



# Social Change and Human Development

Concept and Results

Edited by Rainer K. Silbereisen  
and Xinyin Chen



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and Xinyin Chen**

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# **Social Change and Human Development**



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# **INTRODUCTION: HOW SOCIAL CHANGE AFFECTS INDIVIDUAL ADAPTATION**

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*Rainer K. Silbereisen and Xinyin Chen*

This book deals with the role of rapid social change for human adaptation and development. Our case in point is the fusion of the consequences of political transition following the fall of socialism with crises related to the negative effects of globalization. The aftermath of this fusion was wide-reaching. It affected ideologies and belief systems, central societal institutions (from political representation to economic activities and welfare), the structure of community life and neighborhoods, as well as conditions for families. In the chapters that make up this volume, we ask what these changes meant for people's adjustment and well-being. We are especially interested in how people deal with changes of the economic and social contexts they were used to relying upon, and in what activities are likely to improve their situation, which is often characterized by a devaluing of resources accumulated before the period of transition.

A historical prototype of research on individual consequences of macro-level change is Glen Elder's (1974) landmark study on the Great Depression of the late 1920s. This worldwide financial crisis resulted in economic hardship for many families, primarily through unemployment, and subsequently led to attempts by family members to close the mismatch between resources and claims. The concomitant and often painful adjustment of the household economy, typically by reducing expenditure for essential commodities, resulted in psychological and even physical tension between couples that ultimately damaged the socialization function of the family, with negative consequences for children's psychosocial adjustment. As some of the chapters testify, Elder's research also provided a blueprint for many social and behavioral scientists who became interested in more recent societal changes related to the end of the bipolar world system in existence since World War Two (e.g., Silbereisen & Tomasik, 2008).

## Social change and individual adaptation

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In the following, our understanding of the nexus between social change on the macro-level and consequences for individual adaptation will be delineated in a series of steps. This process provided the rationale for the selection of contributions appearing in this book.

### Types of social change

*Social Change and Human Development: Concepts and Results* brings together research on the longer-term consequences of a particular type of social change. It is connected with the break-up in the late 1980s of the former socialist countries in Central-Eastern Europe, signified by the opening of the East-West border in Hungary and by the subsequent demolition of the Berlin Wall in 1989. It also considers the consequences of the dissolution of the former Soviet Union and the evolution of successor states, with the sometimes radical turnaround, as seen in Hungary and Germany, or the hesitant political reforms towards a representative democracy and free market economy, as in the Ukraine. Moreover, the economic liberalization and opening up to world markets in countries such as Vietnam and China that were taking place at about the same time are included as an example of massive societal change with a revision, rather than a complete breakdown, of the political system.

The common denominator of the social change addressed by the contributions to this volume is the radical transition from the founding ideological principles to new values, such as freedom of expression and movement across borders, which made the old political system and its institutions obsolete. As is to be expected from the logic of such transitions (e.g., the fall of the Berlin Wall and its short-term consequence of the dissolving of established institutions of power), they were followed by a longer period of transformation that included the re-establishing of institutions in line with the new political system, such as those related to the economy, education, and welfare. As in the case of Germany, the high aspirations of the initial transformation period were complicated by the effects of another type of social change, typically characterized by the catchphrase 'globalization,' which heralded rapid technological change, worldwide information access, and global markets for goods and labor.

Although at face value globalization seems to match many of the ideological changes towards a liberal model of political and economic action in the transition countries, in effect it interfered with attempts to restructure the formerly state-owned and centrally managed industries, with an unprecedented increase in unemployment and a widening gap between social strata as prime manifestations. Typically, the merging of evolving

transformation and growing tensions related to globalization resulted in what some have called 'post-transformation' – what was meant to form the solid political and economic base for the new societies needed to be corrected again, because unintended consequences became overwhelming. A case in point is the high debt German municipalities accumulated in order to meet the aspirations nourished by the political transition, which subsequently made them and their service provision especially vulnerable when their income from taxes on enterprises declined due to the economic uncertainty (Sackmann, Chapter 7 this volume).

