization and Economic Change. Eds.: X. Chen, V. Christmas-Best, P. F. Titzmann, & K. Weichold. © 2012 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
HEADNOTE: Globalization and economic change are translated into a variety of changes in the proximal contexts of youth development, which are perceived and tackled differently by different individuals.
Abstract

Youth development occurs in multiple contexts, which are affected by macro-level social processes that change opportunities and constraints for the attainment of various developmental tasks. In this paper, we review some of the transformations that central developmental contexts of adolescence undergo under conditions of recent global social and economic change. We then argue that interindividual differences in the way adolescents perceive and appraise such transformations are the key to understanding their effects on individual development. The relevant theoretical framework is provided by the Jena Model of Social Change and Human Development, which helps to trace the cascading effects of social and economic change from the macro- to the micro-level.
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Developmental contexts play a pivotal role in shaping youth’s psychosocial adaptation and development. Family, school, peer groups, and community provide the opportunities and constraints for the attainment of major developmental tasks of adolescence, and changing relations between the individual and these contexts constitute the basic process of human development. Furthermore, it is primarily through these immediate developmental contexts (that is, micro-systems in terms of ecological systems theory) that macro-level trends such as globalization influence youth development. In the following, we will illustrate how globalization and economic change have been reshaping the central micro-contexts of adolescence. We will then argue that the individual differences in the way youth perceive these changes and cope with them - that is, the active role individuals play in their own development - are the key to understanding the psychological consequences of social change.

School and Education.

The modern labor market is characterized by a decline of routine work, the growth in information technologies, a shift towards a service economy, and an increased need for teaming up with others. To prepare youth for these challenges, schools had started to promote knowledge management and soft skills, such as
communicating effectively, critical thinking, and problem solving.\textsuperscript{4} Such educational extension takes place in both primary and secondary education. Another major trend here refers to educational expansion. Between 1970 and 2009, the proportion of youth enrolled in secondary education increased from 43\% to 68\% globally.\textsuperscript{5} Moreover, between 2000 and 2007 alone, enrollment in tertiary education grew from 19\% to 26\%.\textsuperscript{6} Although this is a worldwide trend, considerable differences between countries exist, which depend on the legislation regulating access to secondary and higher education and on economic prosperity. Furthermore, individual characteristics, such as the family socioeconomic status, remain important determinants of participation in further education.\textsuperscript{7}

Although the expansion of education is considered a positive development, its additional benefit for macro-economic prosperity and youth themselves has been questioned. Southern European countries such as Spain or Italy are currently facing a mismatch between a high number of university graduates and a relatively low demand for this level of qualification on the labor market.\textsuperscript{8} Even more strikingly, Western-type education often proves inadequate in the context of rural Africa, equipping African youth with knowledge they are not able to apply, failing to teach them traditional skills, such as agriculture, and thereby estranging them from their communities.\textsuperscript{9} Thus, although
progress has been made in many regards, the mere amount of education received cannot testify to its quality, and many adolescents across the world remain disadvantaged with respect to both.

Leisure and Peer Relationships.

The increasing time adolescents spend in education may have different implications for their leisure, wherein country and cultural differences are especially evident. In Western societies, with their emphasis on autonomy and independence, adolescents enjoy large amounts of free time, which they can employ usefully on structured activities such as organized sports, on individual hobbies, or on meaningful interactions with family and peers. In reality, however, lots of free time is devoted to passive media consumption, hanging out in public places, and home-based parties, sometimes in conjunction with risky and deviant behavior. In Asian countries, family time and especially schoolwork fill up the typical adolescent’s day, reflecting the cultural emphasis on interdependence, responsibility, and school achievement. The possible downside here is that little space is left for active and structured leisure pursuits as well as for peer interactions.

The most prominent change in the leisure context is related to media use. Besides TV and audiovisual media, communication and interactive media such as mobile phones and the Internet
have become omnipresent in youths’ lives. Many developmental tasks, such as building and maintaining friendships, self-presentation, and self-exploration, which were formerly negotiated in face-to-face communications with peers and in “real-world” settings, are now increasingly tackled via interactions in online spaces. However, interactive media also carry risks such as cyber-bullying, easy access to pornographic content, and abuse by strangers in anonymous online interactions.