Although the above characterization seems to apply basically to all examples of the countries and transitions included in this book, upon closer examination there are differences in how political transition and transformation was brought about, and in how the transformation of the economic system was handled. Both had consequences that percolated down from the macro-level via institution-building to the level of individual adaptation. In contrast to the other countries mentioned, Germany seems to represent a special case with regard to the type of political transformation process utilized. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the formation of a transition government in the East (the former German Democratic Republic – GDR), unification of the country and transformation of society in the East was thought to be accomplishable simply by the transfer of West German institutions and functional elites (Zapf, 1996). This 'incorporation model' (the unification of Vietnam shows some resemblance) differs from an 'autonomy model' (see Wasilewski, Chapter 12 this volume), whereby the transition was accomplished either by agreement between opposing elites within the country, as in the case of Poland, or by top-down reforms that maintained old structures and basically transformed political capital gained in the old system into economic capital under the new circumstances, as in the case of the Ukraine.

Another typology by King and Szelenyi (2005) focuses on the role of elites in forming the new economic systems. They distinguish between different types of influences. China and Vietnam are instances of 'capitalism from below' where, as a consequence of pivotal political decision-making, a market system starts with small businesses and evolves in parallel to the maintained state economy: both are controlled by the established political system. In contrast, 'capitalism from above,' as characterized by Russia and the Ukraine, is where a state-run economy is transformed into a privatized system, but where, due to the lack of democratic control, it results in the concentration of capital among members of privileged political networks rooted in the past. Finally, 'capitalism from without' refers to a situation, as exemplified by Poland, where elite consensus and political integration into Europe leads to the establishment of an open economic system with high levels of foreign investment. In this regard,



Germany is probably closer to Poland than any of the other countries mentioned.

In sum, the countries covered in this book, and thus the type of social change addressed, share a more or less pronounced political hiatus followed by a longer period of political and economic transformation. In terms of the economic system, they differ in their dependency on the old political system and in the related logic of how economic reforms were brought about. As, according to Elder (2003), social change should be seen against time and place, these differences and commonalities have to be considered when investigating the consequences for individual adaptation.

### Comparison across countries and samples

The book includes chapters dealing with countries characterized by transformation plus globalization, and naturally we are interested in comparisons among them, but for a particular purpose. Two approaches can be distinguished in utilizing the structural heterogeneity of change just described. First, one can utilize such differences in order to study the role of a particular element in the process by exploiting its systematic variation across many, carefully chosen countries, as exemplified by the Globalife project on differences and commonalities in the reaction to structural uncertainty due to globalization (Hofäcker, Buchholz, & Blossfeld, Chapter 4 this volume). The element in question is the role of protective regulations for individuals' welfare which differ across countries.

Second, one can use the variation to find out about the generalizability of a well-established model across a number of conditions that have not been analyzed previously or which formerly did not exist. For the latter, we have an exemplary case in the landmark series of studies by Kohn and his colleagues (Kohn, Chapter 8 this volume). They found that the relationship between the substantive complexity of work and intellectual flexibility applied not only to industrial workers in the USA but also to those in Poland, which was still socialist at the time of the study. The only difference was that it was the workers in the American sample and the managers in the Polish sample that reported higher stress levels, in the latter case probably due to the close supervision and control from higher up. The political and economic redirection in Poland challenged this interpretation – would the 'new' Poland now show a relationship between complexity of work and intellectual flexibility similar to the USA? The answer was, 'yes.' This formed the starting point for a series of studies on the Ukraine, an instance of capitalism from above, and on China, representing capitalism from below. By and large the answer again was, 'yes,' thereby demonstrating that the relationship between particular work experiences and intellectual

flexibility is robust across various societal and economic conditions, as far as they provide the theory-adequate variation of work experiences and offer opportunities to choose or to be selected for complex jobs based on intellectual capability; obviously change on the political and economic level had left this regularity intact.