Growing international migration, too, has been changing adolescents’ social networks. Youth in the receiving countries have to negotiate cultural diversity, whereas young migrants have to cope with the disruption of interpersonal ties and to adapt to the new cultural contexts. Moreover, increased mobility of families within countries likewise challenges adolescents’ ability to adjust to changing peer contexts—consider a teen that needs to give up her established social networks because the family has relocated to a new city. Thus, peer relationships today may have become more transient and diverse for many adolescents.

Families and Family Relationships.

Larson and colleagues have identified several domains of ongoing change in family life. First, in terms of family size and composition, there has been a shift towards smaller extended
families (fewer siblings, fewer aunts and uncles). Moreover, nontraditional family arrangements, such as single parent and patchwork families made up from the remnants of divorced families, have become widespread in many societies. The increasingly normative nature of such family forms mitigates their potentially negative implications for adolescent development. However, the sheer number of family transitions experienced by some children and adolescents may lead to adjustment difficulties.²⁰

Second, because of urbanization and increased family mobility, families have become less embedded in the local community.²¹ Therefore, adolescents have fewer opportunities to be guided and protected by community members. However, many middle-class families are nowadays able to exploit broader social connections reaching across diverse social strata. Such connections enrich adolescents’ social worlds, facilitate their career entry later on, and increase social mobility.²²

Third, the institution of marriage is now characterized by higher expectations for the emotional quality of the marital relationship and for gender equality. The heightened expectations and the greater independence of working women partly explain the growing divorce rates in many countries.²³ Implications of these trends for adolescent development are mixed.²⁴ On the positive side, adolescents may develop skills
necessary to negotiate family roles, to enhance relationships, and to accept the versatile nature of interpersonal ties in the modern world. On the negative side, the exposure to severe family conflict and disruption may have long-lasting negative consequences for psychosocial adjustment.

Finally, there have been substantial changes in parent-adolescent relationships. Across the world, parents tend to make greater economic investments in and give more attention to their less numerous offspring. Despite their prolonged dependency on parents, many adolescents from middle-class families enjoy more democratic and responsive parenting than ever before. In contrast, where parents cannot provide economic resources and guidance, a growing generation gap and a loss of parental control over adolescents may ensue. To take another extreme, many parents from Muslim and East Asian societies put much value upon their children’s education but are reluctant to adopt a democratic parenting style. Thus, global change in the family domain is by no means uniform.25

Community and Civic Engagement.

According to the developmental systems approach,26 youth growing up in healthy and caring families and communities develop a reciprocal need to give back, which enables them to become active and responsible citizens. Contemporary economic pressures, however, affect families and communities in ways that
raise concerns about the future of civic participation. Stressful and chaotic labor market experiences undermine community embeddedness of working parents, who may withdraw from civic engagement themselves and thereby fail to act as role models for their offspring. Moreover, local neighborhoods become less stable and coherent, with the possible consequence that fewer adults in the neighborhood are willing to monitor youth activities and fewer opportunities exist for youth to get involved in the community life.

However, the picture is not all gloomy. First, in non-Western countries where civic engagement has not been widespread, rates of youth participation have actually been growing. Second, increased international competition necessitates the reduction of the welfare state, creating a higher objective demand for civic engagement of individuals, to which they are likely to respond. Third, new forms of youth engagement emerge, such as political consumerism and Internet-based initiatives. Last but not least, civic engagement has always been, to a certain extent, a matter of individual choice. Some youth may react to problems in their communities with a determination to achieve improvement and thereby turn themselves from the victims of social change into its agents.

Implications of Macro-Level Change for Individual Development
Our brief sketch illustrates that the manifestations of globalization and economic change are by no means uniform across different regions of the globe and different segments of youth population. Furthermore, it shows the various pathways or mechanisms through which social change translates to the individual level. Prominent examples are changes in the composition of social networks (including the family), shifts in time spent for the different activities of daily living, or shifts in responsibilities and privileges negotiated between adolescents and parents. Acknowledging this diversity represents a starting point for understanding how macro-level trends affect individual adaptation and development. The relevant theoretical framework was provided by Rainer Silbereisen and colleagues, who introduced the Jena Model of Social Change and Human Development (see Figure 1). In a nutshell, this model maintains that macro-level transformations are translated into a variety of changes in the micro-contexts of development, which need to be perceived and appraised by individuals in order to become psychologically effective. In particular, individuals may perceive such changes as new demands, such as the need for careful occupational planning given the rapid ups and downs in different sectors of the economy, or as new benefits, such as the new means of communication that expand youth’s overall opportunities for development. Whereas demands undermine the
accustomed ways of negotiating developmental tasks, benefits may 
enhance existing opportunities or even open up totally new 
developmental pathways.

That new demands and new benefits perceived by individuals 
are the central mechanism through which social change affects 
youth development is a strong theoretical proposition, which 
offers various conceptual advantages. First of all, the demands-
benefits framework is a genuinely psychological one and thus 
allows linking the Jena Model with existing psychological 
theories and research on, for instance, stress and coping, goal 
striving, and motivation. Second, the individuals’ perspective 
is put to the fore. Conceptually and methodologically, this goes 
beyond comparisons of birth cohorts or socio-demographic groups, 
which are a common strategy for studying social change in 
sociology. Maybe most importantly, however, the model allows 
analyzing the complex relationships between social change and 
individual adjustment and development in a very convenient yet 
powerful way. It is not necessary to trace all the pathways 
through which macro-level changes are mediated and moderated 
until they reach the individual – which is often an 
insurmountable task. Rather, it is sufficient to know how those 
changes that arrive at the individual level are finally 
perceived and appraised by the individual. Interindividual 
differences in the perception and the appraisal of new demands
and benefits are thus the key to understanding the processes of adaptation to social change. For instance, people may try to cope with new demands by investing time and effort if they experience them not as a threat but rather as a challenge.\textsuperscript{35} Otherwise, they may (temporarily) disengage from overwhelmingly threatening demands and switch to more promising developmental tasks. Such decisions are taken, more or less consciously, on the basis of available economic, social, and psychological resources\textsuperscript{36} and feedback to subjective well-being.\textsuperscript{37}

The Jena Model has received substantial empirical support from research conducted on adults and has inspired several studies on adolescents, for instance concerning the transitions from school to work and coping with future-related stress.\textsuperscript{38} At the same time, new questions emerge. Are young people nowadays aware of the increased parental investment in their development and education, what do they hold of their own family situation in this regard, and how (and why) do they react to such assistance or a lack thereof? What distinguishes youth intending to leave their deprived communities and seek their fortune elsewhere from those who prefer to stay and strive for positive change? Questions of this kind generated by the Jena Model are of great practical importance and will help to further understand the links between macro- and micro-processes and
thereby to identify the risk and protective factors for successful youth development in a changing world.

Conclusion

In a rapidly changing and increasingly interconnected world, the proximal contexts of youth development are subject to substantial change, and opportunities and constraints for the attainment of adolescent developmental tasks are constantly in flux. The Jena Model by Rainer Silbereisen suggests that these changes are perceived, appraised, and negotiated differently by different adolescents, with very different outcomes in terms of psychosocial adjustment and development. Some youth will certainly capitalize on the benefits of social and economic change whereas others are overwhelmed by the demands that globalization, new technologies, and the freedom to explore new forms of intimacy or career pathways bring about. Although our knowledge is still far from being complete, we can be sure that it is not a random process that determines who falls into the former group and who into the latter. Conceptualizing and investigating the psychological mechanisms behind these different reactions is a crucial step before targeted policy recommendations can be developed.
Author Notes

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Figure 1. The Jena Model of Social Change and Human Development.
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