In the past, social change of the kind entailed in this book has often been studied with similar approaches – comparing samples from different countries that differ in the quality or level of change achieved, or samples from the same country gathered at different periods of the transition and transformation process. As a matter of fact, many investigations of German unification followed this model, by combining a comparison of East and West Germany with comparisons across time during the period of the change (Silbereisen, Pinquart, & Tomasik, Chapter 5 this volume; Tomasik & Silbereisen, 2009). Given the strains related to the breakdown of social institutions and to tensions in the labor markets, the widely held hypothesis was that people in the East would reveal poorer mental health compared to those in the West. The results were equivocal, and it took a while for it to become clear that the assumption of homogeneously high levels of strains was too simplistic (Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2004). This observation was the incentive to assess differences in exposure to manifestations of the societal challenges, and against this backdrop to think about the psychological mechanisms that link the strains experienced with adjustments achieved.

### A conceptual model

The book is organized with such a conceptual model of the relationship between social change and individual adaptation in mind. It describes which aspects of change on the macro-level represent the starting point for individuals' actions and reactions, and thereby clarifies the point that comparisons at a highly aggregated level (such as countries or periods) necessarily underestimate the large variation in psychosocial outcomes.

Had one only taken Elder's model more seriously – as the level of hardship during the Great Depression varied, so did the strains related to political and social changes addressed in this book. The level of strain depended on conditions, such as an individual's stage in the life course or education, or as a function of the particular kind of macro-level change. For our own research agenda (Silbereisen et al., Chapter 5 this volume) this process became clear when a new generation of studies started from the sociological challenge-response model proffered by Best (2007) and developed further by Rosa and Schmidt (2007) and Schmidt (Chapter 1 this volume). The basic tenet of this model is that changes in the ideological base and the subordinate

social institutions of a society should be conceived as challenges that lead to a response, which may in turn be the origin of a new challenge. The quality and direction of responses can vary depending on a large set of circumstances, and take the form of adaptation, resistance, resignation or innovation. Against this backdrop, the linear model of modernization sometimes used to describe the case of the transition and the course of transformation in Germany (Zapf, 1996) was deemed way too simple, although its apparently straightforward explanations (the old system lacked the 'modern' bottom-up planning needed for an economy under the strains of globalization) had some appeal.

The notion of challenge and response reminded psychologists interested in socio-political change of the various approaches that differentiate processes of coping as mediating mechanism between strains and outcomes – the model of Lazarus (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) being the most prominent example. So the task was clear: to determine and assess manifestations of challenges at the individual level. We called these challenges 'demands' (Tomasik & Silbereisen, 2009), and understood individuals' dealing with them as an instance of either engagement, i.e., active attempts at resolving demands by direct action or by seeking support in facing the problem, or as disengagement, i.e., in the case of insurmountable obstacles, quitting the field in order to preserve the potential for future attempts at resolution. Our reference for this distinction was the model of primary and secondary control by Heckhausen (Chapter 6 this volume). Other approaches in studying the individual consequences of the transition from communism, however, have not focused on coping attempts but instead centered on the loss of economic, human, and social resources (Shteyn, Schumm, Vodopianova, Hobfoll, & Lilly, 2003). According to Hobfoll (1989, 2001) such loss of resources is more relevant for mental health than the gain of resources. This can explain why the obvious gains in terms of individual freedom cannot outweigh the negative effects of resource loss, such as uncertainties concerning people's occupational career.

The model of the linkage between social change and individual adaptation shown in Figure 1, drawn from Pinquart and Silbereisen (2004) and amended slightly for this work, helped in the selection of contributions for this book. We wanted to have chapters that illustrate the role of the various conditions and their interplay. The demands represent the perceived mismatch between claims and resources induced by challenges on the macro-level, conceived as discrepancies between the ideological base of a society and the reality of social institutions. An example of this is the proclaimed humanistic orientation of the socialist countries that stood in sharp contrast to the reality of systematic suppression of politically nonconformist positions. Depending on the type and stage in the transition and transformation, different challenges may be dominant,